And the Story Continues

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And the Story Continues

by WhiteLadyDragon

Summary

Yesterday may be history, but history has a way of repeating itself. Four years after the first Kira case, Kira's mark hasn't totally vanished. When a disillusioned former pupil of L's with an appetite for destruction joins a wayward shinigami, a new battle of wits erupts, and Erin and friends once again find themselves caught in the middle. Sequel to "Story Of The Century."

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"Mello, Mello, I'm open!" Toby panted, waving his arms frantically over his head, his chubby face red as a beet with exertion and late November chill. "C'mon, pass the ball!"

Matt wasn't sure why Toby bothered, why anyone bothered. Mello didn't pass the ball, if he could help it. He passed it only when he deemed it strategically sound, and even when he did he would make a show about it and promptly steal the ball back if his teammate didn't reach the goal fast enough or looked like he was about to kick it from the wrong angle. A losing angle. In his mind, he might as well have been the star of the entire British football league, not some gangly fourteen-year-old swarming across the field behind the house with his fellow gangly fourteen-year-olds, with a few younger and older ones in the mix (with the exception of Toby, who was glaringly shorter and portly, "porky," as Mello affectionately called him).

If it weren't a rule that football was a team sport, Mello would play on his own, take on a complete team and vanquish them like a one-man army. Then again, he also needed people to show up and show off to. How could anyone look good when they had no one around to make look bad for comparison?

Mello had managed to dip and dive around the grabs made for him by the opposing team, huffing louder and looking flusher than any of them as his blonde locks flew wildly around his head like the mane of a lion on the chase. The biting autumn air and the exercise may not have had everything to do with the color swelling in his face. Dribbling the ball between his swift feet, he was that close to the goal where Scout stood guard, shuffling back and forth like a panicking crab. Rightfully so.

Matt expected him to go in for the kill. But like some predators, Mello liked to play with his prey sometimes. Most likely because it made him look and feel cooler. Matt couldn't see from his spot as the goal keeper on the opposite end, but he could imagine the wicked smirk cracking through his lips as he swung his bare, dirty foot back and smashed the stained and abused checkered ball, launching it about sixty degrees into the air where it would ricochet off of Toby's broad forehead like a pinball dinging off a target and scoring those last few precious points needed to beat the high score.

No sooner than when Toby plummeted face-first into the crunchy, browning grass did Mello stampede around him to retrieve the ball, taking full advantage of the distraction he had created and sending it sailing over Scout's outstretched fingers and bouncing into the loose, tattered net.

"Bloody hell, Mello!"

"What was that for?"

"You've really done it now, Mello," Toby snapped as two of his teammates dragged him back onto his feet. "Y-you did that on purpose!"

Mello ran a hand through his sweaty locks, looking quite pleased. As smug as a cat that had just caught and devoured a mouse. "You asked me to pass you the ball. I was just honoring your request," he laughed.

Honestly, at this point it seemed that the only reason Mello was allowed to continue playing the game was because he was one of the best players in the House, despite his poor sportsmanship. That, and Mello never took no for an answer. Matt personally found sports, anything having to do
with strenuous activity and/or being outdoors, to be about as enjoyable as walking around with poison ivy stuck on his private parts. He was out here because Mello liked being out here. Someone had to mind him.

And he was no vampire like Near by any means.

Besides, he didn't have to do much of anything beyond watching. When they played, he made sure to be on the same team as Mello, and was always the goal keeper. With Mello's skills and thirst for the hot spotlight which kept the ball well on the other side, he didn't have to concentrate too much on minding the net. He could just stand there, as Mello politely put it, "with his thumb in his bum." Sometimes he'd even take advantage of his "loneliness" by finishing a game level on his new Nintendo DS Lite™.

Exhausted, cold, dirty and most in less than stellar spirits, the kids decided to call it a game and began their way back towards the House for warmth and Ms. Berkeley's hot cocoa. Toby, still seething from the humiliation he'd suffered on the field, made the mistake of charging up behind Mello and pounding him in the back with his small chunky fists.

Mello, not the type to turn the other cheek, retaliated by whirling around and grabbing the younger boy by a fistful of his short red hair, dragging him along like a shamed dog by its collar. "You think you can pick a fight with me? A porky runt like you? After I just whooped you like that in front of everyone?" he taunted.

"Hey, come on," Matt chided as they crossed the threshold. "Haven't you kicked him around enough?"

No one noticed Roger watching them from overhead beyond the wall-length window of his office, the semi-frosty mist of impending winter blurring his reflection in the glass. His mind was blurred with a cold snap of apprehension as his cell phone dangled loose in his hands, a messenger who had brought to him the news in but three impersonal words. Three words he had dreaded to see blink onto that screen for the longest time.

It's amazing, how something as small as two or three words could turn one's whole world upside down in an instant. Like a leaf falling off the tree in front of his office, yellow and withered, gliding innocuously on the breeze before landing in the bird fountain, not yet frozen over, shaking the water with ripples that stretched all the way to the edges.

Then again, most of their lives had never quite been right side-up to begin with, had they?

Roger turned to glimpse at the man smiling back at him in the picture underneath the windowpane. A warm and peaceful smile lifted the jowls hanging off of his mastiff-like face, tempered with a strange aura of sadness that only the few who had been close to him were aware of, like Roger.

Oh, Quillish…we both knew that this day would come eventually. You both had planned for it, including what I must do.

So why don't I feel prepared at all…?

He took a deep breath, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his large, pointed nose. Quillish did not visit often, so it wasn't unusual for him to be unheard from for months at a time, and when he did pay a visit, they tended to be brief but well-received by the children, who had considered him "the nice old guy who owns our school." As far as he knew, none of them knew that along with his known accomplishments as an inventor and philanthropist, he was also the mysterious Watari who worked under L. He had had his funeral service just a few weeks prior, having been
sent back home as he would have wanted. It had been a sad event for the children, needless to say, to the extent that their acquaintance to him allowed. They were moving on the best they could. Quillish would've been pleased to see them do so; it was something that many of them were coming to learn and accept, if they hadn't already.

But the one who had done Quillish this favor never came back. He had told Roger not to expect him to, to say only what was necessary and only when the time came.

And now that it'd been confirmed that he was also gone, Roger knew that he could not hide this anymore. It was his duty to tell them. After all, one of them was supposed to step in, in case something like this should happen. A thirteen- and barely fifteen-year-old.

How were the two going to take this?

Gathering as much resolve as he could find, Roger pocketed his phone, left his office and stepped out into the hallway. His gut already tying itself into knots, he waited for the rambunctious mass to parade past him, his dark cobblestone-grey eyes scanning the bobbing heads for one in particular. He found him struggling against the wall with Toby in his fist by his hair, easy to spot with his long blonde hair and stark black clothes against the sea of color. Matt was squeezing himself between the two, trying to break the boys apart, telling Mello to cut it out. He too was easy to spot by the orange-tinted goggles buried in his mop of auburn hair and favorite striped shirt.

Sidling his way along the wall, largely unacknowledged (as usual), he reached out to break Mello's hold on Toby, wrapping his thin wrist in his gnarled, arthritic fingers. The same old routine.

Mello blinked up at him, almost as though he hadn't been bullying someone just moments ago. "Huh? Roger?"

"Mello, I need to see you in my office," said Roger, his voice soft and low.

Matt threw Mello a look that said, See? I told you to cut it out. Now you're busted, again.

Toby, nursing the top of his head, sputtered, "Ha! You're in hot water now! Serves you right for being mean to me!" He scampered off to join the crowd before he could hear Mello's comeback:

"I only pick on you because you ask for it! Run away like the worm that you are!"

Roger gazed wearily at the boy. It was still hard to believe that a child like him would even be considered for this. But then, he wasn't the one who'd picked. "Mello, please. Worms don't run. Matt, you can go. I don't need to see you."

"Yes, sir. Later, Mello." Matt couldn't explain why exactly, but something about the way Roger sounded felt funny to him. Gave him a vague twitch in his bones. Not the "ha-ha" kind of funny. Funny as in something bad had happened, or was about to. Something worse than Mello getting lectured—once again—on picking on less capable children.

But he said nothing about it. Maybe he was just still feeling the effects of the cold, and itching to go back to his beloved DS? Besides, Roger had always sounded rather burned out. Running a house full of kids, smart and temperamental kids like Mello, at that? The old man should consider retiring with his bugs. He took off, expecting to see Mello in their shared room when this was over, wearing his most petulant scowl.

Roger was still holding Mello's wrist as he glanced into the room next to his office. Whereas Mello usually had to be chased down all over the place, he didn't have to look far when he needed Near. Near could be found almost invariably in that room, fiddling quietly with a few toys or puzzles that
lay scattered around him, almost as though he were putting up a barrier against the world outside. His wrinkled pajamas as pure and white as the tiles he sat on, he seemed to blend in to the floor, distinguished only by his hunched shape and mane of bleach-blond hair that hung over his face, shielding his blank, steel-grey eyes so he could focus on the puzzle in his hands.

Linda peeked into the room, brushing her bangs out of her face. Under her arm she clutched a sketchpad. "There you are! Why don't you come outside, Near? The weather's lovely today. It won't be like this forever, you know."

"Oh, leave him be, Lin," said Quincy. "He won't go outside, no matter what. He's in his own world."

Near, not the type to waste words, muttered, "No, thank you." He didn't even look her way.

With Roger, he had less of a choice. "Near, can I see you in my office?"

Mello paused. Why would Near, that big-headed twit, have to be in his office too, if Roger was just going to chew off his ears for rough-housing with Toby?

Unless…this wasn't about that, at all. Maybe Near had squealed about his latest transgression against him just two days ago? He never put up a fight himself (as much as Mello wanted him to, if only so he could really humiliate him in front of everyone). He just stared with the stupidest expression on his face, almost like a sheep, act like it didn't happen, only to go to Roger behind his back just when Mello had started to forget about it.

Not bothering to ask why, Near grunted, "All right." He took his sweet time gathering his blank puzzle together, placing on top all of the pieces he had yet to put in place, never mind to stand up on his bare feet.

What weak legs, Mello thought wryly, watching the way Near wobbled a bit on his way. It's like he's got polio or something. He could never play football. At least I'm better than him in that respect.

Soon the two of them were in Roger's office. Somehow the room looked drearier than usual, the crisp afternoon sunlight pouring through the windows as the only source of light. Roger sat at his desk, clasping his hands in front of him as he tried to come up with how he was going to say this. Near had plopped down onto the rug and already resumed clicking puzzle pieces into place, while Mello stood as straight and tall as he could, his sharp, ice-blue eyes drilling holes into Roger's receding hairline.

"So what is it, Roger?" he asked impatiently. "What'd you have to see us for?"

The silence between them was so thick, any of them could probably slice through it, like frozen custard.

Roger sighed, keeping his eyes trained on his notes. There was no way to approach this except to get straight to the point. He couldn't bear to see the looks on their faces. He may as well have tossed a grenade into Mello's open mouth when he answered:

"L is dead."

…

…
"What was that?"

"Roger, what did you just say?" Mello demanded, fighting to keep from shouting but at the same time wanting so very much to do just that. Had he heard that right? He's dead? Roger couldn't possibly mean—

"I'm afraid L is dead. I'm sorry." The old man's apology came out softer, weaker, more hesitantly than his announcement.

Mello's voice had already developed a natural crack in it due to puberty, a fact that he had been initially ashamed of but never admitted to. The way it was cracking now, however, Roger knew that puberty had nothing do with it. It suddenly became louder, sharper.

"H—he's dead? L is dead? But—but how?"

L was invincible. He couldn't just die, like any other human being. This had to be a joke, something Roger had come up with to get back at him somehow. "Scare 'em straight," as they say.

No. Would Roger do something that mean-spirited? It wasn't likely. And why would he be telling this to Near, as well? Near was no trouble-maker. Not like Mello, anyway.

Near's only response to the news was the soft, unwavering click of puzzle pieces fitting into each other. Had he heard Roger's words, never mind cared for their meaning, he didn't make this apparent. Not that Mello expected him to.

He gasped, remembering something. Oh no.

"Was it Kira? Did Kira kill him? Come on Roger, you've got to tell me!"

"Probably."

Mello lunged across the desk, grabbing a bewildered Roger by his bony shoulders. His eyes suddenly became wide and feral with shock and denial. "But he promised that he would find Kira and execute him! And now you're telling me that he's been killed?"

"M-Mello!" Roger trembled in Mello's vice-like grip, having no idea what else to say, calling out the boy's name in hopes that he'd calm down and let him go.

Both of them were cut off by the sound of a thousand puzzle pieces tumbling to the floor. They turned to find Near with the empty board held over his head. He still wouldn't acknowledge them with his eyes.

"If you can't win the game, if you can't solve the puzzle...then you're just a loser," he said, his voice small and smooth, lifeless. "Kinda girly," as Mello and Matt would snark amongst themselves. He proceeded to put his puzzle back together, starting in the upper right corner and working his way across. Automatically, like a robot.

Mello held back a snarl and the urge to take that chair from the corner and smash it over his head. That was all Near was going to say about this? That L was a loser? Of course he had never been nearly as close to L as Mello was. To Near, L was just a model, but to him, he was a mentor. If what Roger was telling them was true, that he had in fact died, then technically yes, he had lost.
Lost to Kira. But…

Mello turned back to Roger, his hand balling up into a shaky fist on his desk. "So. Which of us did he pick, me or Near?" That burning question, one that had plagued him ever since he had been told in secret that he was being considered to succeed L. The reason Roger would even tell them this to begin with. No one knew about this plan except the three in this office, and to a lesser extent Matt who had gone upstairs, who wanted little to do with any of it. So it had been ever since the incidents with the first generation of successors (Something that I would know since L told me himself, Mello would think, usually bursting with pride).

Roger couldn't look Mello in the eye, knowing that he wasn't going to like his next answer any more than he had, his previous ones. He wasn't so sure about Near, but Mello…

He peered up into his bushy eyebrows. "He hadn't chosen yet. And now that he's gone, I'm afraid he won't be able to."

…

For the first time in a long one, Mello didn't know what to say. L had never made his decision? Why? L might have been nigh invulnerable, but he also was the type to plan ahead. He would've picked his successor a long time ago, wouldn't he? As soon as he'd had his candidates. Not only had he not picked him, but he hadn't picked Near either, who had always been ahead of him on the roster?

This made no sense. L wasn't supposed to not make sense.

"Mello, listen. You too, Near. Can't the two of you…work together?"

Mello felt as though something was squeezing the air out of him. How dare Roger make a suggestion like that? Trying to deflect the problem onto the two of them. Well, it wasn't his job to choose the next L, only to groom those who had the potential, and Mello and Near were supposed to be problem-solvers. But this…

"All right. Sounds good," Near said flatly. Mello thought otherwise.

"It would never work, Roger!" he hissed. "We can't do this together. You know I don't get along with Near. We've always competed against each other. Always."

And I've always been number two. No matter how hard I try…

Outside, the wind howled softly against the window as it picked up. Out of the corner of his eye, Mello could see the last leaf on the tree, no longer able to hold on, snap off of the branch, soaring away on the breeze out of sight.

He imagined himself as that leaf. This house was the tree; it couldn't hold onto him. Nothing lasted forever. Sooner or later, he'd have to move on and leave this place. That should've been clear to him years ago, but now it had never been more so.

Mello broke the tense silence. "You know what? It's fine," he announced, trying to keep his voice as even as possible. The last thing he needed was to degrade himself in front of these fools with a tantrum.

Roger looked up, a blend of surprise and anxiety washing over his face.

"Near should be the one to succeed L. He's not like me. He never gets emotional. He just uses his
head, like it's a game or a puzzle."

As he spoke, Near clicked the final piece in place, pausing to stare at the image before him. White space, filled only with a small black letter in the upper left corner. Bold and defiant, but unreachable.

L

"And as for me, I'm leaving this institution."

He was already heading for the door when Roger sprang up from his chair. Was it going to happen again? Would Mello snap and pull off the same stunt that B had?

"Wait! Mello—"

"Don't waste your breath," he snorted. "I'm almost fifteen. It's time that I started living my own life."

Not once did he look back as he slammed the mahogany door behind him, his temper finally starting to leak out of his hands. Near listened to his stomping footsteps until they became softer and then disappeared completely, locking his gaze straight ahead the entire time. All the same, he noted Roger's distress.

"Let him go, Roger."

"Let him go? I can't do that! He may be one of the smartest students in the House, but he's still a boy. Do you understand, Near?"

"You underestimate him. By the way you're telling me this, it seems you underestimate me as well. You've been trying to rein him in for as long as he's been here, but you never could, could you? Mello will survive on his own. I doubt he'd do anything to compromise Wammy's House in any way without making trouble for himself."

Roger groaned. "Don't tell me you're planning on leaving, too."

Near's voice gained a slight, almost unnoticeable edge to it. Roger didn't see his hands clench inside his too-long pajama sleeves, or his pale toes curl. "I will have to eventually, now that I'm the new L. You can start bringing me cases, but I think I'll wait two more years before I start globe-trotting. Fifteen seems to be a reasonable age to break off from home."

…

He wouldn't return to Wammy's House no matter what; he didn't count on whatever answers he would find changing that. He'd look like an utter fool after making such a promise and then going back on it.

But something didn't add up. Mello would not rest until he knew for sure. What had happened to L? Why hadn't he chosen either of them? Kira killed him, that's what Roger had said.

What if there was more to it than that? Here he sat in this cramped cubicle next to Matt in an internet café they'd come across in town. Today was November 30th. Two days ago, Roger had dropped the bombshell that rocked Mello's world.

Matt needed the practice, anyway. He needed to test his new program, see if it could successfully hack into a database without leaving a trace. Surely L would have sent Roger something pertaining
to the Kira case, a file with his findings? He wished that Mello wouldn't sit so close to him; his
breathing down his neck (heated and moist on his bare sensitive skin) made it harder to
concentrate.

"I think all that chocolate's giving you halitosis or something," grumbled Matt. "Would it kill you
to brush your teeth a little more?"

"Shut up and get me those files," Mello shot back before ripping a chunk off his unwrapped
chocolate bar like a lion tearing apart flesh from a carcass, his teeth bared. As he run his tongue
across the piece, savoring the smooth rich flavor, a thought came to his mind. A memory. Before
L, Mello had loved chocolate as much as the next guy, and then some. L had been nibbling a
chocolate bar the first—and only—from they saw each other. Classic milk chocolate, he could still
remember. He had been gracious enough to share it with him. Him, a lowly student. He never told
Mello who he was outright, but Mello knew. The things he spoke about, the way he seemed to look
into his soul as he spoke, only L could look, think and speak that way. Somehow the chocolate
tasted that much sweeter when L broke off a piece to offer him. It was like receiving communion
for the first time, accepting the bread as the body of Christ.

Was it blasphemous to make such a comparison? Maybe, but God had screwed him over too many
times for him to keep in touch. Nothing anyone did was good enough for God, whoever (or
whatever) that was. With L...it was different. He must have considered him of at least some worth
to go out of his way to see him when he could have been solving another case. Bringing another
criminal to justice.

Since then, Mello had found himself drawn to the stuff a lot more. Eating it was his way of staying
close to a man he so dearly admired.

Finally, Matt was in. Secretly, he was a bit apprehensive of what they would find, if anything.
Mello worshipped L, more than what would be considered healthy. In fact, Matt had poked fun at
him for this once or twice, asking if he had a crush on him or something, and both times Mello's
response was blistering, as always.

Crushing on someone who'd had to be at least twice his age, the same way a teenage girl was sweet
on a young teacher. How stupid! Not to mention, they had never met the guy. No one in the world
knew what he looked like. For some reason, Matt pictured him as less than ideal in the looks
department. Though himself a far cry from a health nut, even he understood that someone with that
kind of job couldn't be the picture of fitness.

He would smirk to himself. Maybe that's the other reason he doesn't show his face?

But it had all been in good fun before.

He wasn't happy about L's death either, make no mistake. But at the same time he wasn't broken up
about it, not like Mello was. It was hard to really mourn someone you didn't know anyway. When
the news got back to him, the pang of sadness accompanying it was dull and detached, as he might
feel when reading a stranger's obituary.

A few clicks, and a window popped up.

Just before this had all happened, now and then Matt would look at Mello, observe his intense
devotion to this anonymity that they were somehow expected to emulate, and a twinge of
something would pass through him. Was it jealousy? It was stupid to be jealous of someone they'd
never met, who would never in a trillion years be interested in Mello in any way except as an heir
to the title. Matt knew this. Still, he couldn't find another name for the feeling. Except maybe
annoyance, but sometimes it felt a little too strong to be just that.

"What is it? What did you find?" Mello sputtered, shoving Matt against the wall.

"Hey!"

Mello was becoming desperate, if he hadn’t been already. When was the last Kira-related murder? It’d been weeks since any fresh deaths of criminals had been mentioned on the news, from Japan which that L had deduced to be the center for Kira's activity about a year ago (rather epically, Mello had thought at the time when word had gotten out), or elsewhere.

His mind hummed with many questions, more than perhaps the average person could process at once.

"Matt, while you're at it, I want you to look up Quillish Wammy!"

"Hold on, will ya? I can do one thing at a time."

"Bullshit! I've seen the way you multitask!"

It was all up in front of them. Quillish Wammy, the founder of their humble House, had passed away on November 5th, at the ripe old age of 71. In Tokyo. Heart attack. His body was shipped back to his hometown in Winchester, almost fifty kilometers (about thirty-one miles) from their House, where he was now buried.

The boys looked at each other. Roger had neglected to tell them this little detail. "What was Mr. Wammy doing in Japan? Promoting a new product? And how could he have…last we saw him, he looked pretty healthy for an old geezer."

"No," Mello whispered, going numb with realization. "He was working with L. Mr. Wammy is Watari…or was." Roger hadn't told him this, either. Neither had Quillish. But then, in hindsight, how could Mello not have pieced it together before? Had he been so absorbed with L that he had all but forgotten the man who answered to him, was his face for the world? His hands, his eyes, his shield?

Now he was gone. Smited by Kira for the crime of association. They had taken the old man for granted and would never see him again.

The following is the record which contains everything I have investigated on the Kira incident. The fact that you are now reading this message means I am no longer alive at this moment.

I hereby leave this record as my firm achievement.

"No longer alive at this moment." Like he was only temporarily not alive. In an ideal world, that would be the case. L wasn't human; he was a machine that might get a blue screen now and then at worst, but just had to reboot to get back on track.

Matt cringed inside at the thought. He liked computers, but something about that was freaky, even for him.

The prime suspects were high school/college student Light Yagami and rising model Misa Amane. According to this, L had zoomed in on them fairly quickly. The problem was proving their guilt. There had been a third Kira, Kyosuke Higuchi of the Yotsuba Group, but he'd turned out to be a red herring. He'd died on the spot just after they arrested him, and just days after the fact, the rest of the Group suffered mysterious deaths, as well.
"Was he high or something when he typed this?" he asked. "How can a notebook kill someone just by writing their name in it while you think about their face?"

"No. He wouldn't make up something like that. The killer notebook…the Death Note…this was the source of Kira's power. It explains his M.O. perfectly. Gods of death…shinigami…they do exist."

What if they were the only gods that existed? What benevolent god would allow things like the Death Note to exist?

"L must've found the notebooks. He was working alongside Yagami. His prime suspect."

A few rules had been found in the notebooks, put there almost as if to set up a convenient alibi for Yagami and Amane. The user of this notebook must write at least one name every 13 days, or else they die.

That rule almost let the culprits slip away. The only one in the task force willing to test the rule was L.

I knew from the beginning when I took this case that I ran the risk of being killed. I am personally not happy with the decisions I have made but had I not taken the actions that I did, Kira might have wiped out all of us.

…

"What?"

The demand flew from Mello's lips as soft and effortlessly as a single breath. Matt refused to look back at him. He didn't want to see his face, at that moment.

He couldn't entrust me or Near with the case? Didn't he think we could do it? But…we've been trained for most of our lives to take on cases like the kind L tackled. Does this mean…that neither of us is worthy of being L after all?

"Do you think Kira killed him by writing in the Death Note that he'd kill himself?" asked Matt.

"H-he'd have to have gotten his name to do that."

"Well, if what he said about these 'Shinigami Eyes' is true, then the Second Kira could've found out his name and told Kira. Or she would've killed him herself."

"Maybe. But…the way the dates are laid out. Something happened to Kira before something happened to L, or at least something happened to them both at about the same time. It doesn't make sense for Kira to kill L, and then he stops killing altogether."

"Unless the Kiras had a change of heart," Matt scoffed, aware of how likely that scenario was. Mello scowled in response.

The further they rolled down, the more unraveled Mello became inside. Matt could tell this because of the way Mello's breath grew shorter, more ragged. He was winding his rosary so tightly around his fingers, they looked ready to pop. But it was too late to turn back now.

"Mello. It says here that the killings stopped two days before Mr. Wammy died."

How was it that it had taken them so long to learn about L's death when the killings had stopped
cold some weeks before? The last known criminal to have had a heart attack died November 3rd.

But, news about Kira-related deaths continued for two more days. November 5th. The day Wammy—Watari—died.

L had set up a trap. Somehow he must've seen through their plan to smuggle another notebook under his nose, stolen it, and switched it with a replica. Then he'd sold fake stories to the news people to make it look like Kira was still killing. He'd baited the two Kiras into exposing themselves.

…

Then why hadn't there been a public announcement about Kira's capture?

"Says that Light Yagami died right after he was exposed. November 5th. 'Under unforeseeable circumstances.' Does he mean like how Higuchi died? The Second Kira Misa lived though. She had her memory wiped so she couldn't be prosecuted, not without having to disclose the notebook's existence. Says that might've had to do with the fact that he burned both notebooks after all this happened. Talk about getting away with murder."

…

"That's it."

"What?"

"That's it, Matt. How could L have known what had happened to Kira if he had died before him? He...he must've used his power against him."

"What d'ya mean, like he wrote Light Yagami's name in the Death Note and manipulated his actions so he'd act the way he did and incriminate himself before dying?"

As monstrous as that idea sounded, it wasn't impossible. The only thing that challenged that theory was the fact that the Second Kira had been spared. He would've done this to both of them, wouldn't he?

Mello's answer came out hoarse, the circulation draining out of his fists, the tighter he clenched them. The chocolate snapped into useless chunks dropping at his feet.

"He used the Death Note on himself. Gave himself immunity to Kira's Death Note. Bought himself some time."

L, the Great Detective, had committed a mortal sin for the sake of solving the case of the century. Suicide. The act of rejecting life itself. Only the weak and spineless would resort to such a thing. A had done the same thing when he'd cracked under the pressure. B had attempted it, though for different reasons, and had been thwarted. At least physically. Psychologically, he was an overcooked shell up until he'd died in prison.

But never had he expected L of all people…

Matt wanted to feel proud of himself. He knew he didn't have what it took to be a detective, never mind a super-detective like L, nor did he want to try that path. But if they weren't supposed to see this file, L must've put as many locks on it as was possible. He, an amateur, after almost two hours,
sore fingers and a stiff neck, had managed to crack all the codes.

But accomplishment was the last thing he felt right now. It didn't change the fact that L had had them believing that he was still fighting Kira, when in actuality he was dying. He had strung them all along. He still hadn't named a successor at the end of it all. Had that been deliberate?

Hadn't he considered that eventually they'd need to know and would find out one way or another?

Had he cared enough about them to even think of it?

He'd created this record to be read after he'd passed on. The dead didn't have to answer for anything. L had chosen the coward's way out. L, a coward. Was it possible to put those words together in a sentence?

Suddenly the stories he'd told him, about B and A and Los Angeles took on a whole new meaning, and for once, albeit against his will, he realized that Near had had a point back there in Roger's office.

"Mello…?"

Mello sat quiet. Like a volcano just moments before it erupted.

Firm achievement, my fucking ass.

Then the sugar found its way against the wall, snowing down on them in a cascade of glass and grainy white particles. Matt shielded his face, seeing Mello's legs spring up and storm out of the cubicle from underneath his arm.

Looking for something else to toss, Mello's destructive gaze turned to the dull red rosary that he had intertwined between his fingers, cutting into his flesh. The tiny cross swayed to and fro like the pendulum in the old grandfather clock back home. Why did he still carry this old thing around? Because he had given it to him? It was supposed to "protect him in times of adversity?" It burned in his hands every time he held it, the same way his mouth burned with the sickly-sweet aftertaste of chocolate. The same way his mind burned.

Why couldn't he just get rid of it already?

Snarling to himself, he undid the tangles of beads and jammed the rattling jewelry deep within his coat pocket.

Matt tried to go after him but didn't make it past the threshold. "Hey c'mon, Mello! You're blowing this out of proportion," he barked, trying not to make too much of a scene, but judging by the looks many were giving them, failing at it. "So he turned out to be a selfish arsehole—so what if—"

Never before had Mello's eyes bulged so far out with fury. It was like he was trying to blow Matt's brains out just by glaring at him. His words, his breath singed his cheeks like fire. "Save it. I'm done. I don't want anything more to do with him. Or Near, or any of them."

Matt froze. Even me? After everything? Just like that?

"The hell are you gonna go, huh?"

"Like I told Roger, to start living my own life. Don't try to follow me."

"But Mell—"
"I said don't follow me!"

Mello had pitched tantrums like this many times over the years, none of them worth taking that seriously. But this time Matt could hear a distinct malevolence in his voice, one that couldn't be so easily brushed aside. Like he was threatening his physical well-being if he took so much as one step after him.

Who would have thought that he'd be talking like this to the closest thing he'd had to a friend in a long time?

All this time I've been following a false idol. I invested everything in him. Now...he's abandoned us. He's abandoned me. I just can't stay anymore.

"So you think walking out yourself will make things right?"

Mello's head rattled, as though trying to come up with a strong enough argument that would justify his point. Instead, he gave a snort, turned on his leather heels, and stormed towards the exit. With the soft tinkle of a bell, he disappeared into the bone-white light of the autumn sun.

The already strong smell of cleaners almost became too much to bear. It made Matt dizzy and it pounded on his temples, almost like the scent of a fresh bottle of glue. That was what this whole experience was, like that time he'd tried huffing just to see what the fuss was about. After getting whacked with the mother of all headaches (from both the comedown and Roger's ear-chewing), he hadn't done it again since. There were plenty other things to experiment with.

Somehow, this headache managed to be worse than that. He sure could use something to take off this edge, right now. But what?

Trying to save whatever face he'd had left, Matt went back into the cubicle, ignoring the confused and bewildered stares and mutterings.

"Goddammit, Mello."

A strong word for someone who was barely fourteen. But no other word he could think of seemed strong enough. He rested his forehead against his knuckles, shaking his head. This was just another tantrum. His worst one to date, for sure, but a tantrum all the same. In a few days, Mello would cool off and come back, act like this never happened. Like he always did.

Right?

He knew he wouldn't get an answer, but he had to ask anyway. He plopped back into his chair, fixing his sleepy dark blue eyes on the words on the screen.

"Damn. How could you do this to him?"

…

"What was that? You actually want to meet him?" scoffed Deridovely, a big-lipped, eyeless mummy-like creature wrapped in bandages.

"That's right."

"Why waste your time talking to him?" sneered Zellogi, waving his rusted hook for a left paw, the feathers in his headdress rustling like catty words of gossip.
Gukku, a hairy shinigami with a goat's skull for a head, chimed in, "Yeah, it's not like he'll tell ya anything interesting."

"Forget it! It's pointless!"

"Shuddup and answer my question!" Lumen pulled out from behind him a weapon that resembled a zanbatō but was made up entirely of bone, like its wielder. He slammed it into the sand, rock and bone that made up the ground on which they sat, its mighty thump against a boulder echoing across the dark, endless plain as the only sound for immeasurable miles.

"I know he's around here somewhere," he growled, his fierce eyes burning from deep within his sockets, almost as brightly as the gems embedded in his goggles, as red as the band wrapped around his skull. "I wanna talk to this shinigami. I heard he had some fun in the human world."

The three, surprised and somewhat amused by his determination, conceded and pointed him to the far east, where there sat a cave that overlooked a valley of rusted chains and giant bones protruding from the ground like ribs from a half-buried decomposed creature. What did they have to lose? They even told him to make sure to bring an offering ("If you don't give him one of those, he won't bother with ya").

Lumen climbed up the crumbling steps in his lumbering way to find Ryuk perched over the edge of the cliff at the top of them, peering out at the empty gloom that stretched out below him. As soon as he heard the stranger approach, he turned his head, his blue lips still frozen in a grin, as though still replaying in his mind the great adventure he'd had in the other world. The living world.

The two stared each other down for what could have been eternity, if either of them could wait that long. "Who are you?"

"Call me Lumen. I've been looking for you. I wanna hear your story."

"Story?"

"I'll make it worth your while," he promised. He tossed an object straight on at Ryuk's blanched, mask-like face. Ryuk's reflexes were just as swift, and he caught it in his giant paw. His round, bulging red eyes gleamed with interest when he looked over the gift. An apple. An apple of course from this world, skinny and brown and wrinkled and that hung off the tall black things that resembled dead trees from the other world.

When was the last time someone had tossed him an apple? For that matter, when was the last time someone had been so brazen with him?

This new guy, Lumen…he just showed up one day and had been wandering all over ever since, too restless to nap or gamble like the others. Naturally, he was looked down on for it. What was the point to his wandering? Was he searching for something? There was nothing to be found here.

Maybe that was why Lumen had sought him out?

Ryuk chuckled. "I would've liked one that's a little more juicy, but oh well. It'll hafta do." Pinching the fruit by its short crooked stem, he dropped it into his cavernous mouth and took his time chewing it, his sharp teeth gnashing the dry fruit between them as though he were chewing on sand. No, this didn't hold a candle to the plump, juicy blood-red apples from the other world.

"I wanna go down to the human world," Lumen declared, a devious lilt in his words. "I'm sick of this place, it's so boring! I've heard that the human world is a lot more interesting."
Ryuk swallowed. He couldn't stop smiling. Where had he heard this before? Where before had he seen that otherworldly grin, so large that it literally split his face well up to where the ears would be if he had them? "Well, it's no use complaining about how boring it is here. Now, if you were thinking of doing something stupid, like changing the human world…that would be something."

He tossed his head. "Huh…I was getting bored, anyway. I'll humor you. Take it as my appreciation for giving me that lousy apple. I'll tell you the story of a human I once knew, just a couple years ago in fact, if you go by the human calendar. One who tried to change the world and become God."

Lumen perked up, prepared to give Ryuk his undivided attention, however much he had. Thus Ryuk launched into an epic, laughing or shaking his head now and then as he gave words to every memory that flashed before his eyes as fresh as the moments in which they'd happened.

Light Yagami had everything that any human could want: good looks, charm, intelligence, talent, wealth, a loving family, friends and most importantly a future. He was perfect in every way…so it'd seem on the surface.

But none of this was enough for Light. He may have been perfect, but the world around him was far from it. In fact, in his eyes it was rotten, almost as rotten as Ryuk and now Lumen saw their own world. But what could he do about it? He still had to go through college before he could so much as step onto the police force as an equal. He was slowly sinking into a pit of despair behind a mask of complacency.

Then he found that black notebook lying inexplicably out in the open in the schoolyard, courtesy of Ryuk, who had decided to make a different kind of gamble in hopes that something neat would happen. "I wrote all the instructions in the cover in English, since that's supposed to be the most popular language of the human world. I didn't really mean to drop it in that particular place. In fact, I think I had my eyes shut when I did it," he joked.

"How can you shut your eyes? Shinigami don't have lids over their eyes," said Lumen. "They sleep, but they don't have eyelids. Humans have them, though."

"Oh, yeah. Well, what I mean to say is I didn't look. I thought it'd be more fun to surprise myself, and besides I didn't have to. Whoever picks up a dropped notebook becomes its owner. That makes a sort of connection between him or her and a shinigami. I waited for a few days, and then used that binding whatever to find the kid."

By the time he had found him, Light had already filled out at least five pages with the names of the worst criminals, people who he thought were making the world rotten. If he at all had felt so much as a twinge of horror over the reality of the Death Note's power, Ryuk had missed that part (unfortunately), and when they had met, he had clearly gotten over it. Thanking Ryuk for introducing this power to him, he announced that he would now use this newfound power to change the world. The worst of humans would be punished for their sins, the pure at heart could live without fear, and those who even thought about doing wrong would think twice.

The world would be better, and at the top of it all Light would reign over as its god.

Ryuk paused to scoff. "Y'know, looking back, sometimes I wonder how much of that he really meant. He couldn't have known off the bat that the notebook was real; he had to try it first. A perfect guy like him, straight as an arrow, goes and kills a couple folks…I don't think he could handle that. He even told me, me of all people, when we met that the Death Note makes someone wanna use it.

"I dunno how true that is, but what a panic, to think that one human would try to change the entire
world only so he can justify his own crimes. Or maybe he really did just care enough about his world to want to change it for the better? Who knows? You can never quite tell with humans. It's one of those things that make them interesting. At any rate, he introduced me to apples, so that's something."

It didn't take long for Light to start catching the world's attention through his actions. They started calling him "Kira," the Japanese pronunciation of the English word "Killer." Many praised him for his protecting the weak and bringing many crime victims closure. Others were more resistant. Oh yes, Light garnered some bad attention, as well. This crazy detective called "L" got on his case. That was when things started to really pick up.

Soon it became a game of, as humans would call it, cat-and-mouse. Each of them had to hunt each other down without knowing each other's name or face. Whoever was found out first would die.

Ryuk personally wasn't crazy about the guy, but Light found an equal, a kindred soul in L despite being enemies, something he hadn't found before in anyone else. L was just as cold-blooded and calculating as Light, and managed to get quite a few good licks in on him, though Light would generally pay him back in kind. Being the son of the chief of the police force gave him an edge ("It also made for some pretty awkward conversations around dinner").

Over those next few months they would get closer, under the pretense of a "good friendship," all the while trying to feel out each other's identity, enough so one could kill the other. Light would gain an ally in a girl with the Shinigami Eyes who was too much in love with him to be considered sane, as well as half in love with death. "She was cute, though, I'll give her that. Sometimes you couldn't help but feel sorry for her, what with the way Light played around with her and she let him. But underneath it, she could be nasty in her own right. Had Rem wrapped around her little finger and she knew it."

"A shinigami mooning over a human? You're making that up," Lumen clucked, disbelieving and frankly disgusted by the idea.

"I don't make things up, though I can't really blame you for thinking so. It is kinda silly. And it was bad for Rem. Light milked that for all it was worth."

Light had a penchant for bending the rules of the notebook to his whims without actually breaking them. Not only did he manage to clear his name with a couple of fake rules and a temporary memory wipe for them both, but he even got someone else to act as Kira in the meantime and take the fall. Some white-collar loser after status, and who had the hots for Misa despite being more than ten years her senior.

Eventually, it would all come to a boil. Misa found the notebook Light had buried and traded for the Eyes again, despite Ryuk's pointing out that her lifespan had already been halved from making the Eye Deal with Rem. She took up killing again.

L was going to test the notebook. He was going to hurt Misa. Already shaken from her dealings with Higuchi and Light, Rem wasted no time in using her notebook to kill off both L and his right-hand man. Or at least, she'd succeeded in killing one of them.

But L had somehow caught wind of Light's plan—or at least most of it. He used the Death Note against him. In one fatal stroke of irony, Light had gone from being just shy of the top of the world to being totally screwed. The looks on all his friends' faces when they circled him were priceless. Especially his old man's.

Now Ryuk had his dog-eared notebook open in his lap, staring at his crooked handwriting on one
particular yellowed page. His name was still there, after all these years. Light Yagami. "Moon Night God."

"I figured that it was time to put him out of his misery. I didn't feel like waiting until he died in prison. That would've been boring, compared to everything that'd happened up 'til then. So, he lost the game. But, he did kinda win, too. That L guy died not long after he did, all alone. But before he did, he burned the notebooks. He wasn't as interesting as Light in that respect. I was kinda hoping he'd try it out, what with how similar he was to Light. I guess no two humans are exactly alike, another thing that makes them interesting…

"It's a shame, really, how it all ended so soon…I can't help but miss him, a little…"

How did this happen? How could it all amount to naught after everything he gave up? Wasn't Light supposed to be "the god of a new world?"

"No, Light. You weren't actually a god, back then," he murmured. "You were something else."

All this time of trying to become a god, Light had forgotten that for all of his brilliance, he was still human. Nothing he did could take away from that fact. Humans had flaws. If Light had any, it would've been that he had never once doubted his abilities. His foolish pride.

Was it the notebook poisoning his mind, or had his mind always been poisoned?

Ryuk noticed the lack of commentary from his visitor. When he turned to look into the darkness behind him, Lumen was gone. Like he'd never been there.

"Huh, he left." He hadn't noticed him lumber back down those steps. Had he even stuck around to hear the end of his tale?

So that's it, huh?

Wheezing, Ryuk returned to gaze out into the abyss. "Go ahead. Why not give it a shot? If you're lucky, some unbelievable guy might just pick up your notebook. Maybe you'll get to see something you'll never forget for the rest of your life. That's what I think."

"Wouldn't you agree…Light?"

…

"So did you find him?"

Umbra didn't look back at him as he ambled up behind him. He didn't have to. He could recognize that crunch of boots across the bone-white sand from anywhere.

"You were right, Umbra," Lumen announced, his gravelly voice carrying a faraway pitch to it, for he was still rapt by the story he had heard. Shinigami were not swept away by almost anything, most of them having seen it all. And yet the way he spoke, Umbra would have thought he had had…what did humans call it, an ecstatic vision? An epiphany? "That Ryuk had quite an adventure in the world below us. He told me everything and all I had to do was give him a measly apple."

In contrast, Umbra's words were as soft as the gust whipping sand into his dark unruly mane, or the last more or less peaceful breaths of a dying man. "How did it end?"

Lumen scratched his equally unruly mane as murky and brown as dried blood. "Huh? I don't know, I didn't stay for that part. I think the human he hung out with died or something. But who cares
how it ended? What matters is that when Ryuk dropped his Death Note into the world below, this human did interesting things with it. He tried to become a god, like one of us, only more magnificent."

"Why doesn't it matter how it ended?"

"'End.' Heh. How do we even know what that word means?" Lumen snorted. "Humans have ends. They're born, they live a while, they die whether we will them to or not. But shinigami…we have no end. This boring world we live in has no end. Or beginning, for that matter. No one remembers where they came from or when. Even I don't know how I got here, and neither do you. We just are."

Umbra didn't partake in their games, nor did he speak very much. Instead, he watched. He listened. He observed. Once he'd had his fill of shinigami life, which happened fairly quickly, he would turn his sights to the many portals that opened into the world below. Admittedly yes, the human world seemed to have much more to offer with all its colors, its sounds, its vibrancy. But unlike their world, it was all finite, wasn't it?

If he were to go there himself, could he bear it?

He didn't know, nor was he sure he wanted to find out. Unlike Lumen, always wandering about in his quest for novelty, he was content to sit in one spot and watch from a distance, crouched on his long, spiny grasshopper-like legs, four of his spidery paws resting on his knees and two supporting his jaw. Probably no one would've known that he existed if it weren't for Lumen coming back time and again to chew his ear off about this or that (if he had ears to be chewed).

Besides, the only business a shinigami would have in the human world was if they'd somehow lost their notebook in that place. It didn't sound worth the trouble to him.

Lumen begged to differ.

He peered over Umbra's head, at the watery image of a girl tucked in her bed fast asleep. A black cat was curled up at her feet.

If Lumen could frown, he might have. "Huh. Seems that almost every time I catch you here, you're staring at that particular human. Why don't you just kill her, already? Make up for all the time you've wasted looking at her."

"I'm not interested in her. She lives in the same building as several other humans. I'm looking through all of them."

"That's funny. It just seems that every time you're at a portal, you keep going back to look at that one, for some reason. Not that I care what you do, 'cause I don't."

This was the sentiment for most shinigami towards each other's affairs. They didn't exactly have bosom friends in each other but some would congregate anyway, for games and whatnot. Perhaps because it was better than the alternative?

"You just contradicted yourself."

Lumen was taken aback. "Huh? What d'ya mean?"

Without looking at him, Umbra said, "You said that shinigami have no end. Doesn't the fact that you're suggesting that I kill this human to make up for lost time mean that we do have an end?"
Lumen grunted to himself. Shinigami didn't value reason and logic like humans did, only to the extent of how it applied to their lives, which beyond following the laws of their world and of their notebooks, was not far-reaching. Shinigami, unlike humans, had nothing to argue or squabble over except the occasional gambling foul, but even these were insignificant.

That was not to say that there couldn't be exceptions. "Well, that's my point! As long as we keep killing humans for their remaining years, we can live forever! Humans can't lengthen their lifespans, only shorten them. So we really do have no end."

"Then what's the point if this life is so boring?"

No self-respecting shinigami would admit to it, but deep down they were all afraid. Maybe their world was boring, but what else was there besides it and the finite human world below them? That was why shinigami killed humans, to collect on the surplus of time. No one could see their lifespans nor could they see each other's, but that didn't quench their drive to kill as they sensed their time slipping away from them. No one wanted to think about what would happen if, or when, their time ran out.

Perhaps shinigami were similar to humans, in that way. They just had the means to delay the inevitable. Indefinitely, if they wanted.

"We'll just have to make our own excitement," spat Lumen, tossing his head. "We've got all the time to do whatever we want. If Ryuk could do it, there's no reason why we couldn't."

Umbra squinted his white, beady, pupil-less eyes. "But the only way to get down there is if you dropped your notebook. I don't know if one visit to the human world is worth sacrificing your notebook."

Lumen clasped his large, skeletal paws. "Hmm…I'll find a way around it. I don't care if you go or not, but I'm doing this one way or another. That girl there doesn't seem all that special. She won't do. I need a human like the one Ryuk met. Someone like Light Yagami."

"How will you know when you've found him or her?"

Lumen didn't answer for a beat. He peered up through his goggles into the dreary nothingness hanging over them like a shroud. "I'll find a way around it. I don't care if you go or not, but I'm doing this one way or another. That girl there doesn't seem all that special. She won't do. I need a human like the one Ryuk met. Someone like Light Yagami."

Umbra doubted that discriminating in such a way would produce the same results that Ryuk's experience had. But he kept this thought to himself. As he listened to Lumen lumber away, his long ragged coat swishing behind him, he murmured, "Good luck with that."

When he could no longer hear Lumen's footsteps, he adjusted his view back to the messy-haired girl, who was now starting to stir and pawing around for her alarm clock.
Erin was already in the throes of wrestling with the unbearable August humidity, her room transformed into a sauna. The AC had broken down on Friday, and the repairman wouldn't be able to come over until Wednesday afternoon. Until then, she and Lawliet had battled with the heat every way they knew how, from throwing all the covers off the bed except the spreadsheet, now soaked underneath her with sweat, to sharing the fan that swept back and forth from head to foot and back again, cranked up to level three.

The whir of the fan and strange cool of the sweat-soaked sheet and pillows were just about to lure her to sleep when thumps on the other side of the wall snapped her awake. Mice? No. These were too loud and clunky to just be mice. Besides, she was sure that whatever pest problem they'd had, Lawliet had taken care of it. Where else could he have found all those mangled critters he used to leave for her on the sofa or at her computer?

Crash!

Lawliet, with his feline reflexes, leapt off the bed instantly, landing on his nimble black paws as Erin scrambled on the side of the bed, reaching for old Louie who lay wedged between the mattress and the bedpost. Farley had given her his old Louisville slugger before she'd left home, in case of this sort of thing.

"I was planning to give Louie to my kid if I ever have one, but I think right now you'll need him more if you won't get a gun. I'd like my kids to have an aunt in their lives, no matter where she is or what she's doing."

"It's kinda early to be talking about kids, don't you think? That kind of talk, you're gonna scare Penny away."

"That kind of talk, you're gonna scare all the guys away. You better know what you're doing, sis, moving all the way across the friggin' country. To LA, no less."

"Aw, come on. Deep down you must've known that I'd go there one day."

"Heh. Then I guess all I can say at this point is, brace yourself for a fucking of epic proportions. When you've had enough, you know where to find us."

"I love you too, bro. Thanks for giving me Louie. I'll take care of him."

The bat in her hand, she crept towards the door with bated breath, her heart slamming into her ribs with increasing force as the thumps increased in intensity. She could hear stuff, her stuff, getting tossed around. She peeked through the crack in the door. In what little light that poured in through the window from the porch light outside, a long shadow stretched down the hall, dancing frantically along the wall.

Shit.

Louie became hot and slippery in her fists. The past four or so years had stripped away some of her naivety; she hadn't come to this city totally unaware of the dangers. Still, placing her faith in the inner goodness of people, she hadn't counted on someone dropping by on her humble abode like this except perhaps her landlord demanding the occasional late rent check. LA couldn't have been that different from New York. With a name like Los Angeles—Spanish for "The Angels"—a stranger would think that this would be one of the safer and more blessed parts of the country.
Erin didn't have time to dwell on such irony. She felt Lawliet's fur twitch and bristle against her bare ankle, his hiss low and ominous like a gas leak. Aside from the hunting and bringing home dead things, he wasn't generally aggressive, from what Erin could see. Most of the time, he kept to himself, preferring to hide in dark nooks and crannies, showing himself when he felt like it; such was the attitude of many cats (and some people).

She squinted, against the salty sting of sweat, the lack of light, and her own bad eyesight, having had no time to put on contacts or her glasses. She could make out the silhouette of a figure fumbling around the couch.

Another known fact: cats were territorial. Before it could register to her, he had squeezed out the door and bounded around the corner, lost to the shadows in a flash.

"Lawliet, no—"

A yowl. Shrill and piercing, like a baby screaming bloody murder. Lawliet's scream, matched only by the string of thick, accented profanities entwining with it in a dreadful duet.

Any embarrassment she might have normally felt about having someone see her in nothing but a stained white wife-beater and yellow panties poured out of her as she charged for her target, ignoring the sharp pain shooting up her foot as her toe collided with something hard—probably the door—numbed only by the pure rush of adrenaline pounding in her veins.

She thought she saw a glimmer. A knife? A screwdriver? Oh God, he had a weapon! Lawliet would get skewed, for sure!

"Stay away from my cat!"

Erin took a mighty swing. And another. And another, with only two, three seconds in between. Don't let up, they'd said, even if it looked like the danger had passed. Keep fighting, keep making a ruckus.

The issue of beating an assailant to a black, blue, bloody and dead pulp wasn't exactly touched down on. Erin didn't like the idea of killing someone, even in self-defense. Whatever happened to "shoot to stop, not kill?"

"It's either you or him."

Why couldn't it be both? Or neither?

POW! POW! POW!

Erin tried to keep a good distance, close enough to keep landing blows, but far enough so he couldn't reach her with his own weapon. Whatever he was shouting out, she could hardly hear him over the thundering of her own pulse. The entire apartment exploded with a blast of heat and the sound of bone colliding with furniture.

Then the air seemed to fall flat, for the most precious of moments. Taking care not to let Louie fall out of her hands, she blinked back into focus and squinted down at the stranger sprawled out on the floor, brushing a few greasy locks of hair out of her face.

He—a man from the looks of it—was face-down, a ski mask over his head, but he looked to be about in his twenties, if not late teens. A few holes in the back of the mask betrayed patches of dark, curly hair. His clothing was dark and grubby, consisting of a black hoodie, leather gloves, jeans, and a ratty pair of sneakers. Only someone with burglary on his mind would dress up this
warmly in this weather.

Then she saw it, there in his gloved hand. A pocketknife, splattered with shiny dark red. Blood.

Oh no…

Erin didn't have time to call out to Lawliet, wherever he was at. Right then, the man, moaning and cursing to himself, began scrambling back onto his feet, the knife shaking in his hands with punch-drunk but too clear intentions.

Without thinking, she swung at him again. Louie met his side with a loud fleshy clunk that made Erin wince and the guy on the receiving end topple back over, once again knocking the coffee table out of place with his head. She wasted no time half-jumping off the loveseat and body-slamming him into the carpet, straddling him around his thin waist and wrestling him into a rear chokehold, one arm strapped over his arm and across his chest, the other pressed over his head with Louie squeezed between the two. He smelled of sweat and testosterone and anger, his breath pungent and ragged as he tried to get back the wind she had knocked out of him.

"You—you crazy bitch," he slurred into the floor, squirming in her grip as he tried to reach for the knife just inches away from him. "I'll sue your ass in court."

"Really?" Erin gasped. "You break into my apartment, try to steal my shit, almost maul my cat, and I'm getting sued? F-for protecting what's mine?"

"Yeah! S'not like you need the money that bad." Did he mean this? Or was he undergoing the first throes of a concussion? Erin wasn't sure how many times she'd whacked him upside the noggin, if any, but he'd fallen against the coffee table at least twice. Without losing too much of her grip, she worked up her fingertips. Grasping at the warm, wet edges of the hole in the mask, she jerked his head and ripped off the mask. His skin was olive, moistened and shiny with sweat, the right side of his angular face smeared with drying blood that trickled from the gash that stretched from his eye to his hairline.

A twinge of remorse shot through her chest. This was exactly the sort of thing she dreaded about these kinds of situations, besides the other obvious thing.

She used Louie to drag the knife across the floor, far enough away from the man underneath her, but close enough so she could get to it. "Aw, jeez. Sorry I wailed on you. But, you know, if you hadn't broken into my place…I think an apology is in order."

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"Sorry? M-man, you just one crazy bitch, you know that?"

Yep. Definitely a concussion.

"So I've been called."

Maneuvering the knife into her hand (wiping off whatever blood she could on the carpet), she sat up, taking both of the man's wrists while Louie lay across his back. "I'm gonna have to tie you up," she warned him, still out of breath herself. "I-I don't wanna have to, but if you try to come at me again, I'll wail on you some more. Got it?"

The man grunted, trying to turn his head around, probably to spit in her face. Erin simply rolled Louie over his neck like a rolling pin over pizza dough, pinning him in place. His hands still writhing in hers, she panned them behind him—or above him, as it were—molding them into half-formed knuckles before stuffing them into his mask. Pinning his wrists down with Louie over them, she took the bloodied knife and, swallowing down her squeamishness, sliced a strip of cloth
from the hem of her wife-beater.

She hadn't expected her first confrontation with a burglar to pan over this well. But, perhaps she was giving herself too much credit? This kid, the clumsy way he'd broken in, the way he'd tried to attack her and how was putting up less resistance...it was possible that he hadn't been robbing for very long. In fact, what if this was his first time?

"You're new at this, at you?" she asked him.

"That s'posed to be a joke?"

"No, really." She needed to keep him awake, in case he really was getting a concussion. She needed to call 911. She needed to find oh God, where's Lawliet?

She was in the middle of tying the cloth around his wrists, binding his hands within the confines of his mask, when a familiar voice bellowed, "Hey! The hell's goin' on in 'ere?"

Erin heard the patter of slippers across broken glass. She didn't look up, though. She couldn't. "Yo Frank, took you long enough! C'mere, help me flip this guy over! It's okay, his hands are tied."

Frank made a bewildered noise, but deciding it best to ask questions later, slipped his pistol back into the pocket of his robe. He crossed through the gaping threshold that used to be the back door, stumbling over the old brick on the floor—no doubt the means the thief had used to bust in.

Their combined effort huffed and puffed the man onto his seat, propped against the arm of the loveseat. His dark eyes seemed cloudy and unfocused, watering as Frank reached over to click on the lamp. He cursed under his breath, twisting his head as far away as he could from the garish sting of light.


"What do you think?" Erin would take no chances. She had already gone to undo the man's shoelaces so as to tie them together. Like Farley used to do as a prank when she was still learning how to tie them herself as a preschooler and she had asked him to show her how.

He wasn't trying to spit at her, this time. His semi-rattling head rolled to the side. She snapped her fingers in his face. "Hey, c'mon kid, stay with us. Frank, did you call 911 yet?" she gasped.

"Yeah, Macy was dialing 'em before I went out to check on you."

"You ask for an ambulance?"

"Wh-why? Oh shit, are you hurt?" Frank demanded, his beady eyes widening as he saw her torn wife-beater and the faint smears of blood clashing against the white cloth.

"No, no, I'm fine. I'm not so sure about this guy, though. He clonked his coconut against my table and took a couple whacks from my bat. He might have a concussion, but I'm not sure. Definitely gonna need stitches." Her words grew shakier by the second, in spite of her best attempt to steady it.

Both Frank and the intruder passed her odd looks. How many folks would beat the snot out of someone who'd just tried to burglarize them, and then go Good Samaritan on them in the same breath? "You sure you're not the one with the concussion?" he muttered.

"Frank!"
"Well, I'm sure they've sent the medics over, too. You say there's an emergency, they send the whole fucking cavalry."

Erin exhaled, still trembling with the rise and ebb of adrenaline through her body. She swiped both Louie and the knife from off the floor. "Watch him, I'm gonna get some ice from the fridge for his head, and then I need to find Lawliet. Keep talking to him, he's gotta stay awake until they get here. Ask him his name."

Frank drew back in disbelief. "What? Fine, whatever," he huffed. He took on a square stance in front of the delirious young man at his feet, his fingers caressing the pistol in his pocket, meaning to keep it within reach in case of signs of attack. "Hey boy, what's your name?"

No answer, except a groan.

Frank asked again, a bit louder, this time, "Hey boy, what's your name?"

"...Wassit to you, old fart?"

"Why, you—look, the cops are coming over any minute and they're gonna get your name anyhow. You might as well tell us what it is. I for one could care less but my neighbor, who you just tried to rob, for some reason is really itching to know what it is."

The young man swallowed hard. This was a stupid idea; what had made him go through with this? Because he needed to scrap up some dinero to pay off his debts? He should have just quit after narrowly escaping from the first place he'd robbed. Already these people were asking for his name. Once word had gotten out that his brother had been arrested, he was done for.

But then, how long had it been since Kira had killed his last victim? Three, four years? If he hadn't returned by now, maybe he truly was gone from the world? Maybe he realized how pointless it was to keep killing all the criminals? Maybe he'd died or had been caught by the cops in secret?

The heat and the throbbing in his skull made it hard to concentrate on coming up with a fake name to satisfy them. The man in the robe and the girl bounding out of the kitchen, everything in his field of vision came to him in rolling waves.

Perhaps if he had to die, he'd prefer that Kira do it than them. At least it'd be quick.

"...Miguel."

"Huh?"

"My name's Miguel."

The ice inside the plastic bag was already sweating in the palm of Erin's hand. The cold numbed and swelled up her hand, yet it was the closest thing to relief Erin had felt in the past few days. But, this ice was not for her. She knelt down in front of Miguel. "Hey Miguel, here's some ice," she said, working up the closest she could to a smile at that moment as she gently dabbed at the gash along his face, a dishrag wrapped around the bag to absorb the blood, sweat and condensation. "I'm Erin, and this is Frank. It's too bad we had to get acquainted this way, but you know...so, is it okay if I ask why the hell you tried to rob us, anyway?"

Miguel scowled. "That's nun'na your biz'ness. You—you really are a bitch. Acting nice to me before I get my ass hauled outta her—"

"Hey, we can be rougher on you if you want," Frank shot back. "I just so happen to have my pistol
on me, and I ain't afraid to use it. Ever heard of not bringing a knife to a gunfight, kiddo?"

"Guys, please! No more violence. Frank, hold this against his head, will ya?"

The older man shook his head, but complied with her request as Erin rose to her feet again. He did not kneel, however. Instead, he reached out his free hand to press the ice in place, still standing, still keeping his distance. His other hand never left his pocket.

"Lawliet? Lawliet, where are you? Are you okay?"

The wail of sirens outside drowned out whatever reply Lawliet would have made. Beams of flashing red and blue poured in through the window. Erin hurried over to the door when she heard footsteps approach and tore it open.

"Ma'am, we got a call that this apartment number was just broken into," said the cop at the head of the pack. "Is anyone hurt?" he asked, pausing to look at the wreck she no doubt looked like at the moment.

Erin glanced over at Louie gripped in her hand. "Ah! No, I'm okay. This is my apartment. The guy who broke in here, though, you might wanna look him over. He's banged up pretty bad. He's over by my couch, Frank's with 'im. I'm looking for my cat, so you just go on and do what you have to, Officer…"

"Officer Clancy, sorry for that." The officer turned to the cop on his left and briskly told him to alert the paramedics. "Ma'am, wait. Did you just say you were looking for your cat?"

"Uh-huh. As soon as we heard this guy break in, he ran out, probably to show him who's boss, you know?" she half-chuckled, in spite of herself. "He had a knife, and I think he hurt him with it. It's got blood on it. Here, this is it. You can ask Frank for more details." She dropped the weapon into Clancy's huge open hand, jogging a bit in place. She didn't like the look he had on, right then. Was he upset because she'd tampered with evidence at the scene of a crime? Or annoyed with the fact that she was more interested in finding her pet cat than in answering any questions?

By this time, several more neighbors popped out to see what the commotion was about, only to be deterred from their rubbernecks by the police. As a few more cops and the medics shot in from the back, Erin's mind buzzed with too many things happening all at once. She would think that she'd be used to this sort of thing, that anyone could get used to this, but apparently not. Or at least, she was not one of those types that could take such chaos in stride. Not like some people she knew.

…What was that? A hiss? Had she misheard?

She held up a finger. "Sssh! You hear that?" Reaching to pull what was left of her top over her thighs to cover her underwear (which did not help to cover much) when a flush of embarrassment began to trickle in against all odds, she sprang over to her TV.

There it was again, almost unnoticed in all this racket. But as she got down on her knees to glimpse into the cranny between the old TV and the wall, she could make out a black, bristling mass shivering within the tight space, hissing now and then in anger and unspoken fear and pain. His canines flashed in the shadows, his ears flattened against his head. What was left of them, anyway.

"Lawliet! Officer, he's behind my TV. I can't see him that good; does he look hurt?"

This time, another officer, a rookie named Andres, took out a flashlight, stooped over the TV and shined it into the space, while Clancy had headed straight for Frank and Miguel. Lawliet's pupils broadened even further in anxiety as he released a snarl. "Yikes! Looks like his ear's sliced in half.
His head's all bloody."

Son of a bitch. Forget burglary, what kind of son of a bitch would lash out at an animal? Tears of many emotions welled up in her eyes, but she couldn't indulge in them now. She had no time to dwell on her anger towards the man who'd done this. Right now, she needed to get Lawliet to the pet ER. She would have a good cry later when—or if, as it felt—this ended.

Besides, what more could she do to that poor bastard? He was already on the verge of passing out, and unless her ears deceived her he had just started gagging, like he was about to throw up. Once he pulled himself together and got out of the hospital, he should get enough time to think about his actions in jail. She would deal with him, then.

"Hey. Hey, it's okay, boy. I'm here. C'mere, we gotta—"

He snarled at her, making her draw back her hand a few inches.

"H-hey, it's not my fault you went after him like a little tough guy."

Or was it? Erin could've shut him up in her room before going to confront the intruder. He wouldn't have liked that, but it would've had a better outcome than this. At the very least, he'd have been less likely to get his ear sliced open.

No. This was no time for placing blame, either. Cats could be such difficult creatures. Claws and teeth didn't quite match up to knives, but as relatives to the mighty lions and tigers and cheetahs in the pages of Nat-Geo™, cats were too proud to heed such odds. Lawliet had roughed up the bad guy as best he could, and only when he was sure Erin could take over had he decided to retreat. Indeed, the term "scaredy-cat" was an outrageous misnomer that people had coined, an old wives' tale.

At least, Erin could only guess that this was what ran through the cat's mind. In that same vein, getting him into his carrier wouldn't be easy, especially with Officer Clancy insisting that he needed to hear from her on how this whole mess had went down.

"Hold on, I've got a pair of gloves," she said. "Keep an eye on him. Let me grab for him; the mess he is now, there's no way he's gonna let a stranger touch 'im. Last thing I need is to get charged 'cause he roughed up a cop." Oh, thank God for humor. Somehow, no matter how poorly placed, it seemed to make any situation just a bit more bearable.

"A-are you sure about that, ma'am?" asked a hesitant Officer Andres.

Erin nodded, swallowing down the sticky lump clogging her throat. "Trust me, I gotta go through this sort of thing with him all the time when he has to go see the vet just for check-ups." Louie in her hand, she dashed back for the kitchen, ripping off from the top of the fridge an old pair of arm-length leather gloves, worn from the many times a hot-'n'-bothered cat had attempted to sink his sharp teeth into them in hopes of escape. Erin had been trying to train him into going into his carrier voluntarily by using his favorite treats as positive reinforcement, like the book suggested.

But right now, she doubted whether treats would be enough to coax him, this time. Most if not all of the progress they'd made would probably slip down the drain after this. At the same time, Lawliet did not need to be man-handled. Miguel had done more than enough of that.

So she fumbled the gloves onto her sweating hands. With a composing sigh, she snatched up a towel and a can of the cat's version of kryptonite: catnip.
She was vaguely aware of the paramedics lugging Miguel out through the back door on a stretcher. When she returned, the can tucked under her arm and Louie in her hand, Andres was still looming over the TV, trying to keep Lawliet within sight without scaring him away by shining his flashlight directly on him. "Is he still back there?"

"Yeah."

"Sensational! Now, his carrier is by the front door. Go get it, please? I'll take care of him."

"Huh? Well, okay. I'll be quick!" Andres had a feeling that this wasn't exactly protocol in a break-in situation, but how could he say no to a distressed damsel and her wounded pet cat?

With Andres out of the way, Erin set Louie aside, peeled open the can and shook a pinch of the plant into her open hand. Just enough to calm him. Too much of the stuff would have him dinging off more junk than a pinball, like he'd snorted coke. Oh yes, Erin had learned that the hard way when she'd once made the mistake of leaving him with an entire open can.

As she lowered her hand out to him she swallowed again, this time to bite back the tears. Lawliet shouldn't need to see her cry, not while he was like this. Animals, particularly when stressed themselves, didn't typically react well to negative emotions (fear, mostly, the jury was still out on tears). She hoped that he wouldn't find the gloves as threatening as he used to; so far their training had consisted of her offering him treats while she wore them, eventually adding petting to the "reward," so he'd get accustomed to their presence. They had just started working on the carrier before this happened.

Would Lawliet go for the catnip despite his split ear? Though still snarling and hissing to himself, Lawliet began to slink out inch by inch as soon as the scent had hit his tiny velvet nose. As if he were begrudgingly following his companion's whims, or just his urge to chew on some nip. It wasn't as though he hadn't earned it through his valor.

Seeing the way he limped to her, keeping low to the floor as he licked his lips, ripped her heart out. She still couldn't see him clearly, but what she did see seemed to warrant a trip to the clinic. "Sssh…it's okay, Lawliet," she coaxed him, her voice growing soft. "You're gonna be okay. Come on, come get your nip. You earned it."

Andres came back just then with the open carrier, holding it out at arm's length. He knelt down and placed it behind her, his movements slow and deliberate so as not to startle the cat.

As soon as most of the nip had disappeared into his mouth, Erin wrapped him up in the towel burrito-style and took him by the scruff of his neck, the same way his mother would have likely done before her. Before he could start to protest, she eased him into the carrier sprinkled with hairs, zipping the flap shut behind him.

She didn't have much time to dress; before they'd left in Officer Andres's squad car, she'd thrown on a pair of ratty shorts, flip-flops and despite the heat, a denim jacket. Officer Clancy so happened to share the same ride, and he conceded to taking them to the nearest pet emergency clinic before starting questions.

Lawliet's right ear had been sliced in half and he had taken a stab of moderate depth to his right flank, another of less severity to his left shoulder blade. Had the knife touched anything important? Unlikely, said the doctor. "But just in case, we'll keep him here for a day or two to make sure. We're patching him up, right now. I'm sorry that this happened to you."
Thanks to the catnip, Lawliet put up less of a resistance than he would have normally, though the growling and hissing refused to yield. Erin was left alone in the stark white waiting room with two officers prodding her for her version of tonight's events. As best and as evenly as she could, she answered their questions one by one.

"So, you know who that guy was?" she asked once she found it the right time to ask.

"Miguel Mora, age 20. A guy who matched his description had tried to rob another place, couple nights ago," said Officer Clancy. "We think this might be the same guy, but we haven't gotten to putting him in custody, yet."

"You did a number on him," said Andres. "He's probably gonna be in the hospital for a few days. After that, he's going to jail."

Erin felt herself flush with fever, despite the blistering chill of the AC. So that guy was new at this, and younger than her, to boot. What would compel him to do such a thing as to break into someone's home and rob them? Money? She didn't have many extremely valuable things besides a laptop, a cell phone and a TV. But maybe if one was desperate enough, just about anything they looked at had dollar signs stamped all over it.

"Will he be okay?" she squeaked.

The men exchanged looks. They'd dealt with countless break-ins in this area, but not many victims asked if the perp would be okay.

"He said he would sue me for beating and tying him up. Am I going to have charges pressed against me, too?"

"Ma'am, he broke into your place and came at you and your cat with a knife," said Andres. "You had every right to protect yourself. Besides, it's not like you killed him." Something about Andres made Erin think of Matsuda for a moment then.

Clancy shot the younger officer a glazed look, his hazel eyes baggy and swollen from stress and the lack of sleep. "Well, I wouldn't take it that seriously. He has the right to an attorney, but only with regard to the charges against him. Whether he wants to sue you is his business. And I doubt he'd have much of a case if he went through with it."

Her eyes rolled to the bleached tiles under their feet as she wrung her hands, gritting her teeth. It was over. An overwhelming swell of emotions surged through her: relief and guilt and fear and anger and exhaustion and embarrassment and—

She bent over herself and rested her head on her arms to hide her slick greasy face, no longer able to hold it in. She had gotten lucky again, this time. Did she deserve it? She didn't know, and she was too tired to think that much about it. The adrenaline rush had left her as limp as an airless balloon.

"Ma'am?"

Erin wouldn't look up. As petty as it sounded, she didn't want these guys to see her crying. It wouldn't help anything, if they did. "I—I'm fine," she choked, "just gimme a minute." Still hiding her face in her jacket sleeve, she mumbled, "I-I need to use the bathroom," as she pushed herself onto her feet, still on hot pins and needles though they were.

…
The trill of the house phone shook her from her trance. Erin folded the paper over in her lap and reached over to snatch up the phone. In her haste, she forgot to check the ID flashing on the tiny screen. "Y'ello?"

"Yellow to you, too, Erin!"

She blinked in astonishment. She could recognize that chirping Japanese accent anywhere, and yet she couldn't believe it. "Misa?"

"The one and only!"

Erin bolted upright in an instant. "Whoa, I didn't expect to hear from you so soon! How's it going? Hey, where'ya at?"

"We're calling from the airport. We just got off the plane, but we didn't see you anywhere, so I thought I should give you a ring."

Airport…

Fuck me.

Erin clonked her forehead with the heel of her hand, feeling herself go red all over. "Aw, jeez! Misa, I'm so sorry! I totally forgot you and Kimiko were coming to LA today. I was s'posed to meet up with you, wasn't I? Nuts…I wanted to be the first to say welcome to Eagleland, but I reckon someone's already beat me to it."

She rose from the loveseat, slapping the paper on top of her laptop beside her, balancing the phone between her jaw and her shoulder as she hurried for her room to find something presentable to slip into.

"Uh, yeah, LA International. It's okay if you're late, though. Getting robbed is a pretty bad distraction for anyone."

Erin froze. "H—how did you—"

"I picked up one of those old tabloids they've got sitting around this place. Pretty busy place, and this is coming from someone from Japan. Anyway, this little article in the back, it said that a guy was arrested for breaking into your place…and assault…Erin, are you okay? What about your kitty, is he okay, too?" Misa asked, her voice getting a bit small for her.

Erin swallowed. This sort of thing hit a sore spot in Misa, herself a victim of a robbery that killed both her parents almost six years ago. Hadn't she told them repeatedly that she didn't want this posted in the paper in any way? On the other hand, who cared if people got their mugshots published in the next morning's installment, thoroughly humiliated for the more civilized demographic, so long as the public was kept aware of such crooks? If they wanted to avoid the whole mess, they shouldn't have done the crime in the first place. Or so was the idea.

Besides, it wasn't like they had anything to fear. Not anymore. It'd been almost four years, and not a single criminal who'd found his way into the media had died. Indeed, the world had changed since Kira disappeared as mysteriously as he'd come, though maybe not in the way he had had in mind.

"No, no, we're fine! He didn't even make off with anything. All I had to do with beat the snot outta him with my brother's bat," she answered, half-forcing a chuckle. "And Lawliet's fine, too."
If she could define "fine" for a cat as being half-bald and seething with a wonky ear. He had just come home from the clinic; today the doctor had removed the stitches, leaving train track-shaped scars on Lawliet's skin and an indentation around his neck from the cone they'd put on him so he wouldn't tear out the stitches. Since then Lawliet had refused to speak to her except in growls and hisses, like it was her fault that he looked like an extreme pet makeover gone horribly wrong. She had given him a pinch of catnip to take off some of the edge, which helped a bit, but she had to be careful not to give him too much too often. What if he built up a tolerance? Or worse, a dependence? Oh, he'd be a little monster, then.

Now he was off somewhere in their cozy apartment, doing who knows what. Hopefully not dumping hairballs or worse into her shoes like he used to as a kitten. Many valiant socks had given their lives when she slipped into the soiled footwear without looking first, leaving their mates alone and mismatched.

"I'm sorry that happened, Erin, I really am."

"Eh, no biggie. Really. It was like a week ago. Old news."

"Oh! I just had a thought!"

Erin sifted through her closet for a blouse. "That's dangerous."

"No, really! Come stay with me and Kimi for a while. We got this pretty house in the neighborhood that we'll be staying at while I make my Hollywood debut. It's big and roomy and safe. You can bring Lawliet here, too. Besides, we could use a guide to show us around."

Misa's English had gotten better over the years, as had Erin's Japanese. Her L's and R's started to sound a little more like L's and R's, but sometimes she would still mix them up. Her pronunciation of Lawliet's name was more like "Roraito."

Roraito. Lawliet. Low Light.

"Wh-what? For real? Uh…shucks, Misa, you don't have to do that," muttered Erin, shifting the phone back into the hollow in her shoulder as she pulled out a blue denim blouse with a white flower embroidered on it.

"Aaaww, come on! Please! It's only like, twenty minutes away from your apartment. You need to recuperate and we need a guide."

Pulling the blouse off the coat hanger, Erin laid it on her bed before approaching her dresser for a pair of jeans. "Well, erm, thanks, Misa, but really, it's not necessary. I don't need any recuperating. Just because it happened once, doesn't mean it's gonna happen every night. Ever since that went down, just about all my neighbors have gone out to get guns."

"I'll even pay for whatever damages you have."

Erin almost tripped herself. "What? No, no, you don't hafta do that! I've pretty much cleaned up the mess already." She paused to think back on the boxes from their move from NY that now lined up in front of the new back door as a makeshift blockade, each of them filled with things that she had had yet to unpack, but figured that they could stay packed for a bit longer. At least until she could get bars installed.

Which she didn't yet have the money for…

"Look Misa, I don't want to take money from you. Because then I'd owe you, and—"
Misa made a Bronx cheer, known by others as a raspberry. "Since I became a star, we've got more money than we know what to do with. We wouldn't miss it. Besides, you can pay us back by being our guide. You're a local, and more importantly, you're our friend. I trust you."

She felt something in her eye, right then. It'd taken them a long time to find each other again after splitting up in the aftermath of the Kira case. But when they did—thanks to good old Matsuda—they had become fairly close. As much as two girls on opposite sides of the world could be, at least. They talked over the phone or online often. Before this all happened, she never thought she'd become friends with someone like Misa. An idol. An ex-serial killer.

Not that the girl in question remembered any of it. Once Erin debated with herself as to whether she should tell her the truth, but had decided against it. No one else seemed to have told her, and it probably would've been a bad idea. Even Kimiko only knew as much as she had to.

At any rate, Misa never asked for the details, and whatever demons she had wrestled with over the past few years had seemed conquered. The girl Misa used to be was gone, and since then, she shined brighter than ever, in her career and her personal life. There was no telling how much longer she had left to live, but at least she was making the most of it. Why would Erin ruin all the happiness she had built up by telling her something that she might not even believe?

This had to be the first time Misa had said outright that she trusted her. How could she say no, now?

Besides, the AC guy still hadn't shown up. "Family emergency," or something. That was fine, but the heat was really taking a toll on both her and Lawliet's sanity, especially after the fiasco they'd just tussled with.

She sighed. "Well, Misa, I dunno how you do it, but people just can't say no to you, can they? And I guess I'm no exception."

Erin dropped the phone and pair of jeans when the sound of Misa's joyful squeal tore into her eardrum. "Yaaay! Misa is happy!"

As she fumbled with the device in her fingers, she sputtered, "I see you still like to refer to yourself in third-person."

"Why not? It's Misa's stick," said Misa, a wink underlying her tone.

"Um, you mean 'shtick.'"

"Yeah, that's what I said. Stick."

Erin shook her head, a smile playing at her lips. That Misa. What a bundle. All 79 pounds of her. "All right, then. So, I guess I'd better pack up my things, if I'm gonna stay with you guys at Castle Amane. It could take a while longer."

"Castle? I like the sound of that. 'Palace' sounds nice, too. Ooh-oooh! What if, instead of you coming to the airport, we can just catch a taxi and pick you up at your place? You'll save time and gas, that way."

This wasn't new. Misa had a history of changing plans at the last minute. "Ah, sure, whatever you say, Misa-Misa! Hey, I should let you know up front, I've seen Hollywood and all, but I'm not exactly besties with any A-listers. Or B-listers. The only real celebrity I know that well is you."

And L, and Light, and Watari. Rest their souls.
"Ho-ho! Then I guess we'll be helping each other out! You give us a tour, and I'll make you some very special friends."

Erin almost fell over. She couldn't deny that having contacts would be nothing short of good for her young career. But at the same time, she didn't want to use Misa like a ticket to get in with the in-crowd. "W-wow, gosh! I don't—you—"

"Yeah yeah, 'you don't have to do that.' I've heard it all before. You might as well accept it, Erin. I'm gonna do it, anyway. You know me."

…

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right. How right you are. So, take your time coming over, okay? Lawliet's not in the best of moods right now, so I'll need time to get him ready, too. We'll be waiting at the entrance of the complex. Don't wanna attract any unwanted attention, y'know?"

"'Kay! See you soon, Erin! Mwah!"

Click.

Erin hung up. Maybe she could ask Frank to watch her apartment for her while she was gone, just in case? He was the trustworthy, no-nonsense sort and toted a pistol. With Lawliet going with her, he wouldn't have to do much except water the flowers on her windowsill. She had some change to spare; she'd make it worth his while. If Misa insisted on paying for everything…

…

The reunion was a whirlwind of squeals and smiles and lung-compressing hugs, the instant Misa tore out of the cab, tugging a more reserved Kimiko along by the wrist. Erin couldn't resist sweeping the smaller girl off her feet and spinning her around once or twice.

"Oh Erin, I can't begin to tell you how wonderful it is to see you again! Oh! You're still wearing that old hat!" Over the years, Misa's wardrobe had toned down from the Gothic Lolita style she was so fond of and her colors had become brighter and gentler, though she still wore a streak of darkness when the mood struck her. Another one of her shticks as a celebrity, since they all needed at least one. Today, she came in a sleeveless red and pink striped top and a hip-hugging skirt, a pair of sequined sunglasses resting on top of her head. Both Amanes had dressed for the weather, with Kimiko in a simple canary yellow summer dress and wicker hat.

"Weh-hell, this old hat happens to be my rabbit's foot. And it's my stick," said Erin with a wink. For Kimiko, she bowed from the waist and offered her hand to shake. "Good to see you, Kimiko," she greeted in the Amanes' native tongue.

The older woman bowed in turn, a shy smile on her lips as she propped herself up between her cane and the car door, taking Erin's hand in her own. She had her sunglasses over her eyes. "The pleasure is mine," she replied, her voice softer and deeper than her younger sister's. "It's good that Misa has friends here in America to show us around."

"Tch! I'd have been lost in Japan if it weren't for Misa."

Seeing the pet carrier by Erin's feet, Misa knelt down to peek at the shaven, growling mass glaring back at her. "Oh no! What happened to Lawliet? He looks terrible!"

Lawliet hissed at her, as if to say, "You think?"
Erin scratched the back of her head. "Aw, he got in a, erm, catfight the other day with somebody bigger than him. He's just cranky because he got a little roughed up, and 'cause it's hot. He'll be back to his regular adorable self when his fur grows back. He might shed more than usual, though."

"Let's get him in the cab, quick! It's cool in here. The house should be even cooler!"

While the ladies helped Erin pack her things next to theirs, Kimiko read the name tag attached to the carrier and remarked, "Law…liet…that's a strange name for a cat." Her accent was thicker than Misa's, and the name rolled a bit on her tongue. "Roraito."

"He's a cat, of course he's gonna have a weird name," Erin chuckled. "Better than Mittens or Fuzzy or Whiskers. 'Specially since right now, he's not exactly any of those things."

"Where did you come up with it?"

"He likes to lie low in dim-lit places. It looked a little awkward to me on paper to spell it like 'Low Light,' so I tweaked it to make it look nicer, you know?"

No one noticed the odd glance Misa slid their way from the other side of the taxi as she slid inside.

"Misa, do you think it's okay to have a cat in the house?" asked Kimiko, concerned. "What about Jun'ai?"

Misa shrugged. "His cage hangs from the wall all by itself; I think he'll be fine," she called from in the passenger's side. "Unless your cat grows wings or something, ha ha. I've got shotgun!"

"You're too short for shotgun, Misa," Erin teased, taking Lawliet's carrier into her lap as she and Kimiko climbed into the back seat.

Misa stuck out her foot before pulling it back in and slamming the door, showing off her new black knee-length, high-heeled boots. "That's why I'm wearing heels! Now, Mr. Taxi Driver," she commanded into the disgruntled man's ear, "onward to Castle Amane!"

The house the Amane sisters had picked out months in advance was nicer than Misa had described over the phone. Not quite a huge honking mansion like some of its neighbors in 90210, but it was spacious for two women, let alone three plus a cat, a property of little over 1550 square meters. "About 16,750 square feet," Kimiko added. "The house itself is about 310 square meters."

"What's that in feet?" Erin asked, not the type who could work with numbers in her head without a paper and pencil or a calculator in front of her.

"Ah, 3360, squared." Kimiko glanced at her feet, not the type to want to look like a know-it-all. "These are just estimates, of course. Five bedrooms, four bathrooms. It's lovely for an old house; it was supposedly built in 1949."

"Kimi's always been a fan of numbers, can't you tell? I wanted a big palace where I can throw huge parties and invite lots of people," said Misa. "But Kimi wanted something smaller and cozier. So we met in the middle."

Erin appraised the quickly approaching house from her seat by the open window. Relishing in the cool breeze drying the sweat dotting her face, she whistled. "Dang, how much was it?"

Misa answered with a flippant toss of her hair, "Oh, three million or something." The little pigtails didn't show up nearly as often anymore either, as Misa had found a preference for wearing her hair completely down.
Erin wanted to faint. "Th-three million?" she sputtered. "Where the hey did you cough up that much dough?"

"I told you, Misa's a star! We're putting things on the dog! We're living large!"

"B-but not too large," chided Kimiko, leaning over in her seatbelt and slowly reaching across to touch her sister's shoulder.

Misa, not missing a beat, took her hand in hers and pecked it. "That's right. Misa still has to watch her figure."

Kimiko smiled. "You know that's not what I mean."

To think that just years ago, the Amanes hadn't so much as spoken to each other. After a shaky relationship wrought with tragedy and near-tragedy, they had found each other again and reconciled, slowly but surely. Kimiko had been sober for almost three years, after an accident that had left her limping and legally blind, and Misa was learning to forgive. She could talk about Light and her parents now—that is, if the subject came up—without tears, although there was a part of her that would always miss them.

No one ever truly stops missing the ones they love. It just gets easier to live without them. The show must go on, after all.

"Erin, you should see the koi pond that we built out back! It's so pretty and peaceful, just like back at home, and we've got koi of all different colors. They're so cute and shiny! The hands we hired to tend the place before we got here sure did a good job, huh, Kimi?"

"Lemme guess: are they imported? The fish, I mean?"

Misa clasped a hand over her mouth. "Oh, how did you guess that?"

Erin grinned sheepishly. "It'd probably be a bad idea to leave Lawliet alone in the backyard, then," she said, cringing at the thought of the cat dragging a smelly fish corpse into the house and dropping it at Misa's feet. "You guys have an extra room that I can just drop him in so he can have some alone-time?" Lawliet snarled in what she could interpret as begrudging agreement.

"Of course! We've got, like, five bedrooms like Kimi said."

The taxi crawled up the steep driveway and stopped in front of the stoop. The driver, a man of few words and didn't have anything to contribute to the conversation anyway, helped lug the girls' baggage to the front door, which was blocked by an iron gate. Misa made sure to hand him a generous tip for his troubles before he left.

The Amanes granted Erin and Lawliet two rooms by the back of the house on the second floor, one across from the other. Erin made sure to set up his things before letting him out of his carrier. Just as she had the zipper pinched in her fingers, she knelt down to the floor to look into Lawliet's wide, grey eyes.

"All right, look. I know these past few days haven't been the best for you, they haven't been for me, either. But Misa and Kimiko have been kind enough to welcome us into their air-conditioned three million-dollar house. We are guests here. As guests, there's a certain etiquette we have to follow. Which means, no peeing or dumping anywhere except in your box or out in the yard. No scratching anything except your post, that's why you have it. No bringing dead critters into the house. No nibbling on the Amanes' plants. And no more picking fights with people who are bigger than you. Or have knives. Do that for me, and there's a bag of treats in it for you.
She remembered the plump green lovebird with the red and pink face hanging in the gilded cage in the living room, swearing at the cat had leered at him through the carrier as they passed. "Oh. And no making passes at Jun'ai. He's not a snack."

Hiss.

"Don't worry. I'll even pop in that creepy cat flick that you like afterwards. Okay?"

Silence. After all this time, Erin would wonder sometimes whether Lawliet listened when she spoke to him. If he did, he didn't show it often.

"Mrow," she said softly.

Lawliet meowed back at her, as though mocking her for her poor impression of a brother or sister.

"I love you, Lawliet. I hope you know that."

She unzipped the carrier. She would've kissed him or massaged the top of his head with her knuckles, but he didn't look in the mood, right now. He like most cats (and some people) blew hot and cold when it came to affection, preferring to seek out their companions when they craved it. It couldn't be forced on them. Lawliet was quick to dart out across the room and into the hole inside his scratching post, the only place in the otherwise empty room where he could take cover.

Erin shook her head. She felt bad for hogging an entire room that the Amanes could have used for space, but this would only be for a few days. Lawliet couldn't stay in the garage, not in this weather.

That being said…

Better take out whatever valuables are in here, she thought, in case he does start dropping bombs.

She headed for the massive walk-in closet on the far right—little doubt a place where Misa stored whatever clothes that couldn't fit in her room—and was about to open it when she noticed something hanging from the ceiling in the corner.

What the…?

She squinted at the object, square-shaped with a clear unblinking eye and a tiny red light in the corner.

A camera? What was a camera doing in Misa's room? Her gut knotted at the sight of it, watching her every move, though she wasn't sure why. Having once spent six months under constant surveillance, Erin found herself feeling somewhat odd around the things at times, however irrational. It made her think of him, watching her without her notice, dissecting her from the inside-out. Anticipating her next move. Maybe it hadn't necessarily been with ill intent, but that was one of the things that had made him intimidating. How could anyone be sure what his intentions were at heart? Were you his friend, his charge, his enemy, or his prey?

Erin liked to think that she had for the most part, moved past it, like everyone else. But that didn't mean she liked the feeling of being watched. Who did?

Misa had had almost twice as much surveillance on her when this was going on, and then some. What would Misa think about having a camera in her house? Did she even know it was there? Why wouldn't she? It was out in the open. Maybe she put it there?
One way to find out…

Erin ran out of the room and called down the stairs, "Misa?"

"Yeah?" a faint trill answered back from somewhere on the floor below.

"Did you know that there's a cam in this room?"

Misa didn't reply, right away. Had she heard her?

Erin cleared her throat. "Hey Misa—"

"Hold on, I'm coming!"

Misa came bounding up the stairs in her socks with one hand trailing across the banister, her blond locks bouncing around the frame of her dainty face? "What did you say?" she asked, partly out of breath. "No good. Running out of breath just from climbing the stairs…I need to exercise more."

"There's, uh, there's a camera in the room. I was just…"

Erin paused. She could see yet another one hanging from the ceiling in the hallway.

"Uhm…what's with all the cameras?"

Misa giggled into her fingers. "Oh! Well why else would we have cameras? For security, silly! Misa's gonna be very rich and popular after her American debut, so we need all the security we can get. Plus if someone breaks in, his face will be on tape, so not even the best of the best lawyers could bail him out."

"Yeesh. I thought you said this was a safe neighborhood, Misa?"

"It is. But anything can happen. You should know that. You had to beat a guy within an inch of his life just last week. We're peace-loving, but we're not morons. Isn't that right?"
Erin chuckled in spite of herself, more out of anxiety than out of how funny Misa's words were. "No, we're not."

Most of the time, at least.

"Yo, if you need help unpacking stuff, I've got a couple extra hands," she offered, deciding to change the subject. So the cameras were just there as part of the new security system. Sounded legit. If somebody had really bugged the house because they'd wanted to spy on Misa, they could've at least hid the cameras better. Misa obviously knew that they were there and what they were for.

Besides, no one here in the Hills actually knew Misa yet. She may have been an idol over in Japan, but here she was just getting started.

"Why, thank you so very much, Erin, we'd appreciate that!" cheered Misa, clapping her hands. "The sooner we get the house spruced up, the sooner we can focus on planning for the house-warming party!"

"Wh-what? You're throwing a party so soon? But Misa, no one here on this block even knows you yet. Do they?"

"It's never too early to throw a party," the smaller girl declared, a finger pointed high over her head. "You wanna get known? You've gotta make yourself known!"

Along with the house, the Amanes had also bought a car, a light teal '59 Chevy™ convertible. Though she generally preferred to keep up with the times, Misa found the older American cars nicer than the newer ones, and she couldn't resist the feel of the wind in her hair as she sped down the freeway. This time, though, Erin was the driver while Misa sat in the shotgun with her hand in the air, as though to caress it. Aside from one or two fans they'd chanced to meet at the mall, they hadn't yet had to deal with the full wrath of the paparazzi. Until then, they would enjoy their moments of freedom when they had it.

"Man, it's like you're spending that money like it's on fire!" shouted Erin over the roar of the wind and traffic. "Keep that up and you'll go bankrupt by Christmas."

"Pshaw! Don't tell me that you wouldn't spend it too, if you had that much money."

Soon the girls were approaching the street leading into Misa's neighborhood. But instead of making the turn, Erin passed it by without a second glance.

Misa looked over her shoulder at the quickly disappearing street behind them. "Huh? Um, Erin?"

"Hey listen," she said absent-mindedly, her eyes fixed on the road. No city in the world was without their lousy drivers, but the ones in LA could almost compete with the ones in NYC. "I just wanna make a quick stop. Is that okay?"

"Sure, Erin," said Misa, tucking some hair behind her ear, which showed off one of her new earrings. Turquoise, her birthstone. "Where are we going?"

"Oh, you know, to pay somebody a visit. A friend. He's down on his luck, and he could use an ear. Uh, I can turn around and drop you off."

"Don't bother. You already missed the turn. And in this traffic? No, thanks."
"What? Shit. Sorry, Misa. I guess I wasn't paying attention. Thought I was…"

"No, it's okay. Besides, if he's down on his luck, maybe I can help? Misa's happiness is like the flu: it's infectious, only there's no shot for it, but it's more pleasant. So, who is he?"

"…You'll see."

Twenty blocks and a few turns later, Erin pulled up into a baking parking lot. Misa surveyed the stark, box-shaped building with a slight apprehensive tremor.

"Wh-why are we at the jailhouse? Does your friend work here as a cop?"

Erin undid her seat belt and got out. "Eh, not exactly. He's here, but…"

She trailed off. Maybe this wasn't a good idea to bring Misa? But, if she hadn't brought her…

It took Misa a few beats to piece it together. When she did, her hand clapped over her mouth, her face blanching. "Erin, h—how could you? Why would you? This guy broke into your apartment and tried to rob you at knife-point! A-and now you want to stop in and have tea with him or something? I don't understand you!"

Erin's smile was sheepish, as it normally was. "Sometimes I don't get you either, but I still love you. Look, I know it seems a little strange, but I just wanna talk to Miguel."

Misa was almost horrified. Erin was actually calling this bastard by name. Did she know him better than she'd let on? "Is he some crazy ex-boyfriend you didn't tell me about? Did you come here to post bail?"

"What? No, that's not it!" Erin hurried alongside the car and up to the building, compelling Misa to chase after her. "The cops told me his name, and before that, he told me it after I tied him up. Of course, I'm not bailing him out. Wouldn't have the money for it even if I wanted to. I just want to talk to him. I want to know why he did it. I certainly would like an apology. And…maybe if there's anything I can do to help him—"

"I don't know if you can," muttered Misa.

Erin sighed. "He didn't seem like a hardened criminal to me. Foul-mouthed, but not hard-boiled. The way he pulled it off…it was sloppy. I might not have been able to take him on if he was an expert. A savvy burglar wouldn't have even bothered to try a place like mine. He probably hasn't been doing this for a long time. Might be after money or something, you know, to pay off bills and stuff. I think there's still hope for guys like him."

"How do you know that?"

"I don't. I'm guessing. That's why I'm going to talk to him. Come on Misa, you took Kimiko back, didn't you?"

…

Misa stopped in her tracks. Erin stopped with her, just as they were about to cross through the automatic doors. Her honey eyes trailed down to her bare toes poking out of her sandals. She had painted them creamy apricot. Tamura had been very sloppy, himself. Despite having seen him in the act, they'd never exchanged a direct word to each other. What would be the point? He wasn't sorry for what he did, she could tell just from the look in his eyes. He might have killed her too, if she hadn't made all the commotion she had.
In secret, she used to wonder whether that would have been such a bad thing.

"Yeah. I did. But that's different. Kimi's my sister, and she was sorry for what she did."

Not to mention, Kimi could barely see the nose in front of her anymore.

"Well, maybe Miguel's sorry, too? Don't get me wrong, I still think he should answer for what he did, but if there's anything I can do to help him so that he'll be less inclined to do this again, pull himself outta the hole before it gets any deeper...well then, that's something, ain't it?"

Misa bit back something that felt a bit like a smile, but she couldn't be sure if it was real. It also felt like a frown, didn't feel natural. Erin hadn't changed much apart from getting braver since the Kira case, as a writer and as a person. She hadn't lost her faith in people, or at least she had found it again with a renewed strength. They were still friends.

Misa didn't know whether Erin was a saint or a fool. Then again, who was she to judge? Hello, Kettle. I'm Pot. You're black.

She didn't respond, not with words, at least. What could she say? Turning up her nose, she strode past Erin and crossed over the threshold the instant the glass doors swished open for her. Erin followed suit, at an equal loss for words. Or at least words that wouldn't sound condescending or swollen.

Misa was only learning to forgive, after all. Oh hell, so was she. So was everyone. The only worthwhile lessons that weren't painful were the ones from Sesame Street™.

A stout lady-cop manned the front desk, her hair tucked into a tight bun. She had just hung up the phone as the two approached. "How can I help you today?" she asked flatly, a glazed look on her face the product of many years of late, often hectic, often violent, some very dark nights.

Erin cleared her throat and smiled politely. "Hi, we're here to see Miguel Mora? This is the jail he's staying at, right?"

..."Are you here to post bail?"

"No, ma'am. We just came to visit."

"Are you friends of his?"

"Yes, you could call us that."

Behind Erin, Misa shook her head, shivers rattling through her, in part due to the Arctic blast of the AC, her attire unfit for the sudden chill.

The cop took a breath, as though she couldn't believe that someone like Miguel Mora could have friends. A shame that their help had come too late. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid you can't see Mr. Mora."

"Huh? What do you mean? Is there a process we have to go through to see him?"

"He's not here, anymore." For some reason, Erin didn't like the way she said this. Like something had just happened to him. Something bad.

"Was he transferred?"
"He's dead. Last night. A heart attack, from what I understand. I'm so sorry."
Denial

It couldn't be. This couldn't possibly be Kira. Could it? Kira—Light had been gone for almost four years now, though his influence could still be felt in many parts. They had all watched him die, that fateful stormy November morning. Since then, no more criminals had died for their crimes. Not with heart attacks, at least. The world had more or less gone back to where it was when Light had started his crusade.

Then how did Miguel Mora die? And why? It wasn't unusual for inmates to beat each other within inches of their lives, or for some to try taking their own lives, or in some places to just get really sick—a wretched reality as this was—but a heart attack? Maybe for someone older with heart problems, but a lean healthy twenty-year-old?

Compared to the criminals Light targeted, Mora was so small-time. Why would Kira bother with a petty criminal?

Erin clonked her forehead. No. Light couldn't have done this. He's dead. This wasn't Kira, at least not the one we knew.

She closed her throbbing eyes, taking a break from hours of drilling holes into the laptop screen. All was dark, the lights off so as not to disturb her hostesses, and she had draped a sheet over herself and her laptop. The tiny clock on the lower-right corner of the screen read 12:07. After the day's events, sleep had run off to Vegas without leaving as much as a note.

Was it possible that Ryuk had returned to the human world for some more "fun?" Or was it one of his buddies who had dropped their notebook to see who would use it, to replicate the experiment, so to speak?

How do I even know that a person did this? This is only one death. What if it was just a random shinigami who was looking for someone to kill, and Miguel just happened to be the poor sap he'd picked? It's not like real shinigami discriminate when it comes to this sort of thing…do they?

Her fist clenched around the lukewarm Diet Coke™ can, the pliable aluminum crinkling under her fingers. Damn it! You couldn't wait until he got his life back on track, let him enjoy the time he had left first? You couldn't wait until he at least had his hearing?

She didn't know who "you" was, exactly. Fate? A shinigami? A new Kira? Something, or someone, had killed Miguel Mora. Though Misa had done her best to hold her tongue on the matter, Erin could tell that Misa thought she was crazy for mourning over a burglar who had attacked her and Lawliet in their own home. Maybe she was? But, Miguel hadn't deserved to die.

With all the tricks Light had pulled off with the notebook and shinigami in the past, she could find little certainty in any of it, if there was any certainty to be had. Should she call up Matsuda and the gang over in Japan and tell them? Then what, send them on a wild-goose chase through a country they didn't even have jurisdiction over?

All right, cool it, Erin. First thing you should do is make absolute damn sure that somebody killed Miguel with a notebook. Or even that a fucking notebook was involved, at all.

Every investigation needed a starting point. In this case…

I should check for more recent stories about criminals dying, especially of heart attacks.
Reaching out from under the sheet to toss the emptied can into the wastebasket she had moved next to her, she typed the key words into the search engine with bated breath, afraid of what she'd get. What if the police had cut down on allowing access to information such as the deaths of criminals? Then again, maybe not. They hadn't stopped the media from announcing when criminals had been arrested or were on trial. Nothing was more important than public safety.

At first the engine came up with either stories on criminal deaths from years ago or links to websites or articles on Kira. Some of them were critical, but an alarming number of them were addled with praise for the mysterious vigilante/god incarnation. She couldn't help but notice an online version of an essay she'd once written on why the death penalty should be abolished. Among other things, the money spent on capital punishment could be better used for solving and preventing crime, and towards criminal rehabilitation and prison reform. It had been used unfairly against poor criminals or those from minority groups. Besides, it just seemed like a barbaric way to dole out justice, not to mention pointless.

She had to admit, she may not have stayed completely neutral and non-preachy when she'd written it. She always did have trouble with that.

Where is the justness of avenging a life by taking another one? It doesn't mend the damage done; if anything, it adds to it. Another family must mourn a loss, and the victim's family has to go on anyway without them. Even the executioners have to live with the guilt of carrying out the job they are given.

She cringed when she clicked on the link and saw at the bottom of the page that comment-posting had been disabled. It had been a rather...polarizing paper, as most articles on hot topics were. She did have a few who agreed with her, but some...

You're either a saint (or at least think yourself as one) or terribly naïve. Justice has nothing to do with "mending;" it's about Amending. It's about giving everyone what they deserve. Have you ever lost a loved one to some deranged psychopath, or had someone completely rob you of your sense of security? Some are beyond rehabilitation, and to be perfectly frank, I'd rather that those people not breathe the same air that the rest of us do. The prisons are over-crowded and living off our tax dollars; why not make some space?

Ah, the joys of the Internet, where you can say whatever you like and not have to worry about getting a foot shoved up your ass. This one comment in particular stood out in her mind, though she knew that it was, just like her view on the matter, only an opinion and like assholes everyone had opinions, all full of crap. Erin couldn't be sure whether comments like this one were from Kira supporters or just really cynical saps, and to assume anything would be profiling. Or maybe this person was angry and just had to vent?

Oh, believe me. I've met a few monsters in my life.

Erin shook her head. She didn't have time to ponder on this now. She hastily clicked the "Back" arrow and returned to the search engine. Then, she clicked "Newest."

Her worst fears seemed to spring out of the monitor and grab her by the throat, their grip cold and crushing. Her hands shook as she pulled out her pen and notebook, the pale glow from the screen like electric candlelight casting off the notes she scribbled into the pages.

Miguel Mora, 20, charged with armed robbery and drug possession with the intention to sell, August 10, LA, jail, heart attack.

Drug possession? This was new. Apparently, the police had searched his place and found pounds
of coke and weed packed everywhere where a man could hide coke and weed in his home, all worth a few thousand dollars. Was he selling these drugs for someone, or had he bought them for himself? Had his death had anything to do with the drugs?

They had made this discovery just a day before Miguel had collapsed in his cell...

What if his dealers have a notebook, and they used it to kill him as soon as they found out he'd been busted before the cops could question him about the drugs...?

She shivered in spite of the heat coursing through her. People killing people over money, to avoid getting caught...not an unfamiliar concept, but it never failed to curdle the Coke simmering in her stomach. What happened to people to get them thinking that this was a viable way to live?

It wasn't impossible. But again, this was only one death. For all she knew, Miguel liked to get high on his supply and had had a heart attack from the side-effects of the coke, combined with the stress of getting busted.

Although as close as she'd gotten to him, she hadn't seen any signs of addiction. Well, the corners of his mouth twitched a bit, and his pupils were dilated, but that could've been anything. After all, he'd been trying to rob her and she was beating the snot out of him with a Louisville slugger. Things were moving too quickly for her to get a close look at him.

She moved on to another entry, and another, and another still, feeling a notch sicker with every piece of new information.

Rally Stins, 31, charged with assault and battery, July 30, LA, jail, heart attack.

Kelsey Bir, 26, charged with embezzlement, July 27, LA, jail, heart attack.

Daniel Elt, 34, charged with attempted murder and conspiracy to commit murder, June 5, LA, jail, heart attack.

These were only known dead criminals, at that. The ones who'd had heart attacks. The notebook could be used to control its victims' actions and have them croak in other ways, too. In other places, other times. A bank robber in Phoenix—Stanley Klister, 28—had inexplicably shot himself during a shoot-out with the police on August 2. Eerily enough, so did all of his accomplices. A call girl in Las Vegas—Elsa Veel, 22—had hung herself just before her appearance in court on June 15. Still, another man while resisting arrest was struck by a car in Sacramento on May 31.

Jesus Christ. Miguel's death hadn't been the first one. Nor would it likely be the last, not unless whoever was carrying out these murders was caught and the notebook destroyed. It seemed so far that most of these deaths were concentrated in the southwestern region of the United States. All of the victims were criminals, mixed in gender and ethnicity, though more victims were male, most spanning from their early 20s to middle 40s in age. But the dates...they were so erratic, as were the locations and conditions of death. Maybe this explained why the press hadn't made such a big stink about it as they used to when Kira was up and about? The police wouldn't likely find a connection between all these, either. Also, these criminals were more or less minor compared to the ones Kira tackled.

But the Kira forums...the forums were abuzz again with excitement. As much as she hated to admit it, Light had made an impressive impact on the world in spite of his short time in it. In the year he had spent killing criminals he had left a mark that probably would never completely go away. She wondered what he would think about all of this if he could see for himself. Whether he would feel regret about being remembered as a crazy serial killer, or pleased that cults had risen up to place
him on the pedestal of a god.

She shuddered to think of what he could and might have done had he had more time.

Kira had indeed garnered a few followers from the States, who had posted the news on many of these deaths and attributed them as signs of Kira's second coming. With a medium as global as the Internet, it wouldn't take long for followers in Japan and other countries to learn of them and rekindle their faith. Like kids anticipating a snow day after seeing just a few flakes fall from the sky.

Erin feared that she hadn't even begun to scrape the surface.

There's gotta be some sort of connection between them. This can't all just be coincidence, as tempting as it is to call it that. I need more background. But how can I get that? The cops might have more info on these guys…but would they be willing to share that with little ol' me? I'd have to talk to the LA police, the Phoenix police, the Las Vegas police…

After four years there were still no Pulitzer Prizes™ on her shelf. She had yet to monumentally change the world with her hard-hitting journalism, but focused mostly on local stories about people doing good for others, and occasionally posted profiles for the animal shelter about pets that were up for adoption. There was already so much bad news in the world; there should be a balance. For her article about the death penalty she had done all the research and interviewed a few prison personnel, a few lawyers and actual prisoners, but that had so far been the biggest project in her career and had taken quite a bit out of her. No awards were tossed her way for it. She managed to keep a roof over her head and food in her and Lawliet's mouths, but her name hadn't gotten much bigger since she'd graduated.

Not that she cared about fame, but sometimes she wondered how useful it would be if she was more like Hersh™ or Berstein and Woodward™, Or Lois Lane™.

Sometimes she wondered if she really was as intrepid as she liked to think herself. Or whether her adventure in Japan had deprived her of her teeth and claws. She would've thought that it had given her teeth and claws. And maybe it did. They had simply been cut.

Forget it. That's not important right now.

Her eyes were sore. She closed them, laying her head on top of the open pages of the notebook. Just a quick break. What a terrible wedge to be stuck in, between the soft lull of sleep and the jittery call of caffeine and adrenaline marching through her system. Together they switched the signs directing her path of thought, leaving her mind to wander without real aim.

I wonder if the guys can lend a hand. Probably, but they're in Japan. This is America. They can't ask for information from a police force in a different country if it's not relevant to them…can they…?

Man, L had had it so easy. He didn't belong to any police force, and yet had the power to bend any one across the world to his will. Diplomatic immunity to the nth power. No questions asked.

…Well, maybe not completely "no questions asked." Just because he helped solve the cases, didn't mean that the cops liked him. So sure it was easy, but superficially so.

She didn't freak out anymore when she thought about him, but when she did, she often still felt a twinge of sadness. A douchebag though he was, he'd had such a hard-knock life, from what she knew about him. One that he'd had to have stepped into willingly, but hard-knock all the same.
What on earth would compel anyone to become something like the world's greatest detective, she probably would never fully understand. It made about as much sense as wanting to be "god of the new world." Even with all its perks, was it worth it in the long run? She needed only to look as far as L to doubt this, a fact that she didn't appreciate until after his passing. There had been no twenty-one guns or bugle taps. No one besides them even knew that he was gone, like a nameless soldier killed in action, or worse, gone missing.

A soldier. A detective. A doctor, a lawyer, a leader, even. Why would anyone want jobs like these? Maybe not all motives were right or noble, but still the results yielded were more or less the same, and the salary huge. Lives benefited at the expense of the benefactor, often without thanks. Probably because for them to do their job (someone had to do them, right?), they had to screw over other people, and even themselves at times…

Maybe that explained why those kinds of jobs paid the most. As compensation.

Some are beyond rehabilitation, and to be perfectly frank, I'd rather that those people not breathe the same air that the rest of us do…

By the time Erin woke up again, it was 9:16, and someone was pounding on her door with unusual strength for someone her size. "Erin! Hey Erin, ya up?"

She woke with a start, nearly rolling off the bed. On instinct she closed the laptop and slapped the notebook shut. Misa didn't need to know what she was up to. In fact, she needed to stay as far away from this monkey business as possible. Besides, with her memory wiped, Misa couldn't help her even if she wanted her to.

After wrestling herself free from the tangle of sheets, she snapped the rubber bands around the book and crammed it into her bag. "H-hang on, I'm coming!"

She shoved the bag underneath her bed before stumbling to the door, her head light from having gotten up too fast and aching. Wiping the crud at the corners of her mouth and eyes, she unlocked the door and peeked out through the crack at a smiling Misa, looking pretty and ready for the day, having had the time to freshen up.

"Mornin', Misa," she greeted, her words half-groggy.

"Gosh Erin, you look horrible," chided Misa, leaning in for a closer look at the bags under her eyes. "Did you sleep okay last night?"

"I-I slept well enough."

"Why was your door locked?"

"Oh y'know, I'm working on the next great American novel. I need solitude when I write, and I don't want anyone to see it 'til it's done. Once I get started it's nose to the grindstone no matter what time it is."

"I thought you said you slept well?"

"I slept well, not long. Ugh, can't even remember when I went to bed…"

"Well, it's okay if you wanna go back to sleep. Except it's such a nice day out and shooting starts today. I was hoping you'd come with us."

Erin pressed her cheek against the cold door, slumping against it as she tried to fight back sleep.
"Uh, I'd love to, Mis, except…ugh…"

"No, no, it's okay! Go back to sleep. I've gotta drop off Kimi so she can have her interview, and then I'll be gone for a couple of hours." Back when Misa and Light were together, she had considered retiring from the model biz so she could spend more time with him, after the case was solved, of course. But then Kimiko moved back into her life—and Light, out of it—and with her handicap and records, there weren't many jobs she could do besides bagging groceries and the like. So Misa had decided to keep advancing her career, for both of them.

Nevertheless, Kimi insisted on working. She refused to freeload off her rich and famous younger sister and besides would go crazy from having nothing to do.

"Will you be okay here by yourself?"

"Oh sure, sure. I've lived alone before, it's no big deal. Actually, I won't really be alone if I've got Lawliet here." She shook her head, chuckling, "Man, I can only imagine how Hideki's putting up with you not being there with him in Japan. Hey, how is he, anyway?"

Misa shrugged. "Doing well for himself, I guess."

"What d'ya mean, you guess? You keep in touch, don't you?"

"We broke up before Kimi and I left Japan."

"Wh-what? You guys broke up? Why? It looked like things were going great for you two."

"Eh, good, but I wouldn't call it great."

"What d'ya mean? The Misa I know would at least try to make a long-distance relationship work."

After Light passed away, it had taken over a year before Misa would consider finding someone new. But none of the men she'd dated since then had stuck. She was like Japan's answer to Taylor Swift™. They've said that nothing compares to your first love. As perfect as Light was, the next guy had some mighty big shoes to fill.

From the sound of it not even Hideki Ryuga, who had lasted the longest, was good enough, despite being a heartthrob and an idol like Misa. "We lost that spark, even before I landed this deal. He's actually dumber than me, if you can believe it. He had the gall to forget my birthday, last year."

"Your birthday's on Christmas, right? He didn't like, give you a present or anything?"

Misa scoffed, "Oh, he gave me a present, a pretty choker necklace. But only for Christmas. He didn't wish me Happy Birthday or acknowledge that it was."

…

"Wow. I'm sorry, Misa, but that's a pretty dumb reason to dump someone. If forgetting somebody's birthday was enough grounds to dump someone, my folks would have split up before I was ever born."

Misa waved at her. "Don't be silly, we didn't break up over that! I would call that the first domino."

"Aw Misa, I've lost count of how many men it's been now. I think you're too concerned with finding a guy who has all the qualities you want in a boyfriend. All of them. You're looking for Mr. Perfect, that's what I think your problem is. Doesn't matter how nice the guy is. If he lacks one
thing, or he has this one little annoying habit or something, you toss him back without a second thought."

"Hmph, I want Mr. Right, not Mr. Perfect! And like you can talk! How's your love life been lately, huh? I haven't heard about any special someones on your end."

Erin peered down at her sock-feet. She could whiff that funky cottage cheese smell from here, the smell feet got when one had her socks on for too long. Truth be told, she hadn't tried dating in… well, ever. She could be friends with guys just fine, and she'd had her share of crushes that never went anywhere and were eventually forgotten, but dating…

She only had her insecurities to blame. The closest she'd gotten was a guy she'd met while she was still living in New York, Steve, a tall dark handsome blue-eyed devil in her humble opinion (well, devil might be a stretch, there were men who were more distinctively bad-boyish). But all they did was shoot the breeze over coffee after work or on the weekends. She never got the frijoles to ask him out for real. And he couldn't have been interested in her in that way since he didn't ask her out, either.

…Unless he was the shy type too, but she didn't get that impression from their not-dates. Not that it mattered, now. She was here in LA, he was somewhere across the country doing God-knows-what, it wasn't likely they'd see each other again soon.

"I've been kinda busy so—"

"Nonsense! If Misa's not too busy to date, there's no reason why Erin could be too busy for it."

…

"Misa, don't you have someplace to go?" Just like old times.

"That's right. Don't wanna be late! We'll talk about this later. Later I want to take us all out to see that neat Chinese theater with all the handprints in front of it. See ya!" With a wave of her fingers, Misa turned to toddle down the stairs, her hair bouncing behind her as she hopped down each step.

Right, Grauman's.

Erin shut the door and slid down it under she sank to the floor, raking her fingers through her mussed hair.

It was strange. Misa didn't find it freaky that Miguel had died of a heart attack? If she had, she'd kept this to herself. Perhaps in her mind it didn't matter how or why; Miguel had gotten what he'd deserved and that was all that mattered.

…

No.

Erin hugged her knees. There was no way Misa could be behind this. Maybe she just hadn't said anything because she hadn't wanted to upset her more than she already was and start another argument. She was at least past this much, worshipping Kira, killing in his name. She didn't have her memories, and she couldn't possibly have a notebook. Misa wouldn't be so dumb as to let Erin have free range of the place if she had a notebook.

If it was in the house, at least…
Erin rattled some sense into her head. Stop! I still don't know if the deaths are all murders committed by the same person, and not just coincidences that the Kira fanatics are interpreting as Kira's doing. Let's start with that. If it was really Misa, she wouldn't stop at just one…

STOP IT, I said! Leave Misa out of this!

She blew a lock of hair out of her face. Maybe I should call Matsu and the gang? At the very least, they can point me in the right direction.

Wait. Maybe not call them. She didn't have the money to jack up her phone bill for a long-distance call, and she wasn't about to stick Misa with the tab. Would Misa get suspicious if she got a bill for a call to Japan? Maybe not, since Erin would be calling mutual friends of theirs.

There was still the chance of being overheard…

She glanced up towards the camera looming in the corner of the ceiling, suddenly able to feel its gaze creeping across her skin. Even if it was just a security cam, it made her skin crawl. She couldn't do anything with these things watching her. That's why she'd resigned to do her research from under the blankets the night before.

She closed her eyes in meditation, making a tilting gesture over her head as though she were wearing her hat and tucking it over her face.

All right, wait. I think I'm getting something…

…

This girl sure was acting peculiar. After filling her cat's bowls with fresh food and water and cleaning his litter box—or "minefield," as she christened it—she had gone outside onto the patio in the backyard with her laptop. To work more on the "next great American novel," should he assume?

Whatever her motives, she had chosen to work on the patio, the spot with the least surveillance. She'd picked a blind spot. Or so she'd think. It was unlikely she noticed the bug planted in the corner over her head. She had her back to him, sitting in the lawn chair stooped over her laptop. She had tilted the screen towards her, giving him little more to see than a corner of the screen. From what he could see, she had gone on the Internet. That overhyped social networking site Facebook™.

He zoomed in for a closer look at the page. It looked like she was messaging someone. One of her "friends."

…

Huh? What was that name? Touta M—

Touta Matsuda?

Wasn't that one of the detectives who had worked on the task force investigating Kira? Light Yagami, the suspect, was the son of then-Deputy Director of the Japanese NPA, Soichiro Yagami. From there it hadn't taken much to trace who else had been involved on the same task force. Hirokazu Ukita had been killed by the Second Kira but the rest of them had survived, although due to the (hardly surprising) nosedive his health had taken after the case, Yagami was forced to retire early. Shuichi Aizawa had since taken his place as Deputy Director.
Was she talking to the same Matsuda who had worked on the case? What for? He couldn't see his entire name, and there were many "Touta M"s in the world. Besides, this was Facebook™; it wasn't unusual to become online pen pals with people across the pond from you, despite having never met. It wasn't a requirement to have shared a traumatic experience beforehand.

…

Come on, move over. Just a little.

Erin Blogger. L had made no mention of her in his files and yet according to their "reliable source," she had been directly involved in the case. At the very least, she was studying in Japan when the Kira case had taken full flight. According to her barely legally attained records, her grades had dropped, and a few months after coming back to New York she'd had a nervous breakdown during an internship.

The way she was acting now, he couldn't help but wonder whether she had ever completely recovered from whatever had happened to her.

This girl was a journalist. If it was true that she had gotten in on the investigation, the fact that she hadn't tried to sell her story after coming back to America was no small wonder.

His smirk was both pitying and cynical. Then again, she probably kept quiet about it because she didn't think anyone would believe her even if she did say something, not with all the Kira-related trash popping up in the media. Maybe she didn't think it was worth the trouble it would've caused…or the cops paid her a pretty penny to keep quiet, whatever comes first.

But that depends on whether our source is telling the truth to begin with…

From what he'd heard some guy, Miguel Mora, had tried to rob her, and just yesterday she'd gone to see him in jail only to find out that Mora had croaked.

…

Does she smell foul play? Gonna be hard proving that some guy's heart attack was an act of murder. If she's writing to Detective Matsuda, she probably wants to tell him about it. Kind of stupid to talk about something like that online though, isn't it? Especially in a public forum like Facebook™. Then again…

Sighing, he reached for the half-full pack of Malboros™ and the lighter next to it. He'd been watching this stupid house for days—even if it was a house full of chicks, and to his disappointment it wasn't as entertaining as they made it look on reality TV—and his eyes throbbed from the strain produced by both the darkness of the room and the brightness of the monitors. He personally doubted Blogger could cause them that much trouble, as clueless and scared as she looked. It was almost a shame to drag her back into this.

And even if she did reach them, what could the task force do? They were in Japan. This was America. The killings weren't happening in their country this time. From what he knew so far.

But at the same time, could he just pretend that he hadn't seen anything that could be important?

"Not for nothing, but I think you should tell him."

The young man bit back a groan. Oh, great.

He didn't look back as the skeletal creature passed through the wall, unable to be bothered with the
door, never mind knocking. Why was it that even though Matt wasn't the one who interested this thing, he insisted on bugging him anyway?

Oh yeah. I'm supposed to be his nanny.

Lumen seemed to live on reactions, like an obnoxious brat looking for attention. He had thought that the less he reacted to the thing, the less inclined he'd be to bother him.

Unless Lumen had somehow seen through his indifference. Though he had been the first of his kind that they had encountered, he'd seemed smarter than the average shinigami, or at least the kind that L had described. Or at least, Lumen was less afraid to flaunt this. He wandered the place like he owned it, much like the person he was attached to.

"Did you hear me? You should say something. You oughta know that if somebody looks like they'll give you trouble, chances are they will."

A shinigami telling him what to do, something he'd already know…what a world.

"You're not talking to me on purpose."

He slipped the goggles over his eyes, like putting on a shade to shut out everything except the patio in front of him, and the cigarette and lighter in his hands. Erin had probably finished whatever she was doing, because now she was closing her laptop, reaching to wipe the sweat condensing on her forehead and neck.

Shit. What had she messaged Touta? Fucking shinigami. Couldn't keep his mouth shut when it counted.

Lumen's burning eyes fell on the open bag of potato chips by the ashtray. Salt and vinegar, ridged. With a wide, wicked toothy grin, he snatched up the bag, held it high in the air clutched in his bony paws and dumped the greasy chips into his open jaws. Matt resisted the urge to cringe as he listened to Lumen's loud, piggish chews and grunts.

Those had been his chips.

Lumen suddenly gagged in disgust, spitting the chips out onto the floor in a mound of spit and chewed-up potatoes. "What kind of chips are these? Consomme's better than this."

He was also quite spoiled. The thing had nurtured a fondness for potato chips, particularly of the consomme variety. The kind that they could only get from Japan, at that. It had been insisted that they have the exotic chips shipped directly from the country on a regular basis. He had once questioned the rationality of buying junk food from across the world that they could get more easily from the convenience store in town, only to be met with,

"We'll give Lumen whatever he wants, within reason. This way we can ensure that he'll stay loyal to us and help whenever we need it. Besides, my chocolate comes from Denmark and Belgium and I've never heard you complain about that."

He couldn't decide whether or not it was fortunate that Lumen had a short wish list: consomme potato chips and some "entertainment."

Lumen tossed his mane, snorting, "I'm gonna look for some good chips. But seriously, you should tell him about this. I'll pass the word on, if you can't." He began his passage back through the walls like a complacent cat who had just coughed up a hairball, not sparing one glimpse towards the mess he'd spat up on the floor.
Normally shinigami couldn't care less about human affairs. But in this case, Lumen wanted to keep the entertainment going for as long as possible, by whatever means.

Erin could've sworn her head was this close to twisting off her shoulders from all the times she'd kept looking all around her, like an abused action figure having its head snap off. Why was she suddenly getting so paranoid? It'd been so long since she felt this way, and how she hated the feeling. The feeling that you weren't safe in your own country, your own home.

No one was watching her. They couldn't be. They had no reason to. Nobody knew what she knew, or what she was up to. She was just mailing a greeting card to her pals from across the Pacific. That's all. That was as much business as they had to know.

So why had she written her heartfelt message to them with that invisible ink pen Farley had gotten her for her birthday back in April ("So you can tell your boss what you really think of him on his Boss's Day card," he'd explained with an impish grin)? It wasn't like someone was going to intercept it and look at what she'd written. Right? What reason would they have to do that?

So Erin kept telling herself, but it wasn't enough to stop her from using the nifty pen, and then writing over her message with an ordinary pen, pouring out the usual sentiment one would put into a "thinking of you, missing you much" Hallmark™ card.

After the post office, she stopped by the nursing home and asked to see Mrs. Mora. Miguel's obituary had mentioned how he was survived by his mother who lived in the facility. Maybe she could ask her a few questions about Miguel, get some kind of lead on who might've wanted to kill him.

She came to the front desk with a small bouquet of daisies. "Hi, I'm Erin, I'm a friend of Mrs. Mora's." This technically was not a lie, in a vague cosmic sense, at least. "Is she around? I came to see her."

The charge nurse looked her over with a quirked eyebrow. "Well, I suppose. She hasn't mentioned anything about having a friend named Erin…but then, she's not really all there, these days. It's hard to tell what or who she still remembers."

"Y-yeah," she answered, finding something a bit distasteful about a nurse calling one of her charges "not really all there." Even if it was true, that didn't sound like something a nurse should say in front of family or friends.

Mrs. Mora was a short Latina woman with squinty eyes and wiry grey hair tied into a braid, her thin copper skin rippling with age. She was sitting outside, basking in the shade under a tree. Every now and then she licked her dry, cracked lips as though she were catching sunlight on her face and licking it up like melting butter. She looked like a gleeful, half-toothless child wrapped in a Mexican shawl of intricate, colorful design that seemed too big for her, especially in this heat. Attached to her wheelchair was an oxygen tank, around her face a nasal cannula.

"Señora Mora, it's a little hot to be wearing a shawl, isn't it?" asked Erin, feeling a bit funny about talking to a stranger as though they had been neighbors for many years. Would Mrs. Mora be lucid enough to talk about her son?

Did she even know what had happened to him? She seemed too happy for someone who had just lost a son.
"¡Oye, chica! I so happy to see you, Jimena! ¿Cómo estás?"

Jimena? Who was that? A sister? A daughter? A girlfriend, or ex-girlfriend of Miguel's? Mrs. Mora was obviously confusing her with someone else. But how was she to tell her this? She was already starting to feel bad, for both coming here and for the woman herself. What kind of life was it when you couldn't remember where you were or who your loved ones were, or even who you were? Even bad memories were better than no memories at all. With no memories, you might as well have never lived.

She cleared her throat, racking her brain for the appropriate Spanish words by which to reply. "Muy bien, gracias, Señora Mora," she answered with a smile.

"No, no! Call me Abuela, chica, por favor! Like always! When you a' Miguel get married an' have muchos bebés, I be Abuela!"

Erin didn't know whether to blush or give the woman a hug. She felt so sorry for her. When Mrs. Mora motioned her to lean in closer, Erin complied to be met with a brief hug around her neck and a smack on the air around her right cheek. She smelled funny, in the way only old ladies smelled, like powder and wool and potpourri and instant hospital food. Not to mention, her breath wasn't the most pleasant. Erin held her breath until Mrs. Mora let go.

She blinked as she inhaled deeply through her nostrils. "Uhm…I brought some flowers. They're daisies. Here." She placed the bouquet in the woman's eager lap.

"¡Ah, flores, son hermosas! They beautiful! ¡Muchas gracias, Jimena!" She reached out for her again to kiss her. How could Erin refuse?

"D-de nada. They're from, uh, Miguel and me. Son de Miguel y yo."

"Oh, when's that boy going'oo come see his mamí, huh? ¿Cuándo se viene? Is been so long since he saw me. Couldn' he come today?"

Erin couldn't help but notice the anxious glance a nurse was passing her from out of the corner of her eye as she wheeled an old man out onto the patio. It didn't take much to figure what for. Erin couldn't bear to be the one to tell this poor woman that her son was never coming to see her again.

She scratched the back of her neck. "Well…he couldn't come today. I'm sorry, lo siento. He promises that he'll come another day, though, alguna vez."

Mrs. Mora's face fell a bit, the flaps on her face making her face look like a pug's. "Oh. Well, tell him to hurry! ¡Date prisa! Is so lonely here, I miss him so much. Him a' Felipe."

Felipe…Miguel's brother? Was he gone, too?

Erin wanted to leave as soon as possible, but after that soft lonely proclamation, she couldn't. She stayed to chat with Mrs. Mora for maybe an hour about just short of everything under the sun, mostly about their home country and her boys Felipe and Miguel and how good they were to her, except that they didn't come "home" often to see her (despite the fact that Jimena would probably know this herself, but such was the thought process of many patients like Mrs. Mora). She didn't seem to know what exactly kept them away from her—only that she called it "doing God's work"—but whatever they were doing, they shouldn't be so busy that they couldn't see their mamá once in a while.

Erin let Mrs. Mora drive the conversation; it was easier that way. When the woman finally began to look tired, Erin offered to take her back inside where it was cooler. In a moment of weakness,
she promised to come back to see her. Should she have done that? Maybe Mrs. Mora—Abuela—would forget about her as soon as she left? All the same, she swallowed down the lump in her throat.

It made her think about her own parents. They were both still alive and well, especially with her and Farley out of the nest while they still had a few non-gray hairs, but what about when they got older? Would they lose their minds like Mrs. Mora? Not everyone lost it as they got older, but would they?

"I'm guessing she doesn't know yet," she muttered to the nurse. "Miguel, he's…"

"I know. It's better not to tell someone with dementia when a loved one has passed away. You should've seen the reaction she had when someone made the mistake of telling her about Felipe back in February." The nurse massaged her temples. "Sounded like her boys were always in trouble, everyone could see it but her. But you should know that, already. Guess it was only a matter of time…"

…before they ended up as cold bodies in the gutter.

Erin's gut knotted itself so tightly, it felt like it would explode. February? Had this been going on since February, or even earlier? "Wh-what kinda trouble d'you mean?"

The nurse snorted, "Oi, what weren't they getting into? Drugs, assault…Felipe was the worse of the two. And then Miguel goes and robs someone and ends up dead in jail, just like his brother."

"H-he never told me that. He seemed like a nice guy, if a little rough around the edges." Could that be considered a lie?

The nurse shook her head, her bun bobbing on top of her head. "We live in a world where almost nothing is as it seems."

A world where nothing is as it seems. It wasn't the first time someone told her this, and the guy who had wasn't exactly what he'd appeared to be, himself.

"You should never assume that you 'know' people. They can always catch you unawares…"…

But Erin didn't like the thought of such absolute uncertainty about even the ones closest to her. Okay, so everyone had some good and bad in them, and everyone had their secrets, she had seen that for herself. But to not know people at all? Like they were little more than shadows dancing on her walls at night as she lay awake, waiting for sleep to take over?

No, surely there was some sort of certainty to this world, to people. Like…life is full of uncertainty. Yes, that was a fact in itself. Can't spell "life" without "if." And people were crazy, one way or another. Good and bad in all of them. And…life was finite. That was also true, unfortunately. Shinigami lived in a world beyond theirs, fickle and compelled to take lives through writing names in a magic notebook. Was life finite because of them, or was life always finite regardless? If people were capable of killing each other or themselves, then probably not. Shinigami couldn't be held responsible for every death. Erin didn't think that Shinigami were that creative with how they killed when it was easier to just write down names with no details, kill their victims with heart attacks.

Well, most of them, anyway.
Was somebody out there with a notebook, using it to either pick up where Light had left off or for his or her own purposes? That was the million-dollar question, now. Were Miguel and Felipe killed by the same person? According to what she could find online, Felipe Mora got in a scuffle with an inmate, and then some of the other guy's buddies ganged up on him and ended up beating him to death.

But the Death Note could control someone's actions, how they died. Maybe it couldn't make someone kill someone else directly, but could it be used to make someone die from their injuries? She couldn't see why not. If it could make someone get sick, have an accident or have them kill themselves…

In spite of the heat wave, she began to shiver. Guys, I hope that card finds you well…

"Are you all right, Erin?" asked Kimiko alongside her. "You've been rather quiet."

"Huh? Oh sorry, I was just, uh, thinking about what sort of things we should get for the party and all."

"Ah, I see. Misa can't wait for this thing; it's all she's been talking about besides that movie she's working on. It is a good way to get acquainted with people…"

"You sound kinda apprehensive about it."

Kimiko shrugged, keeping her eyes to the ground. "I can't say that I'm not. I mean, we don't know anyone here. How do we tell the good from the bad people? The last thing I want is for Misa to get mixed in with the wrong crowd."

"Well, Americans aren't that different from Japanese. They're both people. We're just louder, more overbearing. N-not trying to stereotype here, mind you! I mean, just judge them the same way you would anyone else back home," said Erin, almost flippantly, though unintentionally so.

"Hm. And then there's…"

That's right. The booze matter, and all those other nasty things people sometimes brought to parties. "You worried about having booze around and stuff?"

"Yes. Never again. But Misa said that it has to be a party that people will want to go to. We don't want people to think that we're 'squares.' People like to drink. But I don't want to be responsible for any…accidents." Understandable.

Erin adjusted her hat, blocking out the sunlight from her eyes. "Well, you could say B.Y.O.B."

Kimiko looked up, her mouth slightly agape with confusion. "Huh?"

"B.Y.O.B. Bring Your Own Booze. Have 'em bring their own alcohol. I don't drink so you don't gotta worry about me. But that way, the guests who wanna drink can drink at their leisure and can't complain about the booze provided. Plus whatever drunken mischief they get into won't be your problem."

Kimiko sighed. "Oh. I see. That might work. Still, do you think we should impose a limit on how much they can bring? Enough to enjoy without getting…sloppy. Like, one can of beer per guest, or —"

"Kimi, Erin! Hurry up! We're here!" shouted Misa with her hands cupped around her mouth, who had been running ahead of them like a little girl through an amusement park.
"Coming, Misa! Slow down, will ya?" Erin panted as she and Kimiko tried to pick up the pace, paddling against the flow of the current of people thundering down the sidewalk. Ah, Hollywood, where the streets were filled with gold. In various forms.

Soon the three found themselves in front of the majestic Grauman's Chinese Theatre, where stars had left their literal marks in the Hollywood concrete for the world to marvel at since the roaring '20s. Two stone lions stood on guard, one in front of each red phoenix-adorned pillar, roaring at the less worthy as if to ward them away from the sacred shrine to all things cinema. On the pagoda over the ornate doors, a golden whiskered dragon stood tall among the clouds and elements. Along the rooftop hung a gong with a bald Chinese monk on it, holding what looked like a head in his right hand, posing like Hamlet with poor Yorick's skull.

"Look Kimi, look at all these prints!" squealed Misa, jumping up and down with excitement as she pointed at the ground. "Misa's gonna get her hands on this, someday! I belong here! Erin, quick! Get some pictures!" she commanded, as though the entire theater could grow legs and walk away any minute.

"Yeah, okay, hold on," said Erin, shuffling through her denim purse to retrieve her Canon™ from the folds of junk. "Take the time to get your blinking in."

Misa planted her small feet inside the shoeprints of Rita Hayworth™ and wasted no time striking an array of poses, her grin so big and Cheshire that it almost tore her face in two. As a model, showing off came naturally to her.

As soon as Erin fished out the camera, her eyes wandered briefly until they came to rest on a street vendor. "Awright, I—"

…

No way.

She could've sworn her heart did a hiccup. Her shoulder slackened, dropping her purse to the ground with a thud. If it weren't for the cord attaching her camera to her wrist, she would've surely dropped that, too. Couldn't afford to break that.

What the hell's he doing here?

Misa stopped her posing to call, "Erin, you dropped your purse!"

…

"Hey, Erin! Erin? Hell-ooooo?"

Kimiko stood next to her, concerned by her lack of a reaction. "Erin? What's wrong?"

She blinked once, then twice to see if the heat was playing tricks on her, like how it made mirages of water out on the road. He was still there. There he was next to the vendor on the corner underneath the frilly multicolored umbrella, his lips wrapped around the mouth of a condensing water bottle, colored light orange with a pocket-sized flavor enhancer. He was dressed fairly sharply for the weather with tan khakis and a white collared shirt, the short sleeves stretching to his smooth biceps with the cuffs folded neatly over.

Dark, shiny smooth hair. Striking blue eyes. Lean ski-slope nose.

I don't believe it.
"You're not looking at me. What're you looking at?" Misa demanded, turning to look in the same direction as Erin. When her own eyes landed on the man by the street vendor, she gasped. Her eyes then took on a twinkle of understanding. "Ooooh! Are you checking that guy out over there?"

"Wh-what? No, no, I wasn't checking out anyone! I was just—"

Misa left her spot and bounded over to Erin and Kimiko, managing to wrap an arm around Erin's neck and bending her down to more her level. She pointed a finger at Steve. "Is it that guy? There under the umbrella? Hmm, gotta admit, he's pretty cute. Tall, dark, well-defined jawline...ah! Erin, do you know him?"

Erin almost crashed on top of the smaller girl. "What? Hey now, I wasn't—wh-what makes you think I—"

"You were staring at him pretty intensely for just checking out a handsome stranger," said Misa, her smile becoming cheeky as she reached down to pick up Erin's purse. She said this like there was a palpable difference between seeing an (attractive) acquaintance and checking out a stranger. "Either you've got a case of love at first sight, or you've seen him from somewhere before. I've fallen in love at first sight before so I would know."

Of course she had. When it came to love, Misa could be a sleuth in her own right. Too bad she couldn't seem to get her own love life ironed out.

What was the point in denying it? Erin took a deep breath, suddenly realizing that she hadn't breathed in the last few seconds. "Okay. His name's Steve. I met him in a bookstore while I was still in New York, but nothing happened. We just talked over coffee."

Misa rattled her head in disbelief. "No, you're lying. Something did happen. Even if you two just had coffee, something did happen. Sparks flew! It doesn't take much, Erin, you just gotta meet the right guy. Why else would you be eyeing him like that, getting all sweaty and dizzy?"

"Um, because it's hot out?" said Erin lamely. This prompted Kimiko to start blindly digging through her own handbag for a drink.

"No, don't you get it? Either it's the pure red string of fate, or he tracked you all the way down here to Hollywood because he couldn't stand to be away from you. Gosh, I can't believe you didn't tell me about him."

…Erin didn't know whether to find the latter theory romantic or creepy. Steve, a stalker? Yeesh. The red string idea sounded better. "W-well, I didn't think there was anything about it worth sharing. I dunno, Misa. If he was interested from the get-go, I think he would've asked me out when he had the chance. He must have some other reason to be here..."

"So what? This is a sign. You have a chance now! Run to him! Make him your man, we can both see that you want him! Kimi's legally blind and even she can see it."

Kimiko handed Erin a water bottle. "Here. This should help you beat the heat. And if it feels right, Erin, I don't see why you shouldn't pursue him."

Deep down, Misa could understand why Erin was getting cold feet. Her last brush with romance had been a disaster, despite her contributions (or was it in part because of them?). Erin didn't want to get burned again. If they were alike in only one way, it would be that when it came to true love, it was all or nothing for them. They couldn't half-ass it if they tried. But unlike Misa, Erin was
afraid of getting hurt in giving her all, hence why she wouldn't give any.

"Come on Erin," she whispered in her ear, her breath fresh and minty. "Sure, I may not have yet found what I had with Light, but I know that if Light really loved me, he would've wanted me to move on and be happy. I'm sure Ryuzaki would've wanted that for you, too."

That's true. She could still remember his advice from the last time they ever saw each other. Make the most out of life. How could she forget? Some days, that was the best thing she had to get herself through.

Her cold feet about Steve couldn't possibly have to do with L, could it? Their "relationship" had been nothing like Light and Misa's. They didn't date, not really (when they did it had been under duress by Misa). But, what were they, exactly? Strangers? Enemies? Friends? More than friends? L never really made that clear. Then again, neither had she…

Anyway, that was years ago. No, this was simply a matter of league. As in, why on Earth would someone like Steve be keen on someone like her? The man was smart, easy-going, charming, looked like someone from out of a perfume ad in the Cosmo™ pages, the kind with the free samples under the flaps, only real. He deserved a girl of the same caliber. Hell, what if he'd already snagged a girlfriend since they last saw each other? He'd have no trouble doing that…

Only then did she notice Misa pushing her down the sidewalk in his direction, like she was herding a sheep into a trailer. "H-hey! What're ya doing?"

"You can't move on if you don't try," grunted Misa, who was quite strong for her size. "He's right there, so go get 'im! Set free those butterflies fluttering in your stomach!"

Erin waved the water bottle over her head like a signal flag, her stomach indeed fluttering more than she could bear. "Wait! D-didn't you say you wanted a picture in front of the theater?"

"Don't worry about that; Kimi will take it," said Misa, snatching the camera from off her wrist.

"Er, Misa? Don't you have to be able to see to take pictures?" asked a meek Kimiko.

"There's nothing to it, Kimi. You just point the camera at the thing you're shooting at and press the big shiny button on the top," called Misa from over her shoulder. "Now go get 'im, tigress!"

With one final shove, Erin found herself on all fours on the ground, stings of pain shooting up from her scraped knees and the palms of her hands. Misa flashed her two thumbs-up before scurrying back to the front of the theater to show Kimiko how to use the camera.

Her fingers scraped against the concrete as her hands clenched into fists, almost to the point of bleeding. Why, you—

"Hey, are you okay?" asked a smooth, familiar voice that made her feel warm in spite of herself. Sure enough, she looked up to see Steve towering over her, a hand outstretched to her.

Oh God. She had his attention. She couldn't possibly go back to pretending he wasn't there, now. The "tigress" was using the wounded gazelle gambit to lure in her prey by appealing to the chivalrous knight in him. Or rather, that was what Misa had had in mind. She had set her up, just like that.

Somehow he managed to snatch up her water bottle and was balancing the two bottles in one hand, pressing them to his side. He was smiling at her now, stands of his hair draping around and over his eyes. Oh, what a smile! So sure and gentle and natural, playful with not a trace of malice. At
this rate, his smile would kill her before the heat did.

His chuckle only made it worse, or better, Erin couldn't quite tell. "Are you going to take my hand or keep staring at it? I know I've got nice hands, but they can't be that nice."

"Oh. Right, sorry." She hoped he couldn't feel her pulse pounding in her hand as she took his. Tipping her hat around, she brushed whatever hair she could behind her ear as they hoisted her back onto her feet together.

"I could've sworn I saw someone push you," he said, offering her back her water bottle. Erin tried to keep the eye contact at a minimum as she dusted herself off.

She took back the sweating bottle. "Aw, don't worry about it, that was just my friend being stupid —"

She thought she heard him gasp to himself. "Erin?" Oh, boy. Somehow her name sounded nicer when he said it. "Ha, long time, no see!"

What are you doing? Say something! You've talked to him before; why are you suddenly getting all bashful?

Because the weather's just made me see what a knock-out he really is.

If it didn't make her look crazy in front of Steve—like she really needed that—she would've slapped herself silly. FOCUS!

"Steve! Well, I'll be a monkey's aunt!" she chuckled. "So the heat's not playing tricks on me, after all. Didn't expect to find you here in Hollywood." Though you've got the face and personality for it…

"I could say the same about you," said Steve, taking her hand to shake it. His fingertips were very lightly callused, the kind of callused that marked a man of hard work and ambition, but the rest of his hand was soft and warm. He'd just touched her hand twice in the span of one minute. Why was she getting so worked up over a handshake, anyway?

"Ah, well, I moved to LA so I could spread my wings, y'know? I've got a friend here from Japan who's visiting America for the first time with her sister, so I'm showing them the ropes. That's them, uh, messing around in front of Grauman's over there," she said, pointing behind her toward the theater, where Misa was striking all kinds of poses in front of her flustered sister.

Steve laughed. What a light, pleasant laugh. "That's your friend making all those poses, the blond? She looks like she's already at home, here."

"I would think. Misa's a pretty big hit in her country, and now she's landed a movie deal here in Hollywood. I think it's a rom-com, she really likes those. Or is it a rom-dram? A rom-dramedy? Well, it's romantic. It's what she's into. Anyway, she's making her debut in the States. We're just hoping she doesn't get too big for her britches." Somehow the conversation flowed easier for her, likely because the topic was on Misa. "Ah. You didn't hear that from me, though."

"Oh, a celebrity!" he exclaimed, his eyes shining with an odd light of recognition. "Well, it's good to see that she has people looking out for her." Erin briefly glanced at her shoes, trying not to blush. He had no idea.

"And when it premieres, Misa's gonna get us VIP tickets for front-row seats."
"And what about you? Apart from that, what have you been up to?"

Nuts. No point in stretching the truth to make herself sound more badass than she really was. But, there was no reason not to maintain a certain vagueness, either. Men liked mysterious, didn't they? It made them want to stick around to find out more. "Who, me? Pffht. Writing articles, giving back to the community... pretty much the same stuff, but a different city. It's not like I've changed that much since I left New York."

Oh no, the same stuff? Did that imply that she was boring? Steve wouldn't want someone boring. "I mean, I do whatever I please," she added in haste. "I'm a freelancer. It's what I do. You? How 'bout you?"

...

Free-lancer. Did that imply she was fickle? Steve wouldn't want someone fickle. He'd want someone who had her act together.

Steve shrugged. Such nice broad shoulders, the kind Erin wouldn't mind resting her head on—Erin, please FOCUS! "I'm here visiting family, myself. I just wish it wasn't so hot."

"It's Cali, what can you do? On the bright side, it might get cooler in the future when the ice caps melt and the whole state goes underwater," said Erin, trying not to stare at the way Steve's lips wrapped around the mouth of the bottle, or the way his Adam's apple bobbed up and down his neck as he swallowed. One of the things about crushes was that no matter what the object of your affections did, somehow it looked attractive. He could be picking his nose and it would still look attractive. Well, maybe not attractive, but it would be less unattractive, just because he would be doing it.

She blinked. "Uhm, come to think of it, that wouldn't be a very good thing, would it?" She hoped that he'd attribute the flush of her face to the summer sun.

"No, it wouldn't. Not for me, at least. My dad would be pissed if his house got flooded over. Then he and my mom would have to move in with me. Ugh, what a nightmare! Hey, I've got some flavor drops. You want some? It's tangerine."

Erin held out her open bottle at arm's length. "D-don't mind if I do." On the inside, she kicked herself for stammering. Chill out, it's not like he's asking you to marry him.

Squeezing the orange drops into her water felt like they were making a kind of blood oath, like how Smith looked at Nurse Gillian as a water brother after just sharing a lousy glass of water with her. Jesus, I'm just as crazy as Misa. Even his pit-stains look manly to me.

"So how do you like it here in Hollywood?"

"Erm, well, it's a—it's a pretty interesting place, even more so when I'm seeing it up close. Maybe it's not as bad as everyone says it is? It's just a place to make movies, isn't it?" She savored the splash of flavored water on her tongue. Tangerine never tasted so sweet, and that was only partly because she was mad-thirsty.

"Maybe. Or maybe that's what they want you to think? Lull you into a false sense of security while they take over the country."

Erin almost choked on her water. "Wh-what? Get out!" she snorted, wiping away some of the flavored water that had escaped from her lips and dribbled down her chin.
"Think about it. We've had at least one president who was a movie star, or who was close to a movie star, and we know how that turned out."

"You're such a jerk, Steve!" she laughed. "Man, I've missed you."

Her words echoed back to her in her mind, and she felt herself turn pale. Did I just say that? But, you don't have to like-like someone to miss them. He'd probably think I've just missed talking to him and stuff, is all...

Steve's own face became flushed with heat as he smiled again. "Yeah, I've missed you, too. It's funny, even though we've only seen each other a few times, I've missed our talks..."

For some inexplicable reason, Erin sank a little inside with disappointment. He just missed talking to her, or so he'd said. Wait. Isn't that what she'd expected? Stop smiling, it's messing me up, never stop smiling, FOCUS!

Just then, a whistle shot through the air from behind. Someone was beckoning to them, or at least one of them. Steve glanced over his shoulder and Erin glanced around him. A black car with tinted windows had pulled up along the curb. Behind the open door stood a tall, busty fair-skinned woman with choppy sand-blond hair draping past her shoulders, her stern eyes a sharp amber. She pulled her fingers out of her red lips, her mouth curled in a slight frown. Her bangs seemed pasted to her face with sweat. Like Steve, her attire was also sharp for the weather, her white blouse left unbuttoned at the top to let some air in.

Steve tapped the heel of his hand against his forehead. "Ugh. Sorry to cut our reunion short Erin, but I've gotta go. Halle's waiting on me."

"Halle?"

"Yeah, Halle. My...partner."

The whole state of California could have a massive earthquake right then, and for a moment Erin wouldn't have minded the earth cracking open just under her feet and swallowing her whole. Oh MAN, he has a girlfriend now? Hold on, he said 'partner,' not 'girlfriend.' But some people call their girlfriends their partner, don't they? Oh look at her, she looks like one of those European models, Swedish or Scandinavian or something. I can't compete with that no-way no-how! Why is she driving a black car with tinted windows? Is she really a model, or—

Without thinking (about what she was doing, at least), Erin shot out and hooked her hand around Steve's elbow, just as he was turning to leave. His bare elbow gleaming with sun and sweat. "Ah wait, hold up!"

Steve looked back at her, somewhat incredulous. "What is it, Erin?"

"B-before you go, I just want to tell you that—that Misa's throwing a house party and everyone who's anyone's gonna be there and I was wondering if you'd wanna come—"

Steve's face seemed to brighten up, not the type to miss out on a good soiree. "Well sure, I'd love to come! Where's the place? When is it?"

"Uh...I dunno, she hasn't really set a date, yet. I'm thinking next weekend, but—I'll hafta get back to you on that. But I can give you her address, it's in Beverly Hills." She patted herself for a notepad and pen, only to realize: "Shoot! I left my purse with Misa. My pen and address book are in there—"
"Hey, no problem. I've got a pen on me, and some cards to write on. Wait a second…"

Erin liked a man who was prepared, in the most innocent sense possible. Steve fished out a pen and his wallet from out of his shirt pocket, his movement fluid and brisk. He handed her both the pen and two manila business cards. "One of them's for you. I'll hold that for you."

What? Oh, right. Her water bottle.

She flipped them over in her shaky, clammy hand. Once again, she couldn't believe her eyes. Across the top in size 16 Andalus font read "Stephen G." Under that was his cell phone number and e-mail.

"O-oh my God, you actually keep business cards? For real?"

Steve shrugged, his smile becoming slyer, almost cocky. "Why not? When you've got as many people asking for your number as I do, it's useful to keep cards."

…

Erin didn't know whether to be nervous about this tidbit of information. "What are you, a gigolo?"

Jesus Christ, she did not just say that. He could've just meant professionals asking for his number. Open mouth, insert foot.

Steve didn't miss a beat. "If that were the case, I'd have a more interesting stage name to go by. 'Stephen G.' is kind of a bland name for that job description, don't you think?"

HON-HONK!

Erin jumped at the cry of a car's horn. "Ah, we'd better wrap this up! Sounds like Halle's getting impatient. Oh, by the way, she can come too, if she wants!"

"Sure, I'll pass the word on for you."

"Great! Sensational!" Erin scribbled down Misa and Kimiko's address on the back of one card before handing it back to Steve. "Just remember to R.S.V.P. by the end of the week, if you're gonna come. Oh wait, I forgot to give you my number—"

"You don't really have to. If you call me on my cell, your number's just going to show up on my caller I.D."

…

"Yeeaaah, but just in case, I'll just squeeze it in there, real quick. This is the one that you'll have the best chances of reaching me at. Oh yeah, one more thing, 'fore I forget. The dress is semi-casual and B.Y.O.B. Be sure to tell Halle that, too."

"Roger that."

So the deed was done. Numbers were exchanged, and Steve had disappeared into the car with Halle and was speeding up the street in a cloud of dust and exhaust before Erin could snap out of her daze and begin to comprehend what had just happened, her water bottle melting in her hand.

Did…did I just ask him out on a date? Why did I do that? It all happened so fast, but…it's out there in the universe, now. I can't really take it back, can I? Or I could, but that wouldn't reflect too good on me. I can't believe he said yes! Yes, to me, of all people! Even after I accused him of being a
gigolo. He's so cool. What a guy…

It’s not technically a date if I invited Halle too, is it? I dunno, maybe they’re not partners in that way? What if he meant professional partners? But in what profession? Art, business, I think he said he was in design or something—

She stopped dead in her tracks, halfway between the vendor and the theater where the Amane sisters waited for her. The wind felt knocked out of her by some intangible force.

Is he a cop?

If he was, she couldn't fault him for not telling her. If she was a cop or detective, she wouldn't go around advertising that fact to everyone she met either, not unless it was necessary. No one from the Japanese NPA talked about their occupation unless they had to. Even the guys on TV didn't mention it when they didn't have to. It was like espionage in a way, only for the public. Either way, next to no one liked them very much.

Well, it would explain the sharp dress and black car with tinted windows…

But…if he and Halle were cops, then what were they doing here? Were they investigating a top-secret case?

…

Does it have at all to do with the thing about criminals dying?

The plastic crinkled under her fingers. But if they were, that would mean that someone does know what's going on, or at least has an inkling that they're trying to investigate. Someone with a lot of power. Oh God, what if Steve's with the FBI or CIA?

She gulped. All right, stop. You're making too many assumptions. Heat and hormones are messing with your head. You know what they say: to assume is to make an 'ass' out of 'U' and 'me.' She took another swig of the refreshing fluid. You don't want to get anyone, especially not Steve, involved in something he has no business in. Not something of this magnitude…

She slumped against a building, staring at the card that looked too professional to be just a potential date's contact info. On the other hand…if he is in law enforcement, and he is investigating this crap, I could really use his help. It's gonna be at least a few days before I hear from Matsuda and the gang, and we could use all the help we can get.

But, how am I supposed to approach him? I can't do it directly, he might freak out.

Would he? Well, maybe not 'freak out,' but…

She tipped her hat over her eyes, grabbing for some shade and privacy. Not only that, but he's gonna want to know why I think the way I do about all this…this ain't something I can lie about.

Erin tried to drink away the rocks bouncing around in her stomach where butterflies used to be but to little avail. It'd been so long since she was able to talk about the Kira case with anyone, and "anyone" went only as far as Matsuda. The others were trying to move on themselves, having little time to dwell on the past as most people did. In fact, since she came back to America, she hadn't told anyone about it. She'd stayed as far away from the Kira subject as much as she could; it was just too personal. And no one would have believed her if she did say something.

Ugh, that's right. What if he doesn't believe me? What if he thinks I'm a nutjob who pulled this
outta her crazy ass? I wouldn't blame him, but I don't want it to come to that. I could have the guys from the task force back me up. But would they be willing to get involved? Why not?

That would mean telling him about the notebook...that's a guarded secret, and for good reason.

Well, if I'm gonna do that, the first thing I'll wanna do is make sure that Steve actually is a cop or detective, and that he's looking into these deaths. Then hook him up with the task force so they can have their say. Oi, that'll be a cake-walk—

"Erin! You were gone longer than I thought! How did it go? You look kinda breathless…"

Jumping at the exclamation, Erin looked up to find Misa bounding her way, her purse gripped in her tiny hands while her own was slung on her shoulder. Kimiko tagged along behind her, looking quite unsure of herself about her efforts as a photographer.

She cleared her throat. "Uh, well…I don't know how it happened, but we got to talking a bit, then next thing I know, we're exchanging numbers. I told him about the party and invited him. I told him to B.Y.O.B. Speaking of, are we having it next weekend or something?"

"Eeeeee!" Misa's squeal was like a baby dolphin's: joyous, shrill yet overwhelmingly adorable. "I knew it! Didja hear that, Kimi? I just knew there was something between you. And it can only get better from here! You just have to keep the momentum going."

"I also invited his friend, Halle. I mean, if she's up to it—"

Misa made a face. "Huh? You did what? D'oh, what were you thinking? The point was to try asking him out so you can get some alone-time. You're not supposed to invite competition, too!"

That's the problem. I wasn't thinking. Not much. "W-well, it didn't look like they're sweet on each other. I think they just work together. I don't think she's competition."

"So? She was in the car he got into, wasn't she? And she works with him. That all by itself makes her a possible rival. You should never trust other females around your man unless they're relatives."

Suddenly, all this tension began building up between Erin's temples in a throbbing headache. "Um, Misa? If that were true, then I'd have to un-invite him from your party on the grounds that you'll be there hosting it."

"Are you saying I'd steal him from you? You know I wouldn't do that. Misa's a good girl!"

"I know you wouldn't, but that's the problem with your logic. Besides, you did admit to me that you thought he was cute," she teased. "And you're single again, so you must be looking for someone new, aren'cha?"

"Oh, stop it!" cried Misa, playfully beating her fists into Erin's shoulders. "That doesn't mean I'm gonna steal him from you! He's cute, but not the kind of cute I'm after."

Erin knew she was telling the truth. All the men Misa had dated since Light's passing were Japanese (of course), tall, lithe, fair in skin and hair with brown eyes, most of them younger than her by a few years. Hideki had about two years on Misa, but he was also fair-haired and could pass as someone younger. It was almost as though Misa was unconsciously trying without avail to find a look-alike to take Light's place in the hole he'd left in her heart…

But Light wasn't the kind of guy who could be replaced so easily.
"Well anyway, if you're done with it, can I have my camera back? Did you get any good pictures?"

"I-I would like to think so," said Kimiko sheepishly.

"Oh yeah! Kimi's a whiz at headshots, foot-shots, side-shots and upside-down shots. She's a ground-breaker! Wanna see?"

…

"Gevanni, I respect your need to maintain a social life, but it would be appreciated if you flirted on your own time."

Gevanni smoothed back his hair, sticky and moist with humidity and sweat. "Oh please. I held us up for what, a minute or two? It was a friend of mine; how could I not acknowledge her? You're not jealous, are you?"

Lidner rolled her eyes as she reached from the steering wheel to adjust the AC. "Jealous of what?"

"That I actually have the time to flirt and you don't."

Lidner would not dignify that with an answer. This was why their superiors were hardest on Gevanni, no matter how talented he was.

"Oh right. Erin's friend is having a house party next weekend, and she invited us both. She gave me the address and her number. Her friend lives in Beverly Hills with her sister. She's an actress from Japan who's making her debut here in the States. Misa. Oh yeah, B.Y.O.B."

How fortunate that a truck was ahead of them at the light, or else Lidner might have ran through it in her surprise with nothing bigger to prompt her to use the brake. "Misa? As in, Misa Amane?"

Gevanni gasped, "I don't know who else she could have been referring to. She pointed out a girl in front of the theater who looks like her." He pulled on the seatbelt so it wouldn't cut into his neck. "She seemed pretty happy-go-lucky for an ex-serial killer."

Hopefully, she's stayed an ex-serial killer.

Misa Amane, the Second Kira. Or at least, she was. They knew this much because L had disclosed this information to them. As the only surviving suspect from the original Kira case, did she have anything to do with the new criminal deaths? Many of the victims were the kind of criminals that the Second Kira preyed on, the kind who preyed on the weak and defenseless in some way. That depended on whether Misa had another notebook on her and was using it. That was what they were looking into, among other things.

"How do they know each other, Amane and your friend?"

Gevanni finished off the last of his water before placing the empty bottle into a cup-holder. "Not sure, although she did tell me once that she studied abroad in Japan when she was in college, around the time Kira was on the rise. They could've met each other that way. She went to To-Oh University."

Lidner glanced up at the rearview mirror, squinting at the jerk crawling up from behind. "Light Yagami was also a student at To-Oh University, but he had to drop out for unspecified reasons…"

Unspecified at the time, that is.
"He was also supposedly Amane's boyfriend. It's possible that they met through him."

"Maybe. Or it was just all coincidence."

Yes. It could've all been coincidence. But the pieces fit fairly well to be just that.

"Lidner, I was thinking—"

"A dangerous pastime."

"Seriously. Maybe we can use this party as an opportunity to infiltrate Amane's house to look for evidence? It should be easy, with all the commotion."

"Or it would make it harder. In any case, we should run it by L and Rester first before we do anything."

Gevanni folded his arms across his chest. "Whatever happened to independent thinking?"

"It's encouraged, as long as the ideas aren't stupid. For all I know, you're only suggesting this because you want an excuse to fool around with that friend of yours," said Lidner as she turned the corner, bringing them onto the street that would take them onto the freeway back to the Holy Chateau Hotel™ on W. 19th St., their temporary task force headquarters.

Gevanni pretended to be bothered, or at least more than he really was. "I beg your pardon? Halle, I cannot believe that you would accuse me of something so sleazy. How long have we been working together?"

"Long enough for me to know how you are with the ladies, Stephen. You keep business cards with your number on them, and they're not just used for business."

"Hmph. Well, at least you can't accuse me of being a home-wrecker." His partner was right in a way. He found himself rather eager to meet Erin again, but he wouldn't admit this out loud. It wasn't likely that Erin knew the details about the Kira case or on Misa's past. He certainly wouldn't want her involved in something she had no business in. And yet…

"That's true. But still…I need a shower," she mumbled under her breath, taking a handkerchief to wipe her brow dry.

"Didn't you shower this morning? Jeez, you've been in the shower a lot lately since we started work on this case. At this rate, you're going to run the coastline dry."

Lidner pursed her lips as her grip on the wheel tightened. "It's hot. I feel like a snowman." As a Northerner, she never was a big fan of summer, preferring the chill of fall and winter.

"Sure, it is. Either that or you might want to think about upping your meds. Or maybe you're just reaching that certain age—"

"Gevanni? Would you like me to drop you off here so you can clear the rest of the way on foot?"

…

"I thought so."

Gevanni allowed a few moments of silence for the tension to ebb, at least enough for his apology to take effect. "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything malicious by it, you should know that. But I guess that was kind of in bad taste."
Lidner didn't answer, but her expression softened.

"Onto a more serious topic…I'm a little concerned about this plan of L's. Do you think it'll work? What do you think he's trying to accomplish, exactly?"

"All he would say about it is that it's supposed to lure out our unsub."

"On what grounds? If there is another person or group out there using the notebook, what if they see through it? This sounds pretty similar to the stunt L pulled on the first case. If our unsub sees through it, all he'll have accomplished is causing a public panic."

"I'm pretty sure he thought that far, Gevanni. Personally, I think he's taking this approach because he might know someone who would use a Death Note this way and thinks this is the best way to provoke him…"

Gevanni fiddled with the AC on his side, adjusting the vent so the refreshing gust streamed upward to his slick face. "If he already has a suspect in mind, why hasn't he said anything about it?"

"You know L. He likes to make absolute certain of things before sharing them."

...

Misa was working late for a night scene, and Kimiko had gone upstairs to bed. With Erin and Lawliet as the only two souls up and about in the house, Erin tried to ward off the eerie silence with music and TV, with the volume turned down as a courtesy to Kimiko. Erin ambled about the kitchen, a pint of fat-free Neapolitan ice cream clutched in her hand. She could use a good sitcom or stand-up routine to unwind. Lawliet's mood had improved, but she knew better than to approach him just yet. If he wanted to curl up, the door and her lap were open. If not…that was fine, too, although she was really starting to miss his furry warmth in her lap on these late lonely nights when she needed it.

She had already called Frank to ask how things were going at their apartment. From his report, everything was fine. No more shmucks had tried to break into her place or anyone else's, and the new back door had been installed. The plants were getting watered and the mail set aside.

I'd better go back tomorrow to check on things, or else Frank's gonna think I'm using him for cheap housekeeping while I'm living it up on the fast lane with my rich and famous friends in Hollywood…

Sinking into the plush vinyl of the sofa, she shoveled a spoonful of thawing vanilla-chocolate-strawberry comfort into her mouth, trying to focus on the roast of some hard-partying rock star as opposed to the other things buzzing through her mind like mad hornets; after all, it was actually pretty funny in spite of all the venom, and it wasn't like the guy they were roasting hadn't agreed to it, it was probably all scripted, everyone should be able to laugh at themselves sometimes—

The screen flashed. But it wasn't storming outside. The night couldn't have been clearer.

Gone were the blasts of insults met by howls of audience members busting their guts. Instead, Erin found herself face to face with a stark white screen displaying only one object. A letter. A familiar letter in the largest Cloister Black font that could fit in closed-captioning.

L.

She almost swallowed her spoon.
Wh-what the hell! Is that what I think i—

The black "L" on the screen seemed to burn against the white background, straight through the TV and branding itself onto her brain like a hot iron against hide. It'd seemed to brand itself onto the inside of her eyelids as she rubbed the crud out of them. This couldn't be real. It just couldn't. Had she fallen asleep on the couch and was having another dream?

Then the "L" began to speak. Even the scrambled voice sounded just like him—no. No, it couldn't possibly be—

"Greetings to everyone who may be watching at this moment. This is L."

She made a frantic grab for the remote to try changing the channel. No dice. She mashed the buttons until they almost broke straight through the device, but every channel was the same. The same letter L looming over her, sharp as a needle injecting anesthetic into every pore of her body.

This had to be a dream.

"It has come to my attention that there are rumors of Kira making a return, in light of recent news of criminals dying under mysterious circumstances, particularly in the US."

How could he know this? Just who the fuck was this guy? How did he know what she had been contemplating for the past few days? He sounded like L, but—but he couldn't be L! The L she knew had been dead for almost four years. Either his spirit had inexplicably come back to haunt the tube—or at least her—or—

Whoever this was, his next words struck her like a cold slap in the face.

"I am here to announce to everyone who might be wondering, that I am not, nor do I plan to be, involved in this in any way. I will say this much: if there is in fact a person or group responsible for the deaths, they are not the Kira the world is familiar with. I have deduced all of Kira's killing methods, and if indeed these are in fact acts of murder, this criminal is likely using these same methods.

"If it were Kira, I would be on this case, but since it's not, I will not take part in these happenings. I have no interest in this criminal. This is something I think the police can take care of themselves."

...

L…why?

The pint and spoon dropped to the floor. She had become so numb, it felt like she'd lost control of her muscles.

"Of course, just saying that I won't get involved in a case isn't reason enough to hijack the airwaves. So, I will conclude my announcement with this…

"If there is someone out there killing criminals, whoever you are, you are a cheap, abominable murderer."  

Then "L" was gone, just like that. Like a phantom she thought she saw peeking at her from around the corner, only to find it gone when she blinked like it'd never been there to begin with. Only then could she stop to catch her breath, like his words had turned into a hand wrapping around her neck, choking her. The roast was back on like nothing had happened, but she could no longer hear a single line of snark uttered.
What. Just happened?

...

Never had Erin felt such an urge to take the TV and toss it out the window, and if it weren't for the fact that it was Misa and Kimiko's, she might have. L had left the world almost four years ago, but neither he nor Light ever quite left their lives, had they? Was this how Jeremy felt when old Mrs. Dubose died and she'd left him her camellia after everything she'd put him through?

"Old hell-devil! Old hell-devil! Why can't she leave me alone?"

She couldn't find it in her to think this over rationally, at the moment. At that moment, she found herself confronted with old feelings, good and bad but mostly bad that seemed to pour out of her from somewhere like blood when a blade trailed over an old white scar, hot and stinging. They left a strange, bitter metallic taste in her mouth, despite having just indulged in a few spoons of ice cream.

This wasn't right. She was supposed to have forgiven the past. Why was it all suddenly coming back to her with the force of a plane touching down over her head? That wasn't really L on TV. Couldn't be! L was dead. Granted, she didn't actually get to see him off; he'd chased her away before then. Had he found some way around it so that he could cheat his own death and go on being L? No, that wasn't likely. The Death Note's power was absolute. Surely he would have known this before going through with what he did.

But…that voice, that insignia, that completely assholeish stunt on public broadcast. This had L written all over it, literally. Either L's spirit had come back to haunt the world, or…

…someone posing as L made that announcement. But who, and why would they do this?

Not many knew L the person as well as the title. Watari and Light had passed away along with him, so this couldn't be their doing. There was no way Misa could or would have pulled off something of this magnitude. That left the guys from the task force: Matsuda, Aizawa, Mogi and Mr. Yagami. They were the only ones in all the police or government agencies who even had the notion that L was dead.

Would they do this? But why? Did they even know about what'd been going on here in the States? No. They would never—

...

A dark, foreign thought jolted her then, shocking her from head to curling toe.

Is there someone else? Someone L never told us about? This guy—or girl, could be a girl for all I know—sounds too much like him to just be a stranger. They must know him pretty well if they can impersonate him.

...

When she realized that her ice cream was going to melt into the carpet, she bent over and picked up the pint and spoon, but she stayed with her head between her knees for longer than she should. She was too dizzy to get up, just yet. Great. Not only is there someone out there using the notebook, but there's some shmuck out there pretending to be L. It's like it's happening all over again. Kira vs. L…you guys just couldn't let it go—

Although she'd only had a few spoons of ice cream, she suddenly felt nauseous. She put the lid
back on the pint and staggered to her feet towards the kitchen to put it away for later. Dear God, what if these two are one and the same?

I—I should go to bed. Maybe I just dreamed up what happened on TV, or something? My brains are fried. If I wake up tomorrow and find it as the first thing on the headlines…then it’s not a dream and I gotta get a hold of Matsuda as soon as fucking possible.

A soft "mrow" chimed beside her. She closed the freezer to find her half-bald cat staring up at her. He didn't look as mad as he had before.

"Hey, boy. What is it? How're you feeling?" she asked, her words and smile watery. Was loneliness finally getting to the cat? Even cats, as naturally inclined to solitude as they were, got lonely more often than they liked to admit.

He flicked the end of his tail.

"You wanna come sit on the couch, for a while?"

"Mow."

She rubbed at her eyes. Somehow her cheeks had gotten wet. "Okay, let's do that. But first things first…"

Erin and Lawliet crept through the house, checking the windows and doors and fetching Louie along the way. Misa had her keys, so getting into the house shouldn't be a problem for her. But just in case, Erin left the porch light and TV on, with the volume down. Once Erin was satisfied with her rounds, she sat back down on the couch with Louie beside her and Lawliet curled in her lap—not as furry as usual but just as warm as any other time—and did nothing else until, against the odds, sleep weighed on her eyelids, fitful as it was.

When Misa came home after midnight and bade good-night to her escort, she found Erin lying on the couch with her bat tucked under her arm and Lawliet coiled by her head. The TV was still on. What was she doing on the couch with her bat, she wondered as she peered at her from over the sofa. She could see drying tear streaks on her face.

Had she been crying here in the dark? Over what? That burglar, or something more? Had she had a nightmare?

Misa stretched the ache out of her limbs. She knew all too well what it was like to cry herself to sleep. But she wasn't going to wake her up to ask about it, now. Let her sleep, it was late. Setting her purse down, she turned off the TV and went upstairs to get a blanket.

As she spread the blanket over Erin, Lawliet stirred and hissed at her.

"Oh, what are you hissing at, huh?" Misa whispered, sticking her tongue out at the cat as she pulled down one bottom eyelid. "Go back to sleep, silly kitty."

…

Matt thought he heard something smash against the dirty concrete or brick before he could knock. Glass? Oh boy. He was breaking things again. That could only mean…

He rapped on the door, already braced for whatever he might throw at him.

"What? What is it?" he snapped, a distinct snarl in his voice like a lion that had just had its paw
mangled in a steel trap.

Matt stepped inside to find beer on a dark, dribbling stain on the wall to his left, scattered under it the dark green shards of a beer bottle. The room stank of booze, sweat, anger and chocolate.

"I was going to tell you about what just happened on TV, but judging by your cheery disposition, I guess you already saw."

Mello slouched in a rich dark brown (chocolate colored) armchair, a prototype for the throne he'd envisioned himself seated in in the ideally not-so-far future, his gloved fingers digging into the leather upholstery like a feline preparing to unleash its wrath on the piece of furniture. He looked like a rock star or dark prince in his black form-fitting leather top and pants. At his feet Matt saw the remains of another beer bottle. Mello didn't drink, not like the others in their group, but he did like to break things, the same way some beat on punching bags or pillows to release their anger and frustration. Better beer bottles than something expensive, or sentient.

Across from Mello, the TV hummed, neither of them too interested in what was on, at the moment.

"Did he really just do that? I wonder why he would get up on TV and say that?"

"He's mocking me."

"Mocking you? What for? He can't possibly know what you've been up to, you've been careful about that. He doesn't even know where we are…does he?"

"Maybe somebody's squealed on you?"

Great. Matt hid his annoyance as the two saw Lumen pass through the wall. "Maybe there's a snitch in our ranks, and he's leaking info?" he suggested with a sneer.

Couldn't be, thought Mello. The cops wouldn't be stupid to sneak another mole into their group, not after last time. The last sonofabitch had managed to get his hands on the Death Note, not knowing what it was. Naturally, he saw Lumen leering at him, freaked out, and ended up blowing his cover. His punishment had been slow and painful, and all bugs he'd had on him promptly destroyed. That was all just a few months ago.

A sudden twinge of paranoia struck the young Mafioso. Had he been sitting in on that case? Had he heard everything through the mole's bugs? No, he couldn't have. After the mole was disposed of, all they'd had to do was move to a new hideout and cover their tracks. They'd had no SWAT teams storming their place or anything of that sort.

Unless that wasn't what he was after…

Well, shit. Even if he did hear something, he couldn't have possibly figured out that he was there, or that he had a Death Note. Was he just going by a hunch? What balls, to go and make an announcement like that on TV on a measly hunch.

Near was always confident like that. Just like their predecessor…

Mello needed a bar, now. He stormed around his chair to pluck one out from the tin box sitting on the floor. Near was trying to provoke him, make him do something to screw up. "Cheap," he'd called him. Mello was a sell-out. He'd taken up a path not unlike Kira, the crazy serial killer who'd defeated the first L.

He smirked in spite of himself. Who's the real sell-out, Near? At least I'm doing it my way.
He tore the gold foil off the top of the chocolate and bit off a large chunk with his teeth bared like a ravenous beast feasting on his kill. Well, Near could forget it. Mello wasn't Kira; he wouldn't expose himself just because someone said something he didn't like. That was how Yagami had screwed up.

"Now what?" asked Matt.

"For now, we'll just keep doing what we're doing. If we don't respond to his message, he can't track us. He did say, after all, that he wasn't going to take action to hunt us down," he scoffed. "In the meantime, we should…weed out any new moles, just in case. Gather everyone around."

"Allow me," said Lumen, already halfway through the wall. "I'm practically the right-hand man, here."

I wonder, sometimes.

When Lumen disappeared, Matt asked, "Hey, Mello?"

"What?"

"About that girl…you're not thinking about killing her, are you?"

…

"No. I can't. Our informant said nothing's supposed to happen to her. Not now, at least."

Matt bit back a scowl. Informant. That's what they're calling it now?

"Besides, what can she do? No one will believe her if she goes to the police."

"She has friends in the Japanese NPA, Mello. They'd probably vouch for her if she asked them to."

"Maybe, but what can they do? They can't prove that these are murders done with a killer notebook. The stunt Near pulled on TV is a bluff. Unless the existence of the notebook becomes public, no one will believe him; he didn't even mention the notebook in that broadcast. He just said that he's already 'deduced Kira's killing methods.' For now, just continue keeping an eye on her."

"Yes, your Majesty," said Matt, his reply lukewarm.

Mello snorted. Damn straight.

Then Mello was alone in the room. He yanked out the black notebook he had stashed under the cushion of his armchair and flipped through the pages: a privilege exclusive to him, in return for everything he'd done for the organization. Some of the names within the pages were in his handwriting, others by other members of the group when they saw it fit. One entry gave him pause.

Miguel Mora.

That's right. The Mora brothers had become inconveniences to the mafia. Felipe's name was scribbled in here some pages back. Gets into a fight with an inmate, has a few more inmates gang up on him and takes a blow that breaks a rib and ruptures his spleen. He dies of internal bleeding.

Miguel had had no conditions attached to his name. The gang had decided to just off him with a heart attack. The guy had pushed products for them; no one would think it strange that he should die from the side-effects of getting high off his supply. He'd been struggling to pay off his debts to them, drawing money so he could keep his batty mother in the home. He had tried to rob a few
places in hopes of closing the gap, and after his arrest a hit on him had been requested.

Mello closed his eyes and envisioned Brother Ivan, bedridden, drooling and lucid for only a few minutes a day, enthralled in the final stages of what he had learned later to be Huntington's. He wasn't actually there to see this, but his imagination was vivid and he'd done his share of research on it...after the fact. Mello hadn't even known he was sick until he had gone back to see him, only to find him already gone from the world. The rosary in his pocket was the only thing he'd had left of him, of that old life. The one before Wammy's House.

They couldn't even grant him a mercy kill. Some bullshit about it being "against God's will." What kind of god would want to make people like Ivan suffer so much? The man gave up his life to serve this god, took Mello in when no one else had wanted anything to do with him, and this god paid him back with a slow and pathetic death. Even a shinigami like Lumen sounded benevolent in comparison.

Or maybe there was no god and Ivan had just gotten unlucky? Then the man had wasted his life on a false cause. Somehow that sounded even worse.

Why make the old lady suffer any more than she had already? She was all alone, her two sons gone, and she could only get worse. There was no quality to be had in her life now, not when she couldn't remember the faces of her loved ones, whether they were even alive. Besides, she was putting an unnecessary financial drain on the group in keeping her institutionalized. They weren't a charity.

He decided to do her a special favor. Put her out of her misery, courtesy of the mafia. Make it look natural, of course.

Mello fished out a pen from under the cushion and wrote the following underneath Miguel's entry:

Estrella Mora, Stroke. Dies peacefully in her sleep of a cerebral hemorrhage on August 13th at 10:30 pm.
"My fellow Americans…the British, Chinese and United States governments have given the Japanese people adequate warning of what is in store for them. The world will note that the first atomic bomb was first dropped on…Hiroshima…a military base. We won the race of discovery, against the Germans. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians. We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of Americans. We shall continue to use it, until we completely destroy Japan's power to make war…"

Quillish wanted to take the plate in his hand and toss it at the radio like a disc, unable to bear the scrambled words worming their way into his ear like a tube scrubbing brush. But his upbringing wouldn't allow him to pitch a tantrum. A good gentleman waited until his company said what he had to say before responding.

But what was good about this? His parents' worst nightmares had been realized, broadcasted for the entire world to behold. Could this be real?

"If Japan does not surrender, bombs will have to be dropped on her war industries and unfortunately thousands of civilian lives will be lost. I urge Japanese civilians to leave industrial cities immediately and save themselves…"

Whatever her reaction was to the broadcast streaming in from the den, Cordie didn't share it, unyielding in her pace of washing the dinner dishes and handing them to the twelve-year-old boy next to her to dry. In fact, her pace seemed to quicken. Once she started a task, she seemed completely immersed in it until it was done. Quillish's mother had admired the old woman's work ethic and hospitality in this stranger's land, chiding her son now and then to be more like her.

Now that she was gone, Cordie had taken over nagging him. She hadn't had to, but Cordie felt a sort of responsibility towards the young son of the woman who had employed her, treated her with kindness, and paid her well for a foreigner from across the pond. This was far more than what she could expect from many of her native equivalents.

Besides, as it stood, all they had now was each other.

Cordie's wrinkling dark skin and olive eyes glistened with sweat and what appeared to Quillish to be tears poking through her eyelids. It'd been almost four years since she'd gotten that wretched letter about Otis and Walter, the generic one they sent to all families of soldiers and staff killed in action. How did she take the news of this massacre of the enemy? Was she sad? Angry? Relieved? No, this isn't how it was supposed to be. Mother and Father never wanted this. They wanted the war to end…but not this way.

His father had sacrificed himself for that exact reason. The last he and his mother would ever see of him, he had urged them to run. Out of the country where "they" couldn't track them down. Quillish had only been six at the time, his understanding of the direness of their situation limited, but not enough for him not to tell something bad was going to happen. He knew this much by the blanched, earnest looks on his parents' faces and the fear leaking into their words as he peered around the corner unnoticed.

The two sat next to each other on the pea-green sofa which suddenly looked sickly in the boy's heavy eyes. "We should go back to Britain, then!"
"No. Y—you might be safe there, but only temporarily. If I can be sure of only one thing about them, it's that they won't stop until they've conquered all of Europe, including Great Britain. You'll have to go much further than even there. The United States, perhaps?"

"Then come with us! Quillish is just a boy! He needs you in his life Isaac, and so do I!"

The pause before Daddy's resigned reply was one of the loudest things he had ever heard.

"Oh, Marie. My darling. I'm so sorry. But I can't. I'm the one they want. If I go with you, they'll hunt me down. And if you get in the way, they won't hesitate to shoot you both first to get at me."

"Y—you stubborn bastard!" cried Mummy, her fists pounding at him as she collapsed against him. "This wouldn't happen if you weren't so focused on everything you do!"

Quillish couldn't help but notice how she didn't try to break down the logic of his argument with her own, as she usually did when they disagreed. Was it because she knew deep down that his father was right about whatever they were talking about?

When he'd heard more than enough of his fill, he grabbed the waistband of his falling trousers and hurried back down the hall and into his room to scurry back under the covers, lying face-down with the blankets over his brow so they couldn't see how very much awake he was. He curled into a ball and pulled the covers tighter over himself to stop his shivering, to hide the suspicious-looking shadows creeping along his wall. Were these shadows "them?" If they saw him, they might hurt him. So Daddy had said. He suddenly felt cold, like a draft had overtaken his little room, even though the window was shut tight.

Eventually, he heard Daddy come in, felt his heavy weight settle on the edge of the mattress next to him. The warmth radiating from him had never felt more welcome, but Quillish dared not scoot closer. He was supposed to be sleeping. For an unaccounted length of time, he just sat there. Quillish could feel his eyes on him through the blankets, blue and sharp just like his. He didn't say a word. He reached out his hand to stroke the top of Quillish's head, pausing in between strokes. He might have been taking note on how similar his hair was to Mummy's, a soft light brown, almost blonde. Maybe he was milking their last moments together for all they were worth.

He heard a stifled choke. When the old man bent over to kiss his temple, his facial fair tickling his skin like fine fairs on a brush, Quillish could have sworn he felt a drop of something hot and wet splash his face. A tear. Daddy was crying, something he had never seen or heard him do before that night. If he hadn't had enough cause for alarm before, surely he did now.

He and Mummy were going away on a long holiday, he'd said, just the two of them. As much as he wanted to come along, he'd had to stay and work on that "very important project" he had ongoing. But he would see them again soon enough, and whenever that would be, they would go on the grandest holiday the three of them had ever taken.

Quillish just knew that Daddy was lying. His eyes and Mummy's gave him away. But he never called him out on it. He was a good boy. He would have to be for Mummy.

He'd given them the majority of what remained of their fortune before sending them off. He wouldn't need it, where he was going. Quillish and his mother could only imagine what became of him after that unusually humid morning at the station as the train whisked them away through a continent once again tearing violently at its brittle seams. Had he taken his own life to avoid capture? Had he taken it like a man and let them torture him until they tired of it and planted a bullet in his skull? Perhaps he went to join an underground resistance group and was killed in action? In the most ideal scenario, he was in hiding, still alive and well and thinking about them as
intensely as they thought of him every single day.

Regardless, they never saw or heard from him again. A never-ending dread consumed Mother's mind as cancer did her body, and she had wasted away without the closure she had longed for over the next three years.

Now it'd been six since they'd left for America with thousands of other refugees from all walks of life, looking to escape the almost apocalyptic chaos, and here Quillish stood facing the stark reality that his father's sacrifice might have just been in vain.

But was it? It wasn't the Germans who had created and dropped those bombs. It had been the Americans, the Allies. Several people from Father's community had warned them of the Germans' intentions, and they had reacted accordingly. And it wasn't as though they'd attacked without provocation; the Japanese had struck first, slaying scores of their men and boys like Cordie's son Otis and husband Walter.

But did that make this right? They hadn't just obliterated men, but innocent women and children, as well. A weapon capable of such massive destruction did not discriminate, as much as many wished that it would. Like Death itself. Hundreds upon thousands of lives gone in a literal flash, and the ones who'd by some miracle managed to survive would live with the scars. Hundreds of children orphaned, just like him.

"Quillish. Quillish? Child, are you payin' attention?"

Quillish blinked back into focus to find Cordie waving another plate in his face. "You know the routine: I wash the dishes, you dry 'em. Don't get idle on me, now." Quillish could hear a strange tension laced in Cordie's words.

"Yes, Ms. Cordie. I'm sorry," he said, hastily putting the dish he had been nursing in his hands with the cloth into the rack to take the next one, still dripping suds onto the peach-colored linoleum. Cordie usually rinsed the dishes thoroughly before handing them to him.

"Know what the problem is? You distracted by that radio. Go on and turn it off when you done with that one, and get your behind back in here so we can finish."

Quillish had a feeling that Cordie wanted the radio off for her sake as much as his, but he obeyed without question. "Yes, Ms. Cordie."

He wasn't sure if he could stomach anymore of it, either.

That night he awoke to loud thumps coming from downstairs, punctuated by a crash. In a flash, he jumped out of bed and pulled the pistol out from under his pillow, preparing to take necessary action. Most boys his age had BB guns rather than actual pistols, but Cordie had bequeathed him one of Walter's old firearms, taught him how to use it. In the day and age they lived in, she argued, he would need to know how to protect himself, as she, her family and everyone before them had come to learn. Some people just didn't respond as well to coffee-sipping diplomacy as they did to the smoking barrel of a .38 Smith and Wesson™.

Mother would throw a fit when she heard that sort of talk in earshot. Violence was never the answer, she'd said. "Cordelia, are you suggesting that Quillish should pull out a gun for every quarrel he'll ever have?"

"I ain't sayin' nothin' like that. 'Course violence ain't the answer. Not the first answer. But get back to me when you've managed to reason with a mob who's come to lynch you 'cause you talked back
to a man, or 'cause you made the same comments to a girl that another fella could get away with making 'cause he was white. Ya'll would probably fare better at it since you got color on your side, but you ain't from here. Some folks won't take too kindly to uppity foreigners like y'self, no matter what you say. Even if you're right."

What a strange country they had escaped to, Quillish would think to himself sometimes, pondering the irony behind a country that would so strongly oppose a fascist regime and yet seemed scarcely any better when it came to certain members of its own citizenship.

Now was not one of those times. Pistol poised and ready, he snuck downstairs, his pulse and steps quickening as he heard the muffled cries of a woman.

Cordie…!

Steeling himself, he reached the bottom step and peered around the corner of the banister with bated breath. There was Cordie on her knees out in the den, her head bent with her chin jabbed into her breast. Somehow she looked so small there on the floor, her body convulsing with stifled sobs as she muttered almost deliriously to herself. Scattered around her lay fragments of what used to be their radio, the messenger on which she'd taken out her frustrations.

"Lord, I-I need your guidance. I need it more than ever," he heard her croak, her shaking leathery hands clasped in prayer. "I'm…I'm not s'posed to be happy about what happened to those people. I know I shouldn't. But Lord…th-they killed Walter, and Odie. They killed my baby boy. Now they've lost all their Walters and Odies. And Cordies. I—sometimes I would pray for this. I'd pray that they would pay for what they did. With their lives. You know that, you know everything. Did you mean for this to happen, Lord? Did you mean for all of this to happen? Oh Lord, what must I do?"

Cordie threw herself to the floor, overcome by a wave to confusion, grief and self-disgust. She didn't notice Quillish's presence on the bottom step as he put the safety back on his gun, which suddenly felt heavier than usual in his hands. He couldn't bear seeing her like this, but he was frozen right there on that step, too paralyzed to try to reach out to comfort her. When they had first met, he had found Cordie's people to be rather overwhelming when expressing their emotions, especially on those vibrant Sundays during service at her church, the one place where they could let go of their frustrations. Even now a part of him was taken back. Cordelia had always seemed such a strong woman to him, his and Mother's rock since they'd left Father behind in Europe.

The longer Cordie's pleas went unanswered, the further he sank into himself. If there was supposed to be a perfect benevolent god above, one in whom Cordie had invested all her faith, where was He? How could He let these sorts of things happen? To her, to him, to Mother, to Father? To innocent people all over? Either He was actually a very nonchalant or a malicious god…

…or there was none at all. Who could know for sure? Maybe it didn't matter? Regardless, all the bad things that have happened were the fault of people and people alone.

…

…

But did people also have the power to do the same amount of good, if not more? Couldn't people change?

Having had enough, Quillish hoisted himself onto his feet, holding the gun in both hands as he stumbled off the step. "Ms. Cordie?"
The old woman tried to stop her weeping as soon as she whirled around to see the worried boy standing behind her. "Ah! Quillish. Wh-what are you doin' up?"

"I heard a crash," he answered softly. "I thought someone had broken in and…"

Cordie made an awkward noise when she saw the Smith and Wesson™ clutched in his pudgy hands, as she hid her mouth in her knuckles. "Oh child, I'm sorry. No, no, no one's broke in. I was just…"

There was no way to explain her carrying on. She had the damn radio scattered in pieces around her, for God's sake. Not that she didn't try to. She simply rose to her feet and wiped her eyes, puffy and red and aching, until they were dry. Quillish couldn't see what they looked like in the darkness. "I…had an accident, is all, stumblin' around in the dark. Bumped into the radio."

"Are you hurt, Ms. Cordie? It sounded like you were crying."

"This ol' bird can take a few more bumps, yet. Now off to bed wit'chu," she ordered, her voice getting steadier, or wearier, Quillish couldn't tell. "I'm sorry if I woke you." She started to pick up the pieces around her feet when Quillish spoke up once more.

"I can get that," he offered, assuming that Cordie was not going to discuss the source of her distress right now, not in the middle of the night. "In the morning, I'll see if I can't salvage it."

"O' course you will, Mr. Handyman," she said, her voice missing the mirth that usually accompanied those words when she found him tinkering with this or that. She let him take the pieces from her hands, his eyes straining against the shadows to find the rest on the floor.

Whether Cordie was able to catch a wink after that was a mystery, but Quillish knew he could not go back to sleep, that night. As he stayed up to fiddle with the odds and ends on his desk by the dull flickering glow of a shadeless lamp, he contemplated the tools in his hands. These tools, these hands, he realized, could be used to either create or destroy. To save lives or to take them. For peace or for war. The hands that made the bomb were responsible for the radio that kept entire countries connected. For both the gun and the dishes on which they ate their supper every night.

He became dizzy at all the potential he could and could not comprehend, all right here in the palms of his hands. In everyone's hands.

And to think that it was but a matter of intent. A choice. A chance.

Quillish knew then that he wanted to create. He wanted to save. He wanted to create in the name of peace so that things like the atomic bomb or even warfare as a whole would never have to be used again, and no more people like Cordie and Mother and Father would have to suffer. Most of all, he wanted others to know this, that it didn't have to be this way, if everyone could just forget their differences and embrace the boundless creativity that they all shared...maybe the world truly could change for the betterment of all.

Such were the musings of a bewildered and tender-hearted twelve-year-old boy in a strange land at the end of wartime. These ideals would never completely leave him, but as he would discover for himself later in life, it was by no means that simple.

Sometimes when one wanted to create, no matter how benevolent his designs, he found himself having to first destroy.

…
"Nothing seems to have changed in the unsub's M.O. since the broadcast," Rester noted with a frown, his foot tapping as he scanned the newspapers scattered in front of him. His blond eyebrows knit together in concentration. "There's been a definite change in the media, though," he grumbled, finding himself unusually overwhelmed at all the articles posted on the incident. "I'm starting to wonder if this was a good idea…"

"It is possible that he saw through it, I admit," said the synthesized voice from out of the computer set up in front of him. The great Cloister Black "L" in the otherwise blank white screen seemed to glare at him, as though questioning his, well, questioning. "But as I see it, one of two things could happen after this. Either the killings will stop or they will continue in the same pattern, if not pick up. I made that broadcast to cast attention on the killer…or killers, but for now let's assume the singular. If the killings stop, then it proves that the criminal deaths were murders, and that the killer heard and heeded the announcement. If they continue, the suggestion still remains that these are murders. Either way, attention has been directed at him and he may find himself trapped. He might even lash out."

"There isn't really much of a pattern to begin with," Rester pointed out as he loosened his tie in order to release the heat building up from under it. His fingers twitched with the urge to turn down the thermostat. "The deaths happen all over the place, at random times and dates. They aren't all heart attacks, either; it's going to be a challenge to prove that all these suicides, accidents and natural deaths are really acts of murder. Unless…"

"Yes. We don't want to have to reveal the notebook's existence, but we mustn't completely rule that out either if it comes down to that. Until then Rester, I want you to keep digging through the profiles of all the victims. There is bound to be something in their backgrounds that links them together, besides the fact that they're criminals of course. Oh. And stay away from the thermostat, please. It's fine where it is."

80 degrees was fine, with this heat wave rolling through? Rester had worked in hot environments before as a commander, but this was a little ridiculous for him. At least all of those other times before there had been no AC or thermostat that could be adjusted. L was clearly not from this world. Even after they'd all started working together, he had refused to show his face to any of them. He kept himself locked away in a separate room from the others and communicated with them through the laptop. Only his assistant "Watari" was allowed to enter and exit that room, usually with food. Or, as Rester couldn't help but notice, toys and knick-knacks.

But he kept his thoughts on this to himself. L may have been strange, but he was the best of the best. It was because of L that at least they didn't need to keep worrying about the original Kira. They couldn't pull the plug on this case without him.

"If you're hot, Commander Rester, I can have Watari set up another fan for you."

"That would be…appreciated," he mumbled, cranking the level of the fan blasting beside him as high as it could go. Stacks of documents fluttered around him, bound together by clips. Rester's eyes were starting to droop but it was way too hot for coffee. So he reached over for the can of energy drink and held his nose to dull the taste of it, wondering to himself just how low young people's tastes had gotten if they could stomach this, never mind like it.

Around that time Watari shuffled past him again in his black suit and tie (even in hot weather a gentleman must be properly dressed), holding out in front of him a tray that consisted of a glass of juice with a bendable straw and a plate stacked with two sandwiches packed with peanut butter and Nutella™, each cut into four neat triangles. A typical child's midday snack. The two locked eyes for an unusually awkward moment before Rester averted his eyes back on the documents.
"Do you need another fan, Commander Rester?" the old man asked wearily.

"Yes, please. Take your time getting it, though," Rester answered politely. Watari nodded in understanding before continuing on his way. He rapped on the door with the "Do Not Disturb" tag hanging off the knob.

"It's Watari. I have your lunch. I'm coming in now."

"So you may," said the computer.

Placing the tray on the stand by the door, Watari used the card around his neck to swipe into the lock, undoing it. As he disappeared inside, Rester shook his head.

It never crossed my mind that L could be someone with severe Peter Pan syndrome.

Somehow he had a hunch that he wasn't the only here thinking this, sliding a glance towards McEnroe sitting across from him, who also held his tongue on the matter. The fan whirred between them, sweeping short blasts of cold air on both sides.

Inside the room Roger surveyed the multicolored maze of Legos™ set up throughout the perimeter. Taking a deep breath, he moved slowly through the narrow pathway, one foot after the other like a tightrope walker until he reached the center where his charge sat on the floor curled over his action figures.

As he bent down to set up the meal in front of him, he felt the boy's eyes bore into his hands. "You might as well give up."

Roger looked up, taken aback. "Huh? What are you talking about?"

"You're still in denial about him. We've tried every other lead already. I am sure you know deep down that he can't be anywhere else."

He sighed. "I know. I just…I suppose I'm having trouble accepting that."

When Mello had disappeared Roger was afraid that he would pull off a stunt similar to what B—Backup, Beyond—pulled when he had run away all those years ago. But time went by and all they'd met with on his end was silence. Matt had taken off not too long after he had, probably to find him himself. His whereabouts were shrouded in even more mystery.

Mello had always been something of a loose cannon, but would he really stoop so low as to use the same murder weapon as Kira had? Exactly how many people had fallen under his pen had yet to be determined, but it certainly had to be higher than Beyond's victim count. He was killing on a national, possibly international level, and the worst of it?

There had been no discernible purpose behind it all. Beyond had killed as part of an attempt to give L a case he could never solve, essentially defeating him. Light Yagami—"Kira"—had taken up killing to try to eliminate the criminal elements from society and to satiate his god complex. It was possible Mello was collaborating with a criminal organization, but outside of that it looked as though he had been doing this more or less on a whim, not to prove a point or to "benefit" society. Whatever scruples he had had, if only because of his admiration for L, he seemed to have abandoned since he'd left Wammy's.

But what would happen now with Near having just called him out on public broadcast? Indeed, though Near's, or rather L's announcement sounded like a rejection to another case, he had made it to get a reaction from the killer.
But Mello had been one of the top-scoring students in the House for a reason. After keeping such close tabs as he could on the Kira case, it was very likely that he saw through it. Still, according to Near, no matter how he should choose to respond, or even if he responded at all, the killings were now brought to the public's eye. The Kira followers were bound to have a field day about this, and the police, maybe now they would become more diligent?

Maybe. Too many maybes. Roger should have gotten quite used to the maybes a long time ago, but even if he had, that didn't make the situation any less grim.

Roger glanced down to see young Mello's photo tucked underneath a few Legos™, taken from a time when his blue eyes held more innocence than ice, though he had always had a cheeky smile. In his haste, Mello had forgotten about this photo when he'd left. His emotions had gotten the best of him, as they tended to do.

He wondered what the boy looked like now after all this time.

He wondered what he thought about the broadcast and how he would react to Near's preemptive strike.

He wondered what Watari would think if he could see for himself what the program had precipitated.

He wondered what L would think.

Most of all, he wondered whether this was all of their fault.

…

"Be careful, God is watching,

In a street blackened by night, please link our hands together.

Even if I'm by myself and far away, He can always come find me.

He comes to teach me everything He knows,

Even if I should no longer remember,

He will teach me over and over…

But what should I do once I know everything?"

This song came to Misa's mind whenever she felt particularly melancholy. She couldn't remember why exactly she had written it; the lyrics and melody just came to her one day after her name had been cleared, before Light and Ryuzaki died. It had stuck with her ever since. It was her private song. "Misa's Song," she'd dubbed it. She never recorded it or sang it to company, she had other songs for that purpose. It was her prayer, her doubt-filled cry to whatever higher power was out there, if such a thing existed. Perhaps Misa was one of those people who couldn't function if there wasn't something bigger than her to believe in. She used to think that that higher power was Kira, like so many others. But…

"Take care of yourself, for God is watching,

Don't hang yourself by your hand in a dark alley.

Even if you walk alone, He will always find you,
He knows, so tell Him your sins,

Oh, he knows, so tell Him your sins,

Tell him, even if you don't know His face…

But what will I do if Heaven's doors are closed to me?"

Oftentimes when she was alone, a profound guilt would make her break out in this song from under her breath in her native tongue. It gave her relief, however fleeting. She couldn't remember what exactly she'd done to earn this feeling, but it gnawed at her from the inside-out. The feeling that for all of her disdain for the wicked, she herself was inherently sinful and almost nothing she could do would change that fact.

Her fingers left the sleek black grand piano, the instant she heard Erin's own singing and footsteps over the dark, soft notes, the loud nasally optimism of her voice erasing them from the air in a flash. She recognized the words as some of the lyrics to a song Erin had shared with her, "The Rainbow Connection™." One of her favorites, its most famous rendition performed by a banjo-playing frog.

"Someday we'll find it, the Rainbow Connection,
The lovers, the dreamers, and me…”

As far as Misa knew, her friend had never done anything particularly horrible, like she had. Not that she would wish that on her. In fact, she hoped that Erin would never have to feel that way for as long as she lived. She didn't know whether her capacity for forgiveness made her noble or naïve, more foolish than even her.

Let them say what they like, but ignorance may be the greatest bliss there was to be had.

Kimiko entered first and then Erin came stumbling through the door with bags in each arm. "Are you sure you don't need help with those?"

"No, no, I got 'em!" Erin insisted, twirling a bit on her heels as she tried to keep her balance. Whatever her deal had been the night before, she seemed to have gotten over it. So it seemed. No. Misa couldn't approach her about it, not yet. Soon but not now, not with Kimiko in earshot.

Besides, it didn't sound like a good topic to touch on just before a house-warming party. "Oh man, this is gonna be a blast,” she huffed, plopping the groceries on the countertop when she reached the kitchen.

Misa couldn't help her smirk. She could recognize that flush in her dear friend's face anywhere. "Why's that? Because Steve's gonna be there?"

That made Erin stop for a beat, her ears burning into pieces of jerky on the sides of her head. "Uhm…well, yeah, I mean, it'll be great if he and his friend make it, but I mean, the party as a whole will be a blast, since you guys are hosting it. Who knows? Maybe he'll bring some guy-friends too, some nice guys for you. Oh crap, I forgot to tell him he could bring guests…”

"Oh. That could be a problem. Everyone's allowed one guest, but no more than that. We only have so much food and space, after all," said Kimiko, starting to put perishables into the fridge. Most of the furnishings in their house had bright neon stickers on them to help Kimiko around the house, since she could only see color and light in her one good eye. "And frankly, I wouldn't like to be left with a total disaster area to clean up when they go home."
"N-no worries, I'll just ring 'im up and let him know. I offered a separate invitation to Halle, so she can bring a guest, too, if she wants. Wait, did I?"

A playful impulse swept through Misa, pulling her to her feet and compelling her to sneak into the kitchen to pull out from one of the bags a jar of red glitter she had requested for. She poured a fistful into her hand with no one looking, then she snuck up behind Erin with her hands poised in front of her lips.

She puckered her lips as though blowing a kiss, blew as hard as she could—pppft!

—and assaulted Erin with a gust of red sparkles clinging to her face and clothes before Erin could completely turn around. "H-hey! What'd you do that for?"

"I'm granting you the love goddess's blessing. May you finally have the courage to make Steve your boyfriend by the big night, and your relationship gets the happy ending it deserves."

"What are ya, my Fairy Godmother? Gi-gimme that jar!"

Before long, the girls were taking turns throwing glitter at each other, while Kimiko stopped putting food away to see what the matter was. "What are you two doing?" she asked, unable to see for herself.

"Uh, nothing! Hold on, we'll be there in a sec."

Misa took advantage of Erin's moment of weakness to take a generous scoop of glitter and sprinkle it through her friend's thick brown hair.

"Hey! Cut it out, will ya?" she protested, reaching up to frantically pick at the shimmery specks clinging to her face and clothes. "This is a pain in the ass to get out, you know that, right? Augh, I look like a giant ruby slipper!"

"Everything's better with glitter, Erin," said Misa with a smirk.

…

"Are you sure you don't want to take the bus or something?"

"We're not that far. I made it this far on my own before you pulled up; there's no reason why I can't make it back just as easily. It's not like my house suddenly got up and moved farther away when I left it."

Matsuda tried to laugh at Soichiro's attempt at a joke, but it came out forced and nervous, like it always seemed to, these days. On his way back from work, he had found the Chief—well, former Chief, Aizawa was technically the Chief now—coming out of the store with a bag slung over his shoulder bearing groceries. Neither Sachiko nor Sayu were with him, only the polished dark red cane gripped in his right hand with dragon-shaped designs carved into it, a gift from Sachiko and Sayu for his birthday last month. His constant companion. His reminder.

"Yeah, but you look pale. And you're sweating a lot. Maybe you should sit down for a bit, have a drink—"

"Well...now that you mention it, I am feeling parched."

Matsuda started to turn to fetch a water bottle from the car, but Soichiro stopped him. "No, I have something. I've got it." He hobbled towards a nearby bus stop to lean against the bench, but didn't
sit in it. Ever since he had graduated from the wheelchair, it seemed that he avoided all chairs and seats when the option was given. It was as if he was afraid that if he sat down for too long at any time, he wouldn't be able to get up again. Never again did he want to take simple things like walking for granted.

Matsuda watched him muster the feeling he had managed to regain in his left arm over these past few years to slowly unzip the fanny pack strapped around his waist. As a younger man who minded the trends, fanny packs looked unattractive to Matsuda, but Soichiro had gotten over the embarrassment of being seen in public with one of these a long time ago.

Perhaps Matsuda just didn't like it because it along with the cane seemed to accentuate his mentor's age. His frailty. He had just turned 53 and yet he looked like he was 66. Sometimes even older.

Matsuda felt helpless just by looking at him. He knew he shouldn't feel that way since Soichiro was doing quite well for himself compared to others in his situation, determined to be anything but helpless. But the feeling gnawed at Matsuda anyway, always needing to be helpful, even now.

Soichiro's gulps were deep and almost desperate, as though he were a traveler marooned in an arid desert and had just come across an oasis. Matsuda willed himself not to cringe, but couldn't help uttering out loud, "Gosh Chief, you must be really thirsty. Didn't the doctor say that you have to stay hydrated?"

The water bottle seemed to pop as he pulled it back out of his mouth. He wiped the corners of his chapped lips with his forearm before snapping the bottle shut. When he had finished slaking his thirst for the time being, the bottle was almost a quarter-full. "I'm getting my fluids, don't you worry. And Matsuda—"

"Ah, right. I'm sorry for calling you Chief. It's...force of habit, I guess."

Like a student used to addressing his teacher as "sensei," long after he'd graduated and left the dojo.

"Hey, if you want, I can drive you back home—"

"No, thank you. I told you, I got this far on foot. I'm sure I can make it the other way," he said, rubbing the melting bottle against his forehead to cool off.

"Hmm, okay, but at least let me walk with you. I can leave the car here and come back to it when we reach your house."

Soichiro took a deep breath to calm himself. He was tired of everyone coddling him, no matter how well he knew they meant. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Before the stroke, he used to be Chief of the NPA, a mentor, a husband and a father. A provider. A protector. A pillar. People used to need him. Now he couldn't even walk to the store by himself without worrying everyone.

Then he would remember how things turned out the way they were today. Then again, maybe it's what I deserve…

He was too tired to object. Matsuda was the persistent type, one of the things he had always liked about him, a good trait for any cop. "All right, if you insist."

"You want me to carry some of those for you?" Matsuda offered, pointing at the groceries in the bag.

"I only have one bag—"
"No problem! I've got one in the car. We'll split up the load. That just looks like a lot to carry by yourself…"

"…Sure. Thank you for offering."

When they set out the bags to divide things up, Soichiro noticed Matsuda putting most of the heavier items into his bag, leaving Soichiro with the fruit and vegetables. He thought about mentioning that he can at least carry the fish, but decided against it. The time wasted debating over who should carry what could be time used to actually get the food home before the summer heat spoiled it.

When they finally reached the block where the Yagami family resided, Soichiro tried not to look too out of breath in front of Matsuda. He heard the shouts of two children coming up the street alongside them, a brother and sister. The sister, her rich brown hair tucked underneath a pink helmet and her bony scratched-up elbows and knees padded, wobbled to and fro on top of a yellow bike for the first time, while her brother kept pace astride her with his hands next to hers on the handlebars. His golden brown hair bounced around his angled face and seemed to reflect the sun off it like a halo.

"Big brother, I'm scared! What if I crash again?"

"Don't worry, I've got you. Don't think about crashing. Just keep your eyes forward and keep pedaling. And don't let go of the handlebars, okay?"

He had just come home from work when he saw the pair out in the middle of the street. The day had been as hot and clear as this one, just after Sayu's seventh birthday, and Sachiko was inside getting dinner ready. Hastily stopping on the side of the road a safe distance back, he had stumbled out of the car and up the sidewalk, just in time for the moment of truth.

"Sayu, I'm gonna let go of the bike. Just tell me when you're ready, and I'll let go. And when I do, keep pedaling and hold it straight."

In a burst of impulsive confidence, she shouted, "Okay! Let go, Light!"

And he let go. Off sped his little girl, her path swerving and shaky, but she kept going, following her brother's advice except to break her concentration on the road to squeal over her shoulder. "L-Light! I'm doing it! I'm doing it! I'm riding the bike!"

He smiled at her, calling as he ran after her, "That's it, Sayu! Keep looking forward, you're doing great!"

Soichiro blinked again and the kids disappeared into the haze, their cheers and shouts still echoing in his mind. It had only been his memories running away from him.

Who would've thought that the same hands that had held Sayu steady would scratch out almost ten thousand known lives eight years later? That those same bright, kind eyes that had helped her find the confidence to ride a bike would look at him years later with such darkness and savagery as he ordered for his death?

Oh Light. What happened?

It'd been four years since that fateful November morning and still he found himself asking this question, each attempt at an answer as fruitless as the last.

The children and the bike were immediately replaced by the family car rolling down the street
before it turned into the driveway before them. Sachiko had had a doctor's appointment today, and Sayu had needed the car to run an errand with a friend. In her haste, she had left her grocery list behind on the fridge for Soichiro to pick up.

He saw Sachiko slide out from the passenger's seat, Sayu from the driver's. Light had died before he could see his little sister graduate from the bike to the car, and Soichiro had been preoccupied with literally trying to get back on his feet. Sachiko had taken it upon herself to guide Sayu through that milestone.

Sachiko looked up at the two with a start. "Soichiro! You brought groceries? Oh dear, I knew I was forgetting something. You didn't have to—"

"It's no trouble. I needed my exercise, anyway," he answered more sheepishly than he meant to. "Matsuda helped me carry them back."

Sayu trotted around the front of the car then, her purse slung over her shoulder. "Huh? Hey, Dad! You got the groceries for us? You didn't have to do that. Are you okay? You look kinda flushed…"

"Your mother just asked me that…"

"Oh yeah, never better."

"Well, come in and sit down, dear. We can put the groceries away."

"No, let me help. I can do it," he insisted, remembering what the doctor had told him about exercising his left leg and arm. Use them or lose them.

"Good to see you again, Matsuda," greeted Sachiko with a smile as she took Matsuda's share. "Thank you for your help! How are you?"

"Doing well, doing well," Matsuda cheered back, bowing in return. Soichiro couldn't help but notice the deep blush running into the younger man's face when his eyes fell on, then promptly darted away from Sayu. Fathers were especially keen on these things. "Everyone on the force says hi, and so do my parents! They just celebrated their 32nd anniversary!"

"Ah, does your mother enjoy the gift I sent her?"

"Oh yes, very much so. She wanted me to give you her gratitude again, next time I saw you."

"Aww, their 32nd year? That's great! 32 is a lucky number, too!" Sayu chimed. "Congrats to them for sticking together for so long!"

No one noticed Soichiro gulp down the lump forming in his throat. He and Sachiko were approaching their own anniversary in September. Their 25th. An unlucky year.

It was a wonder sometimes how they'd stayed together for this long after all they'd been through already.

Or maybe it wasn't? Like him, Sachiko never backed down from a commitment once she made it. Even if she wanted to leave him after everything that had happened with Light and the Kira case, she could never bring herself to leave an old man like him to flounder around on his own.

He squeezed his eyes shut and adjusted his glasses as he headed for the front door. Get a hold of yourself. Why are you even thinking like that, all of a sudden?
"Ah, um, th-thank you, Sayu! I'll tell them that when I see them again! How have you been?"

Sayu waved her fingers with a good-natured smile. "Oh, not much. Just wrapping up this last semester at To-Oh, getting ready for the next one." Sayu had developed an impressive work ethic for someone who used to complain about having homework back in junior high.

Losing Light had made her grow up fast.

"Hmm, education, right? That's your major?"

"Ha, yeah! I want to become a teacher, probably for primary school kids."

For some reason, Soichiro was uncomfortable with the fact that Matsuda knew what his daughter's major was, even though it wasn't exactly a secret.

"Working with kids? That's pretty, uh, cool! Kids are the greatest!"

"So Sachiko, how did it go?" Soichiro asked as the four began to make their way to the door, apprehensive of her answer. "At the doctor's?"

"A clean bill of health," beamed Sachiko. "Though he did say I need to exercise more. Keeping house isn't enough, it seems. He suggested that I try yoga or something along those lines to help relieve stress. T'ai chi sounds more up my alley. If you want, we could even try it together."

While they all headed into the house, Soichiro pulled Matsuda aside to let the women in first. As evenly as he could he said, "Hey. Don't think I haven't noticed."

The way Matsuda sputtered and stammered was all the confirmation he needed. "Wh—n-noticed what? What're you talking about?"

"You're not that hard to read, Matsuda. I've seen the way you've looked at Sayu lately. Your face is bright red right now. You like her, don't you? That's probably why you come over as often as you do…"

Matsuda looked like he wanted to drop dead right then and there as he put up his hands in defense. "What? No, no way! I-I would never—"

He couldn't exactly blame him. Sayu was pretty, there was no getting around that. She was bound to attract male attention sooner or later, as much as the father in Soichiro preferred to deny it. And Matsuda was probably the nicest and most harmless guy he had ever known. Still…

"Well, you can forget it," he declared, calmly but firmly. "I'd never let Sayu marry a cop."

Though he had tried to be discreet about the matter, Matsuda's nervous outburst had attracted Sachiko and Sayu's attention back into the hallway where the men stood. Immediately Sachiko became as stern as her husband. "That's right, I'd never want that for her."

Sayu didn't deserve the heartache that came with marrying a man with a badge.

Matsuda looked cornered, shaking like a dog just spanked with a rolled-up newspaper. His tongue seemed to tie itself into knots in his mouth as he tried to explain himself, and when nothing came, he conceded with slumped shoulders. "Oh man. I never even got to tell her that I liked her," he moaned, not noticing Sayu in the threshold watching him with gentle amusement. "Y-you're too cruel to me, Mom and Dad."
In an instant, the bag in Sachiko hands fell, with all the fruit and vegetables rolling out of it. Soichiro almost dropped his cane. That had come out of nowhere.

"Oh God, did I just say that?"

Sayu giggled, then. "Aw, don't feel too bad. Personally I think you'd be a good catch, Matsu."

The red-faced grin that broke out on his face made Soichiro want to roll his eyes. Poor Matsuda. Maybe some things would never change? "What? Y-you really think so, Sayu?"

"Yep! In fact, if you were just a little younger, I might have considered going out with you sometime."

It was a wonder that the hopeless would-have-been suitor didn't completely fall over on his back. Sayu had indeed grown up over the past four years, reaching a maturity that seemed to surpass even Matsuda. Sachiko and Soichiro couldn't be more proud of her.

Another twinge of sadness surged through him as this sunk in. My little girl's all grown up. When he was still with the NPA, he hadn't been around much to see her or Light grow up. Justice didn't care if you had a family at home. And it certainly didn't care if the criminal you were trying to catch happened to be your only son.

Now Sayu had grown up, right before his eyes. She was in her prime, going on to do everything that Light would never get to. She didn't need him anymore.

As Matsuda tried to shake off the rejection and trotted into the kitchen to help put the rest of the groceries away, Soichiro noticed something fall out of his jacket. An envelope. With all the strength he could muster, he supported his weight on the cane as he bent in to pick it up. It was postmarked from Los Angeles, California, United States.

Ah. This must be from their young American friend Erin. A mix-up during the Kira case had brought them together when she was here in Japan studying abroad, and ever since she and Matsuda had found each other again she'd send cards and little gifts from time to time. The last he'd heard she was doing well for herself. He found another flowery greeting card inside the envelope, with a message scribbled on the bottom in crooked, shaky kanji below the glittery text. Just another reminder that she was thinking about them.

She always was rather sentimental. Sometimes loudly and overwhelmingly so. She'd often forget their native etiquette and hug everyone on the task force or slap them on the back for pretty much anything. She'd even give L or Matsuda "noogies" when the urge compelled her. Perhaps it was just a matter of age and culture that made it seem strange to him? Most of the young people in America probably did that sort of thing all the time. Still, her gestures were appreciated all the sa—

Huh?

His fingertips caressed the back of the card. He'd heard stories of people who became hypersensitive in certain ways as compensation for losing function of a body part, either naturally or through practice. His right hand must've become more sensitive in response to losing the feeling in his left, because he thought he could feel extra print on the back of the card. Was he imagining it? It wasn't impossible. But when he looked front and back, there was no extra printing.

None that was visible.
He turned the card over and trailed his fingers along the back. He held it up to his eye and squinted.

What on Earth…?

He glanced toward the kitchen to make note of how preoccupied the others were, whether they would notice if he walked away. When it looked like the coast was clear, he began his trek up the stairs, taking care to avoid the squeaky spot on one of the middle steps. Along the way he glanced at the stair chair lift attached to the wall. He’d suggested many times to have the thing uninstalled since he got out of the wheelchair, but Sachiko had been just as adamant about keeping it. She still didn't trust him on stairs.

He scowled at it. Use them or lose them. Biting back his bitterness, he pressed onward, taking it one step at a time with his cane hanging from the crook of his elbow as he held on to the banister for what felt like dear life.

Sneaking into Light's room felt like entering a mausoleum every time. Over the years they had given away most of his furniture and belongings. Whatever was not given to friends and family was donated to charity, as Light would have wanted (which Light? My son, not the killer. But they were one in the same). But they had kept his desk and chair as an altar of sorts, a place where his picture sat next to a vase filled with flowers which Sayu and Sachiko tended to every day. The shades were now always open, bathing the room in bony white sunlight, bright enough to spotlight the dust particles dancing in midair.

The way Light had kept his room in life, Soichiro was surprised to see any dust in here at all. But then, Light had always kept the shades drawn. This was his sanctuary, where he slept. Where he studied and occasionally stopped to help Sayu with her studies. Where he dreamed. Where he schemed. Where he killed.

Soichiro closed his eyes. Sometimes he could almost feel his son's presence, his rigid silhouette crossing the stains along the walls where his bed and shelves used to be. His ghost? Or was it just his grief getting the best of him again?

He hesitated for a bit when he approached the desk, trying to shake the feeling that he was violating something sacred when all he was doing was going through a few drawers. He stared into Light's frozen face from beyond the photograph. For some reason, his bronze eyes seemed to narrow at him in accusation and contempt, like he hated Soichiro so much even from beyond the grave that he wished he would die just like he had, or all the criminals—no, all the people he had slain in trying to change the world.

Light had been his greatest failure, as a detective and as a father.

His eyes darted towards the floor. His hand reached out to brush Light's face before placing the picture face down. When he drew it back he felt a thin film of dust on his fingers. He rubbed it away into his sweating fingertips before taking another breath to steel his nerves and opening the top right drawer to pull out a pen-sized light. An ultraviolet light used to look for hidden messages written in basic invisible ink.

He clicked it on and shined it on the inside of the greeting card, his head rattling in sheer disbelief.

You could do better at things like this, Blogger.

Just then, he heard the rumble of a truck crawling up the street before he could fully immerse himself into the hastily scribbled message. He peered out the window. Sure enough he saw a tow
truck passing by, the car attached to it very familiar.

Say, isn't that—uh-oh.

"Erm, Matsuda?" he called out into the hallway.

"Yeah?"

"Your car is being towed."

"Wh-wh-WHAT? No way! Excuse me, Sayu. WAIT, COME BACK! THAT CAR BELONGS TO A COP! I HAVE THE BADGE TO PROVE IT! STOOOOOP!"

The force of the door slamming behind him seemed to shake the whole house. Soichiro sighed as he saw Matsuda scramble out of their yard and chase after the truck like a dog chasing a car yapping at it all the way. From the foot of the steps he heard Sayu chuckle, "Oh my God. Mom, can I take the car one last time? There's no way Matsu's going to get his back that way."

"Well…all right, but don't be out long. Watch for traffic, and I don't want to see any dings."

"Like I've ever brought the car back with scratches. Thanks, Mom! We'll be right back."

With the soft jingle of keys, Sayu was out the door as well. Like a scene from straight out of a romantic comedy.

She's just helping him out, Soichiro told himself. She just rejected him after all. Nothing was going to develop between them. It'd better not.

Around that time, Sachiko realized where her husband had gone off to and called up to him, "Honey? Are you upstairs?"

Soichiro slipped the card back into the envelope and the envelope into his fanny pack. He'd have to look it over later. Not to mention Matsuda would have some explaining to do, the next time he saw him. "Yes."

A distant but unmistakable tension laced her next words. "You didn't use the lift."

"I didn't have to," he answered, more defensively than he meant to. He hobbled out of Light's room and peered down at his wife glaring back up at him, her arms folded across her chest.

"Soichiro, I thought we talked about this. You're not ready for stairs—"

"The doctor said—"

"I know what he said, I was there. That's why you go to therapy. But you're not ready to climb this many steps. What if you fell?"

"As you can see I got up the stairs just fine. If I'm not ready now, then when will I be?" he asked, his chest tightening with anger. "I don't need the lift anymore."

"And what about getting down?" Was that a challenge?

Soichiro straightened up, putting on his stiffest face so as to hide his anxiety. "I can do that just as well. Watch." He was making the turn to start his descent down the stairs when Sachiko made her ascent up them.
"No, stop where you are! You are not going down these stairs without the lift. Now what were you doing upstairs to begin with?"

"You can trust me enough to leave me alone in the house, but not enough to get up and down the stairs by myself? For all you know, I've been running marathons on these when you're not looking. And I didn't realize that I needed a reason to be upstairs in my own house."

…

He shouldn't have said that. Why did he say that? The look of anger and near-horror on Sachiko's face made him regret his words instantly.

"Ugh, I swear you've gotten so ornery ever since you got out of the wheelchair—!"

She stopped when she saw the blood rushing to Soichiro's ears. He didn't blush, he was too proud and reserved for a full blush. Instead, when he got embarrassed his ears turned red and hot, and he would purse his lips, tuck his chin slightly and dart his eyes toward the side. It had always been one of his many endearing traits in Sachiko's eyes.

Sachiko briefly covered her mouth, as though replaying her last words in her mind. "Oh no. Darling, I didn't—I didn't mean it like that, I'm so sorry—"

"No, i—it's all right. I'm the one that should be sorry. For, erm, being an ass…let's forget about it."

They had had their share of ups and downs like any other couple—if not more due to his job—but ever since Light's death, a dark cloud seemed to have descended over the house, and their marriage. Sometimes the cloud would dissipate, but it always came creeping over as thick and grey as ever. Sachiko had not only lost her son on that case, but she had almost lost her husband. Midway through the case he had collapsed with a heart attack, and just a few weeks after Light's funeral he was struck down again, with a stroke this time. If he fell on those steps, he was as good as done for. For all of his resentment on being constantly coddled, Soichiro couldn't say that he didn't understand where her overbearing stubbornness had come from.

He sighed. "I guess I was struck by the urge to see Light's room again. I was checking to see if the flowers needed watering. Saying a prayer for him. That's all."

Over the years as a detective, especially after the Kira case, his faith had dwindled. Why did he keep praying with Sayu and Sachiko? To keep up appearances, mostly. He couldn't know for sure what had happened to Light's soul after he'd died and he probably never would. He just had a feeling that all the prayers in the world would never do Light any good.

At the same time he couldn't deny the comfort it provided, however temporary. People prayed to find some sense in their lives and to stay close to their loved ones, living or dead. And no parent could bear the idea of their child suffering for a minute let alone eternity, never mind if they deserved it.

He couldn't bear the idea of Light's soul vanishing into nothingness either, whatever that meant. It just couldn't have, or else he wouldn't still feel this way. Right?

Sachiko closed her eyes as her hand found its way to her heart. She bowed her head. "Oh. I see."

…

"Well, I should probably get started on dinner while we wait for Matsuda and Sayu to come back."
"I'll help." That sounded more like a question than a reply in Soichiro's ears.

"All right. But stay put while I get the lift up here."

…

…

His next few words came out thick and quiet: "Yes, Sachiko."

…

"You're rather quiet this evening, Takada."

"Oh? I'm sorry. I've just…had a long day at work. That's all."

"Is everything all right at work? You've seemed stressed lately."

Kiyomi maneuvered the chopsticks and placed another sushi roll into her mouth, eating not necessarily because she was hungry but in order to buy herself time to think of an appropriate response. She chewed on the fish, rice and seaweed slowly and deliberately, savoring the fresh salty flavor of the sea. She shut her eyes to give herself a break from her companion's sharp, searching gaze.

"Just your usual stresses that come with keeping the public informed on current events," she answered after she swallowed.

He had his hands clasped in front of him as he tended to do when he was thinking. It always looked to her as though he was praying to a higher power whenever he did that. In fact he had a rather peculiar habit of holding things with both hands—with the exception of utensils of course—as though they were sacred somehow. But he rarely said a word about his religious beliefs. Though he would have much to say about his social beliefs, one of the things about him that Kiyomi had to admit that she found attractive. They had met during a debate on Sakura TV, which she had hosted of course after Demegawa caved to her insistence that she do so, and they had been meeting each other after work at least once a week since then. Kiyomi could figure from his actions that he was a Kira supporter.

Just like her. Birds of a feather, she supposed. For birds, safety came in numbers.

"Is there...anyone in particular who has been causing you problems? Anyone who has been harassing you?"

Kiyomi froze, her glass just millimeters away her lips. Had she been taking an actual sip when he had said this she might have choked. No, that wouldn't be good. "I beg your pardon? Mikami, how on Earth could you jump to such a conclusion?" she asked as calmly as she could.

"You're refusing to discuss what goes on in your workplace. That's typical of someone who has been repeatedly subjected to a hostile work environment."

Perhaps Kiyomi shouldn't have been surprised. Mikami was a highly successful prosecutor. He was bound to have seen things like this before. "You know, there may be other reasons why I might choose not to disclose my work day. It could simply be because there is nothing important to discuss."

"Are you listening to yourself?" he asked, pushing his glasses back up against his pale face.
"You're a news reporter; there is always something important going on everywhere you go. Besides, if there was nothing going on, you would be more inclined to sit up straight and eat."

Kiyomi fell silent, her grip on her glass tightening and her shoulders squaring. She heard them, then.

"I'm sorry Miss Takada, but I'm telling the truth. We've already filled all the positions. I wish you the best of luck."

"Know your place, Taki. No one wants to hear your stupid opinions."

"Your head's like your ass; you gotta learn to loosen up!"

She could still feel the sting of Demegawa's meaty, cigarette-stained hand slapping her rear. Nishiyama had delivered the second blow with a sneer as she glared at the back of his head while he walked away yet again, adhering to her philosophy.

"It's dog-eat-dog out here, honey, and I didn't see anything."

It was then that Kiyomi had realized that her breathing had picked up. The way her career had panned out so far had been nothing at all like she had hoped when she had graduated. The pride and joy of the Takada family, she got all the best marks and held the title of Miss To-Oh back in university. She had her share of suitors and had even briefly dated one of the school's other top students, though the end of that courtship had been one of the more sour moments in her life. But she pulled through it, and with her credentials she had been certain that she was a shoo-in as an anchorwoman at one of the best news stations in the country, like NHN.

As it turned out, none of that mattered after college. All the spaces had been filled, by women who with little doubt in her mind had slept their way into them. Sakura TV had been the only station that would give her a job, and as much as she had preferred not to be affiliated with them, she had convinced herself that it was only a temporary arrangement, she would keep sending out her resume until she found something better and besides she had to get her name and face out there somehow.

But here she was, all because she refused to put out for Demegawa. And so the desk went to Nishiyama, his not-so-secret mistress. Meanwhile her own parents wouldn't speak to her out of shame for having their daughter involved with such a trashy station. The debate had been a fluke. She hadn't gotten so lucky since then, and now her boss was hounding her for "payback" for letting her do it.

"So who is it, Takada? Is it Demegawa?"

She put down her glass and sighed. Really, who else did she have to talk to anymore? "Yes," she answered softly. "I admit, he's been…pestering me for some time."

A distant and strange urgency seeped into Mikami's voice then, his dark eyes flickering with conviction. "Takada, you're stronger than that. You can't let him get away with this. What happened to standing up for what's best for everyone?"

"I know. But it's not going to be like this forever. I'm quitting Sakura TV and planning to move on to something more credible."

"That's not enough. Between harassing you and using Kira to scam all of his followers out of their hard-earned money…Demegawa needs to be brought to justice. He must answer for what he's done. You owe that to yourself, and all the good people that he's abused."
Kiyomi loved that about Mikami. Most prosecutors were in it for the money or the reputation, but not him. He was genuine. It had been such a long time since she'd seen a stronger sense of justice in anyone besides herself.

"Believe me, I want more than anything to see that happen. But no one else will speak up against him. He surrounds himself with sycophantic idiots who let him use them to wipe his shoes off after coming out of the rain. I don't think I'd have much of a case with only he said-she said to go on."

She didn't see it coming when she felt his hand slide over hers on the edge of the table, his fingertips resting over her knuckles. Faint jolts of electricity shot up her arm at the gesture. It was an innocent, assuring touch.

"I will help you in any way that I can," he said. This had to be the softest that she had ever seen him act. Kiyomi didn't know what to make of it. "You have my number and I have yours."

That was not to say that she didn't welcome it. "Thank you." With her other hand she cleared her throat. "It's getting kind of late. So, should I get the bill this time or will you?"

"I will," he offered.

Mikami walked with her back to her apartment; it was Thursday night and her place happened to be on the way to the hotel where he worked out at their fitness center. Being the sort of man who ran on a schedule, he bade her good-night at the front at 8:15 so he could get to the gym by nine.

Though the softness from that moment had since disappeared, he reaffirmed his desire to see Demegawa brought to justice.

Personally, Kiyomi didn't think it enough for that pig to be sued in court. He was one of those types that the world could frankly do without. But as much as she hated to admit it, she doubted any harm would befall him anytime soon. Four years had gone by since Kira's last judgment had been passed, and whatever had happened to him it was unlikely that he would ever return. But there were people out there who refused to abandon their faith. Demegawa could attest to that. For all of his scamming and pickpocketing, he did what he could to keep the fire alive if for the wrong reasons.

If only, if Kira could not return, that someone could step in and continue his work. He could have changed the world.

Once she'd stepped inside and traded her heels for slippers, she lit a candle. From her purse she fished out an access pass she had chanced across earlier that day in the restroom while washing her hands. The woman on the card flashed her sickly sweet, phony smile at her.

Saeko Nishiyama.

Kiyomi didn't waste any time tearing the card out of its plastic case. It wasn't much in the way of dealing justice, but it would have to do for now.

Outside her door the card had already melted down to the halfway point—she made sure to start on the side with Nishiyama's face on it as she held it to the tiny flame and imagined the woman going literally and figuratively up in smoke, despite her usual disinterest in all that voodoo nonsense—when she could have sworn she heard a swishing noise from her living room. Like a book falling to the floor.

What was that?

She dropped the remains of the pass into the jar for the fire to consume it. When she returned to the
den she found a plain black notebook lying in the middle of the floor. It hadn't been there before.

The corners of her mouth twitched, her brow knitting itself together. What the…?

She bent down to pick it up and briefly flipped through it. All of the pages were blank. Where had it come from? Out of the ceiling? She looked overhead and found nothing. The roof, the entire room was the same as it'd always been.

For reasons she couldn't fathom, her heart began to race, its beating the only sound she heard. Was there someone in here? Why couldn't she shake the feeling that there was another presence here with her?

"Hello?" she called out. No answer.

She was about to turn and walk out to check on the candle when suddenly something large and shadowy plopped in front of her from out of nowhere, the shock and horror enough to sweep her off her feet. Before she knew it she was on the floor, all the blood draining out of her as she watched the shadow slowly rise up and take shape. A spiny, willowy black and white creature that almost touched the ceiling, it crouched on long grasshopper-like legs garbed in what looked like ratty pants.

The thing stared at her with pupil-less unblinking slits for eyes, scraping one of its six paws at the back of its mangy jet black mane. Good God, its claws looked almost as long as her head and neck put together! The scream that she might have let out stayed clogged in her throat.

And then it spoke, or rather whispered. Whatever mouth it had was hidden in rags, like a bandit from out of someone's darkest nightmare, and its breathy words were muffled under them.

"Oh dear. It looks like I'm too late."
Refusal

Boy, I must really got it bad to be coming here on my own volition rather than having Misa drag me over, was Erin's last thought before she pulled open the door to the salon. Really, there was no other reason for her to be here. She had passed this particular salon on her way to work a few times and after getting a few recommendations from some of her co-workers she had the not-so-inexplicable urge to pay a visit herself. She was all for keeping clean and looking presentable, but she rarely got dolled up, with the make-up and jewelry and all. She'd always figured that dolling up was for those extra-special occasions.

Well, this was as special of an occasion as any.

She didn't have anything too flashy in mind. Misa had told her a time or two that her hair might look really nice wavy compared to its usual straightness, so she decided to go with that. Better to come in knowing what she wanted right off the bat than to waste the stylists' time trying to decide on what 'do she wanted them to…do. She might have asked Misa to fix her hair, but the starlet was hardly at home lately and Misa had more important things to worry about.

She expected to hear a bell tinkle when the door opened. Instead she was treated to dolphin clicks and trills from somewhere overhead. Unexpected, to say the least. The receptionist glanced up from her books, her expression cool and glazed. "I swear it wasn't my idea, it was Stephanie's. We're putting those dolphin sounds on trial to see how people react to them. Anyway, how can I help you?"

"Oh well I like them. Who doesn't like dolphins? Good afternoon to you too, I'm Erin." Erin twiddled her thumbs in front of her. She clicked her tongue as she searched for the words she thought she had down before crossing the threshold. "Uhm…well…I, uh, I came here today b-

"Obviously. You've come to the right place. So is there a particular style that you're aiming for?"

"Is there a particular style that I'm aiming for?" she parroted half under her breath. Damn it, what was wrong with her? She knew what she wanted just a second ago. "Hmm…I did have one in mind. Hold on, lemme think…oh! Right! I would like to make my hair wavier! Yeah, that's it! Wait. D'you guys do walk-ins, or was I supposed to make an appointment over the phone beforehand or something?"

The receptionist was starting to look rather intimidating from where she stood. She was gorgeous: tall, shoulder-length blond hair and dark blue eyes and full red lips, with the curves in all the right places that were accentuated by her chic body-hugging top and skirt.

Hmm. For some reason Erin couldn't help but feel that she'd seen her from somewhere before. She cocked her head to the side for another look. "Hey. Do I know you?"

The woman rested her jaw in her hand, starting to look a bit annoyed. "I wouldn't think so, if this is your first time here. Typically we do appointments, but business is kind of slow today so we can just set up an appointment for you right now." She pulled out her pen and began jotting a note in her book.

Erin hummed. "I don't mean to offend, I just…I just have this feeling that I've seen you from somewhere before. Can't really put my finger on it…"
She spotted the sunglasses sitting on top of the woman's head. Suddenly a light bulb flashed on. "Can you put on your shades?"

"Why would I want to do that?"

"C'mon, just for a minute. I wanna see what you look like with them on."

She groaned, but complied with her request and slipped the shades over her eyes. In an instant the light bulb in Erin's mind exploded with a surge of recognition. It almost knocked her off her feet and the wind out of her.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "It's you! Wedy." No wonder she hadn't recognized her right away. During the Kira case, Wedy had always worn sunglasses around the place. It was amazing how one little accessory could change one's appearance so drastically.

"Sssh! Hello to you too. Don't call me that in public," Wedy hissed back. Adjusting her voice to a normal volume, she turned her head and called behind her, "Steph, I need to step outside for a cigarette. Can you cover for me?"

"Yeah, sure thing, Mary," another woman's voice answered from somewhere around the back, presumably Stephanie.

"Thanks." She turned to Erin and whispered, "You're coming with me."

Mary? Wedy's real name was Mary? She didn't really look like a Mary to Erin. More like a Jessica or a Michelle. Or an Elvira. Before she knew it, Wedy (Mary?) was pulling her out the door again, a pre-recorded dolphin squeaking its farewell to them.

"Your name's Mary?" she asked.

"Is that strange to you?" Wedy snapped back without looking at her.

"No no no! I think Mary's a nice name. I just, well…hey. Has anyone ever told you that you look kinda like Michelle Pfeiffer™? Yeah. You look a lot like her character Elvira, now that I'm looking at you. Heh. You got Elvie's attitude, too." Wedy didn't respond to that.

The two soon found themselves alongside the building where Wedy's honking huge red motorcycle was parked. Each took a side of the machine, like two businesswomen about to make a deal across a table, with one distinctly more experienced than the other. "Look, I'm sorry about almost blowing your cover, Wed…or should I call you Mary now?"

"Mary's fine. Don't talk so loud."

Erin promptly lowered her voice as much as she could. "Right. It's just, I-I didn't really expect to see you again, in my neighborhood of all places."

Wedy had her arms folded across her full chest. "Yeah, yeah, it's a small world after all."

Erin couldn't help the smile weaving into her lips. She hadn't gotten along the greatest with Wedy or Aiber during their time on the Kira case, and yet she often wondered what the two had been doing with their lives since they'd gone their separate ways. "How's Aiber, what's he been up to?"

Wedy shrugged. "How should I know? Do I look like his keeper? Just because we had the same employer and worked on a case together doesn't make us bosom friends. Although…last I heard of him, he donated a handsome check to this up and coming performing arts school, under an alias,
naturally. Probably some of the spoils he ripped off from Yotsuba that he couldn't decide what else
to do with."

"Oh wow," Erin marveled, surprised by this new piece of the puzzle that was Aiber the con man.
"Like a modern-day Robin Hood, huh? Steals from the greedy to give to the needy."

"Phht. That's the idea," Wedy muttered, her fingers rubbing together as though she longed for a
cigarette rolling between them. "He's always had a fondness for putting on a show."

"And you? How have you been? What brings you to LA?"

"I live here. This salon is my business. I own and manage it."

"Ah," said Erin, fooling with the brim of her Fedora. Even after all this time, it sounded almost
surreal that folks who prowled in the criminal underworld could otherwise have more or less
ordinary lives. Compartmentalization seemed to be a rule rather than a trend. "Looks like you're
doing pretty well for yourself. I'm happy for you."

"Thanks. I'm happy for me, too."

Then Erin's smile fell. Would Wedy know anything about this L imposter? It couldn't hurt to ask.
After all, she had to have known that that was an imposter who'd gone up on TV. Besides, she still
had yet to hear from Matsuda and the guys from the former Kira task force. Any journalist worth
her salt tried leads when she saw them.

"Can I ask you something serious? Since we're here."

"I thought we were being serious."

Erin swallowed the lump building up in her throat. "No, seriously." She cleared her throat as
thoroughly as she could. "You... you know that thing with the 'L' broadcast a couple nights ago?"

After a pause on her part, Wedy herself became slightly quieter and unless Erin was mistaken,
adopted a sharper edge in her voice. "How could I not? It's been all over the news."

"Okay, that's a given. But do you know anything about it, as in the skinny behind it? Like, who this
guy is or what he's after? Why he would do this?"

... Erin leaned in and put her hands on the seat of the motorcycle.

"Don't touch my baby, please."

She shot up ramrod straight and clapped her hands to the sides. "Oh! Sorry, I didn't mean to do
that. W-well, do you?"

... "Do you even know what happened to...?"

Wedy pulled out a cloth to wipe down her bike where Erin had laid her unworthy hands. "Do I
know about him being dead? He never said a word about dying to me or Aiber. But the way he
was acting the last time we spoke, I had my suspicions that I wouldn't be hearing from him again
after he sent me on my merry way. And I was right."
Typical L. Always the secretive, stiff-upper-lip sort.

"So this—this new guy hasn't tried to contact you at all?"

"No. I'm afraid my guess about him is as good as yours. And in case your next question is whether I'd like to help you track this guy down, I'm afraid my answer is no."

Erin stumbled a bit, taken aback by Wedy's bluntness. "Huh? But don't you care about what's going on?"

Wedy glanced up towards the piercing blue sky above them, thin wisps of clouds gliding by like boats out on the water. "While I agree that what happened to my 'boss' is sad, I don't get blindly involved in things I have no business in. I prefer doing my own thing."

"Wh-what're you talking about? You make your living out of getting into people's business all the time. You were in on the Kira case, with Yotsuba and the stealing and the cameras and all—"

"That was different. We had a contract, not unlike what he had with Aiber. I come when he calls, I do my thing, he pays me, I'm gone again. At the risk of sounding callous, I've been officially a free woman since he died. Don't get me wrong, I like what I do. It's interesting at least. But as fun as it was to fuck with those guys, I got way too close to getting killed on that case, and even if dying's a part of life I'd rather not have it happen to me anytime soon."

A strain of indignity shot through Erin, and her hand found itself on her hip. "Well then if you're so worried about not dying, why're ya still smoking?"

Wedy mocked her by mimicking her gesture. "Smoking wouldn't kill me as quickly as a psychopath with a killer notebook would. And I'll have you know that I've cut down since you last saw me. Three cigarettes a day to go with my squares, and one or two in place of midday snacks."

"Hmph. That still sounds like a lot. Snacks would be better for you."

"Oh really? Smoking helps suppress the appetite, keeps your weight down."

"Oh sure. On account of all the chemo you gotta do when you get cancer."

"That's assuming that you do get cancer. Not everyone in the world gets cancer from smoking. You can't prove causation, you can only point out correlation."

The small gold chain necklace swung a little around Wedy's pale neck, and Erin could make out a pendant with a little bird carved into it resting against her breast. Not knowing at the moment what else to say, she pointed at it. "Say, I don't think I've ever seen you with that necklace before."

"What, this?" Wedy held out the round gold pendant, twirling it in her fingers. On the back of it, Erin thought she could see the word "Magpie" inscribed. "It's from my dad."

"'Magpie'?"

"Yeah. That's his nickname for me. Because I've always had an eye for things that glittered." A ghost of a smile flickered as she mentioned this, like she was reciting a fond adage from days gone by.

When Wedy didn't say any more about it, the moment became quiet and awkward. Erin wondered if Wedy had a good relationship with her father, whether he had anything to do with Wedy's refusal to look into the imposter with her. But she didn't ask. It was a miracle that Wedy had even opened
up this much to her; to go any further would probably be pushing it. Besides, she did understand what it was like to fear for her life, and the lives of those she loved and cared for.

Perhaps her adventures in the underworld had made Wedy jaded, as it had L and Aiber and maybe even Watari, and all those other outlaws and shysters she probably would never meet (or if she had met them, she wouldn't know it). In the underworld no one got too attached to each other. They weren't allowed to.

Wedy broke the silence with some advice of her own, her affect turning cool again. "If I were you, I'd stay out of this too. You didn't have any business being on the case anyway, so you'd have even less to do with this. Dig any more into it, all you're doing is asking for trouble."

Erin nibbled on her bottom lip as she felt herself burn up from ear to toe. The weather did nothing to help this. Eventually she tipped her hat up out of her face. "I dunno, maybe you're right. Maybe it would be smarter of me not to dig any more into it. But…"

Then it was her turn to look up, her voice feeling thicker in her throat from a profound determination that condensed it. "I can't let it drop. I can't go on knowing that there's some shmuck out there parading himself around as L when I know that the real L is dead. That wouldn't be right. Not even he deserves that."

Surprisingly, Wedy didn't try to persuade her off her path. Or maybe she shouldn't have been surprised. Wedy couldn't tell Erin what she should or shouldn't do any more than Erin could do the same for her. Though she did give a cynical snort. "Well then, don't be surprised if you find yourself in deep shit later. And don't come back to me complaining about how I didn't warn you."

Erin resisted a gulp and kept her voice steady, trying not to let the implications behind Wedy's usage of the term "deep shit" sink too far in her mind. "Don't worry. I won't."

"Now, if you still want me to fix up your hair so you can impress that guy you've been eyeing, that much I can still do. I'll even throw in a discount."

Erin almost fell on top of the bike, but Wedy caught her by the shoulders before contact was made. "H-how would you know that I—"

Wedy smirked, knowing all too well the follies and fallacies attached to love, especially young love. "An educated guess. I've been around the block a number of times myself. Now let's get back inside. I need my AC," she said, pushing Erin back upright.

After a bit Erin nodded. "Yeah. Okay. That is what I originally came here for anyway. Thank you. One more thing, though…"

As the two moved around the bike and started to make their way back inside Erin stopped and held out her arms to Wedy.

"You're kidding, right?"

Erin's arms spread out wider. She didn't kid when it came to this sort of thing.

Wedy shook her head and rolled her eyes. "You're not kidding. Fine. I'll humor you, like I haven't done enough of that already."

The older woman stepped forward and the two shared a quick hug. "It's good to see you again," said Erin, the moderate scent of perfume wafting to her nose.
"You too, kid. More or less."

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She had to admit that she felt kind of different with her hair draping down her shoulders in soft waves rather than straight down or tied up like usual. She felt…softer and prettier, somehow. Foxy, maybe? A little. She didn't know why, but she couldn't say that she didn't like the feeling.

In spite of everything, she found herself hoping that Steve would like it, too.

Hm. Should she even be thinking about this now? Somebody was out there using the notebook to kill people, and somebody else was walking around claiming to be L. Not exactly the most convenient time to think about the "D" word. And that was assuming that Steve would be interested in the "D" word with her.

I guess whatever happens, I'll just have to take it as it comes. Especially since I've got no idea what happens from here.

She tried to shake off the fear creeping up and down her spine. She hoped that Wedy was wrong, that she wouldn't be in deep-deepshit, and that the fucking Farley had warned her about wouldn't be epic-epic. But maybe this was wishful thinking on her part?

Still on her way an overwhelming surge of sympathy and perhaps guilt led Erin back to the store to pick out another small bouquet to surprise Mrs. Mora with. The lady loved her flowers. This time Erin picked tulips, pink and yellow ones that the florist recommended. They were supposed to express caring and happiness respectively.

As she stepped through the automatic doors, she wondered how the woman was holding up since they'd last seen each other. Whether she was still in the dark about her sons' fates. She clutched the bouquet a little tighter than she meant to, anxious about what Mrs. Mora would be like today. After all, people in her condition tended to be unpredictable.

The same charge nurse from before—Doris, if her nametag was to be believed—peered up at her from her notes. "Oh, it's you again. How can I help you?" Something was off with the tone of her greeting; it sounded tired and forced.

Erin resisted the urge to tug on her shirt collar and smiled. "Uhm, hi! I just, uh, swung by to see Mrs. Mora. How is she? Is she around?"

Doris glanced down at her papers, bowing her head as though mourning the passing of a longtime favorite resident of hers. As a matter of fact…

"I'm sorry. Mrs. Mora passed away Thursday night. She's no longer with us."

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She felt herself go almost totally numb as soon as this bombshell hit her ears, even before her mind could process the words. The tulips dropped out of her hands and landed on the desk as quietly as a final breath. Mrs. Mora had clearly reached the end of her life, but Erin didn't think she would meet her end this soon. Just that Tuesday afternoon she had met her.

Only two days before she died. It was Wednesday, now. Just shy of a week.
"Sh—she's dead? O-oh my God…I told her I would see her again," she whispered, a hand darting up to cover her eyes which were already starting to water and sting. She thought she would have learned her lesson from the last time something like this happened.

At least her last words to the woman hadn't been in anger or hatred. Just an empty promise.

"Did…she didn't suffer, did she?" she asked, her voice getting smaller as she struggled to reel herself back in from the shock.

Doris shook her head as she fiddled with the clip holding up her frizzled hair. "Not as far as I know. She went to bed happy and never woke up. Stroked out in her sleep. And to think only hours before our dear Estrella was singing her heart out for everyone on karaoke. 'La Bamba,' of all things."

Erin pictured the little woman up in front of the crowd in her prettiest dress, situated in her wheelchair and cannula with a screeching microphone up to her dry cracked lips as she belted out an off-key but colorful rendition of an oldie from long ago and not caring a mite about how she looked or sounded doing it. She wanted to cry at the thought, but had just enough self-restraint to blink back and channel the urge into her hands, making them tremble.

She wondered—

Whoa. Slow down, Erin. Why are you even thinking that? How do you know that she was killed with a notebook? Given how old and sick she was, it could have just been an ordinary stroke that happened on its own. Besides, what reason would anyone have to kill a sweet little old lady? She wasn't rich, she didn't have any known enemies and she couldn't tell me much of anything about her sons; she wasn't even aware that they were dead.

Had the person who had killed the Mora brothers also killed their mother? But what for? What if this was just a tragic coincidence that she was reading too much into due to the paranoia she had picked up from her time on the Kira case combined with recent events?

At least she was content when she had died. At least she was with her boys again. Whoever issued her death warrant had been at least kind enough to give her a peaceful and natural one.

A mercy-kill. Erin wasn't sure how good or bad that was.

"Hey. I wouldn't beat myself up over this," murmured Doris. "People die whether their families or friends are there for them or not. We try to make sure that they are there, but…sometimes it happens, anyway. Sneaks up on us. Between you and me, you were the first visitor she'd had in a long time. I'm sure she really appreciated that, deep down."

"Y-yeah. And I'll bet she appreciated having good nurses to take care of her. Thank you for that."

Erin plucked a pink tulip from the bouquet and placed it in front of Doris. An offering for her troubles, small as it was. "Do you know where she's resting now? I still owe her a visit, and I think she'd really like these."

...

"What's going on over here?"

Soichiro and Matsuda broke away from their argument—or interrogation, as it felt to Matsuda—to see Aizawa and Ide marching up to them, their faces washed out from the strain and stress of another hard day's work. The news lately had done nothing to help their outlook, to say the least.
Soichiro tried to recollect his composure and bowed as deeply as he could, his hand gripping the cane shaking with a new intensity. "Aizawa, Ide…I'm sorry. I don't mean to cause any trouble, I was just—"

"Come on Matsu, let's get out of here."

The young cop didn't hesitate to take up Ide's offer of escape and he gladly stepped aside for Aizawa. He didn't expect Ide to swat the backside of his head as they walked away however.

"Ow!" he yelped, a hand reflexively reaching over to nurse the struck area. "What was that for, Ide?"

"You know damn well what that's for, you idiot," Soichiro heard Ide hiss in reply. Soon it was just him and Aizawa standing out there in the middle of the parking garage, though Aizawa made sure to herd them over to the side in case any cars should come by.

"What are you doing here, Yagami? What seems to be the problem?"

"Yagami." That was his title now ever since he'd lost the title of "Chief." The only one who still called him Chief anymore was Matsuda, and that was mostly due to force of habit. Aizawa was the Chief now, and it was already taking its toll on him from the looks of it. He had shaved away his old haircut and had begun sporting a very slight beard and mustache.

He didn't exactly have a reason to keep his face smooth, anymore.

"Aizawa, I'm sorry. I promise I'm not trying to start anything, I just, well…here. I wanted to ask you about this. Do you know anything about it?" He reached into his fanny pack and pulled out the creamy embroidered envelope, now wrinkled and moist from humidity.

A flicker of anxious recognition crept across his face, but he tried to cover over it. "It's a greeting card. What about it?"

"It's from Blogger. Matsuda came to my house and left it there."

Soichiro could have sworn he saw Aizawa's face progressively redden, the longer this conversation went. "That's not unusual. She sends us things like this every two weeks, sometimes even more."

"She wrote a message in here," he pressed harder.

Aizawa grunted. "Most people do that with greeting cards."

Finally, Soichiro had enough. "I wish you wouldn't try to play dumb like this, Aizawa. You're insulting us both. You know all about this. Whenever Matsuda comes across something like this, the first thing he'd do is show it to you the first chance he'd get."

The younger man growled to himself as he wiped at the sweat condensing on the back of his neck. "Matsu, that idiot. Frankly, I think Blogger's an idiot too for even doing something like this. She writes too dark, and to go through the mail—"

"That doesn't answer my question. Is it true? Is there—is there someone out there using a notebook to kill criminals again?"

"We haven't been able to confirm anything yet, but—no. No, I shouldn't even be talking to you about this," Aizawa muttered, more to himself than to him as his head rattled in self-admonishment.
"About what? Come on Aizawa, you've got to let me know if there's someone killing again!" he demanded, more forcefully than he meant to. But he could feel long-buried feelings creeping up from somewhere deep within him that chilled him to the trembling bone despite the summer heat.

"Why should I?" snapped the younger man.

A brief but tense hush fell between the two, each of them trying to rein in their emotions before they should say or do something very out of hand.

Aizawa closed his eyes and bowed his head, sighing, "That's not what I mean. Look Yagami, I don't know yet what the hell exactly it is we're looking at this time, but whatever it is, I'm afraid I can't let you get involved. You don't work with us, anymore. And even if you did I still wouldn't let you."

His voice took on that strain it tended to have when he was frustrated. "I understand how you feel. Believe me, I do. But what happened to Light…was not your fault. How long is it going to take you until you finally accept that?"

Soichiro drew back slightly. This wasn't what he'd wanted to hear, but he couldn't deny the honesty behind Aizawa's words. Truthfully, I don't know if I'll ever be able to accept that. I may not have made Light do what he did—I can't even be sure of that much—but that doesn't change the fact that I could have saved him. I should have saved him, as his father and as an officer of the law. I could have proved to him that he was wrong…instead of wasting all that time trying to prove to L that he was wrong, or that I was wrong to even listen to him.

And now they're both dead. All of those people dead…because I did nothing.

"And what about this new 'L'? Who do you think he is, and why would he go on American broadcast to announce that he won't help the police?" Admittedly, Soichiro had been debating with himself on how to approach Aizawa ever since Matsuda had left that card at his house. But after hearing about this L-imposter, his hesitation had flown away.

Aizawa pinched the spot between his eyes, as though trying to defuse the pressure that was no building up in his head. "Your guess is as good as mine. Whoever that is, he hasn't contacted us at all. So he's probably keeping his word."

Soichiro knew better. Aizawa had been plagued by this news and his own theories on it ever since word had gotten out. He could have been lying to him for all he knew. But as he had said earlier, he was not going to discuss it with him.

"I think it's best if you went home now, Yagami. I'm sorry, but you can't work with us and that's that," he affirmed, not the type who liked repeating himself. "Do you want me to call you a taxi or something?"

"No. I'll be all right. I can make my own way back. Thank you, anyway. Here. You might want to keep this as evidence," the ex-cop said, trying not to sound bitter as he handed over the greeting card. There wasn't much he could say to persuade the former Kira task force members to change their mind about letting him investigate whatever this was with them. He understood their reasons. As much as he'd prefer to deny it, the first case had compromised him. And the last thing he needed now was to get forcibly removed from the premise for being unruly.

…

There was nothing stopping him from doing some investigating of his own, however. After all,
there wasn't much else for him to do these days.

In fact, maybe it was better if he worked independently from the others? They wouldn't be dragging each other down, that way.

Or so he told himself to ward away the feeling of being left out in the proverbial cold as he apologized for making a ruckus and wished Aizawa a good weekend before making his exit. Still, he couldn't help throwing in, "Still, in the future if you find that you need a—"

"Please, just go home, Yagami."

"Right."

Aizawa watched his former boss amble away on his cane, unsure as to whether he should be worried that he would seemingly give up so easily on trying to get back to work with them. There really wasn't much that he could do as a civilian.

He grunted to himself. I wish I didn't have to do that to him…but we can't let him join this case. There's no telling what he would do after what happened on the first one. And that's assuming that we're looking at someone who's using the notebook to kill criminals.

There could be more than one killer, for all we know. He felt himself grow nauseous at that possibility. And if there is, how do we keep them from contacting each other? Assuming that they haven't already…

Or maybe this new guy is just smarter and is killing in a way that would make us think that there's more than one killer. And they're not just concentrated in the States, either; this person or persons have been keeping their body count roughly equal in all nations compared to Light who concentrated on Japan. It's gonna be a challenge to pinpoint where they are, never mind who they are.

Lately I find myself not sure of anything, anymore. And this new "L" isn't doing anything to help matters.

He didn't expect L—the first one, that is—to be privy with them about the mechanics behind his title—whether he worked solo or was really part of an underground organization of "L's"—and of course, he had taken his many secrets with him to the grave. But all the same, a swell of old and new resentment crept through him as he thought about the strange arrogant raven-haired man who ate more sweets than a pre-diabetic kindergartener and acted as such. Whatever secrets he'd kept, they sure could have been useful now.

As he slid into the driver's seat of his car, he gripped the steering wheel and sat there, breathing deeply so as to collect his cool. Whatever Blogger knew—or thought she knew—he hoped that she hadn't gone to anyone else yet. It wasn't likely. She might not have bothered to try contacting them if she felt that she could go to anyone else. All she had was the word of the task force to back up her story.

Even so, he couldn't have her jumping the gun on them. Matsuda had her number, and the two of them had left messages for her warning her not to go to anyone until they could figure out how to handle this. Matsuda had kept missing her, so in a bout of frustration over their game of phone tag, he had taken it upon himself to reach her over Skype™. By the grace of whatever benevolent force there was out there, he'd managed to catch her over her lunch break a few days ago.

It had been arguably the first time in his life in which he'd felt like an idiot next to Matsuda. Then
again, he hadn't exactly had the time or interest in any sort of social networking outside of case work.

…

"Is the camera on, Matsu?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's on. Go on, say something."

"O-oh my God, Aizawa? Matsuda?"

"Ah. She can see and hear us. Hello, Blogger."

"Hey guys! Boy, you're a sight for sore eyes! How are things?"

"They're fine. Listen, before we go any further, are you alone?"

"Oh. Getting straight to the point, huh? Uh…not exactly. I'm at the café, right now. I can't exactly go outside because then I'd lose my Internet connection. But maybe if I put my headphones in and, you know?"

"Hm. I guess that could work. I'll give you a minute to do that."

…

"Listen. We got your card."

"And it was a very nice card, thank you, Erin!"

"Matsuda."

"Erm, sorry."

"…You haven't gone to anyone else about it since then, have you?"

Erin opened her mouth to speak, but snapped it shut at the last minute. She shook her head instead.

"Okay. Now wouldn't be a good time to go into more detail, so I'll make this quick. Can you at least promise us something?"

Nod.

"Keep this between us. You shouldn't be going to anyone else at the moment, not until we can figure out what to do. It's just safer that way. Do you understand?"

Nod. Erin pinched her trembling fingers and trailed them across her lips as though she was zipping them.

"I don't mean to sound curt, but we'll try to contact you again when we can. In the meantime, please don't make any unnecessary moves."

Nod. He could see her turning paler.

"Thanks, Blogger."

"Aizawa, it's okay to call her Erin, y'know. We've known her long enough. Oh, I just noticed, did you fix your hair? You look great!"
A Sheepish grins.

Glare.

…

Blogger wouldn't be that stupid as to blab to anyone else. If that were the case, the press would be having a field day by now.

Aizawa opened his eyes again. He didn't want to think about this, right now. The last thing he needed was to look upset when he came over to Eriko's to pick up the kids for another weekend. No more bringing home the stress or bad tidings from work. Every other weekend from Friday to Sunday, he put away his badge and let the father in him take control and give Yumi and Anika all the attention they deserved.

Or so he should have done, but hadn't lately. He had stood them up for the past two weekends now, regardless of whether he'd wanted to. He hoped that they wouldn't be too mad at him to enjoy this weekend, not that he could blame them if they were. It'd been almost two years since they'd started this arrangement and here he was still struggling with the realization that Eriko was right. Things really hadn't changed that much since they'd split from the way they were when they were still together. Taking on the position of Deputy Director had dealt the final blow to what they had salvaged from their relationship after the Kira case.

Maybe that explained why the girls had adjusted as well as they seemed to? The only real change for them was that their home had become two separate ones, one of which they called their home every other weekend, if they were lucky.

They were a lot alike, he and Yagami: both looking to redeem themselves as parents, as detectives, as people. He had tried to redeem himself as a husband, but in the end sometimes love isn't enough to keep a marriage together when you simply cannot be there to make it work, physically or otherwise.

Was there no way to reconcile the three without having to give one of them up?

Shuichi swallowed the annoying lump budding in his throat, strapped on his seat belt and jabbed the keys into the ignition. As he waited for the engine to sputter to life and shifted the car into reverse, he peered into his rearview and practiced his smile for when he pulled up to the front of Eriko's apartment complex. Thinking about seeing his kids there ready with their backpacks helped, a little. He hoped Yumi would like the hastily wrapped present he'd gotten for her birthday that sat on the floor on the passenger's side.

Even if it was late.

…

"Now let's see. Do I want to wear jeans, or a skirt? Jeans…or a skirt…?"

"If you asked me, I think you should do something different. You're always wearing pants, so wear a skirt this time."

"Y-you really think so, Misa?" asked Erin, still shifting the two articles of clothing to the front of her so as to discern which would look better on her.

"Of course! You wouldn't have bought it if you weren't thinking about wearing it, would you?" said Misa from the doorway. "There's nothing wrong with getting a little girly now and then. Let your
hair down! No, really. Let it down so you can show off its waviness!

After a moment of tongue-roving contemplation she made a decision. "You know what? What the hell, I guess it wouldn't hurt to be different. The skirt it is, then." It was modest yet liberal enough, cut just above the knee and picked to match the bright blue shoulder-less top she'd found earlier. It had been a while since Erin had donned a skirt. Perhaps she was more accepting of wearing one because she'd had a choice on her wardrobe this time?

Misa saw the rouge and mascara scattered around the sink and clapped her hands. "Yay, I see you're pulling all the stops for tonight's bash! You need any help putting on the make-up?"

"Uh, I guess I could use some help painting my lashes. I don't wanna wear too much, though."

"No one said you had to. You're not one of those girls that need a lot of make-up to look pretty. Besides, you've seen all those unsavory pictures in the magazines of stars without their make-up; that's what happens when you wear too much for too long."

The rouge hadn't even been applied yet and Erin could already feel her face turn red. Maybe she wouldn't need it? "Thanks, Misa," was all she could say to that.

"Put on whatever you're wearing first and then we'll do the make-up. Say, what are you doing about shoes?"

"I got sandals. I'm sorry, but I can't do high heels. Heels don't like me very much."

"Well okay, but you should know that heels are the hottest shoes to wear when you're trying to attract a guy. Appeals to their, ahem, primal urges. Anyway, did you get pantyhose at least? Socks don't look good in sandals."

Erin felt like dying right then and there. "Aw, stop! I just wanna look nice, that's all! But yes, I did remember to get pantyhose."

Suddenly Misa's face lit up, as though remembering something important. "Ooh! One more thing, be right back!" She zipped out of the bathroom and returned not too long after with a shiny object in her small hands, a gold hairclip with flowers carved into it. Lilies, if Erin was not mistaken.

"Wear this in your hair," she said. "I wore this clip when I first met Light. It might give you the same kind of luck with Steve."

Erin didn't answer for a beat. Good luck or bad luck?

"Uh, shucks, Misa! Thank you! You don't have to—"

"Aap-aap-aap! We talked about this, haven't we? I do what I want. It's what I do."

"All right, Mis, but fair warning: not everyone's gonna have the same opinion as you."

"People can't say no to me, remember?"

She tipped her head back to give the shorter girl easier access and felt Misa comb her dainty fingers through her freshly washed hair before inserting the clip and snapping a thick enough lock of it into place.

The same fingers that had killed hundreds of people four years before. The same fingers that had manipulated and scratched and slapped and punched. An unwelcome tremor shot down her neck
and spine when these fingers briefly brushed against her scalp.

Misa stopped trailing her fingers through her hair and looked over Erin's shoulder. "What's wrong? You've got this weird look on your face."

"Huh, what? Oh, nothing, I just—I can't believe how well this is coming along. I feel transformed already. And I guess I've got the pre-party jitters."

What the hell's wrong with me? It's like ever since this thing with the new killings and L-imposter…Misa's not that person anymore. So why do I feel strange when she touches me?

You know? She hasn't said a word hardly about all this stuff on the news. Maybe she ignores it? Maybe she doesn't have an opinion on it? Or…

"Are you still upset about that stupid broadcast?"

Oh crap. Why was Misa bringing this up now? Well, it had been all over the news as Wedy said. All right, Erin, just act natural.

"What broadcast?"

"You know the one. I think that L is a big jerk to pull something like that, if you asked me. He hasn't changed at all over these past few years. It's because of him that Kira got away and Light and I got tied up and isolated for something we didn't even do and Light and Ryuzaki died. And from the sound of it, he isn't sorry about it, either." The idol snorted, "At least he's being honest about not helping the police, this time. Or maybe he's just bluffing 'cause he doesn't want to admit that Kira's too smart for him to catch."

It was hard to tell what she still remembered and what she had forgotten about the Kira case besides the obvious. She must have forgotten that Ryuzaki was L and that he had in fact died when he wrote his own name in her notebook.

"Do…you think Kira's still out there?"

Misa shrugged, her tone a little too frivolous for the topic of their conversation. "Who knows? Murder is murder no matter who you do it to, and whatever he's up to now I have faith that eventually his karma will catch up to him if L and the police don't. That's usually how it works, right? Oh, look at you. We'd better stop talking about this; you shouldn't be looking sick in the wake of the biggest house party ever. You won't be able to knock out Steve if you look knocked out yourself."

Yes. Misa's attitude towards Kira had definitely changed since Light's death.

But what if that hadn't happened? Would Misa still admire Kira as a vigilante superhero if Light hadn't died (even if the two were one and the same)? Just as her admiration for him began after he'd killed the man who'd slaughtered her parents, would it be just as strong as long as he went after other people besides those she cared about?

Misa can't be that near-sighted. Even if she was, she's not that different from most people. It seems that the less relevant something is to us and our daily lives, the less we care about it, no matter how horrible or even how good it is. I'm guilty of the same thing, huh? I always thought that Kira was bad, but I didn't really think about HOW bad until I got involved and saw for myself.

If I'd never met L, would I care nearly as much as I do about what's happening now?
Ugh. I don't like philosophizing. Sometimes it takes me to places I don't like to go. Anyway, you should do your part, but you can't expect to fix everything. At least not on your own. Light made the mistake of thinking otherwise, among other things.

Aizawa said I can't do or say anything else until they've figured out what to do about this. I didn't tell him that I bumped into Wedy before he contacted me and asked her about the L-imposter. Not that I could right then and there, but should I have? That's the only person I've spoken to about it, and Wedy said that she didn't want to get involved.

Still…I probably should mention it to him later, after the party maybe when everyone's gone home and gone to bed or something. Just so we're on equal footing. And if I can't reach him, then I could probably get Matsu. Late night over here should be, like, early in the evening or something over in Japan, right?

Besides, Aizawa's probably spending this weekend with his daughters. I'd hate to encroach on that.

As Erin wallowed in her thoughts, she watched Misa pull away to admire her work on her eyelashes. "Totally flutter-able! You need help with the rouge, too?"

"Nah, I think I got that. Thank you, though."

"It's okay to have jitters before a first date, but you gotta relax! Just be yourself and let nature take its course, if you two like each other as much as it looks like you do."

Erin thought about correcting Misa's use of terminology and telling her that this wasn't a date, but found that she couldn't. She had to admit, in her wildest of wants she did kind of hope that Steve would like her as much as she liked him, or at least be getting there after tonight. Silly as that sounded.

Maybe this party would be good for her. It never did anyone good to constantly dwell on problems. Now and then a break was needed, especially if there wasn't much else she could do about it now.

"Name?"

"Matt."

"Last name?"

"McDean."

"Matt McDean?" Kimiko said out loud, using the pencil that had been previously tucked behind her ear to scratch her head. "That doesn't sound familiar…is Matt McDean on the list?" she asked, lending her clipboard to the muscly stern-looking fellow with a shaved head standing next to her.

"Yeah," he said gruffly, keeping one of his arms folded across his chest as he trailed a big finger underneath a name. "Matt's one of the tech guys from the filming crew. I work with him."

"Oh. Misa really did invite everyone, didn't she? No wonder the phone's been ringing off the hook. Have you brought your own alcohol?"

"No. I don't drink."
"A wise policy. Well, if your name's on here, then come right in. Have fun and don't make too big of a mess," she said with a smile and a bow.

"Thanks, I'll try."

The bouncer translated Matt's words to Kimiko for her as Matt squeezed in between them. In a matter of minutes the house had become a tumultuous ocean of people and strobe lights and music and laughter and food and whatever booze Kimiko had permitted on the premise.

What was it about most teetotalers that made them dull stick-up-the-ass killjoys? Somehow the ones that happened to be ex-booze were worse. You couldn't just cut things cold turkey; that was the worst way to approach an addiction.

Matt would know, wouldn't he?

The first thing he did was stake out a discrete corner in the backyard where the DJ and "dance floor" was, a space not already occupied with people undressing each other with their eyes, and light up a cigarette. People-watching was all he'd come here to do, after all.

…

The red Solo™ cup in Erin's hands was getting increasingly slippery, either from the condensation, the humidity or the sweat building up in her palms, or a combination of the three. She could feel the beat of the rave music blasting from the speakers across the yard at barely legal levels pounding up through her feet and rattle every cubic inch of her body. Or was that her heart pounding in her chest that the music had only amplified?

She'd been standing out by the koi pond with a few of Misa's co-stars, trying to make idle chit-chat with them so as to keep herself distracted from the sight of Stephen shaking it out there in the center of a circle of people—mostly women—and looking very comfortable around them, all smiles and jokes. Halle wasn't with him as far as she could see, probably gone to get a drink or use the bathroom or something. From what little she'd seen of her, she wasn't much of a dancer.

Erin wiped at the back of her neck with the moist napkin clutched in her other hand. She hadn't worn her Fedora for this, Misa had said it made her look dorky and offset her entire wardrobe, no offense meant. But now she was wondering if she should just go on and fetch it from her room. The strings of lights dangling above them suddenly had become too bright for her. She found herself running out of things to say to her neighbors, oddly enough.

Misa must've really charmed the heck out of them if they all wanted to come to her party. Although they could have…other motives, too. The fact that her main co-star, the "hero" of the movie was currently ogling said idol in a clearly out-of-character moment while she did her thing was not lost on her. At least Ryuga had been a sweetheart. She still couldn't understand why they would break up.

"Look if you have to, but don't touch," she warned him. "She's not interested."

"She could've fooled me with her acting."

"I mean it, man. Hands off while you're off-set. And even when you're on the set."

"I'll try, but that would make our love scenes a bit less convincing, don't you think?"

Erin didn't know what to make of that comment besides the obvious. Back when Light and Misa were together, she wouldn't even kiss another guy during a love scene. She could still remember
the time they'd called Light out just to be a stunt double for her co-star/future ex-boyfriend. At the time Erin had thought Light was sweet to do that for her in spite of his reluctance.

She wondered now if he really did do that out of love, or rather to appease her so that he could get something in return later, albeit unconsciously.

In any case, now that Misa was unattached it sounded as though she had far fewer inhibitions about those sorts of scenes anymore.

By this time, Misa was shooing the girls away, presumably to get herself more space. She locked eyes with Erin, her grin dangerously close to splitting her flustered face. Keeping her hips swaying to the beat and feet in step, she threw an arm over her head and began to twirl her wrist, as though about to throw a lasso at her. All those years of playing DDR™ were really paying off for her.

Oh no. She isn't.

Oh yes, she was. Misa threw her pretend-lasso her way and began grasping at the air in front of her like she was pulling her in onto the dance floor to join her.

Erin swallowed, her throat dry despite having guzzled down all of her Sprite™. Come on Erin, you can't just leave her hanging. What's the worst that can happen? You embarrass yourself? Everyone's too busy embarrassing themselves to notice. That's what a party's all about, isn't it?

She took the deepest breath she could manage at that moment and slammed her cup onto the snack table. She leapt forward and twirled her way through the sweaty writing masses of bodies, playing along with the idea of getting roped in, and threw around "Excuse me's" and "Sorry, coming through's" whenever she knocked into someone. Soon she found herself joining hands with her friend and though she wasn't the greatest dancer there ever was and to be frank had no idea what she was doing, she tried to let the rhythm of the music guide her movements. She also found it easier to take after Misa, who was clearly the more experienced of the two.

"Glad to see you finally getting into it," Misa shouted over the din, her ponytails swishing around her face. Naturally, she was decked out for the occasion with her short lacy pink dress, boots and fishnets, with some of her favorite necklaces swinging around her neck.

"What can I say?" panted Erin. "Sometimes I need a little push. Or pull, as it were. Hey, just a heads-up: I think the guy you're co-starring with is a lech. He's been ogling you. I told him to back off, but I'd watch out for him."

"I'll say. You tell me that like I didn't already know."

Misa's smile again became playful, bordering on mischievous. But in all the commotion Erin didn't see that as they transitioned into the next dance number. The selection tended to switch back and forth between American and Japanese pop, all of them irresistible to dance to no matter what the language (Erin couldn't help but notice that a few of Misa's songs had been smuggled into the mix, but hey, this was her party).

About four minutes in her head started to feel light with the rush of endorphins flooding through her system, and the less she cared about how she must've looked wiggling around next to Misa. She even almost forgot that Steve was just a couple feet away.

Misa made sure she remembered, though, when she bumped into her, gave an unusually strong thrust of her rear for someone her size and sent Erin tumbling backwards into the crowd, and into someone's reflexive arms.
"Gee, thanks," she exhaled.

"No problem. Hey, I've been looking all over for you."

Oh crap. Sure enough, she saw Steve's smiling face peering over her, his face gleaming with a thin film of sweat and the lights and his hair hanging over as a frame. Was this what those leading ladies in those romances saw when they swooned and fell into their hero's waiting arms?

She gulped. "Oh. Hi, Steve. How are you today?"

"How are you today?" Really? Way to kick things off. Could've said a lot worse though, I guess…

"I've been wondering where you were at," he said as he helped her get back upright before resuming his dancing in place. "I figured that the place would be packed, but I never counted on having people pouring in through the windows. For someone who's just making her debut here, Misa seems to have gotten pretty popular in her neighborhood."

"Well, she did invite everyone from the filming crew. Who can say no to a good party? You found the place okay, right?"

"Oh yeah. Whoever came up with Google Map™ should get a Nobel Prize. So you've been helping Misa play hostess, huh?"

"Y-yeah, something like that. But I'm here now, and you're here now, and the music's on now, so if you don't mind me asking, how are you at cutting a rug? Well, technically we're on grass at the moment—"

"Did you honestly have to ask? By the way, you look awesome tonight." Erin couldn't believe how easily the compliment flew from his lips. He'd called her awesome. He'd been looking for her. She felt like passing out right there, but that wouldn't look good on her. Ironically the dizzying effect of the endorphins made that impossible, besides.

"Er, thank you! You don't look too shabby yourself."

Stop stammering, it makes you sound stupid.

Contrary to what she'd seen from a distance, Stephen wasn't exactly a professional at cutting a rug like Misa was. But there was a smooth, fluid confidence in his moves regardless that could have fooled her, like he was dancing for the enjoyment thereof and not to wow anyone in particular. She had taken his attention from the other ladies so she might as well make the most of it.

She didn't know whether to thank Misa the next time she saw her. She had disappeared elsewhere by then, and at the moment Erin was concentrating on trying not to stare too much into his face while at the same time maintaining enough eye contact with him so he wouldn't suspect that she was getting too shy to look directly at him.

"You're not much of a dancer, are you?" he asked her.

"Huh? Wh-what would make you think that?"

"Your steps are too stilted. You need to relax. It's a party. You've gotta let the beat guide you, don't fight it."

Oh. Guess she wasn't doing as good of a job at cutting loose as she'd thought.
As if in time to the lyrics pouring out of the speakers, he held out his hands to her. "Here, I can show you if you want."

"R…really? Uh…okay," she half-giggled despite herself. Normally she would've slapped herself for that (at least in her mind) but somehow that stopped mattering so much as soon as their hands cuffed together. Time and space seemed to blur for the next few dance numbers, and in spite of the summer sweat, she felt refreshingly cool with every twist and turn like she were standing in front of a fan cranked at medium.

She had to admit, she couldn't remember feeling this relaxed around L. Things were always more intense when he was around her, despite being one of the most stoic characters she'd ever met, to the point where she'd often wonder if he even had real feelings and sometimes this worried her. Not a minute went by when she wasn't feeling something: annoyance, anger, fear, pity, care, hatred at worst. A full freaking spectrum of emotions, though to be fair Erin was emotional by nature. Even in those few moments when they horsed around (at least as much as L was capable of horsing around), in the back of her mind it still felt like she had a point she needed to prove to him. A point on how to live, how to be human again, something he seemed to have given up on long ago.

And maybe the feeling was mutual? Maybe he was just that sort of guy who evoked that sort of reaction from everyone, especially kindred spirits like Light?

…

Why was she even making a comparison? There was no reason for it. L was L, Steve was Steve, she had met them under completely different circumstances.

Suddenly the music changed, and a familiar accented chirp echoed across the busy yard: "Okay, everybody grab a special someone 'cause this next one is for couples only, if ya know what I mean!"

What? Misa was dropping this on her now? A slow dance? Oh God, was she even ready to take such a step with Steve? Maybe he wouldn't want to—

Who was she kidding? Steve liked being in on the action. "Oh, a change of pace. Shall we?"

"O…kay." Really, what else could she say? "No" had slipped her mind by that point.

"What are ya, James Bond™ or something?"

"I admit, sometimes I like to imagine myself as James Bond, except Italian and Jewish rather than Scottish. I mean, who wouldn't like to be him? Say what you will, but Sean Connery™ is the best version of Bond that has ever graced cinema. Here, you can put your hands on my shoulders like this…"

Oh God. Oh God oh God oh God—

What was she just thinking about being relaxed for again?

As soon as enough people on the dance floor appeared paired up, Misa gave the DJ the green light, and sure enough a slow, soft romantic piano piece wafted out of the speakers. One of Misa's newer songs, in fact. Apparently Misa also wanted the satisfaction of having been the artist that sang the song for their first slow dance, on top of everything else.

Misa could be a good matchmaker when she set her mind to it. All she had to do was set up the backdrop, then sit back and let the magic happen naturally.
But Erin couldn't be bothered with the music or any of Misa's trickery. Her pulse roaring in her ears had reduced the music to background noise at best. It was starting to register to her how close Steve was, her clammy hands clutching his shoulders and his cradling her waist. She had the strange compulsion to rest her head on his chest then, if only to keep from staring too much into his eyes. But would that be pushing it? She was trapped.

Steve leaned in and whispered, "Psst. It's okay to move. We're still dancing." His breath was warm against the shell of her ear.

What? Oh right. She must've frozen up again. Damn it!

She snuck a glimpse down at their feet and willed her feet to move. They did, though not exactly in the right direction. The tingles creeping up her spine made them harder to control.

"Ow!"

Nuts. Fuck. Fucknuts. "Oh God, I'm sorry, Steve! I didn't mean to do that."

"Hey, no big—ow! Ow-ow-ouch! Ah, my shin!"

"I-I swear I'm not doing it on purpose, I was born with my feet turning the wrong ways—"

"Okay, here, maybe we should put some distance between us…"

Erin didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed by this proposal, but she agreed. This time they held each other out more at arm's length, though their hands stayed in place. Erin waddled along in step with him, her legs spread further apart like she had a rash between them.

Perhaps she was getting a rash? All this heat and stress was chafing her thighs, another reason she preferred pants to skirts. Not that pants prevented chafing, but skirts and pantyhose somehow made it worse.

So this was turning out a bit more awkwardly than she would've liked, and yet a part of her still didn't want it to end. Misa must've somehow picked up those vibes, because the next three or four songs were more slow-dance numbers.

All the same, she tried to smooth things over with some quiet small-talk of her own. "So, does that mean you like vodka martinis, too? Shaken, not stirred?"

"In moderation, yeah, particularly when I'm feeling adventurous. A good martini is hard to make, but the payoff makes it so worth it."

Erin bit her lip. Would Steve still like her if she didn't drink and he did? She couldn't see why not, though it did limit their conversation on the topic quite a bit. "Well, I hope you brought your own martini-making kit-thing, because Kimiko was pretty adamant about everyone bringing their own booze. Come to think of it, I think she kicked out somebody who tried to bring vodka into the house earlier."

Insert facepalm here.

"Nah, I didn't feel the need. I'm the designated driver tonight, and besides I'm good with plain soda or punch. As I said, in moderation. Vodka martinis aren't something to make a habit of, unless you're James Bond." As they made a turn, Erin glimpsed back at the punch bowl guarded by the narrowed, watchful eyes of one of Misa's cross-armed bodyguards. Gee, Misa sure knew how to pick the most intimidating bouncers.
"Say, if you're feeling more comfortable, we can dance a little closer if you want."

"Uhm, okay."

A small gap was still left between them, but at least this time Erin didn't tenderize Steve's feet, mostly because she slid her feet across the ground rather than lifted them. The less she lifted her feet the less likely they would land on his, right?

But like all things, good or bad, it eventually came to an end and the rave music erased from the air whatever romantic feelings that had been mustered. But the hormones still raged through her system when Stephen asked her if he could get drinks for the both of them.

"Sure, thank you! I'll meet you by the back door; I need to use the bathroom."

"Take your time," he acknowledged with an easy smile, brushing some of his hair out of his eyes.

Erin rushed back towards the house before he could see her blush any harder than she had already. Speaking of, she really did have to use the bathroom to fix her makeup. Sweat was melting it away. It wouldn't be good to meet back with him looking like Heath Ledger™ version of the Joker™.

Since she hadn't put that much on to begin with, reapplying her rouge was easy enough. She ran her fingers through her moistened hair in an attempt to comb out any snarls and to let some air onto the nape of her neck. The dancing hadn't been a total disaster, but now what? Were they going to just sit down with their drinks and talk? That shouldn't be a big deal.

She stopped for a second to wonder whether Steve shared her attraction. The way he'd been acting on the dance floor made her wonder, although he could've been that way with every woman.

No. Steve wasn't the type to lead women on.

Was he? She never got those vibes from him before. He did act like a bit of a ladies' man, but not a full-fledged womanizer...

Erin was so preoccupied with her thoughts when she finally stepped out of the bathroom that it almost didn't register to her that someone else was stepping out of another room at about the same time.

But that detail caught her eye in the nick of time, mostly because the door that this person was stepping out of happened to be across from her. And it led into Misa's room.

What the—?

"Whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa! Hold it right there! What the hell d'ya think you're doing?"

The other person was just on her way of closing the door behind her when she froze at Erin's demand. When Erin blinked again, a flash of recognition surged through her.

She couldn't believe it.

"H-Halle? Y-you're Steve's friend, aren't you?" she sputtered.

Halle kept an impressive poker face the entire time, but Erin thought she could've seen the word Crap flash in her sharp eyes for the shortest of moments. "Yes. I'm with Steve," she answered coolly.

"What the hell were you doing in Misa's room, how'd you get in there?" Erin distinctively
remembered seeing Misa lock her room in anticipation for tonight. Erin had done the same for her room and Lawliet's to keep him safe from the chaos.

"I'm sorry, I was just looking for a bathroom and you were already occupying this one—"

"Bull-horse-dog-cat-pigeon shit soufflé! I just saw you walk out of there and Misa had locked her room before this party started. Did you take anything out of there?"

"No, I haven't. As you can see, my hands are empty and I have no pockets or purse with me."

"So what? Y-you could've been—"

…

Oh Lord. Whatever Halle had been doing, did Steve have anything to do with this? Had he been distracting her while Halle snooped through the house to look for valuables to nab? Or had she been looking for something else…?

The hallway suddenly turned into a shock and fury-induced haze in her eyes, but her voice lowered considerably, mostly without her notice. "You're coming with me downstairs."

Halle probably could have fought her off, but the half-buzzed couple that had been making out against the wall had fixed their glassy, dumbfounded stares on them. It would only worsen the situation to make a scene, so she complied and let Erin take her by the hand.

Before they made their way down the stairs, Erin relocked Misa's door and shot a glare towards the lovebirds, one of them being Misa's costar, she noted. The guy sure got around, didn't he?

"Please, get a room," she snarled. "And by that I mean get your designated drivers and go home, not one of these rooms."

Halle did her best to keep calm, as did Erin, though she could feel her temper slipping out of her grasp the more she thought about Steve with every stormy step she took. How could he? How could he pull the wool over her eyes like this? How could she fall for it? How big of a rube was she?

Sure enough she found Steve waiting patiently for her with two more Solo cups in his hands, though his smile fell away when he noticed that she had brought Halle along with her and she hadn't returned the gesture with a smile of her own. "Erin, what's going on?"

Too angry to think about it, the first thing she did was slap him, right across his handsome face. Her blow left a bright red mark against his cheek and the drinks sizzling in puddles on the ground.

"What's going on? You're asking me what's going on? So you think you're a real charmer, huh?" Her hand throbbed with fury and the impact made against his cheekbone. "I caught your 'partner' Halle here sneaking out of Misa's room, that's what's going on! What the fuck, man? What'cha trying to pull? Are you trying to rob her blind or what?"

The roar of the music drowned out her words for most of the crowd, though a few nearby bystanders did stop to stare and whisper amongst themselves, confusing this scene as a typical love triangle about to erupt into violence. Halle noticed this and decided that whatever was about to happen, they'd best take this somewhere private. Steve was too stunned by Erin's slap to respond immediately—though he had a look on that suggested that he was starting to realize that he had dug himself and Halle into a hole—so she jumped in with her suggestion:
"Look, I think we'd better take this somewhere else. We're starting to draw a crowd."

As much as a part of her thought that these perpetrators should be publically brought to justice, at the same time she didn't want to get Misa and Kimiko involved and ruin the entire party for them. But to make sure that they knew she wasn't through with them, she grabbed both their hands in each of her own and dragged them around the side of the house, towards the street where the cars were lined up.

From behind her, Halle shot Steve a look that said, I told you this was a bad idea.

Steve replied with a look that said, If you thought it was such a bad idea, why did you go along with it, then?

Once they were a safe distance away (read: out by the curb), Erin let go of them and hissed, "Awright, Mr. Bond, spill it. Why did you guys really come here?"

Steve put his hands up in yielding. "Look, I know this looks bad, but I promise we didn't come here to steal anything."

"Then what was Halle doing in Misa's room, for the twelfth time? I'll have you know that Misa's got cameras all over the freaking place and you're not gonna be able to talk your way out of it in court when the jury sees you stuffing your shirts with Misa's stuff."

As off-color and off-putting as this sounded, he really didn't want to have to pat her down to prove her "innocence," relatively speaking. "Halle didn't take anything! Look at her, nothing would have fit if she—"

"Stop."

Halle put up a hand of her own. "Stephen, maybe we should just go ahead and tell her the truth?"

"The truth? What does that mean?" Erin asked, by now getting as red as a radish.

Steve looked at his partner with question, and when she offered no other alternative Steve sighed, still rubbing at his cheek where Erin had struck him. With his other hand, he reached into his pocket to fish something out.

A badge.

Erin almost fainted right there. Sweet baby Jesus in a manger, she was right. Steve was a cop. Up until now, she had been pondering over how to approach him about it, but now it looked like the solution had presented itself to her. Should she be happy?

The name displayed on the badge said "Stephen Gevanni." His real name, or an alias? "We're with a special provision from the CIA investigating a crime wave and we came here to look for—"

"Evidence? A crime wave? What crime wave and why Misa?"

"Obviously because we think she has some kind of connection to it and we don't want her—"

"But Misa hasn't done anything. She wouldn't! She hates anything having to do with crime. Besides, she wouldn't give me free range of her place if she had something to hide…what's the crime you're looking into, anyway?"

"Homicide."
"How many?" Knowing and not liking at all where this was going, Erin felt her voice start to shrivel and crack.

"Several," said Halle. "Quite a few, actually. It's supposed to be confidential. Or it was."
Erin clapped a hand over her mouth, feeling her chest tighten with every passing second until she almost couldn't breathe. Was this what someone with asthma felt like when they had an attack?
Funny how abruptly and deeply life could twist and swerve. One minute you're enjoying an awkward-slow dance with an old friend/ new crush. The next you find out that he's an agent investigating one of your other old friends for a crime that you yourself had been trying to look into with your limited resources. The inside of her skull swelled and pulsed with pressure, like a balloon filled with too much air and three seconds away from exploding.
"Y—you think Misa's carrying out all those criminal deaths that have been popping up on the news lately, don't you? Or whoever sent you thinks so? Why, because she's—"
Because she's done it before?
"Whoa, slow down, Erin. How would you assume all of this already?"
In a sputter of impulse, she shot back, "No way! I'm not telling you anything else until you tell me what your angle is! Who sent you? What do they want?"
After a tense moment of silence, Halle blew some hair out of her eyes. They hadn't expected nor wanted something like this to happen, but the hole was too deep to climb out of now. From the sound of it, Erin Blogger might have known more about Misa's past than they had first suspected.
Only one way to address this…
"Then I'm afraid, Erin, you're going to have to come with us this time. Gevanni, get a blindfold for her," Halle ordered as she unlocked the car and slid into the passenger's side. "I need to call Rester…"

Sweet Jesus, it was happening all over again. Déjà fucking vu. What had she stumbled into this time? She'd had no choice but to comply with their demands, blindfold and all. It seemed like the only way to finally get some of the answers she had been craving for these past few days.
What if these two were working with the L imposter? How did they know that these deaths were murders? How would they know that Misa had once been a killer herself? They had no reason to suspect her now.
Stephen had taken the seat next to her in the back, presumably to make sure that she didn't remove the blindfold, and perhaps to give her comfort when he saw her curled over herself.
She felt a hand brush against her shoulder. No longer feeling in the mood, she shook him off. "Don't touch me," she growled, not unlike Lawliet whenever he thought Erin was getting too touchy-feely with him.
Lawliet. Oh no. In all her haste she had left him locked up in that room, and come to think of it she hadn't even bothered to stop to tell the Amanes that she was leaving, had she? Well they couldn't
exactly turn back now and even if she had her phone with her she doubted she would've been allowed to use it.

I...I don't know what's going to happen, but I think I could come up with a believable story, next time I see them. I just hope they won't wait up on me, 'cause there's no telling how long this will take.

...

But, what if they don't let me come back?

Oh Erin. You never think these things over as thoroughly as you should. I thought you would've learned by now. Now you're in deep shit. Deep Shit, Arkansas, just ten miles south of Gonersville...

I cleaned his box and filled his food and water dishes before the party. I hope Lawliet will be okay. Maybe he'll sleep through the whole thing and won't even notice I was gone.

"Look, Erin. I'm sorry—"

"Sorry? Feh. I don't wanna hear it. I don't even know what to say to you, right now. Except that you really are a jerk, Steve," she grumbled, turning her head towards where she thought was the window, despite the fact that she couldn't see anything. She concentrated on trying to keep the tremor out of her voice. She didn't want him to know how scared she was starting to get the further this all sank in. "James Bond, my ass. And to think that I wore a skirt, I did my hair...I even put on makeup for your sake, you bastard!"

...

Why on earth she said that right then and there would always be a mystery to her. Maybe it was the blindfold; it had temporarily lowered her previous inhibitions toward Steve.

Halle made the wise choice to stay out of it and keep her comments to herself, instead keeping her eyes and mind trained on the dark road. Steve was just as quiet, though more out of a lack of a response to that. Erin didn't know whether or not to feel proud at having left him speechless.

To say that the rest of the ride was the most awkward part of the night thus far would be a gross understatement. Indeed, since it could only get worse from there.

After what felt like an eternity they finally came to a stop. "Hey, how long do I have to keep the blindfold on, anyway?"

"At least until we get up to the room," said Halle, figuring that she should be the one to lead the way for her. Sure, Erin wasn't happy with her either, but from the looks of it she was even less happy with Gevanni.

This was why she stayed away from relationships. They complicated things, often needlessly.

The golden lights pouring down from overhead (albeit dulled through the blindfold) and the echoes of their steps across linoleum made Erin think that they must've stepped into one of those five-star hotels. Of course. Only the best for hot-shot detectives and secret agents.

She wondered which hotel they'd taken her to. There were quite a few in this neighborhood. The Chateau™, maybe? She could hear every beat of her heart echo through the lobby with every hesitant step. Didn't they blindfold convicts before they executed them via fire squad or
something? The theory was that it wouldn't be as painful if the victim couldn't see it happening.

Erin wondered how much that was true, or whether the opposite was true, instead. Why was she even thinking this, anyway? They wouldn't kill her. She didn't know what they had in store, but surely killing her was off the table from the start?

I can't be so sure. If they're working with the L-imposter, he may not have the same scruples that L had...however few and far between those were.

The elevator chimed, indicating that they had reached their floor. No matter what would happen, Erin would put on her bravest face. She had to admit she had often thought about giving this fraud a piece of her mind since he'd made himself known. She didn't know what exactly she would say to him, but it would be cutting, for sure. Any imposter, never mind this one, deserved nothing less.

The rest of the team had been waiting with bated breath by the time they stepped inside the suite. Erin couldn't see them, but she could hear them mutter amongst themselves, their whispers drained by stress and exasperation and anxiety over how this little monkey wrench was going to compromise their investigation.

"Uh...hello, everyone," she squeaked out, stricken by the urge to speak up but suddenly finding herself at another loss for words. "How's it going?"

"Hm. L, the girl is here. She's blindfolded."

"Yes. I heard her."

Mother of God. That synthesized voice...it sounded just like him. But it wasn't him and because of that she could finally feel tears stinging the edges of her eyes. Where was that voice coming from? A computer, most likely, but from where? Was he in the suite with them or someplace else entirely?

"Who said that?"

A man cleared his throat. "We apologize for putting you through this, Ms. Blogger, but after this recent breach we didn't have much of a choice but to bring you in. Here, have a seat."

"When can I take off the blindfold? It's not like you guys would let me go anytime soon," said Erin as she felt another person guide her into what felt like a sofa. Boy, was the room stuffy. Didn't the thermostat work or—

"It's kinda hot in here," she remarked, pulling at her collar. "What's wrong with the thermostat?"

"It's fine where it is. Now Ms. Blogger, Lidner explained to us that in addition to your catching on to her and Gevanni while they were investigating Amane's home, you let it slip that you might know some valuable information yourself. If you don't mind answering a few questions—"

"Why the hell should I?" she snapped, slamming her fist into the cushions and letting her feelings spill out unfiltered. "You're the one who did that broadcast, aren't you? You said that you wouldn't help the police. You denied that there was even a killer on the loose. So what would be the point? And anyway, who are you and why do these guys call you L?"

"Obviously because I am L."

"No, you're not! You're not L; you're an imposter, a fake, a goddamn sham! And I won't answer anything until you admit it, you...you little synthetic cocktail weenie slathered in hot pigeon turd!
You sucker of big fat brown dirty eggs! You pimple-popping pus-licking punk!"

Okay, so far her insults were coming out more childishly than she would've liked. Perhaps because she was still nervous (to put it mildly) in spite of her blindness. She hated that this new guy could have that sort of power over her already.

The room became deathly silent as the agents tried to process her words. She thought she heard Steve bite back a bewildered laugh, only to gasp when someone, probably Halle, jabbed a silencing elbow into his ribcage. As he deserved. Normally she thought that laugh was adorable, but right now? Not so much.

…

"Interesting choice of words. You call me an imposter. May I ask why you would make such an accusation?"

Jesus, this guy even had L's nerves of steel. Didn't he hear any of that other stuff she'd called him? Erin froze for a bit, realizing she was about to reveal something she had left unspoken for the longest time and up until this point had figured she would never share with anyone. This was it. She wished that circumstances could've been a bit different—Aizawa for instance was bound to throttle her for breaking her promise once this got back to him—but it was what it was.

Forgive me, guys…

She took as deep of a breath as she could manage. There was no better way to say this than to get straight to the point.

"Because…I met the real L when I was in Japan. He died trying to stop Kira, Light Yagami. They both died. I…I saw everything. Everyone on the task force saw it happen. I don't know how you managed to pass yourself off as him, but I can confidently bet my next paycheck that you're not L. So stop stringing these good people along and wasting their time and tell them the truth. Hell, you could be the new guy killing all of those people, for all I know. That's probably why you made that stupid broadcast."

God, this scene looked and sounded way too familiar to her…the only difference was that she was blinded for the whole thing. The blindfold really had lowered her inhibitions.

She couldn't help the few tears that managed to leak out of her eyes, but the blindfold soaked them up. She'd deal with the smudged mascara later. "Where are you, right now? I wanna see you. I wanna see your face. I won't say any more until I can see you."

Now the room was in a definite buzz. They couldn't verify that she was right about L's identity, but everything else, L had told them about beforehand. How could this girl know about all of this unless she was telling the truth about being there on the Kira case four years ago?

And if so, why hadn't L mentioned her at all? He had mentioned those from the Japanese NPA who had worked on the Kira Task Force, but not a word about her…surely he would have? This was sensitive information getting tossed around, here.

"L" was quiet for a moment. As much as Erin wanted to think that she had left him speechless and milk from it all the satisfaction it was worth, he could have just as likely—if not more likely—been thinking about what to do with her. In one fell swoop, she had probably damaged, if not totally destroyed, whatever trust these people had built up with him.

Should she be glad of that? But then, what was so trustworthy anyway about a guy who didn't
show his face even to those he worked directly with?

Finally, "L" gave his response.

"Very well. Watari, take Ms. Blogger to my room and accompany her inside. Everyone else must stay back, however. I will turn off my connection so no one else may hear us."

What the fuck, man? He still wasn't going to show his face? Well, not to anyone else, anyway.

Watari…

"Who're ya talking about this time?" she demanded. "The Watari I know died, too! Who's there? Are you the Watari he's referring to?"

"I am," answered a deep British voice (not Watari's voice, this one was a bit deeper and sounded much more morose). "Please calm down, miss. When we get into the next room, if L permits it, you will be allowed to take off the blindfold."

Of course. Everything had to be on L's terms.

The old man in question made sure to avoid the prying eyes of the task force so they couldn't see how uneasy he had become about this new development. If she knew about the first Watari's death, then there could be no mistaking the truth behind her claims.

What he couldn't understand was why L had omitted her from his report. He had to have done that on purpose, but for what reason? From what they had looked up on her prior to her arrival, Erin Blogger was a journalist who currently worked for the L.A. Sun, the last kind of person they would normally trust with these sorts of secrets.

Though to the best of his knowledge, no official stories had been published about L's or Kira's death over these past few years, so this was likely the first time she had disclosed her involvement on the case to anyone. Besides, she was unlikely to have the Shinigami Eyes or anything of that sort. Someone looking to kill L with the Death Note wouldn't be this upfront about wanting to see him.

That said, if L was truly going to let her see his face…

As he guided her towards the door, Erin's heart pounded so hard and painfully against her chest it felt ready to burst from out of her chest cavity and splatter against the wall like a flung spoonful of gelatin. While she didn't quite understand why he was conceding to her demands to see him so easily but not to let his co-workers see him, she was finally going to confront this impostor. A rush of adrenaline bred of anger, fear and arguably foolhardy courage coursed through her and knocked her off-kilter for a bit. She couldn't dwell on her anger towards Steve now. Misa's fate, the task force's fate, the whole world's fate, her fate hung in the balance.

By the time she realized the implications behind this thought, she heard the swipe of a card undoing a lock, a restrained sigh from "Watari" (He's definitely not Watari; if he ever got tired or exasperated he wouldn't show it), and then the click of the door and her chance to turn back closing behind her.
"Ms. Blogger was examined before coming in. No weapons, bugs or cameras were found on her person."

"All right, Watari. You may remove her blindfold," was the dull reply after too long of a pause.

L hadn't exactly been what one would call attractive himself—at least not physically, and sometimes not even personality-wise—but for some reason Erin imagined this guy to be even less wholesome in the looks department. She imagined him to look something along the lines of Tommy Wiseau™; he sounded pompous and narcissistic enough, but he lacked the unidentifiable accent. He sounded like the cross-eyed block-headed type that would write, produce, direct and star in his own film, which would come out as a huge steaming pile of nonsensical pigeon diarrhea.

When "Watari" finally slipped the blindfold off of her eyes, she didn't expect to find a small white pajama-clad mass curled over on the floor in the middle of a maze constructed entirely of Legos™ that stretched up to her knees in height. But that's exactly what she got.

She blinked several times to adjust to the light, or lack thereof. The shades had been drawn over the only window in the room and two lamps on either side illuminated the otherwise vacant space.

No way.

His back was to the two. She couldn't see too much of him proper, but what she could see suggested that—

He…he's just a little kid?

Well, she was right about one thing. This definitely wasn't L.

"What's the matter? You were ranting and raving up a storm just a moment ago."

But for someone who wasn't L, he sure acted and sounded a lot like him. His voice was also soft and flat and monotone, if smaller in proportion to his size and kind of girlish. Like a bite-sized version of L. What was she supposed to make of that?

"I…is that you, behind all the Legos?"

"Yes. Obviously, since you, Watari and myself are the only ones in this room at the moment. You may come into the circle if you want, but do be careful not to trip yourself up." He didn't rise up or turn an inch. He just sat there like a lump of cold oatmeal. It looked like she'd have to walk through the maze if she wanted to see his face.

She glanced back at the old man who answered as Watari. He was about Watari's height and he wore a dark grey suit and glasses, but he was much leaner than the Watari she knew. This new guy had curly white hair with a very receded hairline—he was almost completely bald at the top except for a cowlick of hair—and bushier eyebrows. Whereas Watari's face made her think of a mastiff, this man's face was more angular and bird-like, with a large pointed nose and no facial hair. Watari's eyes were blue and squinted, but this man's were wide—if at the moment narrowed at her —and cobblesstone grey. His ears were about as big as Watari's, but they stuck out more.

And unlike Watari, he looked rather uneasy. He looked at her like she was a massive inconvenience. And perhaps she was, but was that entirely her fault?
Erin bit down on her bottom lip. She had no idea what to say to this man who called himself Watari. Or rather, she did—a thousand questions buzzed ruthlessly through her head like raging wasps—but she didn't know where or how to begin.

Maybe she should speak to the other guy, first? From the sound of it, he was the leader in this partnership, God though, he looks so young…

After looking him over to see if he had any dart guns or other sort of weapon to incapacitate her or worse, which she found none, she slowly backed away from the old man. Any weapons he had could easily been concealed, like in his socks or sleeves or wherever people liked to hide their weapons in case of a pinch, so it'd be best not to make too sudden moves. They'd patted her down for weapons and bugs before they'd brought her in here, but that didn't guarantee that they wouldn't turn her into Swiss cheese if they thought it necessary.

She held up her hands and began the winding path through the Legos, one foot after another, but her pulse was howling. All this excitement had made her so light in the head that not tripping up became more of a task than it should have, especially in what little walking space she had.

Until she thought, What am I doing? I can just step over the Legos instead of walking around them. Duh!

If "L" had had any objection to her bounding over the plastic building blocks, he didn't mention it. While she did get dangerously close to losing her footing once or twice, it sure made the way over to the boy quicker. Soon she found herself standing in a circle that barely managed to accommodate the two of them space-wise, and she squatted down for a closer look. His face was still hidden, but this time she could make out a thick unruly mop of hair, as pale and fluffy as torn cotton balls. His stark white pajamas looked way too big for him; his feet were garbed in white socks and his ghostly fingers barely peeked out of his sleeves.

"What are you doing here? J-just how old are you? Eight? Ten? Twelve?"

He still didn't look up at her but he held up seven fingers, his sleeves sliding a bit down his arms as he did so. "If you absolutely must know, I'm seven."

If Erin didn't know better, she would've said that he had paused on purpose just to see if she would have an aneurysm over this news, which she must admit she got pretty damn close. Until he put up all ten fingers and added blankly:

"Teen. I'm seventeen. Or I'll officially be by the end of the month."

Seventeen? Jesus Christ, he was even younger than L when she'd met him. Granted, she never found out exactly how old L had been, but he'd had to be in his early to mid-20s, at least.

"Well, Happy Birthday to you. I'll be sure to get you a card. But seriously. What are you doing here?"

"You're a bit slow, aren't you? I'm here because I am L. Or at least, the current one."

Current? What was that supposed to mean? L never said anything about being part of a line of detectives that all went by the title of "L." Then again, should she have expected him to?

"I will concede this much: I am not the L that you supposedly are familiar with. However, this doesn't necessarily make me an imposter. It would be more accurate to call me…L's successor."

Erin almost crashed down on her rear. Successor? I'm looking at L, version 2.0 or something?
"I'm not one who is unsure of many things, but it's rather puzzling that the previous L never once made mention of you in his report, a civilian who got involved in something you shouldn't have. How careless of him on both fronts. I expected better," he snorted.

Huh? So these two didn't know about her, either? At least until now.

Did he do that to protect me? Did he trust me enough not to tell anyone about him or the Kira case that he kept me out of his files? Well, in all fairness, I couldn't have told anyone even if I wanted to. I didn't have proof and it would've done nothing but get me and everyone involved in trouble. But even then…

A warm wave of sadness, gratitude and love for him swelled through her at the thought and made her ache all over and when it ebbed, a dull helpless anger lay in its wake. "If it makes you feel better, I've never told anyone about what happened on that case until tonight."

"I suppose we should be grateful for that much. While it does save us a lot of trouble, this does not mean that we completely trust you."

"Is that why you're still hiding your face? Come on, lift your head up. You heard the old man; I don't have anything on me. And I said that I won't talk until I could see your face."

Slowly the boy—if one could call him as such—did just that. But Erin didn't find his real face underneath that hair. Instead she was met with yet another plastic barrier. A mask.

An L-mask. This mask looked like L's face, or at least an eerie caricature of such. Yes, even eerier and more alien-like than how L had actually looked. The wild hair fell down in a frame like thick black wads of squeezed Play-Doh™, the lips were bigger and more pouty, the face paler and shinier, and the brow-less, unblinking eyes even huger and bulgier. They looked like fish-eyes, with the pupils dead still, big and black as two lumps of coal. The shadows painted underneath them were much more pronounced.

Erin didn't know whether to pee herself with fright or start crying. No. She would not give this little punk that satisfaction, even if he was telling the truth. She wanted to rip that mask off herself, but if she did that the old man might have shot her. She'd have to exercise some restraint, here.

Still, if this kid could make a mask to look like L, then they must have known each other, or at least had met each other at some point. How well they knew each other, Erin couldn't yet determine.

"Take off that mask," she growled. "I stand by what I said out there. No matter what you say or do, you will never be L to me. So you'd better get over that."

The boy cocked his head. His already soft words were muffled behind those frozen lips. "Maybe not to you, but I am to the rest of the world. To be frank, I think that's far more important than your singular opinion of me. Unfortunately now that you've shown up and dropped all of those accusations in front of my task force, it doesn't appear that I have a choice except to clear the air when we are finished here."

So you should, thought Erin bitterly. It serves you right.

"You say that like that's a bad thing. Can't even trust the guys you asked to work under you or what? The L I knew would put his guys through hell and back before he trusted them enough to work for him."

"And you think I haven't done that? It seems to have slipped your mind that we are dealing with a
killer or group of killers who need a victim's name and face to kill him or her using supernatural notebooks."

She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but there was something different about this new "L" as well as similar besides being smaller. He seemed…darker, colder, angrier than his predecessor if that was possible, even though she had been the one raising her voice this entire time. She'd thought that L had been the kind of guy one could easily mistake for a monster that crawled up from a basement somewhere, but this small fry…

"But these people won't be able to help you if they don't know the entire story. And neither would I."

"Excuse me? How would you be able to help? Most of what we know about the notebook, the first L has already passed on that information."

"Yeah, but you sent Stephen and Halle out to Misa's house because you think she's suspicious, right?"

"I must admit I'm not pleased with those two, at the moment. They should have just gone ahead and admitted to trying to burglarize Amane's residence. The police might have been called and they might have gone to jail, but they would have easily been bailed out and we wouldn't be having this conversation. I guess Gevanni cared more about trying to get into your pants than he did about staying confidential. Can't have his next conquest thinking that he's a common criminal now, can he?"

Erin just about choked on her own spit at that last part. Her face went ablaze with a fever sprung from embarrassment, fear and fury. Who would have thought that he would put that so bluntly? Never mind that; was that what Steve had thought of her this whole time? Just another conquest? She had already been pretty pissed off with him before she'd heard this, but now? What if this kid was just saying that to be an asshole? After all, she'd only just met him. Why should she trust this cheeky little bastard's word over her own gut?

"On the other hand…if they hadn't screwed up, we might not have found out about your involvement in the first Kira case or that you knew the first L. Also, their being arrested and having criminal records would have complicated our attempts to get closer to Amane in the future. So I suppose we could call this situation a double-edged sword of sorts."

She came back with a sputter, "In any case, I want to prove to you that you're wrong. Misa's innocent. She's changed, and for the better too. She wouldn't let me run around her place, never mind throw a huge house party and invite everyone and their dog if she had something to hide. Now quit your pussy-footin' around and take off that mask."

The boy reached up to twirl a lock of his pale hair around his finger. "You sound fairly confident about Amane's innocence. Or maybe you're only offering to get involved for the sake of your own peace of mind? She's lied to you and let you down before, hasn't she? How can you be sure that she wouldn't do it again? In fact, how do you know that she hasn't been using you from the moment you two met each other?"

There was something rather smug about his tone when he added, "You don't seem that hard to manipulate to begin with, now that I've had a look at you. Hear a good sob story, see a few well-placed crocodile tears, and out goes your resolve. You're like a stuffed animal my granny would make." For visual aid, he pulled out from under him a worn button-eyed patchwork teddy bear with a little hat on its head folded out of newspaper clippings. Holding the bear out by its paws, he wiggled it in front of him as though to make it dance. He even stopped to flap the bear's paws in
her face.

What on earth was she supposed to make of this? By this time her legs had fallen asleep under her and her knees could bear the strain no more, and she plopped down on her keister with her legs scrunched against her body. This kid was supposed to be seventeen? He sounded like he was 34 but acted like he was six.

Just like someone else she used to know…

He's just trying to psych me out. He doesn't know Misa like I do. And I'll prove it too. He can shove it right up his scrawny pompous little—

"Shut up and take off that mask."

"I heard you the first time," said the boy, letting the bear drop helplessly to the floor. "I'm just not sure if you're ready for the ramifications attached to seeing my face." Well, his surly attitude matched a teenager's, for sure.

"What, am I gonna turn into a pillar of salt or something?"

"As pleasant as it would be if that happened since you would be quieter then, no. You'll simply never be able to leave our sight again. We'll have to keep tabs on you indefinitely, even after this case is solved. The first L may have been careless enough to let you go, but not me." Not even L was this rude.

"Oh, drop it. After everything that's happened up 'til now, you guys wouldn't let me go anyway. I've heard it all before, and I want you to know that…that I don't care. Whatever it takes to prove to you that Misa's innocent. And who knows, maybe I'll change your mind?"

"I doubt that. But all right. If you insist…"

Erin and the old man by the door watched with bated breath as the boy lifted the string of the mask in one hand and pulled the mask proper off of his face. His face was paler and rounder than L's had been, and his huge owl-like eyes, grey as steel, bore into hers. His eyes hadn't quite developed insomnia-induced bags under them, or at least they were very faint. He probably had enough sense to sleep more than L ever had. She couldn't really tell as his bangs fell over his eyes and cast them in shadow.

He stared at her for a minute or so, and then he did something rather unexpected. He smiled at her. But his smile was nothing like L's; his smile was like the real-life version of the "c:" emoticon. Somehow it looked…unsettling, unnatural, devious. A Cheshire cat grin, but without the flashing teeth. A smirk, really.

Jesus, had L been cloned or something before he died? No, maybe not. L hardly said much of anything about his origins, but from what she could tell he had been an intersection of Japanese and several different European lineages. Not this fella. He appeared to have come from an all-white lineage and had no accent at all to his voice. Boy, he was about as white as they came.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're exceptionally annoying?"

She bit back the urge to gulp. "Yeah, I get that a lot. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"I've had a few complaints towards my character as well, but they are by and large irrelevant. In any case, we'll have to become accustomed to each other, won't we?"
The old man cleared his throat.

"I'm going to have to ask you to refer to me as L while we are in front of the others, but if you insist on personally not acknowledging me as L, then in private you may address me by my old codename: Near, or N."

"Near, huh? And him?" she asked, jabbing a finger at the old man.

"You could consider him Watari's successor of sorts. As with me, you are to address him by the name the task force knows him as, but he's formerly known as Roger."

She wrapped her arms around her legs, keeping her skirt bunched between them so as to keep hidden what shouldn't be seen. "How did you get into L's position?"

"I went to school," Near answered coolly, switching to another lock of hair on his head when the one he'd been working on was curled enough.

"Is that right?" she snorted. "There's a school where you can get your degree in L-ology and be the next Great Detective?"

"Actually, yes, you could say that. Tell me, have you ever heard of Wammy's House?"

Oh no. He was being serious. Or so it looked. "K-kind of. It's one of those orphanages in England that take in kids and—and teach them stuff. It's supposed to be a school. Quillish Wammy, the original Watari, opened it."

"That's the institution's public description. But it also has a private program, one which selects from a particularly elite group of students the next heir to L's title."

…

"I'm sorry, could you run that by me again? I don't think I heard that right," she said, scooping out her ear with her pinkie.

Roger gave her a look. What? It wasn't like she had any bugs on her. She really couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Very well, let me use smaller words: Wammy's trains certain students to take L's place in case something should happen to him. As his heir, I got his title and everything attached to it: his fortune, his contacts, all of the information he collected from past cases, all of it."

…

But…you're just a little kid. A really bratty little kid, but still a little kid. A baby, practically. God, you're around Light's age when he—

"Hold on. You're telling me that this House that you come from raises little kids to be like L?"

"That's correct, but only a few select students are even considered candidates."

"H—how long have you been going around as L?"

"I became the new L when we found out about the first L's death. So in case math isn't one of your few strong points, I have been the current L for roughly four years."

Four years. If Near was telling the truth about his age, then he had to have started when he was—
Twelve or thirteen.

Had L been that old when he started? Or even younger?

You should never assume that you "know" people.

"Get outta here!" she yelped, suddenly finding herself on her feet again. "What you're talking about right now, that's like child abuse!" She didn't know who to be angriest at: L, Watari, or these two—God, Watari, a nice old man like him, how could he be behind something so unspeakably horrible?

"I ought to report this to the authorities!"

She imagined an assembly line of little kids getting tossed into a machine of sorts that cranked and clattered and popped out little L's on the end, every sliver of innocence and individuality down to their names stripped from them, their backs curved and their spirits broken.

"Now, hold on, Miss Blogger," Roger finally spoke up as he strode towards the wall of Legos. "The intention of the program is not to abuse anyone. I-it isn't as though the students are forced into it—"

"The fuck, they're not!" As uncouth as it normally was to use such language around the elderly, Erin couldn't help herself. In fact, if he wasn't an old man she'd have lunged at him, by now. "I don't care how smart they are; these are still little kids! They can't make these sorts of decisions for themselves! Th-th-that sounds like something a pedophile would say or something!"

Roger began to look pale with horror. "I-I beg your pardon?" He hastily pushed his glasses back up on his sweating face. He and children may not have gotten on the greatest, but he could never do or accept something that low, and certainly neither would have Wammy.

"Ms. Blogger, please lower your voice. I turned off my connection for a reason," grumbled Near, not the type who appreciated having his intelligence, or in this case his capacity for autonomy underestimated just because of his age, especially by someone older and still far inferior to him. "My age at the time couldn't be helped; L had died and someone had to take his place as soon as possible. The other person considered to be L's successor was older than myself, but he walked out as soon as Roger told us the news. That made me the next L by default.

"I can attest to having experienced no abuse of any kind, unless you count being ostracized by my peers, but I was never interested in them anyway, so no love lost there. And to tell the authorities of Wammy's House…would that really be the right thing to do?"

"What the hell d'ya mean, would it be right? You gonna kill me if I do or what?"

"No, Ms. Blogger, we wouldn't kill you. It would be too problematic to even attempt that. But… Wammy's House for all of its flaws has been the closest thing that many children have had to call home. It's safe to assume that I may have been a lot worse off had Wammy's not found me. Not to mention you would be placing everyone who's had any association to it in danger by telling the world that that is where the detective L comes from. Would you honestly want to destroy all that? Think of the children."

She didn't like how he said that last part, like he was mocking her. How much of this did he really mean? The two of them, Near and Roger, could have been lying to her the entire time for all she knew. But how could she know for sure? Still, maybe there was a point somewhere in what he was saying? Maybe.

"Why do we even need a detective like L, anyway?" she asked, more to herself than anything. "No
one should have to be put through all that pain and suffering."

"That's like asking why we need the police or doctors or leaders. The job has to be done by someone, no matter how much it sucks to do it. We've invested too much in L's legacy, and the world has grown too dependent on it, for us to simply abandon it now. Besides, I for one can't see myself doing anything else."

Wow. She didn't expect him to put it that way. But then, she hadn't expected him to talk about Gevanni in the way he had earlier, either. Boy, she would have a hard time facing him again when this was over. Her fists clenched at her sides as tightly as her jaw did. Why was it that L and now Near couldn't give up the title? Because of how they naturally were, or because of how they'd been conditioned?

"And…the other guy who was trained for the title? Wh-what happened to him?"

Near switched to yet another lock of hair to curl. "That brings us to our central problem. He disappeared. We've been looking for him since he left the House. We have reason to believe that…"

He glanced towards a blond Viking action figure standing in front of him dressed in fur and flashing exaggeratingly huge muscles, next to it a Grim reaper figurine in flowing plastic robes. The two toys were locked arm in arm.

"…he's somehow obtained a killer notebook for himself and is currently using it for his own ends."

She realized then that she'd momentarily stopped breathing. So it was happening all over again. Ryuk again, or one of his buddies this time? "You think he has a notebook? Wh—why would you think that?"

"I admit that the evidence is rather circumstantial at best. Several months ago a mole was dispatched to try to infiltrate a criminal ring. I was not in charge of that case; if I had been maybe it wouldn't have gone as wrong as it did. He was caught and the bugs on him were promptly destroyed, but…some of the background noises as well as the mole's panicked reactions suggested that there was a shinigami present in the room that the mole had managed to see when he somehow got his hands on the notebook."

Oh God. Erin could only assume that the mole didn't make it out, if these guys were as vicious as Near implied. "And…what makes you think your guy was there, too?"

"In the background it sounded as though one of those thugs was eating a chocolate bar."

"O—kay. Your guy likes chocolate, huh? B-but that could be anyone. Who doesn't like chocolate?" Someone she used to know ate chocolate and other sweets like there was no tomorrow. "Well, besides people who are allergic or on a diet…"

"That may be. As I said before, our evidence is rather flimsy, but it's the best we've gathered so far. Besides, I can't imagine many thugs to be munching on chocolate while they're sending a traitor off to his execution. In case this was your next question, that was why we did that broadcast. We were trying to provoke him, or at the very least draw attention to his activity."

"Well then, if you thought he was with this criminal group, why haven't you caught him already?"

"By the time this had gotten back to me, they had already slipped away again."

Erin put up her hands then. Something—well, many more things still didn't add up in her mind.
"Wait a minute. If you think this guy has anything to do with the new criminal slayings, then why are you bothering Misa?"

"As a former serial killer who escaped justice, there isn't anything stopping her from doing it again if given the chance."

Erin was really starting to get fed up with this kid, if she hadn't been already. "But I keep telling you, she's over that! After she and Light were caught L burned her notebook, and she lost all her memories about the Death Note and being the Second Kira to Light's Kira. That's why she couldn't be prosecuted. And with people like me and her big sister Kimiko around, there's no way she'd ever fall back into that."

"Maybe. Or at least she would be more careful going about it."

"Ugggh, look, if you think your guy would ever try to contact Misa—d—would he even know that she—?"

"He wasn't second to me at Wammy's House for nothing. It's possible that he got his hands on those files for himself. And yes, there is a possibility that he would try to contact and use Amane, provided that he hasn't already…"

"W—well, d'ya got a picture of him or something? Maybe I would know if he's been around her if I knew what he looked like?"

Near snorted again. "I don't think he would make himself that obvious, but we do have one picture of him. Keep in mind though that it's outdated and he may have very well changed his appearance since then."

He pulled out a photograph that had been lying face-down under the Viking toy's feet and tossed it up to her like a ninja star. She fumbled with it in her hands for a few seconds before she found a good grip on it and looked it over carefully.

What she saw broke her heart. On the surface it was an ordinary snapshot of a thin, fair-skinned boy—around twelve to fourteen, from the looks of him—out in a yard somewhere, presumably Wammy's. The trees around him had golden leaves suggesting that it had been taken during fall. He had on a black shirt, longish blond hair with the bangs cut straight across, and eyes as blue as the crisp bright sky behind him and as cheeky as his smile, if intense for someone his age. He had the eyes of someone who always wanted more and wasn't afraid to do whatever it took to get it.

Then her mind wandered as she thought about this boy in the picture: what he was like then, what he was now, what he could and might have been, whether he could still be saved, whether he'd want to be saved. If he was still up and about then he had to be around Light's age by now, as Near was. And killing just as Light had before him.

She wondered if he understood how similar he had become to Light, the person who had destroyed his mentor, or rather helped him to destroy himself. She didn't know this boy from Adam yet a part of her mourned for him already.

She snapped back into reality and blinked back the tears pushing at her eyes. Is Near right? Am I that much of a bleeding heart that I could be played for a fool that easily?

It wasn't like it hadn't happened before. Light had played her, as had Misa and yes, even L. Then again, she had been on the same boat as Matsuda, Mogi, Aizawa and Mr. Yagami. Was it wrong to care about someone else no matter who they were or what they did? She didn't think so.
You know what? Fuck him, what would he know? He hasn't known her as long as I have or the way that I do. Misa's my friend and I'll prove her innocence and make him eat crow. I'll help track this guy down and get the notebook and destroy the goddamn thing like it should be.

Besides, what could this guy possibly want from her? I don't think Misa would be of any use to him without her memories.

After a moment of silence she squeaked, "What's his name?"

"You may call him Mello, or M. That's the name he went by at Wammy's, though he could be currently going by a different name."

Mello and Near. Talk about ironic naming. These clearly were aliases besides but she knew better than to expect him to throw around actual names. She'd roll with at least that much. As for everything else…

"Hm. Well, I've never seen him before, that's for sure. But I'll keep my eyes peeled. Do those people outside know all this? Do they know about this Mello kid?"

"No. I've been trying to avoid telling them that. So far I've assigned them to researching each of the alleged victims or surveillance."

"Aw, what? No man, that's not gonna work. I told you before, we won't get very far if we're not honest with each other. They have to know."

"Honesty can get you killed, Ms. Blogger. Surely you could appreciate that at least a little."

"But the lack of honesty will keep you going in circles." She sat back down again, Indian-style this time.

"You don't say. Then what about you and Amane? She doesn't remember killing anyone…but you do, don't you? You've never told her, have you? Isn't that dishonest? Would you not call your relationship with her a perpetual circle?"

"What the—th-that's different! She doesn't need to know that. Your men and Halle need to know about Mello. I can't say I totally trust you either but I'll still cooperate with you, more or less. Come on, what if I shared with you what I know? I don't know how much it might help, but I think it's something. You've shown me your face and all so I'll talk now, like I said I would."

Near grunted to himself. Roger had gone back to standing guard by the door, looking displeased with her and her earlier accusations. "You may. But first…I'd like to know how exactly you got entangled in the Kira case to begin with. L left that out in his report."

She stretched the hem of her skirt over her knees, folded her hands in her lap and took a breath or two. "Oh, right. See, around the time the Kira case was in full bloom, I was studying at To-Oh University, as an exchange student, y'know? A writer starving for a story. So one day Misa came to visit the campus…"

…

Geez, what was the hold-up? Whatever was going on in that room sure was taking a long time to get resolved. Now and then the agents would hear shouting, mostly from Erin, but then things would get quiet again. They couldn't hear what exactly was being said as they had done what L had asked and stayed back.
Stephen found himself worried about Erin. He had to admit he'd found it shocking, and at the same time kind of funny, that she or anyone would outright call L a "sucker of big brown dirty eggs" and all those other insults. The kind of stuff that Stephen could only dream about having the freedom to say.

On the other hand, the fact that Erin had actually been in on the Kira case was, to put it mildly, an even greater shocker. Though…it would help to explain why she was so jittery, bursting in fits of emotion before going back and withdrawing again. Even when they had been dancing, it had felt as though she was holding back, staying guarded, no matter how much she'd suggested she liked him otherwise. He hoped that "L," whoever he was, would go easy on her. He would have to do a lot of explaining when they came out again.

Him and me both.

Finally, Erin and Watari stepped out. The blindfold was gone from her face this time. The two of them looked so washed out. Her head was down and he could see mascara smudging the outline of her eyes and stretching down to her rouge-stained cheeks. Son of a bitch, had he made her cry? His gut clenched at the thought. There were few things he hated more than assholes for superiors and seeing a woman cry, never mind both together. She glanced his way for about a second but then quickly turned away. Either she didn't want him to see how messy her face had gotten or she was still mad at him for tricking her. Probably both.

Naturally though, L stayed hidden in the room. Watari was locking the door behind him when the computer blinked on. Erin picked an unoccupied armchair on the other side of the room rather than the sofa where Stephen was and plopped down. Her arms rested on her knees and she wouldn't make eye contact with anyone. In her hand she clutched a few sheets of tissue. He wanted to sit next to her, see if she was okay, but something told him that she didn't want him near her, right now.

Come to think of it, he thought he'd heard his "name" being mentioned at least once. Whatever had been said about him, it must not have been too flattering.

"My apologies for making you all wait on us. But now that we've settled our disagreement for the time being, I'd like to take this time to clear the air a bit. I am able to verify most of Ms. Blogger's claims. The title of L is actually a secret organization of detectives who share the title. It's true that one of us did die while working on the original Kira case; that was the L whom Ms. Blogger encountered. It was an unfortunate mix-up. I have since stepped up to take his place.

"As for Watari, there is indeed a chain of people who share this codename as well. When the first Watari died, our current one took his place."

So that was L's secret, huh? He should have guessed that that was the case. It simply wasn't possible for one person to be responsible for solving all of those cases in such a short time. Was it? No, L had just admitted it.

Then again, he could very well have been lying about this, too. But how could they verify it if he was? What had he told Erin? Stephen doubted he would be allowed to ask. Would she even answer him if he did?

"It goes without saying of course that what you have just learned tonight will remain strictly between everyone in this room. As will the following: while I wish to continue surveillance on Misa Amane, I do have another suspect in mind. A member of our organization defected a few years ago and we have been searching for him ever since. We think he may have somehow gotten his hands on a killer notebook and is now using it; it's possible that he's joined a criminal group to
expand on his newfound power."

Oh yeah? So Halle was right; L did have a suspect in mind. And he couldn't mention this before because…?

Whatever his reasons had been for withholding that information, Erin must have said something that persuaded him to change his mind.

...

Whoa. She got L to do something. She'd made him change his mind. Impressive.

He looked back at her again; just in the nick of time he saw her looking back at him, but her eyes darted back to her feet the instant she noticed him.

"L, if you don't mind me asking, is there a particular reason you couldn't mention this before?" asked Rester, starting to look understandably irritated but trying to stay calm with his question.

"I was hoping I wouldn't have to, the part about our unsub being a former member of the L organization, at least. I've been having you all research the backgrounds of all the alleged victims in hopes of finding something that tied them together, such as a common affiliation to a gang or other major criminal ring. But after tonight's interruption, I had no choice but to come clean."

Interruption? How dare he talk about a girl that way? Sure, Erin coming here had been unexpected and it did complicate things, but he didn't have to be so rude about it. In fact—

"That's no excuse to be rude to her," he said out loud, and everyone, even Erin, turned to him in surprise. "Besides I find it hard to believe that as an organization, one of your members wouldn't bother to share with you the fact that she'd gotten mixed up in the Kira case and met one of you. But that's the only reason I can think of as to why you never said anything about that sooner: because you didn't know either until just now."

A tense hush fell over the room for a minute stretched to its utmost limit.

L's response to this was cool as always: "The previous L was one of our less competent, at least when it came to dealing with people. He was too…trusting."

"I'm not so sure. If it's been four years already and she's never said a word about the case until now, I think that speaks volumes on how trustworthy she is."

Now everyone was giving him dirty looks, and not that he knew what L looked like but given the slight underlying irritation in his artificially scrambled tone, his probably would have been the dirtiest. Not that this was new, but he couldn't understand why this time when he had a point.

"That will do, Gevanni. We all know that you're only saying this so as to salvage an attempt to get back into Ms. Blogger's good graces."

Sadly, Erin had looked kind of touched when he'd started defending her honor like that. But once L dropped that, she froze. Her eyes narrowed and her frown became sour again, crossing into scowl territory. She turned away and crossed her arms. She didn't look at him again for the rest of their time together in this room.

I get that you're mad at me, but you don't have to be so cold. It really doesn't suit you.

Wait.
"That being said, Ms. Blogger and I have struck up an agreement. She will stay with us and help by keeping an eye on Amane as she's supposedly close to her and could do so without looking suspicious. Her activities in turn will be monitored by us. I trust that everyone will be able to adapt to this new arrangement."

"That's all well and good, but what about now?" asked Halle, not sounding terribly pleased about this herself. "Should we go ahead and take her back to the Amanes' residence? Then again, that might look strange at this time of night."

"Let me see. It's 1:35 a.m., currently. Strike that, 1:36. I imagine that by now the festivities have ended and most everyone has gone home and gone to bed. Ms. Blogger, you didn't tell the Amanes that you were leaving the premise for any reason, did you?"

A soft and bitter "No" was Erin's first word since coming out of L's room. Her eyes stayed on the door the entire time. "It all happened kind of fast. Didn't get the chance."

"That's just as well. We'll clear out a room for you and you may stay here for the rest of the night. In the morning Gevanni can drive you home. If either Amane or her sister asks, tell them that you left with Gevanni and that you spent the night with him. That should sound credible enough."

Steve felt his eyes bulge in their sockets. What the hell?

"What? Hey now, I-I never agreed to that!" snapped Erin, her face burning that adorable shade of red again. She was practically floundering in her seat like Kermit the Frog whenever he got excited. "Do you have any idea what the hell you're suggesting?"

"I do. Of course you don't have to tell them that. You could always tell them the truth. It all comes down to what you think is more worthy of sacrifice: your honor, or our only viable chance to catch a serial killer. Or you could come up with a completely different story to tell them besides what I've suggested if you're creative enough. Good luck with that."

Interesting, Near thought to himself when he switched off the connection once more. From the way she reacted when she saw my mask—no, just from the way she was so quick to chew me out when Lidner and Gevanni brought her here, I would think that she developed an attachment of sorts to the first L during her time with him. Stockholm syndrome?

The teddy bear's front paws had strings attached to them that stretched over the Lego walls. The ends of them were tied around the pinkie fingers of an ugly grinning green-skinned witch figurine that stood on top of the last wall.

And the only reason I can fathom as to why L would omit her from his reports is that the attachment became mutual.

He shook his head, his thoughts taking on an edge of disdain the more he pondered the concept. He found something in the idea to be unspeakably disgusting.

I expected better of him. He has truly proven himself to be a letdown.

He "hmphed" to himself. Then he turned the computer towards him and called for Roger. His typing skills were not the best, so Roger would have to construct and send the message he'd had in mind for him. He didn't expect Deputy Director Aizawa to be so engrossed with his weekend that
he wouldn't check his E-mails. Not if he was as diligent as he was supposed to be.

…

Well, this felt awfully familiar.

As Erin tossed and turned and tried to sleep—not like she could do anything else at the moment—every profanity she could think of bounced around in her throbbing skull. Jesus F. Christ. I'd often thought you were an asshole, L. But this new guy Near, he's even worse! You were a gentleman compared to this bratty half-pint. I bet he's only putting me through this to get back at me for crashing his party. That's gotta be it. Un-fucking-believable.

I don't even know what to think about the other one, Mello…what could have happened to him that turned him into a serial killer? But then, why would Light or Misa become serial killers? Or Higuchi? Why would anyone become a serial killer? Does the Death Note just have that sort of effect on us as human beings? She trembled at the thought and held herself more tightly. What if she somehow got a notebook for herself? Would she be seduced by its wicked power, too? What about Matsuda, or Aizawa, or Mogi or Mr. Yagami, some of the most upstanding people she'd ever known? If they ever got a Death Note, would they use it, too?

She hoped not. But then, they did have a notebook at one time, didn't they? Two, in fact. Only L had used them and that had been to kill himself.

She would destroy it the instant she knew what it was.

But how would she know if she saw it? Besides the part about killing people, nothing about the Death Note distinguished it from any other ordinary notebook.

Would she find out what it was after she'd tried it? After she killed someone on accident while writing down their name and number in its pages? Oh God, how could she live with herself if that happened?

No. You know what, I think I'll play on the safe side and burn every fucking notebook that comes my way. Ask questions later.

She reached up to rub at her eye. She had long since washed what was left of her make-up from her face, having come here with nothing but the clothes on her back. At least this time she would get to go home, but she couldn't say she was looking forward to going home with Steve in the morning…well, later in the morning. Things between them had gotten so awkward that any chance of taking their relationship beyond friendship had probably been decimated. Probably.

And maybe it was just as well? The way things were going and the rate that they went, dating wouldn't have been possible anyway. Right? Of course. Besides, just because she was gullible didn't mean that she liked being toyed with by some slick sonofabitch. No. She was not going to cry again. Stop that right now, Erin! Don't give them the satisfaction!

Could she still even consider Steve a friend anymore? Maybe. A friend that she wanted to avoid at the moment lest she say or do something that she might regret later, but a friend all the same. Problem was, she found herself more and more attracted to him in a way that she couldn't simply call friendship anymore. On top of that he'd tried to defend her honor from Near. As mad as she'd been at him, she couldn't deny how touched she felt when he did that.

But then Near had to go and say basically that Stephen was only doing it to get—

She slammed her fist into the pillow, out of frustration and to fluff it. Steve couldn't be that sleazy.
Near was purposefully making things between them difficult. Why? Because it amused him? That
was the only reason she could think of. He didn't like her or Steve, so why not make them
miserable around each other for a laugh? God, not even L was that cruel, that sadistic.

At least as far as she knew.

She closed her eyes and thought about the sort of relationship L might have had with his successors
before he died. If Near could make a creepy mask that looked like him then they had to have
known each other to some degree. But how close had they been? Had he been a role model for the
boys? That might explain why Near acted so much like him. But the way Near would talk about
him when he came up…did they not have a good relationship? Or did something happen that
soured things between them? Did it have anything to do with his death?

And what about Mello? Was it that bitterness and grief that turned him down this dark path? She
would have asked for more details on that but something told her that she wouldn't be answered if
she did. Maybe she could try later, when she proved herself a bit more.

I don't know. Maybe I'd be bitter too, if someone I looked up to died and I had to take his place all
of a sudden. At thirteen years old, too. Jesus Christ. When I was thirteen I worried about puberty
and school and my social life and making enough money delivering papers to get my own laptop,
not about saving the world and not getting killed. I've often wondered what sort of horrors L must
have dealt with before the Kira case, but imagine going through all that at thirteen years old. I don't
know if I want to.

…

Doesn't mean he gets the right to be an asshole, though.

Somehow in spite of the heat and all of her thoughts she managed to fall asleep for a time. She had
to or else she wouldn't have had a vision of standing in the middle of a blank grey space that was
neither cold nor warm. Just emptiness.

Well, not complete emptiness. She could see L up ahead, standing there with his hands in his
pockets, his gaze deader than she remembered and fixed on her. Feeling heavier than usual, she
trotted up to him. He didn't do the same. She started asking him all her questions, from then and
for now, the demands flowing from her with the force of a rocky, angry river with a waterfall at the
end.

But he didn't answer any of them. His mouth hung open ever so slightly, but it produced no words
in reply. How could he answer anyway? He was dead.

Don't just stand there with that dumb look on your face! Answer me!

She swung back a hand and swatted him, finding that it hurt more than it would have in real life.
Her hand burned in contact with his skin like she'd splashed it in acid instead. But she didn't have
time to dwell on this because then he did something he had never done in life or at least in the time
she had spent with him.

He grabbed her by a fistful of her hair in one hand, her back in the other, and jammed his lips on
hers like a stimulated cobra. His huge, black, now fierce-looking eyes and hair became all that she
could see.

She wanted desperately to break free but found herself paralyzed and helpless against his chest.
The few hugs they had shared in life had been at least a little comforting, but not this one. He was
singeing her with his hands, draining the heavy feeling out of her through his devouring kiss and feeding her poison in its place that corroded her throat, her mind and all her insides. His arms constricted around her to the point of crushing, like he was trying to smother and poison her at the same time. Erin could feel herself shrinking in his embrace, shrinking shrinking shrinking while L got bigger and bigger as he hoisted her off her feet and up into his arms.

Until he was holding her like a teddy bear. His face was not his anymore. Now it was Near staring down at her with that creepy C-shaped smirk on his lips.

He took her by her hands and started to dangle her out in mid-air at arm's length, making her dance against her will. And she could do nothing to fight it. All she could do was watch as his face changed once again. His hair grew longer and blonder and it clashed against the grey, but the rest of his face was cast in shadow. Only his eyes were visible, flashing between searing blue and brown, but always vicious. He looked at her like an old toy he wanted nothing to do with anymore.

So he snatched her up by the neck, tore off her head like an angry child would do to a doll, and tossed her into open space.

And she kept on falling.

She tried to scream but sometimes you can't scream in dreams.

Her eyes snapped open. She was back in bed again, but the room had gotten much too stuffy. Or maybe that was just her? The clock beside her read 6:42. She had gotten about four hours of sleep, if that.

She rolled over and tried to catch her breath like a diver coming up for air. Holy shit. What did I eat last night?

Her stomach lurched, either out of anxiety or plain hunger. She had been so nervous about seeing Stephen again she hadn't had the stomach for anything at the party except soda. Then everything else happened and now she was starving and her bladder was ready to explode with whatever she hadn't emptied before bed.

So she rushed into the bathroom, relieved herself and cleaned up as best she could before going out to face the confusing and frightening world again. She wrote off her nightmare as her mind's attempt to sort through everything she had learned the night before; she had learned quite a bit, a lot of it still hard to swallow. Unfortunately, the dream hadn't helped to make any more sense of anything. She was just as bewildered as before it, if not more so.

Although the first half of it was kind of Freudian for my liking…L never did that in the whole time I knew him. How my mind could conjure up something like that is beyond me.

She held up Misa's hair clip. Good luck, my ass. But it wasn't hers to throw out. Misa would want it back. She had no pockets on her, so with a reluctant sigh she fixed it back into her frazzled hair. The hotel was supposed to have their complimentary breakfast buffet up and running by now and Near had allowed her to grab a bite before heading back to Misa's place. It would go on his tab. Arguably the most semi-decent thing he'd done since they'd met.

She had no mints or means by which to brush her teeth so Erin used her tongue to scrub at the fuzz that had built up on her teeth, gargled a bit of water from the sink to try to get rid of the morning breath smell. That was where morning breath came from, after all: hanging your mouth open during sleep and letting it dry out. Yes. Even though her anger towards Steve hadn't changed much since last night she still worried about how her breath smelled. Go figure.
When she stepped out to greet her new "friends" she did her best to keep her head up and made sure to wish everyone good-morning when she saw them. The names they'd given her were probably all aliases, but she'd have to accept that for now. "Ooh, a commander? You've served in the military? Sure you've got some interesting stories!"

"I suppose," he'd answered blankly, sparing her only a few brief glances from over his shoulder as he mulled over a stack of documents on the couch. He didn't sound in the mood for story-time.

"Hey, y'know my dad's name's Anthony," she told him in an attempt to break the proverbial ice. "But everyone calls him Tony. Except when he's in trouble with my mom. Hm, come to think of it, he's blond too."

"You don't say."

"Uh...yeah. I can see that you're busy. Sorry, don't mean to keep you."

Sure enough, Steve had offered to escort her downstairs for breakfast. Oh boy.

"G'morning," she mumbled to him, looking away as they walked into the elevator. He looked pretty nice himself, not at all tired. He must've been the early-riser type.

Steve pressed the button for the first floor. "Good-morning yourself," he answered as brightly as he could. "I hope you're hungry; they've got an impressive breakfast buffet here. Anything you could want for breakfast, they've got it. Take as much as you want. Also, I want to give you something while we're down."

"Like what, an apology?"

She vaguely remembered that Steve had tried to apologize last night, but she wouldn't hear it. If he had to say it again for it to take effect, so be it. "Well, no. I mean, wait. Listen, Erin. I'm sorry about last night. I didn't mean to make you feel like I used you just to get information on Misa. And I didn't want to drag you into this mess, either."

"But you did. You did use me. And you were probably after something else too, while you were at it."

By the time she realized what she just said, Steve's posture stiffened. "E-excuse me? What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. You know very well what I'm talking about," she grumbled, a fever sweeping over her face from her chin to the tips of her ears.

"E-Erin, I can't believe that you would think that about me," he said, sounding shocked and a bit hurt. She started to feel sorry she'd brought it up. Hunger and the lack of good sleep were clouding her thinking. She'd wanted to avoid him in case she did something regrettable and wouldn't you know, she'd gone and done it anyway. But then, how would she get over it if she didn't confront the problem directly? Hear it from Steve himself. It wasn't like things could get any worse between them, right?

As the elevator chimed and opened up to their floor, Steve said, "All right, I admit I like the ladies and I've had my share of girlfriends in the past. But that doesn't mean I want to sleep with every girl that comes my way. Just because I like James Bond doesn't mean that I am him. You can ask Halle. We've been working together for years, but that's it. We've never thought of each other as anything more than field partners. Then there's my mom and my sister, but those go without saying."
When they reached the dining hall, Erin couldn't help the question that slipped from her lips: "Okay, so what does that make me?"

They stopped in front of the beverage table. Erin wasn't sure if she liked the fact that Steve paused before he gave his answer: "I like you. I think you're a good person and a really good friend. You've got your faults, but you know what they say: a person who's looking for friends without faults won't have any friends at all."

A really good friend. That was it? Nothing more, nothing less? But before that he'd said that he liked her. Which was it?

He passed her a glass and took another for himself. "And think about it: if I really just wanted to sleep with you, don't you think I would've tried to while we were still hanging out in New York?"

"Hmm…I guess." She poured herself what she thought was orange juice while Stephen got cranberry. Now she was starting to feel stupid, more than before. How could she let Near twist up her brain like this?

Steve must have picked up on this because then he started to look more serious. "Does this have anything to do with what he said last night?"

"Sorry, can't tell you that. I'm not allowed. That's part of the deal," she mumbled, picking up some prongs to help herself to some fresh bacon strips. "Although I guess I could mention that he said very few flattering things in there. Actually, nothing he said in there about anything or anyone was flattering. I don't like him, but if I'm gonna clear Misa's name I don't really have a choice but to work with him."

"Amen to that," said Steve. Erin felt an impulse to offer Steve some bacon, but remembered then how he'd mentioned being Jewish. Sure enough he passed over the bacon, ham and sausage and went over to the next table for fruit and a bagel instead.

"Yeah. Misa's the only reason I agreed to this." Erin felt a little better. During the Kira case she couldn't necessarily complain about L to anyone besides Matsuda, and he didn't like to hear it either. It was refreshing to be around someone she could openly grouse about bosses with.

Once Erin got her pancakes and syrup, the two sat down with their plates facing each other. "Fruit, juice and a bagel? That's all you're gonna eat?"

"It's all I need," he said simply. "I don't do meat."

"You gotta get your protein in there somewhere. Get an egg or something. Wait. Is an egg considered meat?" Boy Erin, you can be such a dumbass.

"In some circles. Some vegetarians might eat eggs, but vegans don't. And I am getting my proteins. There's the cream cheese," he pointed out as he started slathering his bagel slices with plain cream cheese before adding his two creamers to his mug of coffee. The berries and melon, apple and orange slices lay in a circle around the bagel slices. Something about the way Steve prepared his food struck her as very meticulous, like he wouldn't eat until everything was arranged and dressed the way he preferred. "Oh, and the cream for my coffee, now that I'm thinking of it." He stirred the concoction with his spoon.

Erin looked down at her two eggs, two bacon strips and two pancakes bathed in butter and maple syrup. Suddenly, without knowing why, she felt like a pig next to him.

"What's the matter? Don't like your food?"
"Huh? No, no it's not that, I just—uhm, are you mad now? On account of, y'know, what I said earlier? Oh. And, um, slapping you?"

"No. I don't really blame you. This has just been an ugly misunderstanding. But that's why we talk to each other," he said before taking a sip of his cranberry juice. "So we can straighten these things out. At the very least we wouldn't be able to work together if we didn't." Well. If he was mad at her, he sure knew how to hide it. No, Steve wouldn't hide his feelings. Would he?

"Hey. For what it's worth…I really did enjoy hanging out with you at the party, dancing and all. That's kind of the reason I came in the first place. Ah, besides the other thing."

Erin was just getting over the food thing and was about to shovel a pit of pancake into her mouth. When she heard this, she lowered her fork.

"Really? No. No, you're just saying that."

"It's the truth. I figure I owe you at least that much for being upfront about gussying up for me."

She hastily shoved the pancake piece into her mouth while cutting another one as she chewed. So now what? Did Steve like her as much as she liked him? No, it was too early to tell. She'd already asked him what she was to him, and he'd said she was a good friend. If she pushed any further, would she be coming on too strong?

Wait. If he said that she was a friend, did that mean he wasn't interested in dating her? What did they call it when this happened, getting friend-zoned? Ugh, this romance stuff was confusing and Steve wasn't exactly helping to make it less so. She took a sip of her juice and her lips puckered. She'd gotten grapefruit by mistake.

You know what, fuck it. I've embarrassed myself so many times already in the past few days, I'm just gonna go ahead and ask—

"O-okay, I'm confused about something. Do you like me as a friend, or more than that?"

The orange slice hung from Steve's mouth. He quickly tore the juicy fruit off the peel with his teeth, put the peel back on his plate and swallowed. Rather endearing, Erin thought. "Ah. I'm sorry if I confused you. Well, this is kind of sudden, and it's a bit early to know for sure, but yeah. I definitely like you as a friend…but I think I might like you more than that." Amazing, how easily he could admit something like this. He really had been around the block several times. "I would consider dating you, if that's what you mean."

Erin felt like she would explode into a cloud of confetti, sparkles, apprehension and happiness, but tried to stay calm on the outside. "Oh. That's—that's good to hear. Awesome. Thank you for that. Because, I think I might like you more than just a friend, too. B-but, I'm not entirely sure either."

Steve flashed her one of his easy-going smiles. "So you finally admit it."

"Wh-what does that mean, was I that obvious?"

"Kind of, but I wanted to wait until you said so yourself. You'd really have it cut out for you in poker," he teased.

It wouldn't be good to throw away good juice despite it not being what she wanted, so Erin swallowed the rest of her glass and then tried to dilute the sourness lingering in her mouth with some more syrup-soaked pieces of pancake. "Er, so what now? Where do we go from here?"
"Give it some time, go on some more dates when time, and L, allows it. See if it would work. You don't technically work with us so it shouldn't be a big problem as long as we keep our heads in the game and don't flaunt it in front of everyone."

When L allows it. For some reason Erin didn't like the sound of that. Steve was of course talking about Near, not that he knew this, but what about actual L? This is what he would have wanted, for her to move on in every sense. Besides if he was still around today, she didn't think he'd have the right to have a problem with this, seeing as how he'd never once tried to let her know whatever feelings he'd had.

Or was she being petulant to think this, seeing as how she didn't figure any of it out until after she'd left him and by then could do nothing about it? After having the sort of dream she'd had hours before…

"That—that sounds like a plan, Stan."

"You mean Steve," he laughed.

"Of course I did." She polished off her eggs and bacon. Now that they'd put their feelings out in the open, Erin found that her appetite had gotten bigger.

"Oh yeah. There was something else I'm supposed to give you. Hold on…"

He reached into his back pocket to pull out a small black box. Instead of getting down on one knee like Erin had briefly imagined for whatever dumb reason, he simply put it on the table and opened it to reveal a set of small earrings. Their design was relatively simple: silver, with large amethysts in the middle of each.

Erin almost fell out of her seat when she saw them. "Whoa! Y-you're giving me jewelry already?"

"They're not from me, they're from him. The earrings I would pick out would be more tasteful. He wants you to wear these when you're around Misa. They have bugs in them. They're fragile, so be careful with them."

Oh boy. She was going back with bugs on her ears? Wouldn't that be invasion of privacy? But if Erin was going to prove Misa's innocence to Near, she supposed she'd have to wear these. This was all for her own good. Even so—

"But Steve, I don't pierce my ears. Won't it look strange if I come back all of a sudden with these?"

"Don't worry, these are clip-ons. Besides, if you're starting to get into skirts and make-up, I don't think it would be too much of a stretch if you wanted to start wearing a little jewelry, too. I think Misa would buy that." She could have sworn she heard a wink in his voice as he said this, and she gave him a playful punch on the arm for it.

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The ride back wasn't as tense as Erin worried it would be, but her stomach still fluttered and jumped; the food jumbling around in it made this more uncomfortable. She thought about what was going to happen now, whether this was going to get back to Aizawa and her friends in Japan (boy, old Aizawa was surely going to let her have it), how this would affect her job and her possible relationship with Steve and her friendship with Misa. She hoped that this wouldn't get back to her family in NY; the less involved they were in this, the better.

She'd have to check in with them sometime today, make sure that they knew she was alive and
Most of all, she prayed that they would find Mello and destroy the notebook as soon as possible, so no more people would have to die. She hoped that they would be able to save him.

The inside of the car was cool and the radio on. Of all things, Billy Joel's™ "She's Got a Way"™ had just come on and Steve as if on instinct started to sing along to it. She had to say, he wasn't half-bad at singing.

"She comes to me when I'm feeling down, inspires me,
"Without a sound she touches me, and I get turned around…"

No joke, she could actually envision him sitting at a piano and playing this to her, in her wildest dreams, anyway. Maybe in the future it would become a reality, but fantasy would do for now. When the song ended, Erin clapped.

If Steve hadn't been busy driving he probably would have bowed. "Thank you, you're too kind. God, I love this guy, and that song never gets old. So, Erin. You were on the first Kira case and met the previous L?"

She tensed up at his question. "Uh…Yeah. I'm sorry, I can't tell you too much about it, I promised I wouldn't. Although, I guess I can tell you that the first guy was kind of a jerk. I mean, a big jerk, a real smartass like our guy. Smartassery must be a requirement to be L. He wasn't always bad, though; this new guy, he's a lot worse than he ever was. In fact, I might not even be alive today if it wasn't for him."

"Oh. That's pretty heavy."

"Yeah. And I guess because he saved my life I feel I've got this obligation—I feel I owe it to him to live my life the best I can."

"Well, everyone should make the most of life regardless. You come to appreciate that a little more in my occupation."

Eventually Misa's house came into view on the side of the road and all the cars that had lined up in the street had vanished. A few bits of trash had found their way on the yard here and there, but the damage didn't look too bad. Nothing that she and the Amanes couldn't clean up in a few hours.

As she went to undo her seat belt, Steve asked, "Would you like me to walk you up to the door?"

"Huh? Um, no thanks. It looks like a pretty clear day and the yard's not booby-trapped, so I won't need a human shield. I think I could get up there by myself."

"Okay. Can I at least kiss you good-night?"

…

…

"What?"

"Can I kiss you good-night? I mean, it's okay if you don't want me to. I understand if you don't. It's just a thing that I have." Steve brushed some hair out of his face and propped up against the steering wheel. "For me a date isn't complete until I kiss my girl good-night, no matter how bad the
date was as a whole. But I'm assuming that this was a date to begin with, or it started as one. Let me know if I'm wrong because I could be."

Oh God. A kiss? Erin didn't know if she was ready for kisses, yet. After the breakfast she'd had, she didn't imagine her breath to smell the best. Her hands, now clamming up again, clenched around the strap of the seat belt. She could still remember her first kiss: second grade out in the yard during recess. She'd been very fond of this boy in her class, Danny. Or was it Denny? She couldn't quite remember now. It was her understanding that girls showed boys that they liked them by kissing them, like her parents did. So she gave him one, totally without warning after a particularly good game of kickball. Just a peck.

"Well…kinda, yeah. I didn't want to call it that 'cause I didn't know if you would feel the same way, but then we danced and spent the night at a hotel and ate breakfast, so I guess you could call that a date. Something resembling one."

His lips were dirty and sweaty and afterwards Danny/Denny panicked and ran off screaming to the teacher. She got a note sent home with her that afternoon and never approached him again no matter how much she wanted to. The other kids in the class refused to let either of them live it down for the rest of the term. While it might be a stretch to say that the ordeal had completely ruined her romantic confidence, sometimes like now she wondered…

"So when you say a kiss, you mean like, o-on the lips?"

"It doesn't have to be on the lips," he shrugged. "It could be on the cheek, or forehead, or even on the hand. The lips are the best place, but if you don't want that, I'd settle for the hand." To demonstrate he offered his open hand to her, palm up.

No. She couldn't. Her breath stank, and even if it didn't she still didn't know if she could kiss him yet. After all just a few hours ago she'd thought he was using her. While she wanted to think that they'd settled that issue over breakfast, an inexplicable shadow of doubt still lingered in her mind.

Still, she couldn't just leave him empty-handed, after all the kindness he'd shown her.

After concentrating on the quiet purr of the car engine for a moment, Erin worked up a smile, smacked her lips against her palm and then used said hand to shake his. "There, there's your kiss. Good-night, Steve. Or good-morning, whatever, it's nighttime somewhere. I'll see you later!"

"Yeah. Good-night, Erin. Thanks."

She couldn't get out of the car fast enough, and as she slammed the door behind her she left Steve leaning against the wheel shaking his head, disappointed but not really surprised.

I wonder if I put him off, Erin thought as she buzzed in to get through the gate. I didn't mean to, but he made me nervous again. Oh well. I can't go back, he's gotta be halfway down the street by now. Maybe I should wait until tomorrow before putting on the earrings? Until then, I can put on some pants, maybe put them in my pocket or something—

When Erin stepped into the messy house Misa greeted her in one of her nightgowns: lacy, pink and on the skimpy side to show off her thighs and cleavage. Her freshly washed and dried hair billowed down her back like a veil. "Oh-ho-ho! Well good-morning to you, Eri! Gosh, I knew there was something between you and Steve but I didn't think it was that strong."

"Uh, hey Misa. Wait, what's that supposed to—"
"Erin? Oh, thank goodness," exclaimed Kimiko, bounding out of the kitchen in her fluffy purple robe and slippers. "Where have you been? You disappeared and you were gone all night. We tried to call you but you wouldn't answer your home phone and you left your cell phone here at the house. Are you all right?"

"I told you Kimi, we had nothing to worry about," said Misa with a cheeky grin. "Erin took off with Steve and spent the night with him. Oh look at you! Your face is going bright red," she giggled as she pointed both fingers at her. "Hey, what happened to your make-up?"

Erin put up her own hands in defense. "O-o-okay, you got me. I did go with Steve and I'm sorry I didn't give you guys a heads-up. But we didn't do anything—"

Misa put her hands on her hips. "How can you be out all night with a guy that you like and not do anything? Sounds pretty scandalous to us! Unless you're not the type to kiss and tell."

Misa, you have no idea. And here's to having it stay that way.

"I'm not, but I can tell you what happened since we didn't 'kiss.' I forgot my make-up here so I went ahead and washed it off at the nearest gas station. But first are we gonna clean up or what?"

Misa wrinkled her nose. "Gas station? That doesn't sound terribly romantic. Well, we had a long night so we slept in and we're making breakfast right now. Then we'll clean up. You can tell us all the details over rice, soup, plums and tamago."

Oh. Another breakfast? Erin supposed she could stomach a little more food if she took smaller portions. "Yeah. Okay, sure. Oh, Misa?"

The sisters were heading back towards the kitchen when Misa turned around. "Yeah?"

Erin felt a strange compulsion to give the girl a hug so she did, which Misa readily returned. There was simply no way Misa could be at it again; nothing Near said could make her believe that. "I'm sorry if I kept you guys up with worry. I didn't mean to run off like that," she murmured into the top of her fragrant head.

"Don't worry about it. You do what your heart tells you; we're not your keepers. I knew you'd be fine. Misa has gut feelings about these sorts of things. Kimi's the worry wart around here; she was thinking about calling the cops before you showed up, can you believe that?"

"Hm. I'll be with you guys in a bit. I need to go change and check up on Lawliet." The sooner she could get out of her bra the wad of napkins in which she'd smuggled the bugged earrings the better. "Here's your clip back," she offered, proceeding to unsnap it from the back of her head when they pulled away. "You...you were right. It worked like a charm."

"Damn it. It was right here a second ago...all right, which one of you scarfed down my cake?"

Only Kiyomi could see Umbra rising up from under Nishiyama's desk to lick his claws clean, and she bit back a smirk as her rival passed through the spirit totally oblivious to his presence. Since the two had become acquainted Umbra seemed to get more and more comfortable being in the human world, mostly for the food it offered. He seemed to have developed a rapid taste for sweets in particular, and he didn't care where they came from. Just the other day she'd had to stop him from ransacking a bakery counter in broad daylight and make him wait until she could reach her wallet to get the goods the socially acceptable way.
But as important as it was to keep the creature satiated in exchange for his help her money had to be saved for other important things, especially now that she was on her own. So she'd granted him permission to help himself to whatever sweets he could find around the station as long as he was discrete, left no crumbs and didn't eat where people could see. After all, it would look strange to most to see food floating in mid-air before disappearing into nothingness.

Should she have felt any qualms for doing this? Perhaps, but Kiyomi didn't like anyone here to begin with, Nishiyama least of all. No. She liked Demegawa the least, with Nishiyama a close second.

Fortunately she wouldn't have to put up with either of them for much longer. In fact, the only reason she hadn't killed them both already was because she needed them to build up her reputation before she could move on. Indeed, these past few weeks had been quite lucrative since the notebook had fallen into her apartment. Recently on the way to interviewing Masako Wakita, a fugitive suspected of murdering a co-worker at a hostess club, the woman had collapsed right in front of their van.

A heart attack, as Kiyomi had written.

She was surprised but pleased with herself at how well she could act on TV. She had called for an ambulance though she knew it would have been useless to do so. She had touched her victim's neck to find no pulse and found herself reveling and at the same time revolted with the sensation of Wakita's limp lifeless flesh against her fingers. Revolted because Wakita had been a criminal and unworthy of her sympathy however fake (like a carcass left out for maggots), reveling because she had finally been brought to justice for all of the nation to behold, and Nishiyama would have no choice but to report the story alongside her and face the fact that Kiyomi had shown her up. Again.

It had all been Kiyomi's doing. If someone had to step in and take Kira's place as god of the new world—or goddess, as it were—let it be her.

"All right Saeko, what seems to be the problem?"

"Someone keeps taking the dessert for my lunch and no one will own up to it!"

Nishiyama was especially pissy today, and with good reason. Kiyomi's efforts had finally begun to pay off when Demegawa had told her in passing that the higher-ups wanted her on the anchor desk. She had guts, her comments were sharp, her sensitivity towards the issues surrounding Kira was impressive and drew people in, blah-blah-blah. "So I guess you finally blew me," he muttered. "Just not the way I would have liked."

Kiyomi accepted this news gracefully, as she always had. Nishiyama? Not so much.

"All right, baby, just calm down. How's about you and I go get lunch? I was just about to go anyway," he cooed in that sleazy way of his, patting the small of her back with his grubby, meaty hand. "You can get all the dessert you want."

Kiyomi didn't look back at them as they left the office. As she focused on the computer in front of her, she shielded her mouth with her hand so no one could see the small cynical smile stretching it. Once Saeko crossed that threshold, she would never cross back over it again.

Saeko Nishiyama, traffic accident. At 2:20pm while driving back from her lunch date, she gets in an argument with her date and demands to stop the car. She goes out into the road, gets struck by a delivery truck, and dies instantly.
"Why did you kill that woman?" asked Umbra once the two were back in the privacy of her apartment. His tone was not accusatory but simply curious, like a child asking why his parent did this or that. That was the best way Kiyomi could describe her new companion and roommate, quiet and vaguely child-like despite his size and grotesque appearance. "She wasn't a criminal like everyone else."

Kiyomi kicked her heels off of her aching feet. As predicted, the station had been thrown into pandemonium the instant word had gotten back that Nishiyama had been in an accident. All of their shows had been cancelled for today and everyone had been sent home. "Maybe not in the conventional sense, but she was a criminal in her own way. She used her looks to get ahead and used her position as an anchorwoman as an excuse to bring down everyone around her. She was someone that this world could do better without, an inconvenience. After the funeral no one will think anything of her, or if they do it will not be fondly."

Umbra tapped a claw against his rags, on top of the place where his mouth was hidden. "I think I will miss her a little. She always brought good cakes and other sweet things to eat."

"Don't worry. I'll try to fill in the void she left in your stomach. Although I do find it odd that for a shinigami you would have to eat so much."

Umbra scratched his head. "Actually, we don't need to eat like humans do. I do it because I find it stimulating. It's different. We don't have cakes and cookies and other sweet things in my world. It's a rather dull place, where I come from: no color, no sounds, no sweets."

Kiyomi made a face as she searched her closet and laid out her clothes for tomorrow after changing into her gown behind her screen. The black blouse and skirt would be most appropriate, to express her "mourning" for the loss of her "mentor." As the new anchorwoman, this was bound to be her first announcement.

"Maybe you do feel sorry for killing Saeko if you're going to say words for her?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm announcing her death because it's my job. Sometimes people say things they don't mean and keep their real thoughts and feelings secret, in order to keep up appearances. In an ideal world we would be more honest with each other, but as it is, honesty is inconvenient."

Umbra was quiet for a moment as he followed her back into the kitchen. She opened the fridge and pulled out leftovers from the night before to warm up in the microwave. He followed suit and took out the remaining half of the strawberry cake they'd gotten from their adventure at the bakery.

"It's strange. Shinigami aren't so selective about who we kill; we just do it. We never explain why we kill to ourselves because we don't feel the need to. Killing is what we do, all we know, all we are. But humans, like yourself, have to try to justify killing when you do it. If all these victims truly meant nothing to you, why try to justify killing them to yourself?"

"And why do you have to ask such stupid questions?" snapped Kiyomi, around the time the microwave beeped. She pulled from it her hot plate of food using a dishcloth, grabbed a pair of chopsticks and headed for her bedroom where she kept her computer. "I've told you my reasons for doing this: Kira was doing a good thing for the world by eliminating the criminal element, and now that he's gone someone must finish what he started, and more. That's how I feel. These people mean so much to me in that they must be removed for the new world to happen. I would hardly call them 'victims.' As much as I'd love to do more, right now I have to keep my killings equally spread out and under the radar so the police don't catch on."
"And anyway what would you know? I wouldn't expect you to have feelings or opinions about the human condition. You just admitted that you're a ruthless spirit of death that only knows about killing." She waited for the computer to warm up and then opened up the Internet to do a search on criminals still at large.

"Hmm…yes. Maybe you're right. Perhaps I find you humans confounding because I have no feelings or values of my own. I wouldn't understand."

Umbra severed a slice from his cake, held it pinched in his two claws and licked at the frosting with his long giraffe-like tongue poking out from the folds of rags. The slurps and grunts he produced nibbled and gnawed at her concentration, and she hissed at him, "Can't you be quieter about eating? I think I've told you this before."

"I am being quieter," the creature replied innocently.

"Well, be quieter than that, please. It's distracting."

While she sat here, what was Kiyomi to do about Demegawa? A public execution? As satisfying as that would be, Kiyomi resisted the idea. No, it might look too suspicious if he got up on TV during one of his programs and suddenly collapsed of a heart attack. She didn't know how much the police knew about how Kira killed his victims, but given her close proximity to the man and her affinity for Kira's ideology it wouldn't take much for someone to trace his death back to her.

Unless she made his death look more natural and less surprising.

A sly smile played at her lips when she came up with something. Not only would his death look unsurprising, but it would humiliate him. And before then, he would do probably the only good thing he'd ever done in his life. The Death Note was the only way one could get Demegawa to do anything remotely charitable.

The Death Note could do many things.

She could do many things as a goddess.

She pushed the button on top of her pen and with his fat, mustached, greasy-haired face in her mind, inscribed the following at the top of the next page:

Hitoshi Demegawa, sepsis from a ruptured appendix. On September 4th at 1:30am he goes to a playground drunk and bets he can fit into an infant's swing for 9800 yen. He strips naked and manages to squeeze into the swing but cannot get back out. Twenty minutes later his appendix ruptures with pressure to his abdomen and he dies from septic shock. Before his death happens, he spends the rest of his time alive between today's date and September 4th giving back all of the money acquired from his "Kira's Kingdom" scam; he does not mention a word about this to the public.
"Okay…here's another good word: 'challenging.'"

He sat on the couch with Yumi standing in front of him in her pajamas. As though she was up on stage in front of a microphone, she locked her arms behind her back, closed her eyes and answered automatically, "Challenging. Chal-len-ging. C-H-A-L-L-E-N-G-I-N-G. Challenging. In a sentence: You should give me more challenging words to spell." Her rich brown eyes popped open again and she grinned at him. That grin got to him every time. No matter what weighed on his mind at any given moment, Aizawa couldn't resist smiling back at her.

No. He wasn't Aizawa here. Here with his girls he was Dad, or Daddy, depending on which of them addressed him.

"Yumi, you seem to know your words pretty well already. Are you sure you want to spend what's left of your summer vacation practicing this?"

"I have to," she answered matter-of-factly. "If I have any chance to winning the Spelling Bee in November, I have to practice. I want to be able to spell the entire dictionary from cover to cover by then, and the dictionary you gave me for my birthday is gonna be a big he—no, it will be advantageous. Hm, that's another good word! Ad-van-ta-geous. A-D-V-A-N-T-A-G-E-O-U-S. Advantageous."

Wow. Yumi had just turned ten and she could already spell words off the bat that he still had to spell-check now and then, in English and their native tongue. Her teacher's encouragement had made her head swell, but generally in a good way. Then again, Yumi had always been good with words. It was facts and numbers she had trouble retaining.

"Come on Dad! Open it! Give me a harder word."

"Uh, o-okay. I'll see what I can find."

He thumbed through the new book and searched the top of the pages for a good word, the scent of fresh print rising up to his nostrils, though not as crisp as the day before. As he did this, Anika bounded into the living room with a fuzzy cowhide blanket tied around her shoulders like a cape and her bull-horn headband nestled in her dark wiry nest of hair. "Spelling is so boring," she piped up as she climbed over the arm of the couch and tumbled in under his arm. "Daddy, come play Moo-Moo Girl with me again! We always have more fun playing Moo-Moo Girl."

"Uh, I'd love to, Anika. But it's getting kind of late and—"

"He's busy with me right now, Anika," huffed Yumi. "We played all day, now it's my time. H-hey! Don't touch my dictionary! You'll mess up the pages that way!"

"This isn't a dict'ary, it's an evil magic book and you're the wicked witch that cast him under its spell! Now it's up to Moo-Moo Girl to save Daddy! Moo-Moo to the rescue!"

"Anika! You little—g-get back here!" shouted the older girl as she chased after her baby sister around the living room, the little one holding the book high over her head and squealing all the while. Meanwhile Aizawa stayed on the couch, wanting to join in but finding himself inexplicably shaken about Anika's mentioning of "an evil magic book."

Perhaps because there were evil magic books out there? And he dreaded the possibility, no matter
how remote, of either Yumi or Anika getting one of those. After all, he'd lost his sanity, one of his best friends and his marriage in trying to keep these two from slipping into a dark world where one could lose his life for even the most minor infraction and somehow that would be treated as okay and even just.

But you won't always be there to protect them.

No. I'll always be there for them.

Really? You're not really there now. And who knows what's going to happen with these new killings? What if you get killed? Who will protect them then?

He shoved these thoughts aside with a defiant and almost desperate, Then I won't get killed. None of us are going to die on my watch. Never again. With that, he sprung off the couch in spite of the ache in his muscles from the day's excitement and followed the girls, stubbing his toe on the coffee table along the way.

Eventually Yumi did get her dictionary back after a vicious tickle-fight, and afterwards at 9:15 he deemed it time for bed. "Now Yumi, as good as it is to study you won't be able to retain anything if you don't get a good night's sleep, and Anika, Moo-Moo Girl won't be able to save the day if she's tired. Even superheroes need their rest."

Once all of the bedtime rituals had been completed—toilet flushed, hands washed, teeth brushed, kisses and hugs shared, covers tucked and stuffed cows retrieved from under the bed and dusted off—he found himself back on the couch nursing his still tender toe and pouring himself a cold glass of Asaki draft with ice added since he couldn't keep the beer in the fridge where the girls could see and get at it. As much as he needed this, he couldn't drink in front of the girls. Of course not, that would be setting a horrible example. Only after they'd gone to bed could he crack open a can.

Since he'd dedicated the entire day to them he hadn't had the chance to check his E-mails, so he fired up his laptop and logged in as soon as he could get into the Internet. Better to come back to work with as few surprises as possible.

Speaking of…

Huh? Eriko sent me a message? "No Subject"…

What on Earth would Eriko have to say to him, especially at this time of night? At one time, back when they were still dating and in the earliest years of their marriage Eriko would put a "3" in the subject line and a "3~" at the end of her message in the same way most might use X's for "kisses." That was so long ago, before reality seeped in. Now it was "(No Subject)?" He almost didn't want to click on it; what would she have to say to him that she couldn't say when he had come to get the girls?

Then again, maybe it was important? He wouldn't know unless he opened it. Taking a sip of his beer, he absently sloshed the light low-malt concoction around his mouth like mouthwash and was about to swallow when he clicked on the message.

What he saw had him spitting up most of it all over the front of his shirt.

Mr. Shuichi Aizawa,

For safety and convenience I borrowed your ex-wife's address so that I may contact you. I apologize for doing so, but surely you understand the need to stay confidential. I would like your assistance on a case that I am working on. If you are willing to assist me please access the fourth
block of the fourth section of the Manga Kissa server tomorrow at 09:00. The line will be open for five minutes and you'll have to break through the firewall yourself.

L

PS: Please destroy your computer within twenty-four hours of reading this message.

…

He didn't know what was more mind-boggling: the fact that L who was supposed to have been scattered ashes for four years now had just sent him a message asking for his help, the fact that he'd used Eriko's address to do it, or that he was making him contact him at a café called Manga Kissa, break through a firewall and destroy his brand-new US $400 laptop by tomorrow night. Perhaps a combination of the three?

Aizawa hastily put the glass back on its coaster before it could slip out of his hand. What the hell? This couldn't be L! At the same time, this message sounded way too elaborate to be a simple prank, from Eriko or any ordinary trouble-maker (“trolls,” Matsuda called them). This had to be from the person who made that broadcast and had called himself L. Who was he, and what could he possibly want from him?

Was it safe to just ignore this message? His constricted gut advised against that more and more with every befuddled second. Not if this guy was serious, and chances were he was. He would know if Aizawa ignored him. What if he retaliated?

He pinched the place between his eyes to ease the pressure building up behind it. It looked like this was the only way he could finally get some answers to the questions that had been plaguing him ever since this all started. But it was Sunday tomorrow, wasn't it? He couldn't just leave the girls home alone while he ran this errand, not when he had no idea how long it would take. He certainly couldn't take them with him. He'd have to take them back to Eriko's first thing before setting out to this task.

But what about breakfast? I was really looking forward to breakfast with them tomorrow.

Exhaling through his puckered lips, he picked the glass back up and took another sip. I guess I can put it off and can eat with them afterwards. Maybe invite Eriko along. It's been a while since we ate together as a family.

His eyes squeezed shut tighter than they should, the longer he mulled over it. He and Eriko had been amicable enough around each other, or so he liked to think. Sometimes though he wondered how much of it was genuine and how much of it was a front for the girls' sake. Since they split, Eriko had become more aloof to him; he could hear it in the tone of her voice, see it in the look in her eyes where her smile didn't reach as often as it should when they were in each other's company. He supposed that it was her defense mechanism, to keep her from getting reattached to a man who had practically gotten remarried to his job. A dangerous job at that, one that could take his life any day if he wasn't careful, and had on a few occasions come close.

And not just on her end. He found himself in question, too. Not that he didn't wish her happiness and security, but sometimes it felt as though she had abandoned him, at least in spirit.

Or did I abandon her first? I—I never meant to. Oh hell, what difference does it make, who abandoned whom when? It takes two to tango, doesn't it? We're better off this way, no matter how I slice it. If we'd have stayed together, who knows how much worse things would have gotten?
He'd heard stories from many divorced parents who said that they only stayed and put up with the strife as long as they did for the kids. But now that he'd joined the club, he wondered if staying when you knew it was over and letting it drag on actually hurt the kids worse in the long run. Especially when even the kids could see it, like Yumi and Anika had seemed to.

He punctuated his musings with another large gulp of his beer. His shirt was starting to feel sticky against his chest from where he'd spilled his drink. With a sigh, he got up and hobbled towards his room to change, switching his thoughts to how he was to dispose of his computer and carry out the task asked of him, never mind his reluctance. On the way he passed the half-open door of the girls' room, and he peered inside to see the two of them nestled in their respective beds, their faces soft and blissful with sleep. One almost would've never guessed how much these two bickered and chased each other around when awake.

He saw Moo-Moo lying on the floor under Anika's dangling hand. Holding his breath, he crept into the room, picked up the plush cow and her arm and gently tucked both by her small round face. In the shadows her dreamy smile seemed to broaden a little at the gesture as she drew the toy closer to her, and a warm, protective familiar feeling swept through him. One that only a father could feel for his little girls.

He hurried back out before he could make a noise that might wake her or Yumi up.

No matter what happens, I'll always be there for them. So he kept telling himself.

…

"Well Aizawa, this is an unusual place to meet for you," said Ide with a bemused frown as he surveyed the business standing before them. A mug of coffee was clutched in his hand, a liquid battery to wake him up early on a day that he normally spent sleeping in and reading his novels.

"I know, but I didn't exactly have a choice on the matter. I called you because your hacking skills are better than mine; it'd take me a lot longer than five minutes to get through the firewall."

"Do you mind if I ask why you need to do this, anyway? Or should I wait until after we get in for answers?"

"The latter, I'm afraid." L never said that he couldn't bring someone from work with him. Besides, if he was looking for assistance on a case as he'd said—and if it was the one Aizawa had guessed—then the other detectives from the former Kira task force would inevitably get involved no matter what.

The first thing he noticed as they stepped inside was that the café was unusually under-occupied today. Virtually no one else was here, and Aizawa had to wonder briefly if "L" had somehow arranged that. The man allegedly had more power than all of the governments and investigative bureaus in the world combined, which frankly sounded like more natural power than any one man could or should be trusted with.

And that assumed that a man didn't also have a killer notebook.

Once the two found their cubicle, Ide sat down, set his coffee next to the monitor out of the way, and lightly cracked his knuckles. No time was spared for small talk. "All right, let's get to work."

Luckily this wasn't something that Ide couldn't handle with his basic training. Just as it looked as though he had gotten access to the server, the entire screen became stark white, with the exception
on that lone black calligraphic letter floating in the center of the screen, one that Aizawa and Ide had come to associate with some of the most loathsome things in existence.

"Shuichi Aizawa?" The synthetic voice sounded exactly like the one L had used. Already this felt way too surreal for Aizawa's liking, and probably for Ide's too, given the stunned look on his face.

"This is him," he answered over Ide's shoulder when he found his voice again. "And I brought one of my partners from the NPA, Hideki Ide."

"I don't recall saying that you could do that."

"I didn't read anything in the message that said that I couldn't either," said Aizawa, a thinly suppressed growl in his voice. As much as he didn't like L, there was something profoundly disturbing about having an imposter take up your identity after your death and act exactly like you. Aizawa couldn't wish that on anyone.

Although given what L had once said about going by at least two prominent detective names that likely did not begin as his own, maybe this was karma paying him back?

"And anyway, I'll be upfront with you: we're not inclined to trust you at the moment, not when you call yourself L. The first man who called himself L died four years ago on a case. So what does that make you?"

"I figured that you would say that. The truth is, the man you worked with on the Kira case and myself are both part of an organization of detectives that all share the title of 'L.' After he died, I was chosen to take his place."

He and Ide bit back a collective gasp. They shouldn't have been surprised that L never told them that, but still, how could they be sure that this "L" was telling the truth?

"How can we be sure that what you're saying is true?" said Ide, his dark eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Simple. I have someone here that can verify my claim. It's someone that you may know and who I assume that you trust."

Someone that they may know…

Wait a minute.

The two heard crackles, like someone was thoroughly clearing their throat on the other end. Then a meek, faintly nasally voice greeted them: "G-g'mornin', guys."

Aizawa got too close to losing his grip on the swivel chair and falling on top of Ide, whose hand had frozen in mid-air while reaching for his coffee.

Blogger! That IDIOT! I told her not to go to anyone!

"Blogger? Is that you? What are you—what are you doing over there? Where are you? Did you—"

"I-I know, I know and I'm sorry! I swear I didn't go to anyone first! But then the party and Misa and Stephen and Halle and—and then one thing led to another thing…wh-what this guy's saying is pretty much true. Eh, more or less. Like, 70 percent. Maybe 65."

Ide looked ready to facepalm. Frankly Aizawa felt the same way. But besides being annoyed as
hell with her, he still worried a little. The first L had taken her into custody after she saw their
group arrest Misa Amane in front of To-Oh campus. None of them could really do anything about
it then no matter how much they disagreed with the arrangement. They had to keep the details of
the case under wraps and as an aspiring newshound there had been no guarantee then that she
wouldn't go and blab about it the first chance she got. She wouldn't even accept hush money, or so
they'd been told when they first got word of it.

If L had never done that, would she be in this position today? He doubted it, and he hated how
there was nothing he could do that would change things now. Mad as he was, he couldn't help but
pity her.

"L" regained the connection. "Don't get the wrong impression, Mr. Aizawa. As big of a mouth as
Ms. Blogger has, the blame is not entirely hers. There was a mix-up, a series of interactions of
context and coincidence that one could tentatively call contrived. I assure you, though. She's not
being held captive or anything of that sort. We have made an agreement, which ties into the reason
I requested to speak to you in the first place."

Request? More like command, even though it had been worded as a request. The first L had been
the same way; no matter how politely he asked it, no was never an acceptable answer unless it
came from him. Such was the attitude of spoiled brats, egoists and psychopaths.

Come to think of it, Light was sort of that way himself. He just hid it better. Perhaps one of the
worst things about this observation was that Aizawa made it based on hindsight; that alone
rendered it utterly useless, at least as far as Light was concerned.

"Well, what is it that you want?" he asked, finding this stranger undeserving of politeness when
nothing he had done had warranted it.

"Tell me, Mr. Aizawa, that you've noticed the steady increase of stories circulating over the news
and Internet about criminals dying again."

The men exchanged apprehensive glances. How could they not? "Lately we have noticed signs of
widespread suspicious activity, not unlike what we saw on the first Kira case," he answered. "We
think there's at least one person somewhere in the world using...Kira's power, maybe more."

We hope that there's only one person, but when was it ever enough to hope, then or now?

"A smooth deduction, Mr. Aizawa. Next question, who has Kira's power and where are they?"

Aizawa's teeth gnashed in tightly restrained fury. He'd often thought that L was to put it mildly
insufferable, but this guy...

"We're still looking into that. Given how more under the radar this new killer is compared to the
first Kira, we believe that he has considerably more savvy; he probably watched the first Kira and
is trying to avoid his mistakes. If that's the case, we don't think using a public broadcast like the
one the first L used will help to lure him out."

"I don't count on this new killer to fall for the same tricks Kira did, either. I made that broadcast to
at the very least call attention to his activity."

"By telling everyone in America that there was no killing and that you weren't going to help?"
scoffed Ide.

"Now gentlemen, I'm sure you know as well as I do that Kira's killing method mustn't be disclosed
to the public, if we can help it. If our unsub has been so careful about carrying out these new
judgments—or at least he thinks that he's been careful—the fact that there is someone, or a group of people out there who have even the slightest inkling about what he's doing could put pressure on him."

"And you think he'll do something to give himself away then?"

"I hesitate to say that he would immediately do something to screw himself up. Instead, he'll attempt to cover his tracks, such as pass his power on to someone else. Someone who could and would easily take the fall for him."

That didn't sound that different from what Light and Misa had done on the first case with Higuchi and the Yotsuba Group. Then again, it had fooled them for the longest time…

Why couldn't Aizawa shake the feeling that this L already knew someone who would use the notebook in the way that the unsub had? On the other hand, L didn't even make Light's acquaintance until later on in the investigation and he'd managed to zoom in on him fairly quickly.

"Well, we've been building a profile on the unsub on our end. Based on the information we've gathered so far from the media, we've created a time-table on the criminal deaths—"

"Mr. Aizawa, surely you realize how pointless that is? Kira can control the time and conditions of his victims' deaths."

"Every criminal has some kind of M.O. Some are better at hiding it than others, but they all still have some kind of pattern in their activity."

"Even if you could find a pattern, it's completely possible that he created that pattern just to throw you off. Let me guess, does the time-table fit a schedule that a high school or college student would have?"

"Come to think of it, Mr. Yagami has a surviving daughter that's going to college. It would only be natural for her to want to follow in her big brother's footsteps, wouldn't it?"

You son of a bitch. You…you fuck.

Thank goodness Soichiro wasn't here to hear this. Aizawa could only imagine how badly he might have flown off the handle if this comment could piss him off this much as a friend of the family. Not to mention that if he knew this much about the Yagami family, then he really must have had some kind of affiliation with L that would grant him access to such information about them and the case.

"L, do you really want our help or did you drag us here just to insult us?" he demanded.

Suddenly the feed became fuzzy, and then there was drop-dead silence though L's insignia remained on the screen. "L? L, are you there?" asked Ide. "Hello? He's not answering…"

"His screen is still up. We can't leave until he finishes talking to us," Aizawa muttered. "He must have momentarily turned off his voice connection. Or…"

…

Erin situated herself between him and his computer, her hand over the microphone. "Hey kid, I'm not gonna put up with you talking to my friends like that," she said sternly. "You have no idea what they and their families have gone through."
Unfazed, Near rubbed a lock of his pale hair between his two fingers. "Oh, don't I?"

"Well, you wouldn't be treating them like this if you did."

"Whatever they 'went through' in the past is irrelevant, Ms. Blogger. Such is the case for everyone. What matters is here and now."

"What kind of PS are you spouting? I thought you were a genius. The past helps to shape everyone into who they are today. You oughta know that."

"The only thing anyone should take from the past is their mistakes, so that when they make mistakes in the future, at least they won't be the exact same as from the past. The same mistakes over and over get boring to watch before very long."

Erin threw an exasperated hand into the air before slapping it back against her side. "Jesus Christ, were manners not in the curricula over at Wammy's House or did you flunk out of that class? I thought you were going to ask them for your help? You're not gonna get their cooperation this way, that's for damn sure. And if you think they're that stupid, why are you even bothering to talk to them at all?"

"Etiquette was an elective and I was exempted from taking it. When I'm given a reason to respect someone, then I'll respect them. Just because the Japanese task force are relatively clueless doesn't mean that they aren't still useful. If you'd let me finish—"

Anger sizzled through her like a long lit fuse about to trigger a bundle of dynamite. Not even L was this vicious, or at least he didn't make it so painfully apparent. That last comment about Mr. Yagami's daughter Sayu was simply uncalled for, spoken completely out of spite. Right then, whatever self-restraint she had cultivated slipped from her fingers. "C'mere, I'm about to give you a crash course on manners!"

As physically weak as Near appeared to be, she easily managed to wrestle him into a headlock so she could give him a noogie, vigorously scrubbing her knuckles against his scalp like scrubbing a stubborn food stain off of a china plate. That is until Roger hastily bounded over to pull the two apart, this scenario all too familiar to him from his days as caretaker of the House.

Near reached up to nurse the top of his head. The only evidence of distress he gave besides that was a few more blinks than usual. "She touched me inappropriately," he deadpanned.

"Oh, hush! All I did was gave you a noogie. Roger you saw that, didn't ya?"

"You put my face up to your breasts, Ms. Blogger. What else am I to make of that? I don't see how that's supposed to teach me good manners. Besides, shouldn't you be doing things like that to Gevanni?" Taking a lock of hair into his fingers, he nodded towards the exit. "Please show her the door, Watari. I have no more use for her at this moment."

Not of the opinion that a lady should do something so undignified anyway, Roger started to guide Erin out the door. Despite the momentary shock from that last comment, she recovered quick enough to put up her arms to block the doorway. "W-wait, I wanna say something to Aizawa."

"What would that be?" Roger grumbled.

"Don't worry, I won't be longer than a minute. I just need to clear the air."

She scrambled back around a frustrated Roger and towards the small computer sitting on the floor. Before Near could get to it, she turned the microphone back on.
"Yo, Aizawa? This is Erin, again. You still there?"

"Yes."

"Listen. Don't take what he just said too personally. He's a sh—he's a stinky diaper to everyone. Hold on, I'll put him back on the line..."

She thought she heard a faint, choked-back chuckle from the other end before stepping over Near, probably Ide taken by surprise by her remark. Aizawa wasn't generally the type to chuckle at stupid comments, especially these days.

... While Ide tried to recover from having accidentally forced coffee down his windpipe, Aizawa took over. In some ways it seemed that Erin hadn't changed in the least. Still unafraid to be childish and belligerent with people of authority. But then, weren't most Americans like that?

"Pardon that interruption," said "L" as though there hadn't been one, or even that he had been so rude to them just moments ago. "As I was saying, while I understand that you would think building a profile of the killer or killers would be helpful, what you really should be doing in the meantime is keeping your eye on the news. The first Kira used the media to his advantage and it wouldn't be too far of a stretch that this new killer would as well. In particular I want you to keep an eye on the reporters. Who they are, who they work for, and their type of coverage."

"On reporters? Just the ones here in Japan? Why?"

"I'm afraid we're running out of time. I only intended to speak to you for a few minutes; you can thank Ms. Blogger for cutting into most of it. Besides, I'm sure you can figure out the rest for yourselves. I will contact you again as needed, most likely in the same way as before."

The two had no choice but to concede, finding it pointless to argue with this new detective as distrustful as they still found him. Although before the connection was cut again, Aizawa had to ask: "Hold on. What sort of 'agreement' did you arrange with Blogger, if I'm allowed to ask?"

"Don't worry. She won't be doing anything terribly dangerous as long as she holds up her end of the deal and does as I say. Blogger is conducting some surveillance for me."

"Surveillance? On who?" He didn't like the sound of that at all, and from on Ide's face neither did he. What business would someone like Blogger have to watch anyone that extensively?

"Who do you think? Surely you wouldn't have forgotten after all this time."

Those were "L's" last curt, dispassionate words before the screen blinked back to its normal desktop image.

The first thought to come to Aizawa's head after this abrupt parting of ways was, Asshole. Somehow he's worse than the first L.

His second: Wait a minute.

"He must be talking about Misa Amane," he muttered.

"Amane?"

"It can't be anyone else. With Amane in America right now working on her new film...it'd make
sense that he'd want to keep an eye on her."

"Except when it doesn't. You don't really think Amane would be at it again, do you? And either way, is getting Blogger involved the smartest thing to do?"

Aizawa groaned. Given the girl's past they couldn't entirely rule out the idea, but at the same time it didn't sound likely. This new killer's M.O. didn't match Misa's style when she was still the Second Kira. Misa tended to go after people who so much as spoke out against Kira. These days she had become one of the brave masses who did the speaking out, having lost all of her memories and turning against Kira's ideology after Light's death.

But what if this was wishful thinking on his part as he didn't want to think that Misa would fall back into her old ways? Looks could and did deceive. It would be foolish of them to forget that after all they'd witnessed. But then, would Misa go that far in covering her tracks if she truly had any involvement in these new murders? Blogger could be in grave danger, whether Misa was guilty or not.

Anyway, what could they do about it now? "L" and the girls were over in America and they were here; from what he had said, they might have to stay here for a bit longer.

Was he trying to tell us that our unsub is or is involved with someone who works in the media here in Japan?

"So what now?" grumbled Ide. The two stood up and stretched the ache from their joints, neither of them as flexible as they used to be.

After a moment of hesitation, he exhaled. Brunch with the family would have to be moved back, again. This, here and now, was far too serious to put aside for another time. "We're going to have to call Matsuda and Mogi in for an emergency meeting. Let's see what they can make of this. Besides he didn't say we couldn't do that."

…

"Whoa! Sh-she did what? Get out!"

"I admit I've made crap up in the past because I thought it'd be funny to see how you'd react, but…I wouldn't make something like this up. I wish I was."

Erin didn't like the pause over the line, but she was so taken aback by this news she had found herself at a temporary loss as to how to break the silence. Farley broke it first with a pained chuckle.

"You know, I'm actually kinda glad I found out when I did. I finally got the guts to pop the question to her; I was just about to do it when this whole shitstorm blew in." This was Farley for you, cracking lame jokes in the face of adversity, even betrayal.

"Oh my God. I—I'm so sorry, Farley."

"What are you apologizing for? You didn't do anything."

"Aw Farley, not even you deserve that. Man, I oughta call her up myself and give her a piece of my mind! How dare she go and—"

"N-no, no don't. It's not your problem. I don't need this to escalate any more than it already has. Besides it wouldn't look good on me if it got out that I cried to my baby sister about how—uh, you
know what? This conversation never happened. I'll chat you up later."

Click.

Even when she heard him hang up Erin called out his name into the phone against her better judgment, for some reason expecting him to pick up again. When the dial tone started beeping she hung up in turn, pinching the place between her eyes and shaking her head. As she slipped the cell phone into her pocket she could see her brother hammering a hole in the wall with his head as he tried to remember what he could have possibly said or done—or didn't say or do—that would drive Penny into the arms of another man, never mind humiliate him like that. Personally Erin couldn't see it. Farley had been joking, and only to her, when he'd talked about having kids in the future and he was a total puppy-dog when it came to Penny. Unless that was Penny's reason for doing it…

Either that, or Penny had started to get cold feet about things between them becoming more serious. Whatever her issues had been, she sure picked a horrible way to address them.

"Is everything okay, Erin?"

She turned to find Misa standing behind her dressed for another successful day of filming.

"Oh, it's my brother. He just found out that his girl's been messing around behind his back. And just when he was gonna propose to her, too…"

Misa clapped her fingers over her lips, gasping in shock. "Oh no! That's terrible! Is he gonna be okay?"

"I dunno. He didn't sound okay when I talked to him. He and Penny, they've been together for almost two years. I wonder why she would do something like this now…"

"Hm. Well, maybe there is a bright side to this," said Misa as she ran her fingers through her blond locks that still glistened from the shower she'd just taken. "As least he found out she was a slut before he got too entangled with her."

"Misa!"

"What? Don't tell me you're not thinking the same thing."

"Well, I've certainly lost a lot of respect for her but I—at the same time, I don't like using that word."

Misa put her hand on her hip. "Oh, really? You'll use other four-letter words and call people other names but you won't say 'slut'?"

Erin scratched at the back of her neck. "There's just something about that word that never sat well with me. I mean, if you wanna sleep with anyone and everyone that's willing and able that's your prerogative. But don't promise to be faithful to somebody and then be everything but. I think that's a lot worse than just sleeping around."

Misa was quiet for a moment, somewhat unusual for someone as chatty as she was. She always was sensitive about relationship stuff. Or was it something else? Erin didn't want to ask too many questions or ask in the wrong way lest she arouse her suspicions. For these past few days neither Erin nor Steve had seen anything strange; if Steve had noticed anything that she hadn't he would have shared it with her. Then again, he couldn't be around Misa nearly as much as she could. As far as Misa was concerned, he was just a "maybe" new flame of Erin's.
Her fists clenched when her frustrations toward Penny crawled back into the forefront of her mind. "He told me to stay out of it but God, it's hard not to want to get involved. This is my brother who just got his heart broken."

"I know how you feel. But maybe he's right? What can you say to this girl that probably hasn't been said already? You do sometimes say stuff when you get mad that makes the problem worse. I think the best thing you can do is just be there for him. He'll find someone better eventually when he stops hurting."

Erin sniffed. "Yeah. Maybe you're right," she conceded, recalling the incident with Near not too long ago. He hadn't allowed her back into the room with him since then. Not that he was pleasant company to begin with, but it did make things unnecessarily tense and put her out in the dark. On top of that, a stipulation had been put on her that she could no longer contact her friends from the NPA independently until this case was closed, and Erin couldn't be sure of even that much. How could she be sure that Near would treat them right if she wasn't there?

No matter how she looked at it, a peace offering seemed to be in order. She would work that out later before her next appointment with the task force. Until then, she could leave a message for Farley, let him know that she would be around when he felt ready to talk.

Still, she never saw someone have such an extreme (if delayed) reaction to a simple noogie. Had he never gotten one before? Or had he gotten too many in his short lifetime for him to bear? She could only imagine how the other kids treated him when he still lived at Wammy's—even kids could be unforgiving of those that were different—and in spite of her dislike of him a lump of sympathy started to clog her throat at the thought.

She didn't want to admit that he was right about her being a teddy bear, but nothing she said or did exactly contradicted his accusation, either. She did like to think of herself as a decent enough person, but not a complete teddy bear. It made her sound like everyone's sap, everyone's plaything just by virtue of being nice to them.

Misa reached over to bat at one of her earrings with her pinkie. "You sure do like these, don't you? You've been wearing them every day, practically."

Swallowing down the lump at least partly out of anxiety Erin said, "Sure, why not?"

"Personally they look kinda tacky on you."

"Well I like them."

Misa smirked. "Do you wear them 'cause Steve likes them, too?"

She glanced down at her feet as her face flushed. "W-well, he hasn't said that he doesn't."

A look flickered across Misa's soft face as though she were about to say something vaguely catty, but for whatever reason decided against it as she said instead, "Well, when we both get time, we're going shopping for more earrings. You should at least mix things up."

Erin smiled. "Whatever you say, Miss Fashionista."

Misa beckoned her with a wave of her hand. "Until then, let's get going! Don't wanna be late!"

"Okay, hang on, I'll catch up."

As the two started for the door Erin dialed Farley's number again. He didn't answer. So she left
him a message:

"Farley? Hey, it's Erin. You hung up on me kind of abruptly. I get if you don't wanna talk right
now but...when you're ready, I just want you to know that I'm here. You know where to reach me.
Love ya, big bro."

... 

It hadn't slipped by Misa that Erin had been spending more time with Stephen since the party,
when she wasn't working on an article or spending time with her. Today she was going to
accompany her to the set to get some material for an article she'd offered to write about her,
"Y'know, to get your name out there."

Years ago Erin had gone to college with the hope that one day she would become one of those
hard-hitting journalists who exposed lies and conspiracies to a public that had every right to know
about them. Now here she was writing about local news, celebrities and animals in need of
adoption. No gossip, though; that hadn't changed in the slightest.

Misa could only imagine that her experience on the Kira case had scared her into the opposite
direction. In a way she couldn't really blame her. What could be worse than being thrust into the
middle of one of the greatest most dangerous stories the world may ever hear, and then coming out
of it unable to even tell it to anyone?

That case had changed her, too.

She would never admit it, but sometimes for the shortest of moments she found herself jealous of
Erin and Steve. Not because she wanted Steve for herself, oh no, handsome as he was she was
telling the truth about him not being her type. She was jealous of the relationship as a whole, of the
fact they'd hit it off so quickly and seemed happy together.

And so she would have expected. After all Misa had been the one to, literally, push them together
so that they could build that attraction in the first place. As foolish as she knew it was to get
jealous, she couldn't help herself. She never could help herself, could she? From what Erin had told
her their first night together had been wonderful: cruising around the city all night in his car and
talking before stopping by the water to watch the sunrise over fast-food coffee and donuts.

It almost sounded too good to be true. While it wasn't the soft candlelight, roses and satin from the
covers of those supermarket romance novels that Misa was so fond of, it sounded romantic all the
same. The kind of moment that she herself yearned for but had never shared with any of the men
she'd been with.

Not even Light.

Misa sat down in front of the mirror with a rare gratitude about the lack of necessity for
conversation and closed her eyes as Leslie broke out the make-up kit. Hearing Erin talk about her
brother's relationship troubles had made her think about him. No one would have known it to look
at them but even without the whole Kira mess theirs hadn't been as wonderful of a relationship as
it'd seemed. When they had just started dating Light had seen other girls. He insisted that he'd had
to. They couldn't appear to be that close to each other, he'd said. It was for her reputation's sake and
his. She didn't think that he became too...intimate with those other girls, the way that he would
never be with her—or at least she hadn't wanted to think so. The idea was simply too unbearable.

Of course that changed when they both got pulled into the case; after that Light was lucky to find
time to go out at all, never mind meet other girls. Whatever girls who might've been interested in
him besides were repelled by Ryuzaki's maddening presence. He had literally chained himself to Light's side because he couldn't let go of his suspicions about him.

Then Light's attention turned to Ryuzaki. They argued together, conversed together, worked together, ate together, slept together, probably showered together. Not that they had the kind of feelings for each other that Misa had for Light, she would have noticed if that were the case, but in private the arrangement drove her insane. The first person she felt any sort of connection to in the longest time, the first to give her consistent attention however slight, and here he was being stolen away by someone who, as much as she hated to admit it, understood him almost as well as she did. Maybe even more.

That was why she had been so pushy about setting up Ryuzaki with Erin. To divert his attention so she could take back what she believed was hers. Never mind if the two didn't get along or that Ryuzaki would end up hurting her somehow. Looking back Misa couldn't remember dwelling on that for very long. She was selfish then.

And I'm just as selfish now.

She used to be in denial about it, but after getting time to think about things she'd decided it better to embrace her nature, not fight it. She didn't know anymore if fairy-tale endings were still possible outside of books and movies, if they ever were. All she knew was that she'd given up her right to one a long time ago.

Leslie pulled away to give Misa a chance to check herself out in her reflection. "Viola! Looking fab, if I do say so myself!"

Misa twirled her chair around and made an array of her best faces: cute, funny, serious, enticing, the entire array. None of these necessarily reflected her feelings at the moment, but she had always been billed as an excellent actress. If she concentrated enough, she would adopt the mindset to go with the face. An actress could be anything she wanted. Or what anyone else wanted. Sometimes she could be different people to audiences at the same time.

When she was satisfied, she tossed her hair and gave two thumbs-up. "All right, let's do it!"

…

Erin's hand drew away before her fingers brushed the handle. I don't know if I can do this.

But you have to. Come on, the longer you stand there debating over it the greater chance you have of getting caught. Her hand inched back over…only to dart away again. She wiped the sweat dotting her brow with her wrist.

But it's not right to look into people's phones—

Oh fuck, Erin, make up your mind! You're just gonna look at her texts and voicemail. That's it. She will never know about it and then you can at least say that you've been thorough.

She took her deepest breath until her chest felt like bursting and exhaled slowly, her lips puckering as though she were blowing out a candle. Clutching the handkerchief, she turned the knob on the lock according to the combination Steve had given her during one of his own escapades on surveying Misa. She hadn't been happy about hearing this, but all Steve had to reply with was, "I did what I had to. I never found anything, but it couldn't hurt to check again. Since you'd be coming with Misa, it would look a lot less suspicious if you did it."

Click.

Her heart drummed so violently that her sheer pulse seemed to make her hands tremble. Peeling the cold steel door of the locker by the top with her finger, she found Misa’s leather purse sitting inside. Misa had several cell phones, each with a different purpose. Erin thought to start with her "personal" phone, the dark blood-red one with the keychain attached to it that looked like a voodoo doll version of its owner. She took another breath and flipped it open, taking care to place the handkerchief between it and her clammy hand.

Upon going into the voicemail, an automated voice asked her for a passcode. Damn. But this all by itself didn't incriminate Misa; most people had codes on their phone, didn't they? Her body tightened bit by bit as she strained to come up with what numbers Misa would use for her code.

First she entered 1-2-2-5, the month and day of Misa's birthday, December 25th.

"Sorry, that is not your passcode. Please enter your passcode and press 'pound.'"

Her tongue poked out from between her lips as she tried again using Kimiko's birthday this time, September 25th: 0-9-2-5.

"Sorry, that is not your passcode. Please enter your passcode and press 'pound.'"

Come on, think! What other combination might she use?

...

Well, there was another. But for some reason Erin kind of hoped that wouldn't be it. Though what choice did she have except to try it?

0-2-2-8.

February 28th. Light's birthday.

To her discomfort, it must have been the right one. Because then the robotic voice announced, "You have no new messages. Main menu…"

Following the prompts, she found there were no saved messages either. Erin didn't know whether to worry or be relieved over this. She backed out of voicemail and returned to the phone's main menu to find text messages.

The shock of what she found there slackened her jaw, leaving her mouth open to the dust mites dancing in the sunlight pouring down from the one window above her.

...

Matt was just outside the locker room with another cigarette dangling from his lips. He had enough time to enjoy that warm, soothing first puff before a girl in a Fedora burst out pale and shaking like she'd just seen something ghastly. Perhaps a little something that someone had left in the crapper and forgot to flush?

"What's the matter?" he asked her coolly.

She tugged at her shirt collar like it had gotten too hot underneath it. "Uh, nothing. I wouldn't go in there for at least fifteen minutes, just a heads-up."

"I didn't realize that I looked like a lady from where you were standing," he said. "I wouldn't have
"Ah, sorry, I didn't mean it that way, I just—oh, never mind!" With a hand over the top of her hat she made a mad dash back for the pool to watch Misa and her costar Dick do their next scene.

Matt hung his head and took another drag, already getting an idea as to what she might have seen that freaked her out this badly.

... 

"Hey Mello. When did we start getting interested in killing criminals outside of the mafia?"

"We haven't."

"The news and Internet say otherwise."

After what couldn't have been more than two minutes of scanning the results of Matt's search on the engine Mello flashed a sneer, taking another chunk of chocolate off the top of his bar with his teeth. "Well, well. Looks like there's some idiot out there who somehow got a notebook of his own. From the looks of it he seems to be trying to pick up where Kira left off. Isn't that right, Lumen?"

The shinigami's gaping jaws were just as occupied, with the last fistful of consomme chips from the bag. "Gotter ber," he mumbled between spit-firing bites. He swallowed loudly. "A shinigami from my world probably dropped his notebook here on accident," he said with no trace of sympathy in his voice for his fellow god of death. He wiped the crumbs off of his skeletal face with the sleeve of his coat and let the aluminum bag flutter uselessly to the floor.

It didn't take either of them long to realize that they should hunt this guy down. "He could be useful to us; he's already useful in that he must be distracting the police from us," said Mello from over Matt's shoulder. "But we won't know until we find and get a hold of him. Lumen, how can you tell if a person owns a Death Note? Would you be able to tell if you saw him?" Matt didn't answer him. He was just about to lean his head back into his chest when Mello pulled away to face their otherworldly accomplice.

Lumen snickered. "Sorry, I couldn't tell you if I wanted to. Shinigami aren't allowed to point out other Death Note owners any more than we're allowed to give you anyone's real name. Besides, if you're as smart as I've been led to believe I think it'd be much more fun to see you try to figure it out for yourself."

Mello huffed. He should have expected Lumen to say that. All of the consomme chips in the world couldn't make Lumen be at his complete beck and call. So now what? L didn't mention much about how the Shinigami Eyes worked, but he assumed that on the first case the Second Kira was able to find the First Kira with them. And after what Lumen had told him the first and only time he'd offered to make the deal, the "marker" had to be one's lifespan, or lack thereof.

But making the trade for himself was out of the question, and he couldn't get someone else to do it without giving up ownership of the Death Note and transferring it to them. Or he could, but he didn't trust anyone here enough to do it, for if they did have the Eyes then they could see his real name and out went his advantage over the others.

Yes. Yet another thing to consider. They couldn't yet tell if this person had the Eyes. If he did he certainly would be useful to Mello if he could get him on his side, but at the same time if he ever saw his face and found a reason to kill him…

So history repeats itself.
He'd just have to track this person down the old-fashioned way. It wasn't as though he hadn't been taught to do so.

…

"What're we taking this way for?" whined Lumen. "The usual route is quicker!" He was of course talking about their route to meet their men with the next delivery of chips. Otherwise he wouldn't have cared less.

"We'll get there, don't you worry," said Mello from the seat next to him. "I felt nostalgic and wanted to take the scenic route. Besides, shinigami can't starve so I think you can stand to wait."

Lumen cocked his head. "Nostalgic?"

"Yeah. This is a piece of history we're visiting. Well, my history, at least," he said with his gloved hand under his chin. He wouldn't expect the spirit to understand what that word meant. Indeed, most people wouldn't know it to look at the city, but they were driving through an old battlefield.

To Lumen's chagrin he didn't explain himself any further nor would he look his way. He started to hum and huff and make all sorts of obnoxious noises to get his attention. He certainly got that of the driver, who made his irritation quite apparent in his reflection in the rearview mirror as he tried to keep his eyes on the road. Eddie cursed under his breath for writing in the notebook himself, if only because if he hadn't he wouldn't be able to see or hear this asshole at all.

They passed the apartment on 3rd Avenue, where Quarter Queen was bludgeoned to death and her eyes crushed in. From what he knew, the girl's mother never returned there since then. Not that her fate was or had ever been his concern.

His elbow propped against the door, he peered out the dark tinted windows to see that now vacant little house on Insist Street, where Believe Bridesmaid was strangled and carved up. Before long the Metrorail Glass Station came into view, along with it the townhouse where Backyard Bottomslash had had the most gruesome death of the three: strangled, stabbed, beaten and then dismembered, and probably not in that order. If he closed his eyes he could see all of these murders unfold beyond his eyelids. Not that he was there for any of it; what he knew of the LABB affair L had told him himself and he had done extra research based on the news. But for him it wasn't difficult to imagine. Most people might be deeply troubled by the deaths of three innocent and unrelated people, but to Mello they had simply been unfortunate casualties in the war Beyond Birthday had declared upon L.

The condo in Pasadena rolled by then, now renovated. He imagined Naomi Misora rushing down the pathway on level 4 to room 404 just as Beyond was setting himself on fire, his final anguished battle-cry piercing the night and haunting the street for at least a year afterwards.

In hindsight, it was rather telling that B had to kill people just to get L's attention. The man had been constantly plagued by the fact that death was inevitable and that most of humankind's endeavors would prove futile in the grand scheme of things, and he'd still gone for it anyway. If B could take any comfort from his failure before he died in prison, it would've been that this applied to L, too. His fall just hadn't been as soon as he had wanted.

Attention. Attention. Attent—

A blazing streak of realization rattled his mind, burning his skull from the inside-out.

Yes. That's it. This other killer isn't as obvious about it, or so they like to think, but they crave
attention too, on a global scale. As a god, like Kira himself. Hm. Or even better, they want to surpass Kira. And like Kira they can't stand people who contend with their points of view.

But they are currently modeling themselves so closely from Kira's M.O….they must be a Kira admirer. Maybe someone who comes from a prominent family or has an occupation that puts them in public view often. Like a reporter. The killings may be spread out, but it wouldn't hurt to look back to the country of Kira's origin first. We need to watch for who is reporting on the deaths and how.

And who else dies around them.

He never saw Lumen leap so high or soar so quickly across the lot as soon as the car came to a stop and everyone got out. He watched the shinigami crash down on the mooks carrying the crates out of the truck with little interest. His mind had gone elsewhere, by then.
Roger's father Charles D. was a wildly successful businessman who issued patents to inventions he considered profitable. As a result the Ruvie household name had been one of the most prestigious at least within Wales. He supposed his pampered childhood had made him complacent and naïve to a point, if not outright spoiled. Not that he lacked compassion whatsoever for his fellow man or else he could have very well pursued a different career path—like that of the old man's, perhaps—instead of a doctor's. But being so used to getting his way set him up for a rude, rude awakening when he discovered that the money Mother and Father had put down for him for his schooling couldn't buy guarantees that the patients under his care would live. 

Not that they all died. Roger for whatever reason just had a tendency to get stuck with the worse cases. People told him that it was because he was one of the best in his class. If he was the best then why couldn't he save everyone? Was it that he didn't care enough? Had he become a doctor for the wrong reasons and it affected his performance? Roger wasn't usually superstitious but these past few years had made him wonder…

But he kept a stiff upper lip about the whole thing. He'd sit at the table organizing his meal into separate piles with his fork in a feeble attempt to have some kind of order, his appetite banished by the troubles from his day and the lingering scent of blood and vomit and excrement and cleaners and death. He only spoke about his day when asked and relayed only what was appropriate for supper conversation. The first time he said anything about a patient dying on him—a thirty-seven year old woman with a defective heart valve, 37 is much too young for someone to die just like that—Father tried to brush it off of him as he'd always done. "People die in the hospital all the time, Roger," he scoffed. "That's what it's made for. Surely you're not going to waste your time mourning each and every one that does? At the end of the day you're still getting paid. That's what I would bother myself about."

"Your father is right, darling," said Mother, her tone gentler and more sympathetic—if superficially so—to the anguish clouding his expression. "You mustn't trouble yourself with this. That poor woman isn't suffering anymore at least."

He never brought up things like that around them again.

Roger first met Quillish, a soft-spoken and somewhat blithe gentleman six years his senior, at one of his father's parties. Father had mentioned him a few times as someone with some "interesting ideas for patents," but they did not exchange direct words that night. He had been too preoccupied that time to listen to them discuss whatever business they had had with each other. Lucy had just told him that she was pregnant. The last thing he had wanted to hear, just as he was finishing school.

But what could he do about it? Leave her and deny responsibility? He had seen the consequences of that one too many times at work to consider that remotely justifiable. He had tried looking for a distraction and had gotten reckless; the least he could do was own up to it and marry her, preferably soon to save both their reputations. Besides, she'd seemed so excited and yet so anxious upon telling him, he just didn't have the heart to tell her anything but what she wanted to hear. He was weak that way, he supposed. Roger had always been a follower.

Perhaps that was why he was so attracted to Lucy? She was even more of a follower than himself. Simple as she was, she had completely agreed to keep the pregnancy secret until after they'd been married.
With a beaming Lucy next to him, he untangled her dainty painted fingers from his own and clinked his glass with his spoon to get everyone's attention. "Father, pardon me for interrupting but may I—ah, may we make an announcement?"

"Oh, you're finally speaking up. So what is it, boy? What's so important?" the old man asked with a smirk.

Roger resisted the urge to gulp, cleared his throat and rose to his feet, taking Lucy's hand back into his. In his clearest and most even voice he declared, "Everyone, Lucy and I would like to announce that we have become engaged. We are planning to marry as early as June." He felt her hand tighten around it in sheer joy, to the point where he felt tingles running up his arm from the cutoff of circulation. She had a hand over her mouth to keep from breaking down into a fit in front of everyone.

As expected, the guests applauded and congratulated the couple. The smirk never left his father's face; if anything it seemed to broaden, almost as though he knew already why they were saying this now and was silently mocking him for it as he had for just about all his life.

Quillish had been sitting next to him and clapped along with the crowd. There was something strange about the way he looked at him, though Roger couldn't quite put his finger on it. His smile looked…sad, as though he knew too even though they were strangers, but rather than mock him, he pitied him. His bright blue eyes seemed to dissect him right where he stood. Roger didn't know if this or his father's smirk made him more uncomfortable.

Their first conversation was over six months later, at the cemetery. Roger had stopped by that morning with a bouquet of daffodils, daisies and forget-me-nots, Lucy's favorite flowers. By this time America and Britain were doubled over with the stomach upsets of social and political turmoil and the world steeped in the middle of the Cold War, a pissing match between the Soviet Union and the United States that the rest of the world had somehow gotten dragged into when it had only just started to recover from the travesty that was the Second World War.

Or perhaps that was oversimplifying it, but Roger couldn't find it in himself to care as he stood over Lucy's tombstone with holes in his head and chest. It felt so surreal to see his last name carved next to her first, more so than when he first saw the two printed together on the certificate that would turn out to last five and a half months. Roger had been absent for most of it trying to heal people and not thinking about how he didn't feel ready to be a father.

Then the universe, God, whatever capricious forces that Roger had never given that much thought to, handed him an act of cruel, cruel mercy.

He didn't notice the black umbrella hovering over him right away but when he did he jolted a bit. He found Quillish standing at his right in a scarf, trench coat and a small mustached smile. His other arm was strapped across his chest.

"Oh my. You startled me."

"I apologize. That seems to be a talent of mine. It's just that it's beginning to snow and I noticed that you had no cover." He glanced down at the grave marker and his smile crinkled into a frown. "I'm…sorry about Lucy. And Gilbert. If I could have gone to the service, I would have."

He spoke to Roger as though they were old-time friends when they hadn't even spoken directly to each other before today. But then, that must have been the sort of person Quillish was.

Roger nodded and placed the bouquet on the ground. "Thank you," he answered slowly.
"I think it's good that you at least gave him a name. Gilbert's a good name for a boy. Where did you get the inspiration?"

Roger couldn't explain why but there was something about the man's presence that soothed him enough to want to talk to him. Probably just the fact that it sounded like he would listen to him, no matter what he said. "Lucy came up with it. She thought we ought to name our baby after Gilbert John Arrow, the famous entomologist who worked with Lamellicorn beetles. She knew that I'd always had an interest in insects and thought it'd be adorable to name our child after someone I admired. Had the baby been a girl we'd have named her Mary. After Mary Ball."

Strange, how well she paid attention to my interests when I couldn't be bothered to learn that much about hers. I married a woman I wasn't in love with and wasted her last few months of life.

Roger hadn't been around when Lucy went into unexpected labor and was taken to a different hospital from where he worked. From what he'd heard from her mother later, in her last murky moments of consciousness she kept asking why the baby wasn't crying, wasn't he supposed to cry by now, could she see him. Then she collapsed and never woke up again.

The least I could do was give the boy a name in her honor. Maybe it's just as well that she died when she did; it would have destroyed her had she lived long enough to find out that he was stillborn.

"Should I assume that you're going to see little Gilbert next?"

Roger froze. The children's cemetery was just up the way but he hadn't gone there since the funeral. He was afraid to. Even before this happened he'd tried to stay away from that part of the plot. Something about standing on the graves of children had always unnerved him. When older people died it was at least expected, but not little children who were supposed to have their entire lives ahead of them, who Roger, perhaps foolishly, thought were supposed to be immortal. Goodness knows that it often felt that way when they were snotty or threw temper tantrums. Some of them like Lucy's son (your son too, he corrected, he's your son too whether you like it or not) had died before they even had the chance to be born.

But what was he supposed to tell a stranger like Quillish? No, he wasn't because he was a coward?

"Do you mind if I accompany you for a bit? I was on my way to see Cordelia but I'd like to walk with you for a bit. It's along the way. That is, if you'll have me."

"N-no. No, I don't mind."

Lucy, I'm so sorry. I killed you, didn't I? Did I kill the baby too? I wished that we weren't having a baby and now you're both six feet underground. The rational part of me insists that this was only bad luck but—

Roger turned away from the stone, his lingering hand tracing the outline of it as they moved away. "I just...don't know how this could happen," he muttered absently. "I'm a doctor. This sort of thing shouldn't happen to a doctor's...family."

Family. Could they have been a family? Had Roger given the idea a chance would he have been at least a fair father and husband? Or would he have turned out like his own parents, fake and self-serving to the point where, as he would learn later from Quillish, they would sell weaponry to the Soviets despite Britain's opposition to the communist forces? The chance had slipped out of his hands.
"You feel regret for not having been there. That's understandable. But, it might have happened even if you had been there."

"Maybe if I'd paid more attention we'd have known sooner that something was wrong. Even if we couldn't save Gilbert, we could've at least saved Lucy…"

"Maybe. Then again, these sorts of things do come about unexpectedly," said Quillish gently. Oh God, what was this man trying to do, pry a confession out of him? Make him admit what a horrible, shallow, spineless person he was deep down?

Quillish held out a gloved hand and caught a few snowflakes from outside the umbrella, which quickly melted into the leather on contact. There was a slight laugh in his voice as he said, "It's peculiar. I'm a native son of Britain and yet I'm still trying to get accustomed to its weather. I came here from America with Cordelia just five years ago after I'd raised enough money to do it. She loved it when it snowed; why, she became more used to this place than I still am."

What had he been doing in America, Roger wondered. But he didn't ask, at least not then. He was afraid to say anything.

"Before she died, I asked her if she wanted to return to the States to spend her final days, perhaps be buried with her family in her hometown. She declined my offer. She said that it didn't matter where she was buried since she would be going to the same place regardless to meet Walter and Otis."

A bit of melancholy crept into his voice after that pause. "She said that there was nothing there for her to go back to anyway. What a sad thing to say, don't you think? The woman had a difficult life and by the end of it it seemed she'd just about given up on things ever getting better for her people and her country. But she did make me promise one thing. She said, 'Quillish, whatever you do, don't be a coward like I am. Whatever comes your way, stick to your principles and stand up for everyone that can't stand up on their own.'"

Why are you telling me this, Roger wanted to ask but remained quiet. Soon enough the two found themselves standing over the tiny plaque on the ground that bore the name of the son Roger never got to know. Gilbert John Ruvie. The snow, frost and the mist fogging the lenses of his spectacles obscured the angels carved into either side and made them look like beetles.

Gilbert…what kind of person would you have grown up to be? He tried to imagine a bright young man with Lucy's eyes and his nose and hair standing there in front of him, but his vision was clouded by the infinity of possibility that would never be realized. At least for him and all of these children buried in the cold, hungry earth.

"It looks so barren," Quillish commented. "This won't do. A child's grave shouldn't be barren. No grave should be, but especially not a child's." He started to pull out a handkerchief from his coat and hand Roger the umbrella so he could kneel down in front of the plaque, when suddenly Roger spoke up:

"Wait." His voice felt sharp and rusty in his throat. "I—I should tend to it. This…is my son, after all."

Quillish nodded in understanding, hoisted himself back up and exchanged the handkerchief for the umbrella. Roger almost collapsed on his knees as he began to wipe the plaque clean so he could lay on top of it the few flowers that he hadn't left at Lucy's grave. With the snowfall it seemed useless to do so but for some reason Roger couldn't stop. He wanted to say something, talk to the baby resting underneath him, tell him that this was his daddy and he was sorry he wasn't there when it counted. But no words would come to fruition; all he could manage were a few hot tears rolling
down his cheeks without his notice that clashed against the chill. He normally hated getting so 
emotional in front of a stranger, but somehow it felt safe to drop his guard around Quillish and he 
couldn't explain why.

"Cordelia isn't actually buried here, is she?" he whispered after a few minutes of being left with his 
thoughts. Quillish had been standing behind him the entire time.

Quillish's response sounded strangely playful and rueful at the same time. "I couldn't just keep her 
away from her home and family, even if she stopped believing she had one. I believe that one 
should be buried in the place where they come from. I'm sorry for leading you on."

But Roger couldn't find it in him to get angry. Not then, and not even when he'd learn from 
Quillish himself that he had helped to turn his parents in to the authorities. For a while he 
wondered if he ought to be. Hadn't the man ruined his life? Or had he simply helped him to realize 
how empty it had been?

Roger had been a moth fluttering about in the darkness and Quillish drew him in with his 
inexplicable light and warmth. The instant he let him into his life everything would change, for 
better or worse.

…

"Watari, hey! Can I get an audience with L?" Erin asked no sooner than when he found her up in 
front of him with two red boxes in her hands.

"Ah! Don't do that, I don't need surprises at my age—what do you need to speak to L about?" asked 
Roger with a steadying hand over his chest.

"Oh, I-I'm sorry. It's just that, well, I went snooping around in Misa's stuff and I found something 
that…I don't know what to make of it but that's why I want to talk to him. He's not too busy, is he?"

Roger hadn't forgotten what'd happened the last time she and Near had been in the same room. "I 
will relay your request to him immediately. Also, if I may, what's in those boxes? They smell like 
grease."

"What, these? They're Happy Meals™. You guys looked like you could use some so Steve and I 
pooled our money and got one for everyone, even you. I got one for L too, but he can't have the toy 
until after he eats." For emphasis, she slipped the plastic squeaker into her pocket.

He held the box out pinched by the yellow handles, trying not to turn up his nose. Roger was never 
too fond of fast food and needed to mind his cholesterol besides, but his manners wouldn't allow 
him to refuse her offering. Besides, it was very unlikely that she'd poisoned it. He'd save it for 
someone else if they were hungry. "Erm…well. Thank you, Ms. Blogger."

"What's wrong, you don't like McDonald's™?"

"Well it's, er, not my first choice for lunch. But I do sincerely appreciate the gesture."

Erin glanced away and started scratching at the back of her neck. "Hey, you're not still mad about, 
y'know, me calling you a pedophile, are you? 'Cause if you are, I wanna apologize for that too. I 
didn't mean it; it's just that I was shocked and upset and—"

"That isn't an accusation that should be thrown around lightly, I'm sure you understand."

He saw her flinch at the slight sharpness of his response. "I-I do. I'm really sorry. I wish I could
take it back but I can't. All I got is a Happy Meal™. I just—I just don't think kids should be put in charge as the 'world's greatest detective.'"

Roger sighed. The girl was at least trying to make amends. No need to make this any harder or any more awkward. "Believe me, Ms. Blogger. If we could have waited until he was older, we would have. But in the meantime we put down as many safeguards as we can."

"Mm…you may or may not answer me but, how old was the first L when he started out?"

Of course she was going to ask that. He didn't answer for a spell but when he did his reply was terse: "Very young. Even younger than the current L when he took on the mantle." He couldn't bear to tell her any more than that.

"Why would the first Watari think it was okay to do that to a little kid? Even if he was a genius?"

"I'm sorry Ms. Blogger, but I'm afraid that's a story for another day. Didn't you need to discuss something about Ms. Amane?"

Erin looked understandably taken aback and yet not that surprised by his unwillingness to explain his old friend's history with L. "You're right about that. And if you don't think now's a good time that's fine. But y'know I'm just gonna keep asking until you tell me. If you're worried about me telling anyone else, don't be. That'd be pretty hard for me to do if you're going to be watching me 'indefinitely.' Enjoy your Happy Meal™ and make sure L gets his, too." She handed him the other box before trotting out into the den where the rest of the agents worked. "Remember, no toy until after he eats. That kid's way too skinny."

Roger couldn't help but shake his head as he went to deliver the food and her message to their recipient. Just the other day this same girl gave Near a noogie for being rude to Deputy Director Aizawa. This was the sort of behavior he'd expect to see in children and teenagers who couldn't decide if they liked you or not, or whether to act on it if they did.

If Near allowed her back in the room again, it'd be wise to be there with them to supervise.

...  

She should have figured that Near wouldn't be so open to the idea of letting her see him again so soon. Besides, everyone else would have had to know this anyway. Provided that it was relevant.

"So what valuable evidence have you managed to dig up on Ms. Amane?" asked Near from the computer in the center of the room. He didn't thank her for the food nor did he sound too confident in her, not that she expected him to. The one person, as far as she could tell, who had Near's total confidence was himself.

Erin took a deep breath and fished into her pocket to pull out an old crumpled receipt. She unfolded it and smoothed it out on her knee. "I was looking through Misa's phone during one of her shootings and there were a couple of texts on it. I wrote them down to the best of my memory."

With trembling hands she flipped the receipt over to the blank side with the blurry, shaky scribbles. "From what I remember, these couple of ones were made out maybe two days ago. The first one says, and I quote, 'Hey whatcha doin next,' uhm, 'weekend,' I think. It's written like 'N-X-T W-K-N-D—'"

"We don't care about the spelling, Ms. Blogger. What does it say?"

Erin felt Stephen glare over her shoulder towards the bold black "L" in front of her. While she
appreciated his having her back, he made the smart choice to stay quiet and let her finish. "Okay, okay, don't get your shorts in a twist. Um, the next one says, 'You mean Friday or Saturday?' And the next one after that: 'Either/or.'"

"Then, 'Am working late Friday, maybe free Saturday.' And then the following one says…"

She tried to stay calm but her voice was starting to crack at the next line. Only yesterday she'd found the message and she still couldn't believe Misa would write something like this to some guy. Well, not that it was completely out of character for her, but—

"'Wanna hook up? I'll be sure to dress sexy! L-O-L X-X-X.'"

"You've got to be kidding me," Halle murmured. Erin almost said, "I know, right?" but stopped herself. From the tone of her voice she could tell that their interpretations of this were quite different. The other agents made noises that suggested that they shared Halle's impression of this news too.

"So you mean to say that you're making a fuss over a text conversation between Amane and a man she might be seeing? What is it with women and romantic entanglements?"

"No, no, you don't understand. Misa can't do secret relationships. Doesn't like to. When she was with Light she wanted the triple-W to know that Light was hers. She'd have climbed up to the top of Mt. Fuji with a megaphone and professed her love for him to the heavens if she just had the time. Light, he was much more low-key; heck, even when one of his exes caught them together at this coffee shop he still wouldn't admit that they were dating. But not Misa. She's been like that about all the guys she's dated."

Her voice shrank a bit. "The idea that she would see somebody and for some reason not tell anyone about it, not even Kim or me, it just—"

Smells as fishy as low tide in the middle of summer. And for some reason I can't say that out loud. Hold on, Erin. This doesn't mean that Misa has anything to do with the matter at hand. It's just as likely that this is totally unrelated, if not more likely.

Still I can't help but worry. What if she's seeing someone that she shouldn't be? Someone bad for her. Why else would she keep it under wraps? People keep relationships secret when either they're worried about how others would react if they knew, or they know that it's wrong but don't want to stop.

"This was the only conversation I found in her messages. On top of that, whoever she was talking to called himself 'm.' Not capital M, lowercase M."

M for Mello? But then, "m" could be anyone. There were myriads of men out there whose names started with that letter. Hell, what if "m" was only an alias for someone whose name didn't start with it?

"So what did you say before, about Amane having nothing to hide? By virtue of the fact that she'd keep you as company? Either she's better at hiding secrets than you credit her for or you're just so lethally inattentive it's a wonder that you're still alive. Maybe guardian angels exist after all, at least for you?"

She almost told him to shut up but couldn't do it this time.

"It could be an illicit relationship," said Halle. "But it could also just be someone she's seeing
casually, hence why she didn't feel the need to mention him."

"Hmm…yeah. I guess. But Misa never struck me as the kind of girl who, uh, saw people casually. She's a really romantic kind of girl; it's all or nothing with her—"

"People can change, Erin," Halle argued, her tone becoming a tad impatient, as if to tell her without actually saying so, How dare you waste our time with such drivel. "She just ended a long-term relationship and being a celebrity she would probably be too busy to seek another serious one."

Yes. People could change over time, couldn't they? And not always for the better.

But Misa had gotten better. Hadn't she? And she did say that anyone had the right to see, and sleep with, whoever they wanted who was up to it. But that didn't ease the knot in her gut. What other things could Misa be hiding?

"Well I wouldn't recommend confronting Amane about this directly," said Near. "If you did that she'll know that you looked through her personal messages. And you can't bring this up to her sister because then she'll want to question her about it, assuming of course that she doesn't already know about this presumed affair herself. Either way, it'd all be downhill."

"So…I should keep watching her, then."

"Yes. And I'd stick with Gevanni and not take matters into my own hands. Also, I want my toy."

Tch. You're welcome. She folded her arms. "Oh yeah? Did you eat everything?"

"I ate the fries and drank the punch, but I can't eat the burger."

"What's wrong with it?"

The voice filter obscured most of it but Erin thought she could hear a sneer in his otherwise monotone voice. She could imagine him sticking his tongue out. "It has pickles and onions on it. And ketchup and mustard. It's ruined."

"What, is that all? Then just pick 'em off."

"It'd still taste like pickles and onions. And you can't 'pick off' ketchup and mustard. Watari is making a peanut butter and Nutella™ sandwich for me, which would be just as nutritious as the burger would have been. Therefore I demand my toy."

Damn. If this is what raising kids is about, count me out. Suddenly she understood all of the strife she or Farley put their parents through when they pitched tantrums about the food put in front of them, healthy or otherwise. If she could apologize to them then for all those years of suffering, she would have.

L would have just drowned the stupid thing in chocolate syrup or caramel or something…though come to think of it, I don't think I ever saw him touch meat to begin with.

"Well you've gotta let me see you to make sure you're telling the truth, if you want the toy that badly."

"Very well. Watari, escort her in."

Sure enough Roger was carrying a plate of cut sandwiches at arm's length when she met him by the door to Near's room. The old man cleared his throat. "You'll have to pardon him. He has certain
preferences regarding meals. He likes them plain. No toppings, no sauces and no spices," he muttered as he led the way in.

"Oh. That would have been useful to know when we were getting it."

"Well Ms. Blogger, I don't recall you mentioning any plans about it beforehand." Roger swiftly stepped over to the left, a move which Erin didn't understand until after she saw something small and pointy-looking zip straight at her forehead, whereupon she ducked and heard the projectile thump against the closed door and drop to the floor. It turned out to be a dart.

"Wh-what the hell kid, I thought you weren't gonna try and kill me?" she sputtered, her hands still clapped over her head.

"I'm not. Your fat head just happened to be in the way of the board when I fired," Near deadpanned. The Lego™ labyrinth had mysteriously vanished and now he was perched in a chair in the center of the dim-lit room, with one leg folded against him and the other stretched out with his foot planted on the floor. No matter what position he took it seemed he needed to keep some kind of contact with the floor. As always, one hand remained up by his head as his fingers rubbed and twirled locks of his snowy hair between them.

"E-ex-cuse me?" She wagged a finger at him. "Rule number one when addressing a lady: never suggest that she's fat."

"Even if it's true? What happened to being more honest?"

She saw the empty fry carton and paper cup discarded around the chair, as well as what she could assume to be used napkins and wet wipes. Roger headed towards him to place the sandwiches on top of the stand next to the chair and bent over to pick up the trash. "I don't want to step on any toes but whatever it is you're teaching your kids at Wammy's, you really should put more emphasis on respect and common courtesy. Where's the burger? If you don't want it I'll take it home. Lawliet will probably appreciate it."

"And who may I ask is that?"

"My…my cat. He's got even better manners than you do and that's saying something." She didn't like the way he was staring at her then. She never liked the way he stared at people but there was something particularly off about it then and there, like he was searching her with his cold hollow eyes. L did that just about all the time and she hadn't liked it then either.

"Where did you come up with a name like that?" he asked coolly as we watched her wrap up the untouched sandwich.

Then it hit her. She still couldn't determine how close he and L had been. Had he known what L's real name was? Maybe, or maybe not. She couldn't quite tell from the tone of his voice, or lack thereof. And yet she didn't think lying was going to help her out of this one. Against a kid who was raised to be L's successor? No way. A bad liar like her stood no chance.

"I had a friend with that name," she answered as calmly as she could. "He died a couple years ago, and when I adopted my cat I gave him that name in his honor."

Not that this prepared her for his smug, cynical, smirking reply: "He was your friend? That's a
laugh."

Near could laugh?

"Did he tell you that himself?"

"I-I asked him one night if we were and he said he wasn't against the idea."

He fiddled with another lock of his hair. "And you believed him? Hn. Maybe in your own weak mind he was; whatever you have to tell yourself to help you sleep at night. But he didn't have friends nor did he want them. To him, people were either tools to use or obstacles to clear away."

Maybe she should've expected that he'd catch on that quickly. Oh, how she wanted to shake some sense into him, tell him that L wasn't as horrible as the picture he was painting of him suggested. But it wasn't as though Near was totally wrong. There had been many mysteries left undiscovered about L that he'd taken with him to the grave. She'd only seen him in action on one case; who knew how he'd conducted himself on other cases? Had she seen him at his best or at his worst?

She rattled her head. "Okay, so he was kind of an asshole but he wasn't as horrible as you'd think. He saved our lives, for crying out loud. Hell, he might as well have saved yours and you weren't even there."

"Only because he had to. You shouldn't confuse pragmatism with genuine caring, Ms. Blogger. Besides, if he truly did care then where is he now? Even his own life was expendable if it meant he could expose Kira for what he was. What mattered was solving the puzzle and winning the game. Nothing more and nothing less."

Erin was speechless. She almost dropped the sandwich in her surprise. So that's it? He thinks L abandoned him and forced him to take over his title? Is that why he talks so trashy about him? I—I might be assuming too much, but that's what it sounds like.

I can only imagine if that's how Mello feels about this whole thing too.

Good God, all of a sudden she felt like throwing herself over him and squeezing all the sadness and anger out of him that she hadn't until that point known had existed. But she was frozen. How could she argue his point, that L hadn't meant to abandon him? How could she know what L might have thought about his successors when he went through with what he did? L had never even mentioned them, though given what was going on at the time it had probably been for a good reason. Near would never listen to an argument based on pure extrapolation from an outsider, even if she was right.

Besides, he wasn't wrong. That was sort of what'd happened. She'd offered him an alternative but he'd refused it because he couldn't find it in him to let Kira get away. How could she convince Near that he had misinterpreted things?

Especially when she herself had thrown up all these same accusations in L's face the last time she saw him?

By this time Roger had thrown the trash away and was standing by the door out of the way, on standby in case this new argument got physical. "What's almost as laughable is how you still seem willing to trust Amane at this point. In fact, for all you know she may have purposefully left those texts on her phone for you to find. She could be luring you into a trap."

What? But wouldn't that mean that Misa knew that Erin had been—
"Well now who's being ridiculous? Contrary to popular opinion Misa's no bimbo, b-but she's not that smart. A-and that's assuming that she'd have any motivation to do something like—like that! I'm gonna follow up on this and I'm gonna prove you wrong! And if you're that concerned, I'll have Stephen with me the whole time."

The sooner I can at least find out who "m" is, the better. The sooner I know that, the sooner I can decide if chasing the guy away with Louie would be appropriate.

She yanked the squeaker from out of her pocket and slammed it into the stand. "Here's your dumb toy. Next time I'll get your burger the way you want it but I expect you to eat it. Ya got me?"

Near didn't reply. He was already chewing on a mouthful of peanut butter and Nutella™, almost defiantly so. He opened his mouth and rolled out his tongue to show her the mush inside: the middle finger for children. L would talk with his mouth full too but at least you couldn't see anything. Most of the time, at least.

She pulled away and averted her eyes. "Oh God, I did not need to see that!"

"By the way, I'd think twice about feeding your cat leftover fast food if I were you," he said after he swallowed. "For his sake I hope you're capable."

Erin couldn't scoot out of here fast enough. No, really. She had to get home to feed Lawliet lest he start chewing up furniture to soothe his hunger pangs. Maybe Near had a point and she shouldn't feed him the sandwich after all? Maybe he wouldn't like the pickles and onions either? She could always eat it as a snack. She was in such a hurry to go she didn't notice the small orange bottle on the floor in the bathroom until her foot found its way on top of it and almost rolled her backwards like in the cartoons when the bad guys stepped on top of marbles.

Luckily she managed to grab hold of the sink before her head made contact and found her feet again. As she caught her breath she bent over to pick up the offending object.

A half-full prescription bottle. Sertraline, 200mg. Everything else including the name of the bottle's owner was blacked out.

Huh. Sertraline? Somehow that sounds familiar. Better go see who these belong to. She had started to open the door when she had another thought. Oh. I probably shouldn't make a public broadcast of it. I'd hate to embarrass whoever's missing these. I should ask everyone one at a time, instead.

She asked one of the guys, Isaac Detrieve first. He was one of the more built, stony-faced agents who tended to work separately from the others, not unlike one of the bouncers that Misa had hired for her party or who stood guard at sets. Erin stood behind him and peered over the top of his dark blonde hair. "Hey, Isaac?"

"What?" He didn't sound too happy to interrupt whatever he was doing to acknowledge her. A lot of the agents didn't seem too happy to have her around, or maybe that was just her insecurity reading too far into things. In any case, she tried to be as little of a nuisance as was possible for her.

"Uh, hi. So I found this bottle of pills in the bathroom, Sertraline. I was wondering if it was yours."

"What, Zoloft™? No, but I wish it was."

Zoloft™, of course! No wonder it sounded familiar.
Wait. Wasn't that supposed to be an anti-anxiety and depression drug?

Isaac ended up making this easier, or harder, by calling out from across the room: "Hey Lidner, Blogger found your happy pills."

It so happened that Halle was digging between the cushions of the couch when Isaac called her "name." Her sandy blonde locks flipped over her face as she whirled around.

Erin gulped. "Aw man, what'd you do that for? I was trying not to embarrass anybody."

"It's not a secret when everyone knows about it." He never turned to face her but she thought she could hear a smirk in Isaac's voice.

Sheesh, and I thought Near was a jerkoff.

"Hey shut up, Detrieve," snapped Stephen. He beat Halle to them and held out a hand. Erin gave him the bottle and he stepped aside to pass it on to Halle. She remained cool enough, but somehow her fair complexion looked a tad more flustered than usual.

"Where did you find these?"

"I-in the bathroom on the floor. I almost cracked my head open on 'em. Don't worry, I didn't spill them."

"I'm so sorry. I don't know how I could have lost track of these. Thanks for finding them." She gripped the bottle so tightly in her hand it looked like she was trying to make it disappear. Her words were tense, like she wanted this moment to end as soon as possible, to walk away, get back to work and pretend that this never happened. Anthony and the rest were wise enough not to comment on the situation; this was probably just as awkward for them too.

Erin gladly obliged her. "Uh, y-yeah, no problem."

Why in the world would Halle need to take Zoloft™? She always seemed so calm and collected. Unless she maintained her composure because she took the pills. Not that this was really any of her business, but maybe Erin should ask later to make sure that Halle was okay. In private, of course.

Or would that be too intrusive?

When she left Erin couldn't resist bopping Isaac at the back of his head. "We've already got enough jerks around the place; we don't need another one."

"You found the pill-popper faster, didn't you?"

"Hey Detrieve. Shut the hell up and leave Halle alone. Don't make me ask you again," growled Stephen from his place adjacent to him. Isaac made a dismissive pfft sound but said nothing more on the matter. Erin could feel a blush coming on. What a guy, Stephen. Anyone who readily stuck up for his friends was A-OK in her book.

"Yeah, don't act like you never had to take medication for anything. Uh, hey, Steve. Let me know when you're ready to go, okay? I gotta get home to feed my cat."

"Sure, hold on, give me five more minutes."

For a moment Erin contemplated asking if he'd like to hang out at her apartment afterwards, but quickly decided against it. What if it was too early in their "relationship" to be hanging out at each
other's places? Besides her place was a sty at the moment. She hadn't had much time to clean lately. But she supposed she should get started after he dropped her off.

"I just don't know what to make of this," she confessed to him on the drive back. "We've been hanging out a lot since she and Kimiko came to America and I never saw or heard anything shady up until now. She's flirtatious and all, but I've never seen her horse around with any one guy in particular. I don't even know if this has anything to do with the investigation but I'm still worried that she could be seeing this guy and not even bother to tell us about it. That's not like her, Stephen. And I can't bring this up to Kimi because she's gonna freak out even more than I am right now and confront Misa about it and then we're sunk."

She tossed herself back into the upholstery, clinging to the strap of the seatbelt for what felt like dear life. "Then again, what if Halle's right? It shouldn't be my business who Misa dates—oh, who am I kidding? I made it my business the second I offered to watch her."

Stephen kept his eyes on the road and drove on, waiting patiently for an opening in Erin's ramblings. "You're realizing that just now?" he chuckled.

"Not helping, Steve."

"Sorry, I'm just saying," he said with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "Did those texts say anything about where and when Misa and her gentleman friend were planning to rendezvous this weekend?"

Gentleman friend? Rendezvous? What generous things of him to say. "That's just it. 'M' hadn't answered her back yet. He said he'd probably be free on Saturday, but that's the only clue he gave. We might just have to tail her all weekend…I could probably get a feel of things in a roundabout way by asking her if she wants to go out with us. Y'know, a girls' night out on the town or something? And if she says she's got other plans—"

"That sounds like a good idea but you need to relax first. If you approach her the way you look now she might think something's up."

"Don't kid yourself, Steve. I've always been jittery. Maybe I should ask Halle if I could borrow some of her—no, no, I shouldn't say that. That's horrible. She's got her reasons for having them around, which I would ask you about but I don't know if you'd tell me if I did."

"You wouldn't be wrong to doubt. As her friend and co-worker I'm obligated to guard her secrets. Most of them, that is. It's kind of a touchy subject for her, but since you found her pills already…Halle's kind of like you. She has problems with anxiety too, and she takes those pills to help control her symptoms."

Erin's brow knitted together. "Symptoms? You mean like OCD or something like that?"

"You figured that out yourself, just for the record in case it comes up. I didn't tell you that. But yeah, OCD. It compels her to bathe and wash a lot. Personally I worry about her, what with her working on this case. And not just for the obvious reasons. I think Halle would prefer to tell you the details herself when she's up to it but I will say this much: she's got a big grudge against Kira."

Erin's answer was soft as her eyes drifted towards her feet. "Kira...he killed someone she cared about, didn't he?"

"Yeah; again you figured that out yourself. What's really sad is that he wasn't even a criminal."
"Was he an investigator?"

"No. He had nothing to do with any of it and he was still killed."

Her thoughts turned to Light then. She wondered: what had Light thought when he retrieved his notebook from Higuchi and got his memories back? Or even when he started killing in the first place? Had it ever occurred to him that his "power" could be and had been used to kill innocents, deliberately or otherwise?

Had he ever been bothered by that?

Or had he brushed it off as part of his plan to throw L off his trail, like he had with everything else? What were a couple of minor sacrificial lambs in his blueprint for the new grand scheme of things, even if they were friends and family? She tried to imagine how Light or Higuchi or even Misa could have rationalized killing innocent people in their minds, but nothing came to her.

Maybe it was easier to ignore it when they weren't there to see those people die? Writing in the Death Note was like firing a missile or dropping a bomb without the fiery explosions (unless specified); the further away the target, the less one cared about who or what got in the way.

What would you think of that, Light? What would you have done if someone came up to you and told you that you killed someone completely innocent? Or several people? Would you use your twisted ass-backward logic to explain it all away before shooting the messenger? You didn't seem to have a problem with killing your old man or any of the guys who worked with you—

"Wow. Poor Halle. I had no idea…"

"Well, that was kind of the point—"

"Yes I know, I didn't hear this from you. I heard you the first time."

Soon the entrance to the complex came into view and Erin unfastened her seatbelt. "Listen, bottom-line: don't stress yourself out over this too much. I hope Misa's hands are clean too but whatever will be, will be, like Eddie Money™ said. No amount of worrying is going to change that."

Erin sighed as she opened the door. "I know."

"I'll be taking over surveillance for the night. You just focus on getting a good night's sleep, and keeping Lawliet from eating the furniture. Cats may like to pretend otherwise, but they don't really like being alone for long periods of time."

She worked up a tired smile. It'd been ten days since they admitted that they liked each other and already they sounded almost like a couple. Or so it did in her ears. She didn't want to read too deeply into it.

…

L never had this, did he? He'd had Watari to take care of him, but this was a different kind of intimacy. A partner and companion. Someone to have adventures with, someone to joke with, someone to put him at ease, to open up to and guard each other's secrets, to let him know where he was going wrong and point him in the right direction. Someone who loved him.

Could that have been her? Erin didn't know and probably never would. She couldn't turn back time. Or maybe Near was right and he hadn't wanted someone around like that anyway? He
couldn't even keep friends around, never mind a romantic partner. He hurt people even when he hadn't meant to. He was like a thorn: he stuck on her when she wasn't looking or thinking about it, but he pricked and prodded her the more she tried to take him in, too much not to tear him off in frustration and throw him back in the grass. Who was to blame for that?

She would hazard a guess that that was because he was too afraid to be close to anyone. He'd spent the majority of his life confronted by mortality and the darkest skeletons in humanity's closet. When you've been alone your whole life, how could you change what had always worked for you?

She reached over and hugged Stephen around the neck, resting her head on his shoulder as she did so. He wrapped one arm around her waist in response. "You be careful on the road, okay? I swear people around here drop IQ points when they get behind the wheel. And keep me updated if you see anything weird."

"I will. Good-night, Erin." He did the smart thing and refrained from kissing her, thinking it would freak her out if he tried. Hugs would do for now.

Taking a deep breath, she pulled away and mustered enough courage to blow him a kiss before climbing out of the car.

Whatever Misa was up to, maybe someday she could find a good man like Stephen too?

…

"Hooo boy. Thanks for driving, Mogi," mumbled Matsuda sleepily as his heavy head rolled from side to side. "I'm so tired I can hardly keep my eyes open."

"No problem."

Matsuda felt bad for making Mogi drive for him after such a long rough day at work; no doubt the big guy was as exhausted as he was. But he hid it well. He always did have the most stamina out of everyone in their group. For most of the ride they were silent. Neither of them knew what exactly they had to talk about besides the new developments of this case, which had already been beaten to near death at work.

But even though sleep drooped over his eyes his mind viciously fought it off. None of them had ever thought it would happen again but it was. Someone was killing criminals with a notebook and someone else who called himself "L" had apparently asked for their help. A new L. All they had was Erin's word that this guy was legitimate. And given Aizawa's tense posture when mentioning him, quite unpleasant to talk to. Aizawa hadn't looked that frustrated since those days when they worked with the first L.

His blurred gaze drifted towards the tinted window where the garish lights of Tokyo's nightlife zipped by them. Matsuda had been the only one who bothered to come back and check on L in those last few days before he'd died. The one day they'd all come back to see him they'd found him sitting in his chair with a half-eaten candy bar on the floor and his chin resting on his chest as though asleep. Except he would never wake up again.

In a way though, he couldn't blame the others for not wanting anything more to do with him after Light died and the case closed. What he'd done was kind of heinous.

Kind of.

Matsuda had never been a hateful person. Even when he thought he should hate someone, he couldn't. Not really. Even when it came out that L had been right all along and they'd caught Light
trying to write down all of their names, even when he fired his gun to stop him, there was no
satisfaction or closure to be had. Only sorrow, horror, anger and regret.

He never could find it in him to totally hate Kira even before the truth came out. He had thought
like Kira. Many people thought like Kira. Some people would be better off dead or never born.
Kira was just someone who'd decided to make it a practice when he found a way how. And they
had brought him—to justice? Why had it not felt like it?

They might have stopped Light, but they could never get rid of the shadow he'd cast on the world
and on their lives. Not just as Kira the megalomaniacal mastermind, but as Light the fallen son,
brother, hero and friend.

What the hell were they going to do about this new killer? Was he anything like Light? Did he
have a raging god complex too?

I wonder how Soichiro, Sachiko and Sayu are doing. Aizawa made us all promise we wouldn't talk
to him, at least not about the case. I feel so stupid for leaving that card at his house—like that's
anything new—but even if I hadn't done that, he would have found out something was going on
one way or another. For crying out loud, it's already cropping up on the news.

I don't think he's ever completely recovered from what happened with Light. I don't know if any of
us have.

The lights of the city flickered and brought out a strange silhouette to his attention as the two
passed a park. Someone appeared to be sitting on a swing at the playground. He was hung over, not
moving.

Wait a minute. That guy's pretty high up off the ground. What's he doing over there?

Matsuda reached over to lightly shake his partner's shoulder. "Mogi? Hey, look over there. What
d'you think that guy's doing? It's like two in the morning; why would he be hanging out at the
playground?"

Mogi slowly braked the car to a halt in a space alongside the curb. His dark eyes narrowed at the
faraway figure in disapproval. "Hm. Probably another drunk."

"I think we'd better go check it out."

They got out and made a beeline for the offender with their flashlights in hand. Matsuda called to
him, "Excuse me, sir! Would you mind telling us what you're doing out here at two in the
morning?"

No reply.

"Yeuch. Do you smell that?"

Mogi grunted in disgusted agreement. The warm breeze carried their way the pungent and basic
stench of a man who had just soiled himself both ways, as some drunks did when they got sloppy
enough.

"Sir, are you listening to—oh my God."

The men stopped dead in their tracks, and Matsuda bit back the violent urge to throw up his already
churning late-night dinner of instant ramen, energy drinks and stale potato chips.
There they beheld the pale bloated body of Hitoshi Demegawa, director of Sakura TV and self-proclaimed spokesman of Kira: naked, greasy, and wedged in an infant's swing dangled over a dripping puddle of his own excrement.
"Well I can't say I'm not a bit disappointed. I was looking forward to bringing Demegawa to court and prosecuting him. And yet...somehow this is better than any punishment the courts could have handed him. It seems he did himself in, instead. A fitting end, don't you think?"

Kiyomi placed two fingers to her mouth although she and Umbra were the only ones in the room. Somehow the gesture helped her to feign shock. On her lap sat the daily edition of the paper open to the article bearing the news of her former employer's untimely demise. "Teru, doesn't that sound a bit extreme? It isn't like the man killed anyone."

As it turned out though, to her pleasant and more genuine surprise, she didn't have to fake anything, at least as far as her feelings toward the whole incident went. "Kiyomi, you don't have to pretend for me. I know that you're happy that this happened to him and you know that he deserved it. He is unworthy of anyone's sympathy, including yours or mine."

There was a calm contentedness in Teru's words, as though his secret prayers had just been answered once again, that most might have found eerie in this context, but not Kiyomi. Nothing he had said in this conversation was untrue. She was struck by a faint urge to tell him that she had been the one to deal Demegawa his sentence but prudence stamped it out before it could grow any more.

"I guess you're right. To tell you the truth, I'm actually more worried about what sort of chaos this is going to bring about at work. Fortunately I'm not planning to stay much longer; I've submitted my resume to NHN and thanks to my position as Sakura TV's anchor I think they'll accept me without hesitation."

"The sooner you can move to a more credible station, the better. I always thought that you'd make a better spokesperson for Kira, anyway. People would be more inclined to accept his ideals if you were there to spread his word rather than someone like Demegawa. He never cared for his ideals; he just wanted attention and money. No one could take him seriously."

"The problem is, I'm not sure if NHN supports Kira enough. Their current Golden News anchor Tanakabara has argued against Kira ever since the night Kira tried to broadcast his message on Sakura TV. But...perhaps I can persuade them, if they'll have me?" She brushed a hand over the notebook that lay next to her on the sofa.

Yes. They'd have her this time. She'd made sure of it.

After the two made plans to meet for lunch later this week and bade each other farewell, Kiyomi hung up and started to dial her parents' number. Her manicured fingers hovered over each button as she thought about whether Teru would make a good accomplice. A servant. Most gods in the scriptures and texts had servants, didn't they? While she didn't think he was onto her secret, they sure did think alike. The more people she could get behind her, the more criminals that could be slain and the more the police would be distracted from her.

On the other hand, it was a fairly well-known fact that a plan that had more people involved was also more likely to fail, especially if some of them were to be caught and forced to talk. Kiyomi couldn't afford to have careless people work under her. At least until she somehow gained control of the police, which she hadn't yet conceived a plan for. Actually, she'd been so busy playing an anchorwoman and being Kira—yes, I'm Kira now, aren't I? This isn't just his will I'm carrying out; I. Am. Kira—that she hadn't had the time to even consider that.
At any rate, if she wanted to enlist Teru's help that would mean letting him in on her secret. Kiyomi wasn't sure she could take that risk when there was currently no need to do so.

From the apartment next door a newborn's shrill cry pierced the walls between the neighbors and she tightened her grip on the receiver, frustrated. Ever since the Tamakis brought their new son home all he'd done was scream and wail, all day and into the night. One would think that they had never gone to quiet him even if the very opposite was true.

This was why she would never have children. If her mother didn't agree with that, too bad.

…

It was strange. Before the Death Note landed in her living room she had deferred almost entirely to her mother's implacable whims. Becoming Kira seemed to have awakened her, made her more—aggressive? No, assertive. And why not? Surely her mother would be proud of her now. Besides the obvious, she was finally breaking away from Sakura TV.

Her mother's first reply to the news was: "And who did you sleep with to get that position?"

Kiyomi was speechless for a second. It had been surprising enough that her mother would stay on the line after she had affirmed herself. But why would she think that she—

"I'm…I'm sorry? Mom, what are you talking about?" She uncrossed her legs and her posture became ramrod straight.

"You think I'm a fool? A respectable business like NHN would never accept a reporter from a station like Sakura TV based on their own merits. How else could you jump that far up from the bottom?"

Will nothing I do ever be good enough for you, Kiyomi wanted to scream but she couldn't. She sat there with her mother's cold stubborn condemnations in one ear and that baby's shrieks in the other. Her head felt close to exploding off of her shoulders. She wanted to kill someone.

When she'd had enough of the unprovoked shaming, she decided to calmly end the conversation, lest she say something that her mother would somehow use to prove her point. "All right, Mom. I just thought I should call to tell you how I was doing, in case you were curious."

"I wasn't until you called."

"Yes, Mother. Good-bye."

Click. That was all. No "Thank you" or "I love you." Just "Good-bye." Indeed, what was more appropriate in this case? She thought about calling her father to ask if he could help her set the record straight, that she hadn't slept into her prospective job, they'd raised her better than that, how could she accuse her of something so outlandish? Just because she hadn't gotten her dream job the first time around and had had to settle for far less than she'd deserved for so long?

But what was the point to that? Her father had never stuck up for her; why would he start now? He was a worm under her mother's iron will. He always had been. She would have all the plans for Kiyomi's future—the pageants, the schooling—and he would just go along for the ride.

Her resolve suddenly become steely. She looked up from her lap and stared a hole into the print that hung across from her and bore a picture of a lake and the words to a haiku from Masaoka Shiki:
A lightning flash:

between the forest trees

I have seen water.

You know what? It's fine. I don't need them, not anymore. They've served their purpose.

She pressed the button at the top of her pen, put the paper aside and replaced it with the notebook.

I wonder if I should make it so that, if they've removed me from their will at this point, that they put me back on it before they die. No. That may look a bit too suspicious and besides, I can easily strike out on my own without their money. And it's time that I did just that. I'm a goddess.

She turned to the next blank page and wrote the following entries at the top:

Chiharu Takada née Chiharu Sato, suicide by gas inhalation. On September 7th at 9:00pm she seals all of the windows and doors of her house, then turns on her oven and places her head inside. The house fills with gas and she dies from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Akio Takada, suicide by burning. On September 7th at 11:15pm he returns to his house to find his wife dead in the kitchen. Overcome by despair, he douses himself with kerosene and strikes a match. He not only sets himself on fire, but blows up his gas-filled house in the process. His and his wife's bodies are completely incinerated.

Like a scene from out of a tragic melodrama. No sooner than punctuating the second entry she closed the book, sealing their fates with a sense of detached finality. She would never see or hear from them again after that call. She couldn't even if she'd wanted to, not if she wanted to avoid being incriminated. She had made sure to list both her mother's married and maiden names as from what she had gathered, the notebook only worked for a victim's birth name.

It was then that she noticed that the baby had fallen silent.

So for that matter had Umbra's licking, grunting and chewing. In fact, where was Umbra? He left his half-eaten box of daifuku sitting on the counter.

A woman's scream split the air, Mrs. Tamaki's scream, followed by frantic pounding on Kiyomi's door. "Kiyomi! Kiyomi, are you home? Please answer!"

Kiyomi quickly slid the notebook underneath a cushion of her sofa and rushed to answer the door. "Mrs. Tamaki! What's wrong?"

"M-my baby! He—h-h-he's floating, Kiyomi! I went to check on Hajime and he's floating over his crib! Come quick!"

Floating?

Oh no.

The two women hurried back into the Tamakis' apartment and into baby Hajime's room as soon as they could. But when they burst in, they found him curled back into a fetal position in his crib like nothing happened. Only Kiyomi could see Umbra—as she'd suspected—crouched on the far side with his chin resting over the bar and a blank expression, and one giant paw lazily batting at the mobile hanging over the infant like a cat with the end of a string. He spun it slow enough to seem natural. At least, to the point where no one would suspect a ghost sitting there.
Mrs. Tamaki staggered and collapsed against the doorway with a hand over her plump chest. "B-but, but he was floating. He was, just a moment ago. I-I know what I saw," she stammered breathlessly.

Kiyomi took her hand into hers and stroked it, trying to soothe the nerves of a woman who truthfully had gotten on her nerves almost every time they'd spoken to each other. Oh, how she wanted to scream at that damn shinigami then and there! "There, there, Mrs. Tamaki," she said in fake gentleness. "I wouldn't think that you've gotten much sleep since you brought him home. Exhaustion must be making you hallucinate."

Mrs. Tamaki blinked and rubbed at her half-squinted, baggy eyes. "I—I don't know. Maybe you're right. I mean, Hajime seems calm now so maybe I should…"

Kiyomi nodded. "Why not let me tend to him while you rest up? At least until Mr. Tamaki gets home. It's all right; I've got no place to be for tonight."

"Ah, thank you, Ki-ki. You're an absolute angel," Mrs. Tamaki sighed with gratitude.

After Kiyomi helped the new mother to bed she turned to Hajime's room and shut the door. There was no baby monitor to be seen and the baby wouldn't understand anything she was about to say never mind mention it to his parents, so she deemed it safe to chastise Umbra in front of him. Quietly, that is. "What do you think you're doing?" she whisper-snapped.

"I was trying to find out where that awful noise was coming from," explained Umbra, his vacant eyes fixed on the tiny pink, squishy-looking creature curled under him. "It came from this baby. When I picked him up he stopped making that noise."

"Do you realize what could have happened? I thought we've talked about this, several times. Are you deaf or just stupid? Even if I'm the only one that can see or hear you, you are not to make your presence known to other people in any way. Now I'm stuck here watching this baby until Mr. Tamaki comes home from work. And who knows when that may be?"

Umbra didn't answer that time. He scrunched over himself and poked an arm through the bars to stroke Hajime's back with two claws, like a child petting a small furry animal. Another paw remained stretched out to keep spinning the mobile. Kiyomi couldn't understand what about the baby would fascinate the spirit so much; had he owned the notebook instead of her, he might have killed him for his lifespan by now.

Kiyomi cupped her chin in thought and paced for a bit. It wouldn't be wise to bring the notebook out of my apartment. But I can't go one day without meeting my quota. Or could I? No, if there's any break in my schedule the police could catch on to me somehow. At the same time I shouldn't take the baby out of the apartment, and I can't leave him unattended either lest he start screaming again.

Looks like I have but one option…

Kiyomi approached the crib and lowered her voice. As dumb as he acted, the shinigami did have his uses. "Umbra, go back to my apartment. I want you to pull out the notebook and take over killing criminals for me for the night. I should have the targets I've chosen up on my laptop already. Kill them all with heart attacks, nothing else. After you've done that I want you to erase the history from my browser, close the laptop, tear out all the used pages and dispose of them as always. I don't want to have any pieces stuck to the spine or crumbs on the computer like last time. Lastly, hide the notebook in its usual place. I'll know if you didn't do everything I asked."
She said that last part as though she had a punishment in store for him if he didn't meet her expectations, though there really was very little in the way of such when shinigami were immune to physical harm and deprivation.

After a moment more of staring at the infant Umbra slowly arose, his mane brushing the ceiling. "Okay." His newly acquired sweet tooth had begun quivering in his lower jaw again anyway.

He phased through the crib and an oblivious gurgling Hajime and not bothering with any doors, passed through the walls. On the way out he stopped to help himself to the box of cookies that sat on the coffee table, dropping each one onto his long black tongue before pulling them in for chewing.

After writing down the names of Kiyomi's twelve daily criminals, each destined to die an hour apart from each other, he tore out the used pages, folded them into squares and stuffed them into his belt with all the other pages. After all he hadn't been as lucky as Lumen, who had had time to plan his expedition and gained access to the human world by dropping an extra if dubiously obtained notebook while holding on to his own.

Umbra briefly scanned the page bearing Kiyomi's parents' names and the details about their impending deaths, combing his claws through his mane. What did they do that made her write their names in here, he wondered, but he didn't dwell on this for long. It wasn't his business.

Before he took care of the laptop however curiosity got the best of him. Using the tip of the pen as a "finger" as his claws were too big for the keypad, he typed a name into the search bar one letter at a time. A name he recalled quite well given that he'd been watching the human with this name for about two years before this all happened. Umbra had first seen her one night on a rooftop burning something—it had looked like a spiral notebook—and he had kept seeing her ever since. He didn't know why he was so compelled to watch this human in particular live her life but it gave him almost the same feeling he got from eating sugary things, only softer and warmer. Especially when she smiled.

A few articles under her name and the link to her Facebook™ account popped up when he pressed "Enter." He clicked on the link to her account and found a picture of her, with her Fedora, a sheepish smile and her cat in her lap who had turned away from the camera and looked in the process of trying to escape.

Erin Blogger.

He sat crouched on the sofa with a claw from one paw dangling from his mouth and the other paws resting on his knees. What was she up to? He could still see her lifespan so she had to still be alive. He hoped she was doing well. He hadn't seen her since he'd dropped his notebook in this very room and possessed Kiyomi. It appeared that she hadn't updated her page for some time. He thought it brave of her to keep pictures of herself up on the Internet in a time where anyone's life could be taken by revealing his or her name and face to the wrong person.

His brave, kind little Erin.

He wasn't sure if they'd get to meet face to face before he completed his tasks and could return to the shinigami world, but as long as she didn't interfere with Kiyomi or whoever Lumen was currently attached to, she would be fine. Right?

With his leftover daifuku perched in his own lap he stared at her image for two hours, having enough sense to erase the history before Kiyomi came in through the front door. He caught wind of this when he eventually heard her speaking to a tired and immensely thankful Mr. Tamaki from the
next door down.

"Yeah, it looks like Demegawa from Kira's Kingdom is dead. They found him bare-ass naked in a baby swing sitting in his own shit. No word yet on the autopsy, but they didn't find any evidence of foul play. According to this his chums said that they were all wasted and he'd bet that he could fit into the swing for, maybe a hundred from each of them. They left him hanging as a joke and insist they didn't know that it would kill him."

"Interesting. What this tells me is that this faux-Kira has to be in and from Japan. Kira's Kingdom is most popular there. Why would someone from another country bother to kill that fat bastard?"

"Mello, how do we know that our guy had anything to do with this? It sounds to me that Demegawa was just drunk and stupid."

"That's where you'd be wrong. He probably killed Demegawa this way to give people that kind of impression. Besides, I found another intriguing piece of evidence. This hasn't been made public yet, but one of the moles we dispatched to Japan has reported that before he died he'd ordered to have all the money he'd asked for on the show returned to their donors. Why would a money-grabber like Demegawa do something like that? Not by his own free will, he wouldn't. Our guy must be someone who knew or worked under him, who had a grudge against him and thinks he's sullying Kira's name, so he used the Death Note to control his actions before killing him." There was a slight growl in his voice at the word "grudge." Mello would know very well what having one of those was like.

"On top of that, the network is talking about cancelling the show since they don't have the money to continue it. Now where do you think all that money went?"

For a moment Matt wondered how Mello would have done had he taken on L's title. He didn't hesitate to throw everything he had at a problem whereas Near was more thrifty with his resources. Or maybe Roger actually had a fairly decent idea when he'd proposed that they work together? Matt personally hadn't had big problems with the kid, creepy and dickish though he was; they were mostly enemies because Mello had deemed him as such.

But there was no use in wasting time thinking about the could-have-beens. Now Mello was dedicated to destroying the title and the empire around it, even if it meant plunging the world into the kind of chaos that plagued his mind. That was what mattered.

At least he hadn't deluded himself into believing that this would do anyone good like Kira had.

"Excellent. This narrows down our search considerably. Oh. By the way, Matt: have you replied to her texts?"

"I was getting around to it."

"Are you fucking kidding me? You know this isn't going to work unless you keep up your correspondence with her. Have you decided on where and when you're meeting?"

Matt bit back a groan. "I said I'd be free Saturday night."

"Well follow up on it. Agree on a time and tell her the name of the hotel you're staying at. No matter what happens just go along with it and you'll be fine. You're good at that."

"Yes, your Majesty."
"Yeah, good luck, Casanova," cackled Lumen from the other end.

I'm still not sure why you can't do this yourself. It's not like you haven't had practice.

But Matt did know why. Mello sending Matt to take up this dirty job had been for the same reasons he had exiled him to this hotel room miles away from him and the mafia, posh as it was. He had even been considerate enough to get him a smoking room. If they were going to get close enough to Near for Mello to deliver a blow he'd have to stay far enough out of the way where Near couldn't reach him to hit back.

Matt hated posh. He couldn't explain why exactly. Maybe growing up poor before coming to Wammy's House had made him unused to the glitz and excesses of the rich. He felt surrounded by silicone, neon lights, glitter and illusions. He pulled his orange-tinted goggles over his eyes to dull the garish colors and lit another one up, falling backwards onto the bed where the cool sheets splashed against the bare skin of his back. There he lay for a while, concentrating on the warm puffs from each drag to the rhythm of the rise and fall of his chest. If he focused on it for long enough he could feel his head rising and falling on top of his dad's chest like it did when he was little and his old man was snoring off another night at the pub.

The man who came home on Saturday night was quite different from the hard, stern mechanic who slaved away during the week to make ends meet and gave him clouts on the ear if he fucked around too much in his shop. That man was far more tender and affectionate and Matt would stay up waiting until he came home, just moments away from falling asleep when he'd hear the creak of the unlocked door and his dad softly slurring his name, asking for a hug and a kiss. Together they'd sit on the couch and they would talk, most of it nonsense naturally, and sometimes he'd tell Matt that he loved him and that he was all he'd had in the world. Things he would never tell him when he was sober.

Until one night he didn't come home. That night nothing had stopped Matt from drifting off and he had awoken late in the morning to cops and concerned neighbors (who hadn't shown much concern for them before from what he had seen) shaking him back into consciousness. Evidently the old man had fallen off the bridge while stumbling home from town and drowned in the river. An accident, or a buried suicidal impulse that the liquor had unleashed along with all of those sentiments? It would always remain a mystery, and perhaps it didn't matter.

All Matt had known then was that he was alone, and he'd continue to be alone until he somehow found himself on the doorstep of Wammy's two years later where he met Mello and Near. "Because he belonged with smart kids like him." None of the kids knew each other's names from their old lives, but rather chose for themselves new ones to go by. He'd chosen Matt because it was much easier than his real name to pronounce for even the slowest people.

Yet here he was again, on his lonesome.

He crushed out the cigarette inside the ashtray resting next to him—which looked like it had been crafted from the shell of a sea turtle he couldn't identify, weren't those supposed to be illegal?—and exhaled his last puff towards the ceiling fan humming overhead. The cloud of smoke dissipated as soon as it was released.

He'd better get to it, then. His reply was overdue and little doubt she'd bitch about making her wait when they saw each other again. Matt slowly hoisted himself up and fished through the nightstand for his phone.

…
"Ooh-ooh! Kimi, look! A mood ring! It changes color depending on however you're feeling at any
given moment. I'm gonna try it on!"

While the Amane sisters crowded around the jewelry Erin stayed behind them absently shuffling
through tops that she probably wasn't going to end up buying. She found herself holding her breath
as Misa observed the color change in the stone and announced the end result: "Ah, it's red."

"Red? What does that mean?" asked Kimiko, holding up the legend but unable to read it.

Misa took the card from her and recited: "Red: means high energy, adventure, passion, fear or
anger. Hm. Well I am feeling particularly peppy today so that doesn't sound that far off! Not that
that's anything new, of course. Hey Erin, wanna try on this mood ring?"

"Uh, no thanks. Not interested."

"Well hey, Misa. Maybe I want to try?" Kimiko suggested. "Just for the fun of it."

Erin turned her back on them again and gulped. She was afraid of what color the ring might have
turned if she put it on. Come on, you can't judge whether somebody's guilty of something just by
the color their mood ring changes. It's a stupid mood ring, not a polygraph. Misa's always been
really energetic, besides.

When should I pop her the question? The weekend's looming over us. I'd better do it soon to get a
feel of things.

She found her window of opportunity later on in their venture when Kimiko went in the ladies'
changing room to try on a few dresses that caught her fancy. Not that Erin didn't enjoy the older
Amane's company, but it was becoming increasingly harder to keep biting her tongue about Misa's
text messages. As her sister didn't she have the right to know?

But she couldn't know. Poor Kimiko, I don't think she suspects a thing. She wants to trust Misa as
much as Misa trusts her. There're so many things about Misa she doesn't know about. Things that
not even Misa would know herself.

"Hey, Misa?"

"Yeah?" The girl in question was holding a skirt in front of her to see how it would look. Today she
had her hair up in a ponytail near the top of her head.

"So, uh, what'cha doing this weekend?"

"Probably gonna be working. Why?"

"I was just asking 'cause I was thinking about going out for the weekend. Y'know, a girls' night out
on the town? How 'bout Saturday night? Saturday night's all right for a fight! Right?"

"Awww, sorry Erin but I can't do Saturday. I'm working late for another night scene. How about
Friday, instead?"

"Oh. I dunno if I can do Friday. I promised Lawliet I'd spend some time with him. Then, uh,
Stephen and I were going to hang out later on."

Misa wagged a finger in her face, gently chiding her, "It's okay to call it a date, you know. I don't
understand why people these days are so afraid to use that word. 'Hang out' makes it sound like you
guys are just friends when you and I both know that you're a lot more than that."
"Well, yeah. It's just that, we don't want to take things too fast, know what I mean?"

"Dating doesn't mean committing to anything. Dating's about getting to know somebody to see if they're boyfriend or girlfriend material. It's not like you're looking to get married. Then it'd be an omiai." She beamed and raised a hand in volunteering. "Though it would be awesome if that's what you end up doing. I call planner and maid of honor."

Erin put up her hands. "Whoa, easy, Misa. You're scaring me with that kind of talk."

But this time it wasn't so much what Misa said that frightened Erin, as it did what she wouldn't say. She was not looking forward to stalking her all weekend, but it was the only chance she had at finding out who "m" was and whatever else Misa might have been hiding up until now. She had asked Macy to watch Lawliet during her "errands" and from what she'd heard he hadn't been too much of a hassle so far. He always did seem more welcoming to female company than male. That was probably an animal thing. Males fought and competed.

Suddenly a muffled tinkling noise rang from inside Misa's black leather purse. "Oh! Was that my phone?" She set the skirts aside and whisked her purse off the floor. "Better see who's calling! I'll be in the changing room!"

With a toss of her golden locks she disappeared behind the swinging doors before Erin could comment on the interruption, and her gut coiled and pinched itself like a tangled garden hose with every guess she made as to who was contacting Misa and was so important that she had to hide in the changing room to answer. Could it be "m"?

The phone had made that noise it did when someone had sent her a text. And if she followed her in Misa might get suspicious. What if the same thing happened if she asked who that was when Misa emerged? Erin felt stiff and helpless. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and noticed how sunken her face looked, at least to her. She swiped a hot, clammy hand over her face as though to erase that look on it.

Oh, Misa. What's going on with you? I thought you were past all this. I thought I was past all this. …

Matt got a gaping pit in his stomach when he heard those dreaded knocks on his door and it got wider and wider with every step he took to go answer it, knowing too well who he would find outside.

There in front of him stood Misa in a black leather jacket with matching high-heeled boots, fishnets, corset and skirt. She was slumped against the doorway with one arm up along the woodwork and the other arm bent on her hip. Her lips were as bright and sinfully red as her nails, and her half-lidded honey eyes glazed and feral, already getting bloodshot around the edges. She looked like the quintessential whore.

Wasn't that the idea?

"Hey, Matt," she greeted in her warmest and most sultry voice, though the high pitch of it kind of dampened the effect in his ears. She wore her hair completely down for the occasion, and the way her pupils dilated made it look as though she were boring a hole through him. "Mind if I come in?"

Looks like she hasn't wasted any time. He stepped aside, wordlessly inviting her to enter. He shut the door behind her and watched her saunter over to the sofa with an extra sway in her hips. She reached up to rake her fingers under her hair, letting it fall over her shoulders as her purse swung.
from the crook of her arm. She pulled a small box from out of it and knocking it against the glass a few times, she dumped its contents onto the table: two long, thick lines of stardust already cut up into powder.

She expects me to snort some too?

"I brought a little treat for the two of us," she offered with a pearly white smile as she took her seat on the sofa and crossed her legs. She stretched herself out like a cat and made sure to show off as much thigh and cleavage as she could, as if to tease him.

It's hard to tease a man though when he knows where it's all going.

She patted the cushion next to her. "Come on, sit with me."

Against Matt's private wishes he obeyed.

"Phew! Is it hot in here or is it just me? I think I dressed too warmly. Better fix that." She began to wiggle out of her jacket first like a snake shedding its skin, then thrust her hips upward to undo her skirt and shimmed it down her legs before kicking it off across the room, revealing a low-hanging pair of tight black panties.

Matt felt sick. Rather than watch her striptease he had looked the other way trying to pretend that this wasn't happening but it was no use. Misa made sure he'd keep his head in the game by straddling him and clutching his jaw in her hand, but not before taking her straw and snorting in half of her line of dust. How she managed to fit all that into her tiny nose was nothing short of a wonder.

Matt grimaced. "You...got something." He gestured to his own nose with his thumb. A large smudge of white dust had found its way under her right nostril and the spot trailed down to her glossy lips.

"Oh dear. Silly me," she giggled, licking the smudge away. By this point she had begun to twitch and tremble, but Matt doubted that this was necessarily from real desire. Just how much dust had she snorted already before she came here? She held out her used straw. "Try some; it feels wonderful. I can't remember the last time I felt this relaxed. It'll help loosen you up, too!"

"No, thanks. Didn't they ever tell you that you shouldn't share straws with people? That's how you pass shit around." He knew that Misa was clean as far as diseases went but still the idea repulsed him. He had been all for experimenting before but this was getting too much.

Besides either Misa had smudged her lipstick when she'd licked the dust off her nose, or her nose had started to bleed from the self-inflicted trauma.

"Aw, come on! It's romantic!"

There is nothing romantic about this and you know it.

"Hmph! Fine, we'll share it another way." She leaned backward and slammed the straw on the table, all the while spreading her legs as far as she could and grinding her hips against his, rubbing against his nonexistent hard-on. He wanted to throw up.

"Come on Misa, your nose is bleeding," he grumbled, reaching around her to yank several sheets of tissue from the box nearby. When she came back up ready to lunge at his lips or whatever she'd had in mind he squeezed the tissue around her nose. "I don't think we should do this."
She twisted her head away, her moist matted hair catching in his unwelcoming mouth which he hastily tried to pick out with his free hand. Her smile became devilish and perhaps a little bitter. "Don't you think it's a little late to go back now? Now don't you fret; I've got everything we need in my purse. We'll be safe."

She lowered her head and latched onto his neck, her hot mouth sucking gently. Matt winced on contact and tried to push her away but she anchored herself by locking her knees around his back, pressing her firm breasts into his chest and sliding her warm hands up his thin striped shirt, stroking his skin with her palms and fingertips as she started to lift the cloth off of him. Her mouth moved up to his ear and before long she was licking and nibbling at the lobe. Her grinding intensifed. She had him trapped.

In between pants she whispered, "If it helps, pretend that I'm Mello. Also, you should clean your ears more often. They're all icky and waxy."

... "GAAAAH, I can't take it anymore!"

After four days of dread and twenty minutes of watching the front of the building in tense silence Erin exploded in a swell of fear, fury and frustration and tore out of the car, slamming it behind her. Stephen hated it when people slammed car doors, but for now she was too swept up in her emotions to notice or care.

"Hey, where are you going?" Stephen called out, scrambling out of the driver's seat after her.

"Where do you think? I'm going in!" was all she cried back in reply, catching herself before she fell to the ground. She disappeared into the revolving door after taking a few hurried seconds to figure out exactly which way she was supposed to turn it to get inside.

Stephen started after her, beseeching her to stop. "Erin, wait! Come back, you're gonna blow our—"

"Gevanni, stand down," commanded Halle's voice from the phone device in his ear.

"Wh-what do you mean, stand down? Erin just charged into the Marriot™ to confront Misa. She's going to blow the whole operation—"

"No. Let her go. If she's about to do what I think she is, it'll make our job that much easier."

Stephen frowned. What job? Had L planned something that he for whatever reason couldn't tell him or Erin about? "What do you mean by that? Did I get locked out of the loop again?"

"I'm afraid there's no time to explain it now. I will afterwards. For now, just trust me and roll with it."

Stephen glanced back at the Marriot™, none the less worried or doubtful. "Still, she looked like she's going to kill someone."

"I don't think she will. I've seen that look before and it hasn't happened yet that I'm aware of."

...

Her fist ached and throbbed with every pound on the door of Room 309. What the hell could they be doing in there? Her mind swam with a hundred ideas, each worse than the last, and it put an
extra oomph in her swing.

A shirtless young man answered, looking awfully disgruntled for someone who presumably was about to score unless he looked that way because of the interruption. All along his face, neck and chest she could see red and white smudges. The red ones from what looked like lipstick, but the white ones…

Well, this wasn't Mello. Or at least he didn't look like him. But he did look familiar; he was the guy from tech. She had seen him hanging around the set smoking cigarettes but had never thought that much about him until now. Also, over his shoulder she could see Misa squirming upright on the sofa in nothing but a corset and panties that looked way too tight to be comfortable, her smooth, round pink rear end protruding from out of them. Next to her sat a shiny black box and a line of snow white powder.

"Erin!" She couldn't tell if Misa's surprise was genuine or not. It looked and sounded real, but Erin still didn't know whether to believe it. That had to be the worst part. It was practically a scene from fresh out of a rag mag.

These details were all she had time to think of before pouncing on him and wrestling him into a half-nelson.

"You scumbag fuckface dickhead asshole!" The obscenities spouted from her as though she were possessed and speaking in tongues. "You shikicking motherfucker, how dare you! You degenerate tomcat! No no, to call you that would be an insult to cats everywhere!"

"The hell're you doing, lady?" he demanded from under her arms as he writhed around to try to break free. Misa scurried over to pry Erin off of him, swaying side to side all the way. "Who the hell are you? Is this your girlfriend?" he grunted to Misa, managing to point a finger at the red-faced girl crushing him.

"No no, not in that sense! Erin, wh-what are you doing here? Hey! Let Matt go—"

Erin jerked away and hoisted the man up so she could pin him to the wall. She would deal with Misa later. "Matt, that's your name, huh? Matt, Matt you listen to me you little jackass: if I ever—you hear me? If I ever, ever catch you anywhere near Misa again, damn it, I'll knock all your fucking lights out! And I don't care if it lands me in jail." She couldn't be sure whether she meant half of all of these words, all of this venom firing from her but she didn't fight them. As soon as she'd seen the coke and Misa half-naked whatever capacity she might have had to give him the benefit of the doubt flew off the balcony. As far as she was concerned he was lucky she wasn't going to knock him out right then and there.

"Technically you could go to jail just for this," he growled.

"I don't care about that either! Now get your shirt a-and your coke and get outta here!" She released him from the wall only to shove him in the direction of the sofa. Meanwhile she felt Misa pound on her back with her tiny fists, screaming words of protest she couldn't make out. Erin wanted to cry, but she forced herself to hold it in and held out her arms when Misa tried to sidle past her and get back to Matt.

The guys would be outside when Matt left. Maybe they'd see the powder and bust him on it? A little jail-time could do him some good. Did they have the authority to do that, though?

Wait. What if this got out to the paparazzi? Misa would be screwed, and what about Matt? Would he be killed? What if they both got killed? Goddamn, she'd acted without thinking again.
As he fumbled with the hem of his shirt in one hand and held the box in the other he sighed, "Sorry about tonight, Misa—"

"Don't! Don't even talk to her! Out out out out out!"

"All right all right, I'm going. Jesus."

Maybe it should have seemed suspicious that unlike Misa he didn't put up much of a fight. But then maybe Halle had been right to an extent. Matt must've been a common party animal, a good-time Charlie who loved 'em and left 'em. How Misa got tangled up with a shitcan like that Erin couldn't fathom, but she was going to undo it.

"God Erin, why d'you gotta be such a wet blanket? Wh-what are you doing here anyway?" By now Misa was teetering around on her heels. Her eyes were so red and bloodshot, her pupils so dilated that she looked like a deranged cartoon character. What the fuck had happened in here?

"What am I doing here? I should be asking you that! What the hell are you doing here? I thought you were working late!"

The girl gritted her teeth. "S-so maybe I lied so I could have some time for myself; what's it to you? You're acting like a jealous girlfriend or something! Steve won't be around long with a-an attitude like that. Have you been following me or s-something?"

Shit. Erin had gotten so caught up that it hadn't occurred to her that finding her here like this suggested that yes, she had in fact been following her. Was the jig finally up? Hold on. Misa was stammering. She was high, wasn't she? Look at her shaking all over. And what happened to her nose? Is it bleeding? From the snorting, or did he hit her? Oh Misa, when did this all come about?

"Time for yourself? What, to do coke and some asshole from your set crew? Normal people don't do that to pass the time, Misa!"

"Oh Erin, Erin, Erin. You're so naïve, you don't even know. O-of course everyone does it. Except squares like you, apparently." She bent in at the waist and had both hands on her hips, as if taunting her. She jabbed a finger into her chest. Misa was too high to be reasoned with but still Erin fought against her.

She looped an arm around the shorter girl's shoulders and started to guide her back to where her jacket and skirt lay. "No. They don't. Now come on, get dressed, we're going home and getting—"

"Well maybe I'm not normal!" Misa shook her off, her voice suddenly getting higher, sharper, more…resentful. "And maybe I don't want to go home right now! Who made you my mother?"

Who was this girl? How could this be Misa, the same girl who had criticized Penny for cheating on Farley? Erin hadn't seen her like this since...

She drew back for a second. "W-well you're not staying here, that's for damn sure! Excuse me for thinking that after what'd happened with Kimiko you wouldn't do stupid shit like—"

"I am not my sister! You can't tell me what to do, Erin! I'm older than you and more important than you! I'm almost 24 years old and a biiiiig star! I'll do whatever I wanna do, I'll go wherever I wanna go, I'll see whoever I wanna see, and I'll fuck whoever I wanna fu—!"

She stopped in mid-rant like something had just sapped her energy, and she draped helplessly against Erin like a curtain, trembling and her breath in shallow gasps. Her clammy skin felt sizzling to the touch and when Erin placed two shaking fingers up to her neck her pulse thudded much too
fast for her to count. Her heart seemed to beat against hers like a frantic little bird fighting to get out of its cage. This was enough to get her own pulse accelerating with reawakened fear.

"Oh my God. Misa, how much did you—"

She didn't finish. Misa wouldn't have been able to answer her anyway. Was she having a seizure? How the hell could she have taken so much cocaine? Had she snorted some in the bathroom, and in the taxi ride over here? How could she have missed it? It didn't matter now. Erin needed to get help. She thought about going back down to get Steve but what about Misa? She couldn't leave her alone. Something could happen to her, something worse than now.

Erin carried her away from the door and gently set her on her stomach on the floor with her head turned to the side. Before trying to loosen the strings of the corset she pulled the phone off the stand and called for 911 and then Steve's cell phone.

…

Matt was tempted to tell her that she couldn't technically throw him out of his own room, but decided not to argue and get out when the opportunity presented itself. The farther away he could get from Misa and her overprotective batshit insane friend, the better. He felt violated and Misa hadn't even gotten to unzip his pants. He shuddered to think of how far she had been willing to take things before the interruption.

But this was supposed to happen. Maybe not exactly in the way he thought it would happen, but the end result would be the same regardless.

The things I do for—

His fingers hadn't even brushed the keypad by the elevator when someone pulled him backwards into them. Their stocky build made him infer that it was a man. The last thing he would see was a giant hand clasping a rag over his eyes. He did not struggle nor run or fight back. It would have been useless to.

"Matt McDean?" the man asked.

"Yeah?"

"This is the police," someone else said, a woman this time. "You need to come with us. You're under arrest for conspiracy."

…

"A—Armo Justin?"

"It's Armonia Justin," corrected the gold and jewel-encrusted shinigami from his throne of skulls. He chewed on a thick smoking stick that looked like a cigar from the human world and rested his ornate jaw on a bony white fist as though he were thinking, when in actuality there was little for their kind to contemplate. Armonia Justin Beyondormason knew the rules of the Death Note and shinigami life better than anyone here (apart from the King, that is), making him a sort of advisor for the others. His voice was tinged with mild exasperation, even if he'd expected Sidoh to get his name wrong. He almost never got his name right, or anyone else's, for that matter. This was especially true when he got nervous, which seemed to be far too often for a god of death.

"S-sorry. So, I've got a little problem and I was wondering if you could help me with it, since you know all the rules and all."
"Well, out with it."

"Oh Armonia Justin, I need your help real bad!" The cicada-like shinigami begged, shuffling around his chair until he was directly in front of him. He held out his long thin, stick-like claws as though asking for an offering. "Midra's gonna destroy me when she finds out I lost her notebook!"

"Wait. You mean Midora? And how did you lose her notebook? A while ago you came to me complaining about how you lost your notebook."

"Oh yeah, Midora. Uh…do you want the long or short story?"

"Short, preferably," Armonia Justin requested, his diamond eyes gleaming amidst the gloom.

But Sidoh being Sidoh, the story he gave ended up becoming quite long. And perhaps it couldn't be helped; it would turn out to be too unusual of a situation to understand without a full explanation. "W-well, it's like this: when Ryuk returned from the human world and I asked him for my notebook back, the one he took the first time, he told me he couldn't give it back to me because these humans…d-destroyed it. I couldn't enter the human world to look so h-he had to be telling the truth.

"I went and told the Old Man about it but he wouldn't give me an extra notebook. What else was I supposed to do? I was desperate!" Sidoh's voice cracked like he was on the verge of crying, provided that shinigami could cry. But they had no tears to shed and very little to shed them over even if they did.

"Hm. He must be getting senile in his old age," said Armonia Justin with a smirk in his voice, if not on his frozen skull of a face. Had he cared enough to sympathize with Sidoh's plight, what good would it have done? The King's will was absolute, no matter how unreasonable or off-kilter.

"So I, uh, I bumped into Midora and we agreed that we'd, uh, share ownership of her notebook so I could still keep killing for lifespan."

"Hold on, you can't share ownership. There can only be one owner to a notebook at a time."

"We found a way to do it. Uhm, Midora did, mostly. She would be the owner for a while, then she'd pass ownership on to me so I could kill a human and I'd give it right back to her."

Armonia Justin grunted in bemusement, and amusement. He'd never heard that done before, but there was nothing in the rules that he could recall saying that it couldn't be done. Not that it was recommended, such as for reasons Sidoh quickly laid out:

"But now I've gone and lost that one too! Midra and I are both in trouble if I don't get it back soon, and she'll make my last moments of existence miserable in the meantime. Sh-she told me so! I asked Ryuk if he took this one too but he swears he didn't. He isn't allowed to leave the shinigami realm anymore unless he drops his own notebook and only his own notebook. He said someone else musta took it instead, probably that scary Lumen guy that he told his story to a while back," he moaned, hanging over at his theoretical "waist."

Sidoh wasn't generally a bitter sort, but how was it that he and Midora were both facing the ultimate death for Ryuk's crime while Ryuk himself could keep living on forever? How much more unfair could this get?

"Heh. Okay, who owned the notebook last before you dropped it and Lumen picked it up?" Armonia Justin said finally.
"I did," mumbled Sidoh.

"I haven't seen Lumen around in a long time yet. My advice is to go to the human world, find Lumen and get your notebook back from him."

"Are you kidding me? He musta passed it on to a human by now! I'd have to wait until either that human dies or gives it up! I don't know how much time me or Meadra have left!"

And I asked Umbra to help me look for it but he hasn't come back either. What's taking him?

Unless he stopped looking for it 'cause he's mad at me for making him drop his when I asked for help. I kept telling him up and down that it was an accident!

"Well then you'd better stop wasting it complaining and get out of here. Have fun."

I guess I don't have a choice. I gotta go to the human world. This sucks.

"Hmmm, all right. But can you promise me one thing, Alamo Justin?"

"Armonia Justin, and what?" he snarled, already getting sick of hearing Sidoh's whiny voice and his mispronunciation of his name. His jaw clenched so tightly that his smoking stick snapped in two, with the burning half falling to his feet.

"Please, please, please don't tell Meadra about this. She can't know, okay?"

"I can't know what?" asked a booming voice from behind them both. "Sidoh, there you are! Where the heck have you been?"

Sure enough along waddled a massive, warty amphibian-like creature with beady red eyes, big dark lips and muddy brown spots running down from the top of her slimy head to the tip of her fat crooked tail.

"Have you been avoiding me? Don't be so greedy, I need my notebook back. Give it here!" She stretched a stubby arm and demanded her book back with a hungry wave of her slender newt-like fingers.

Sidoh quaked with panic. His yellow beady eyes darted downward. "Oh! Madea! N-nice to see you again! I, um…uh…"

"Sidoh lost your notebook," Armonia Justin deadpanned. After all he hadn't promised to anything and was an advisor, not a secret-keeper. "He's gotta go to the human world to get it back."

…

…

"You. WHAAAAAAT?"

Midora's roar echoed for what sounded like all around the boundless emptiness. As did the whacks Sidoh made against the ground when she grabbed him by the ankle and smashed him face-down into it back and forth like a club, and the accompanying guffaws from Armonia Justin. Humans couldn't hurt shinigami nor could shinigami physically harm humans themselves, but other shinigami could maim each other if they wanted. They were just unable to kill each other.

Somehow that made this all the worse for Sidoh.
Erin and Stephen spent most of their time on the funny-smelling sofa in the corner of the lobby with his arm around her shoulders and her head resting in the space between his shoulder and his chest. His presence soothed her as much as it could, but even with the bruises forming under both their eyes she refused to nod off even for a moment until she heard from the doctors that Misa was okay. And if Erin couldn't sleep, Stephen figured he might as well stay up with her.

Her hands fiddled with the cell phone in her hands. Kimiko must be home in bed right now. I really ought to call her to let her know what's going on...oh, but I can't! Of course she's gonna want to know what happened; what are we supposed to tell her?

Oh Misa...why would you do this? Why now? I would think that you'd know better. Rem didn't give up her life just so you could throw yours away for some cheap kicks...

But the more Erin thought of it, the more baffled she got. If Misa truly did know better, would she have ever become a serial killer all those years ago? Or had the Death Note been like cocaine: trying it once had made her want to try more, and the more she used it the more hooked she got on it like Light did? Was the Death Note really that potent over the human mind, or had Misa always been one of those types who was prone to addiction?

As if this whole thing with Misa wasn't enough, Farley still hadn't called her back. She checked two, three, four times even though she could see that he hadn't left a message the first time she'd checked, such was her anxiety. According to the latest from Dad who had been trying to keep the peace, he wasn't speaking much to any of them right now. Especially after the blowout he just had with Mom the other night. "You know how Mom's always been at odds with Penny. I guess she got carried away and couldn't resist rubbing it in. Needless to say, it hasn't helped things," he said sheepishly. Unlike Mom, Dad tried to keep an open mind about people since they could surprise you, sometimes in a pleasant way. Some would argue that he was naïve like that. Like father, like daughter.

Gosh. Farley can snark with the best of them but he's almost never really mad, not that mad. He must be crushed. But I can't help him out of it as long as he keeps ignoring me.

Across the way the TV droned with the constant jeers and hisses of the crowd on the Maury Povich Show™. After over two decades on the air hardly anything he put on there seemed shocking anymore: teenage girls running wild, people messing around with everybody and their horse—no wait, that was Jerry Springer™—women on the hunt for their sometimes numerous baby-daddies. And who knew whether Mr. Povich genuinely cared about these people's problems, not to mention those poor innocent kids, or was just exploiting them in the name of entertainment?

She kept her eyes on her feet but her head pounded regardless. Apart from a nurse occasionally calling for the next person or the sporadic hum of a car speeding by outside the TV was the only sound in the immediate vicinity, the seemingly only splash of color, however off, in this stark bleak place.

She thought about getting up to change the channel but stayed glued to her seat next to Stephen. A few other folks here for their own reasons appeared to be watching it, probably to help forget what had brought them here in the first place. That was debatably one thing shows like Maury or Springer were good for: to point and laugh at the folks who made total jackasses of themselves on national broadcast and say, "Well my life may suck right now but at least I'm not that dude" or "At least I'm not that chick." How else could they still be popular enough to be on the air for this long?
She had noticed though that since the whole Kira thing, they had taken care not to have people go on the show admitting that that'd committed any crimes, or if they did their face would be blocked out and their name changed. She'd heard that Maury and Jerry's shows were dwindling in popularity because of that. Due to its very nature, Steve Wilkos's™ show was cancelled entirely. If the guests didn't have names or faces, how could they be mocked?

Besides it was unlikely that there was anything much better on at this time of the night—or was it morning? Erin briefly checked the time displayed on her phone and read 12:16. They'd been sitting here for over three hours, what was the hold-up? Was Misa going to pull through it? Had they gotten here too late to save her? No, they would've come out and broken the bad news hours ago had that been the case, right?

"Hey. You thirsty?" Stephen asked softly.

Her throat did feel quite dry at the moment, but all she could manage was a single nod against his chest. It felt nice to have her head here; he wasn't too muscular but certainly not scrawny either. Stephen smelled like an odd mix of cinnamon body wash and slight natural odor, probably from the lack of time to freshen up, but it comforted her. A while back his scent might have driven her crazy-gaga like everything else about him, the way she'd felt when they'd danced at the party. But she was too tired for crazy-gaga right now.

"Okay, I'll go get some water. Be right back." He briefly rubbed her arm in assurance before letting go and rising off the sofa. As Erin watched him disappear down the hall she somehow felt colder without him there. She needed something to distract herself, just for a minute. The gift shop! She needed to get something for Stephen's birthday anyway, even though it had been over a week ago.

When she'd asked him why he hadn't told her sooner—that is before this whole thing with Matt and Misa had gone down—he'd just shrugged and replied, "We've got more important things to worry about. Besides, birthdays are fun and all but at the end of the day they just mean that I'm getting older."

"Aw come on, you can't be that old. What are ya, 24? 25?"

"This last week was my fifth 21st." After a quick count on her fingers she'd figured that he meant his 26th. Nerves seemed to have interfered with her capacity to get jokes.

"Well, I wouldn't think about getting older as a bad thing. Wine gets better with age, doesn't it? I mean, that's what I've heard."

He'd laughed that cute gentle laugh of his. "Yeah, you may have a point. Maybe later on when I've got time I'll treat myself to a glass of good wine. Or a vodka martini, depending on how adventurous I feel."

She couldn't get him a bottle of wine at this moment in time but she couldn't just get him nothing at all. Oh dang, the gift shop was closed. They wouldn't open until 8:30. She supposed she could bide her time. Come to think of it Mogi’s birthday was coming up too, wasn't it? She'd have to get him something too. She'd have to get Near's permission to send him it, though. All of a sudden she felt like crying. Near, he'd been right all along, hadn't he? No way! Misa just screwed up like most movie stars did. This had nothing to do with the killings.

Just then a nurse came out calling her name, and Erin perked up like a dog that had just heard a whistle. "How's Misa is she okay we didn't get here too late did we?"

The harried nurse tucked some frizzled hair back behind her ear. "Well, her condition seems to be
stable now but we're currently keeping an eye on her in ICU. I'm afraid now isn't a good time to see her. Has this ever happened before?"

"No! She's never done this sort of thing before. N-not that I'm aware of. Her sister used to be an addict though, if that means anything. An alcoholic. Ah, she's not anymore. I don't know. The guy she was messing around with must've introduced the stuff to her and…"

She liked it a little too much.

The nurse nodded. "It's good you got her here as quickly as you did," she commented tersely, as though stopping herself before mentioning something she shouldn't. Such as what could have happened if they hadn't gotten Misa to the hospital in time.

Eventually Gevanni came back with two bottles of water from the vending machine. Erin was back on the couch absently flipping through a three-month-old edition of a magazine, having already looked through the newspaper. It sure had taken him a long time just to get some bottled water. But she quickly figured out what the hold-up was when he reclaimed his spot next to her, handed her one of the bottles and draped his arm back around her shoulder.

He smelled different. She could have sworn she could now smell a splash of spice, wood and lavender cologne under his arm. It was a familiar scent, but quite fresh given the time they'd been here. "Did you just spray on cologne?" she asked him after taking a swig of water. Now that she was looking at him his hair seemed more combed back than before, too. His hair smelled a bit like cologne at the moment, too.

His answer was calm and shameless. "Yeah. Even on these late nights I still like to smell decent, at least until I can get time for a proper shower." He too took a swig. "I don't go anywhere without my Aspen™."

Ah, so that's his secret to looking good after a late night. He makes himself up.

An article she'd just skimmed through in the magazine had cited gussying up for no apparent reason as a sign that one's man was cheating on her. She wanted to slap herself. Come on, he was gone for maybe five minutes. That's hardly enough time for anything to happen, and in a hospital of all places. I shouldn't have read that garbage; now it's got me all paranoid. So he's a little vain. Hey, at least he admits it.

Besides...we're not really in a relationship yet, so could I even really call it cheating? You know what, I should stop thinking about it. Off you go!

"Any word yet on Misa?"

"Well...they just came out and said that she's stable, but we can't see her right now."

"Oh. Thank goodness for that. Her being stable, I mean. Hm...well, they have our numbers. Do you want to go back to the hotel?"

"I don't know. If I left now it'd feel like I was abandoning her. Not to mention what about Kimiko? What the hell am I gonna tell her? I'm afraid to call her up but at the same time if I don't say something, someone else will. And somehow I just know it'd be all the worse if that happened."

"Oh. I could stay with you a while longer if I had to, but they might need me back at the hotel. From what I've heard from Halle, there's been a breakthrough. Or at least we're hoping it's a breakthrough."
"Wh-what's up now?"

Stephen paused to look to his right, then to his left, and then pulled her closer to whisper into her ear, "You know that guy you caught Misa with back at the Marriott™?"

Her stomach churned at the mention of him. "Yeah. What happened, did you guys arrest him? For what, drug possession?"

"All I could gather is that he wanted us to arrest him as soon as he came out. Halle didn't have time to explain everything what with this whole thing with Misa."

He…Near? Near wanted them to arrest Matt? What the hell for? What did Matt have to do with anything?

"How about this: I'm gonna go outside and call her again, ask her what's going on and whether they need me back. If they don't I'll stay here with you. But if they do…"

"Aw hey, if they need you back, they need you back. I ain't going anywhere. Besides…"

She flipped her phone open again and sighed. "It looks like I'm gonna have to call Kim, anyway."

"All right. I'm going outside." He briefly drew her closer and squeezed her shoulder. She saw him move his head so that his lips would have touched her temple, but he stopped before contact was made. "May I?" he asked, his warm breath brushing her skin.

She blushed in spite of herself. "Uh…sure. I don't see the harm."

His lips made a quiet smacking noise as they touched her head. They were soft, or at least they felt so for the short time they were there. Her stomach was flip-flopping like Dad's flapjacks in the pan by the time he'd disappeared out of the sliding doors. While she certainly didn't want the physical aspect of their relationship to go too fast she felt kind of crummy for making Stephen feel as if he had to ask permission for even the simplest gestures. She wasn't frigid and she sure hoped Stephen didn't get that impression. She could be a real cuddlebug when the mood struck her. She always was shy and awkward and maybe kinda-sorta neurotic around guys she liked. In hindsight, she used to get kind of awkward around L too, that is when she wasn't mad at him or some other thing.

Though sometimes that was more because she really was afraid of him.

Later on I should probably outline what's okay with me at this point and what's not, so Steve doesn't have to ask every time.

Erin flipped open the phone and started to punch in the Amanes' home number. She remembered then how Kimiko's birthday was also coming up in a few weeks and she tried to swallow down the lump crawling up her throat. That's right. Kim's gonna be thirty.

"Hello?" Kimiko's voice answered groggily. She must have been sleeping when Erin had called. She felt awful for waking her up but it couldn't be helped.

"Uh, hey, Kimiko. This is Erin."

"Erin? What's going on, it's…half past midnight."

"I-I know, I'm sorry but I—I thought I should let you know as soon as I could."
"Wh-what're you talking about? Has something happened?"

"Kim, it's…it's Misa. She's in the hospital."

As though Erin had flipped on a switch, Kimiko's answers became much more automatic and shaky. "What? Misa's in th—oh my God! What happened, was there an accident?"

"You could say that," Erin mumbled, feeling quite nauseous about this whole thing herself despite having only had this bottle of water sweating in her fist.

"I-I'll get a cab and be right over. Oh God, is Misa okay? Please tell me she's okay!" Her voice was crackling now, not so much with grogginess as from panic and the verge of tears.

"They said that she's stable now but she's still in intensive care. W-we're at Good Samaritan™, 1225 Wilshire Boulevard."

... 

"I—I don't understand. Why would she do something like this?" Kimiko asked aloud, whether to herself or to Erin, Erin couldn't tell. She pillaged her mind for a good answer but nothing was coming up. She was just as lost as Kimiko.

"How could she? That—that idiot," the older Amane growled, her clenched fists whitening around her cane in her lap. Having had no time to properly dress, she had slipped slacks on and tucked her nightgown into it and had crammed her feet into sneakers without socks. She had her shades on but somehow Erin knew that if she could see her seemingly vacant and unfocused eyes they would be wet with ripening tears. She had her arm wrapped around her. "That fucking idiot! Oh, when she wakes up again I'll give her what-for!"

Like Misa, Kimiko virtually never swore. Although Erin was no stranger to profanity hearing Kimiko use it somehow frightened her, almost as much as it did when she heard Misa use it.

"I don't know, Kim. I'm as stumped as you are. Has…has Misa ever done this sort of thing before?"

"Done drugs? No, never. Or, not that I'd know of since we started living together again. I never saw any warning signs. And I'd know damn well what those are…"

That last part sounded as though Kimiko was either trying to rationalize how she could have not seen this coming, or going over in her mind what signs had been there to catch if any at all.

"W-well, maybe this was a one-time thing? Maybe she was just looking for something to help her relax. Y'know, get away from the stresses of her career and being in a new country and all. And then she got carried away—"

Sheesh Erin, way to trivialize things, you moron.

"But cocaine? Cocaine, of all things! She could have died! Doesn't she realize that? No obviously not because right now she's in critical care in a fucking coma!" Kimiko brought her knuckles to her mouth as though about to bite them, but simply pressed them to her lips instead and bowed her head as though praying while trying to get back her composure. This was not the usual quiet and reserved Kimiko that Erin was used to. When she began to rock slightly Erin told her to hold on as she reached into her bag to pull out a packet of tissues.

"Thank you. I'm so sorry," Kimiko sniffed, blowing her nose into the first wad of tissue she pulled from out of the plastic. "I hate it when I get like this. I'm the big sister; I'm supposed to be the rock.
It's just…I would've thought that after seeing what happened with me, she'd know better than this."

I thought so too. I even told her that myself. But now I don't know. I don't think I know that girl lying in that bed, not nearly as much as I thought I did.

What are we gonna do when she wakes up? Will she fess up to all the secrets she's been hiding? Or will she just spin another web of lies?

Erin fought the urge to cry out in frustration herself. Kimiko didn't need that. She needed someone to listen and help talk her out of her turmoil, even though she wasn't exactly the best at that either.

"Here I thought things were going fine. I've done everything I could to make sure that she's comfortable while still giving her space to spread her wings. I don't want to have to constantly hover over her shoulder but if this is what she's going to do when I'm not looking…"

After a moment of tension-addled silence Kimiko lifted her chin in thought. "I…I wonder if this has anything to do with her breakup with Hideki? I wouldn't have thought so at first since she's supposedly the one who broke things off, but—"

Erin sat up a bit straighter. "Hideki? What makes you think this has got to do with him?"

Kimiko swallowed and grabbed another few sheets to dab at her eyes. "Misa's always been really passionate about men she falls in love with. Too much so, if you asked me. She falls fast and she falls hard. Doesn't matter how long she's actually known them. I mean, she tried to—"

Kimiko stopped herself as if she had just gotten close to spilling a dark secret of her little sister's. "Sh-she suffered a horrible breakdown after Light died. I never got to meet him; we weren't on speaking terms then and I was wrapped up with my own problems. But from what she's told me, he was a wonderful young man. Kind, bright, had a strong sense of justice. The sort of guy we'd have liked her to be with. He was studying to become a detective and had actual case experience. He was killed on his last one, but you already knew that. She was devastated, almost as much as when Mom and Dad…"

Her voice seemed to shrink at the mention of their parents, like she were remembering something or perhaps several things at once that were painful to put into words in front of a stranger (relatively speaking), even after all this time.

Yes. In Misa's eyes Light was wonderful enough to die for. And to kill for.

Tragically in different circumstances, maybe Light really could have been a good man, especially for Misa. Maybe. Erin didn't know. Like L, Light had taken many secrets of his own to the grave. Her eyes darted towards her tapping feet for a bit as she tried to process what had just been said, let alone respond to it. Misa had tried to kill herself after Light's death, hadn't she? Around that time she and Erin had lost contact with each other as well and even after they reconnected she had never told her that part. But then, Misa tended to avoid talking about the bad things in life, especially her personal life. It wasn't that surprising and yet it made Erin feel like an idiot and a lousy friend nevertheless.

Jesus. She's tried to kill herself before? So this whole thing with the coke…was this another attempt? But why? Because of Hideki? For some reason I can't buy that…"Hey, Kim?"

"Hm?"
Erin scratched at the back of her head. "I—I don't want to be too, um, intrusive or anything but… how exactly did you two become estranged in the first place? Misa's never gone into much detail about that."

The older Amane took her turn for silence, eventually hanging her head again. Her shoulders slackened. "Probably because she doesn't think it's important anymore now that we've made up. But, honestly I blame myself for most of it. We were fairly close when we were little but when we got older…things changed."

At this point Stephen was in the corner on the far side of the room with his face buried in today's newspaper. Apparently he wasn't needed back but he kept his distance all the same. Kimiko wouldn't be opening up like this otherwise.

"They changed?"

"Yeah. I used to pride myself on being the brainiac in the family, while Misa always had a taste for the spotlight. Pageants, theater, modeling, that sort of thing. And she knew how to get it. Mom and Dad would dote on her every chance they got while I got pushed more towards the backseat so to speak. This was especially true with Dad. He and I were kind of distant despite living under the same roof, and it seemed to get worse as we grew up. Every time I tried to talk to him he'd deny that there was a problem and brush me off. Arguments came easily for us. I never understood why things were the way they were until I turned eighteen and learned the truth."

Erin's gut twisted like raw pretzel dough. "And what was that?"

Kimiko exhaled through her nose. "I found out that our dad wasn't actually my dad. A neighbor of ours told me about it. They both knew the whole time and it took me confronting them for them to finally admit it." A slight reluctant edge appeared in her voice as she recalled an old hurt that she knew was pointless to hold on to and yet it lingered like the dull ache from touching a burn.

"Did, uh, did you ever contact your biological dad?"

"I tried, for about three months. The only response I got was that I stop or else he'd press stalking charges against me. He had a family of his own by then. In hindsight maybe I should have been more aggressive, asked him for at least a paternity test to prove that I was his daughter. On the other hand, I don't think it would have changed anything. Father or not, he didn't want anything to do with me and that was that."

Then her lips twitched with what might have been a smile, if sad, bitter and self-depreciating. "That was about the time I started drinking. I only meant to get smashed one time, partly to forget about my feelings and partly to spite my parents. I used to think the idea that you could get hooked on something after just one try was bull. But for some people it's true. I ended up liking it so much that I wanted to do it again, and again. Somehow it spiraled out of control and eventually I ended up getting arrested and kicked out of the house. They told me not to come back until I got sober. And I didn't. At least not in their lifetime." An unmistakable regret tinged her words then, one that Erin knew too well from having made a similar mistake.

"I can't say that I blame them, not anymore. I was…I was horrible when I got drunk, a completely
different person. The night I was arrested I threw a bottle at Mom and slashed up Dad's face with one of the pieces. And I didn't care. So help me God, I didn't care. It seemed like it didn't matter what I did—getting the top grades, being valedictorian—none of it would matter to them because I would always be a mistake. Misa was like their second chance, their real little princess. It made me want to lash out at everything. Poor Misa, she just wanted to move on from the whole thing and be a family, and I left her when she needed me the most.

"Th-they weren't totally bad people; please don't think I'm trying to say that they were. They might have made mistakes but they did the best they could in spite of them. He may not have been my real dad but he was still the only dad I knew; he was still the one that raised me and he didn't have to. I didn't exactly help the problems we had either. The drinking was something I chose for myself, and as angry as I was with them I never would have wanted them to get slaughtered by some freak looking for drug money."

She paused to take a few more breaths to steady her nerves. "I'm—I'm sorry. I shouldn't have unloaded all that on you."

"No, no. It's all right. I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want to know."

Even before the murders and Kira, Misa's life seemed rife with drama and tragedy. Whenever her family came up during their time together on the case Misa had practically nothing but good things to say about them, and whatever few not-so-good things she mentioned had been so downplayed. But this was her family. Who would freely bad-mouth their family no matter how screwed up they were? People seemed to do it all the time online but even then they were still anonymous.

Who was to blame for the sad state of this family? Maybe, to an extent, everyone in it. But what good did laying blame ever do, especially for families?

The older woman sighed once more. "It's funny. I call Misa clingy and yet I'm hardly any better. Our relationship's been a crazy roller-coaster of ups and downs but she's all I've got left since the accident, and I could never forgive myself if something happened to her now." While she sounded calmer now, probably from "unloading" her feelings, a shade of distress and anger still lingered in her tone.

Erin reached over to take her hand, the one not clutching the tissues. "But they said she'd pull through it. If you want, we can wait here until she wakes up and we can see her. Maybe have some kind of intervention or something."

Kimiko nodded. "I…I don't want this to get out to the paparazzi, either. She's been humiliated enough."

"Hopefully they won't; I don't think Misa's well-known enough around here yet for them to bother. But if they do come around, to hell with it; we'll fight 'em off." She held up a fist to emphasize her point.

The two eventually fell into a much longer silence as they waited for another update on Misa's condition. As they did, Erin was left to her mishmash of thoughts, in the center of it all trying to figure out for herself why Near would want to arrest an ordinary punk like Matt. He'd been hiding something from them again, hadn't he?

Her neck snapped up as Kimiko got up to get a drink for herself. Another wave of sickness swallowed her up and she didn't know what it was from anymore.

Is Matt another runaway from Wammy's?
"Matt?"

"Matt."

"Matt, please. Talk to me. I—we know that you know where he is and what he's up to. Or at least we're certain of it."

Of course you would think that. I'm almost never seen without Mello. In fact I probably wouldn't cross anyone's mind unless they were thinking about him first.

Not that that's ever really bothered me. If it did I might have done something about it by now.

"What if we…gave you an offer? If you'll tell us what you know, your…sentence will be lenient."

Don't I need to have a lawyer here for that? Besides it's not me I'm looking out for. I know you'd never be lenient on him, no matter what you say otherwise or even if you really would want to go easy on him yourself. Not if Near is anything like the first L was supposed to be. He's fucked no matter what if he gets caught.

"We can offer you protection, as long as he still doesn't know your real name."

Mello wouldn't kill me. He would've done it a long time ago if he really wanted to. You're feeling guilty about this whole thing, aren't you? If you hadn't let him walk out maybe none of this would be happening.

But I hope you know that I don't resent you for that. Why would I? You've got no more control over him than I do, or anyone for that matter.

The only response Matt gave was the constant rapping of his fingertips against the desk, his hands twitching from nicotine deprivation. They'd taken away his fags when they'd brought him here, the only thing he'd had on him besides his clothes, his phone and the box of coke that had technically been Misa's. Although he had erased the messages detailing their "conversation," the fact that he'd been caught in such a compromising position with the girl was enough to make them think he might have had some kind of connection to her. Paired with what felt like his lifelong connection to Mello…

But he wouldn't say a word. That was his right after all, wasn't it? What would they do, torture the answers out of him? Roger could never bear to do that to one of the kids he'd raised.

Then again, that might also depend on how much pressure Near would put on him.

Roger sighed, his deep voice beginning to waver. "I understand if you think you're trying to protect him, but think about what he's doing. We know he has a killer notebook, the same kind of weapon that Kira used. You're not helping anyone by keeping quiet, least of all him."

You're telling me this like I didn't already know.

Matt simply turned his head and resumed staring at the pasty white wall, keeping his breaths slow and deep. But his fingers rapped faster with craving. He just had to bide his time until he could get
out of here. Mello didn't explain when or how that would happen, only assured him that he'd be out of this cell as soon as the plan would allow.

What would happen after that, Matt could only guess. What mattered was here and now.

He heard a soft thump against the desk—probably Roger's bony elbow—and a quiet frustrated huff.

"Sir, with all due respect why couldn't you tell us about him sooner?" demanded Anthony, his patience wearing ever thinner with this constant secrecy from their "boss." "We're really not going to get much done if you keep us in the dark about these things."

"I'm telling you now, aren't I? I don't feel the need to disclose information until it's necessary. After his voice was picked up on the feed during Gevanni and Blogger's surveillance I knew that our defector had to be somewhere nearby, or at least he'd know where he is. He used to hang around M all the time and sympathized with him. This mix-up with Amane was an excellent chance to catch and bring him in. Speaking of, what is Amane's status at the moment?"

"Gevanni just called to tell me about that," said Halle from across Anthony. "She's at Good Samaritan for a cocaine overdose, although he said that she will recover."

"Cocaine overdose? How convenient." Somehow even with the scrambler both could hear a hint of disbelief and scorn lining his voice. "We're going to bring her in for questioning as well, preferably as soon as possible."

"You really think that M and Amane have made contact and are working together?" asked Anthony with his stocky arms folded across his chest. "What business would he have with her? Without her memories she wouldn't be of much use to him as far as the killer notebook goes."

"That still remains to be answered. But I am 95 percent confident that she's involved in this somehow. You said that M2 didn't struggle when you arrested him, right?"

Anthony exchanged a suspicious glance with Halle. "Hm…that's right. The way he acted, it was almost like he was expecting it."

"On top of that, why would Amane clear everything on her phone except for those texts for Blogger to find?"

"That could just as likely be because she forgot to erase those…"

"Perhaps, Lidner. But there is something else to consider…"

"And what's that, L?"

"M2 doesn't like women. At least not in the way that the position Blogger caught him in with Amane would suggest."

Erin didn't waste any time zipping through the gift shop as soon as the glass doors were unlocked and the lights turned on at 8:35. The three of them had been sitting around all night at this point and Kimiko had just gotten up to use the bathroom. When she came back she found Stephen leaning over in his chair rubbing circles into his temples.
"Hey, d'you need an aspirin?"

"Nah, I just took one. I'm still waiting for it to take effect. If you got me a bottle of wine, I'm afraid now's not a good time. Unfortunately," he teased despite himself.

"Oh. Well, um, I didn't get you that. But I did get you something. Here." With both hands she held out a small box of tropical-themed shot glasses. "I know they're not much and I don't know, maybe they're kind of cliché but you like glass stuff and drinking and boats so I thought, 'Well, he probably wouldn't like a nurse teddy bear.'"

He cocked his head to the side. "How would you know that?"

A wave of heat flashed through her. "W-wait, you do like teddy bears?"

He smiled broadly at her. "No, I'm just pulling your leg. Seriously though, thank you! That's really thoughtful of you. I'll be sure to christen these the first chance I get." He took the box in one hand and reached out to her with the other. She stepped closer and bent inward to let him kiss her cheek and place his hand on her back. In turn, she got enough nerve to peck the top of his head. His hair was a bit greasy and smelled like his cologne (freshly applied, once again), but it was soft and his head warm, like the rest of him.

"Happy Birthday, Stephen. Even if it's late."

A while later after the three came back from the cafeteria for breakfast, Erin stopped in her tracks. Anthony and Halle marching up to the entrance, their faces tired but hard and steely. They looked like they were about to arrest someone.

"Anthony, Halle? What are you guys doing here?" asked Stephen as they hurried outside to greet them. "Has he talked yet?"

He? Matt?

Anthony shook his head. "No, not a word. All we know is that he's got to be covering for someone or else he wouldn't insist on keeping quiet. Anyway, we've come to pick up Amane."

"Wait a minute." Erin held up a hand. "Pick up Misa? What for? No before that, Stephen told me you arrested that Matt guy; why would you do that?"

Anthony exhaled. "Well, according to him, Matt is another member of his organization and a sympathizer of M's. If he's here in the area, then he might at least know where M is."

Erin gasped under the palm of her hand. I was right. Matt is another runaway from Wammy's! Near…he used me and Stephen to sniff him out, didn't he? Why didn't he ever mention him before?

She shot Stephen a questioning look. "Don't look at me," he answered hastily. "I'm just as shocked as you. Why didn't he mention that sooner?"

Anthony grumbled, "Apparently he doesn't trust us enough to tell us these things until the last minute. He thinks that M and Amane have been working together and communicating through Matt, and the way they were acting when you caught them at the Marriott™ was a ruse."

No. No, that couldn't be. What business on this grand green earth would Misa and Mello have with each other? "A ruse? For what?"

"That's why we're here to get Amane," said Halle. "She could give us some much-needed
answers."

"Now hold on! Guys, her sister's here. Can't this wait until after she leaves?" Erin snapped, jumping in front of Stephen. "No, better yet, can't this wait until Misa's discharged? A-at least let me go talk to her first—"

"No, I'm sorry Blogger, but we can't let you do that," said Halle. "It could give her a chance to escape."

"Dude, they pumped her full of tranquilizers and who knows what else! How the hell is she gonna run away?" Erin half-cried.

For that matter, why would she try to run away?

All of a sudden her mind had gone back to the first Kira case, to those first few days when L had Misa blindfolded and tied to a chair. She never saw him or anyone do anything to her, as in beat or drug or water-board her or anything like that (or if L had done something he was careful not to do it when she could see) but hell, being tied up and blindfolded in a cell for almost two months had to be torture all in itself. She couldn't do anything about it then but she sure as hell wasn't going to stand it happening a second time, even if Misa turned out to be guilty the first time around…

And maybe this time, too. Sohelpher.

Dear God, was Near torturing Matt right as they spoke? As pissed as she'd been with the guy she could never wish that on him. Would Near torture someone he grew up with in the same house? She didn't want to think he could be that bastardly. Besides, torture almost never worked anyway. It was like blowing up a pile of dynamite in the toilet to unclog it when a good ol' plunger with integrity worked just as well.

"Erin!"

She turned around and saw Kimiko stumbling towards her on her cane, gasping lightly as she broke to a stop after crossing the threshold.

"What's the matter, Kim?"

"Have you seen Misa anywhere? She's not in her room and I just checked the caf—uh, h-hello," she greeted awkwardly when she noticed Halle and Anthony standing there. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. C-can I help you?"

Although the weather was still too hot for it, Misa pulled the large black hood further down over her face, both to make herself small enough to hide and to absorb the film of sweat condensing on her forehead and stinging her eyes. Her head pounded and her stomach writhed with sickness, but she managed to stagger off the bus and onto the street by sheer will, the same power that had helped her steal the clothes she had on from an unsuspecting neighbor and sneak out as soon as she could move again (albeit sluggishly). Normally she hated wearing such heavy frumpy things, but it was either this or go out in her hospital gown.

In a way she'd kind of hoped that that stunt she'd pulled with the cocaine would kill her, but she knew better. That would never happen with Erin following her around like she had. Even as she became suspicious of her she would still defend her honor without hesitation, just like old times. It ended up working in their favor, anyway.
And everyone says I'm the dumb one. That is when it isn't Matsu.

This is it. Kimi, Matsu, Mochi, Monchichi, Hideki, Erin… I'm leaving everything behind and I can never go back to it again. They'll have a hard time finding me since I left all my phones and stuff either at the house or the hospital.

Strange how no matter how aware she was of this, it didn't hurt as much as it probably should have, nausea and fatigue notwithstanding. Maybe because she'd already let go a long time ago, before this all happened. For the first time in what seemed like forever, she no longer had to hide behind a mask.

Unbeknownst to anyone, she had arranged her will before she'd left Japan so that Kimi would get 80 percent of her fortune plus the cars, houses and everything in them; 10 percent of it would go to Erin and the rest would go to charity. After all, her money would be useless where she was headed and the people she'd leave behind would most certainly need it. They would only find out about this after she died.

Which, she half-hoped, would be soon. Depending on when all of this business could get finished.

She waited slumped against the telephone pole for him to show up as he'd promised. Despite herself, her blood boiled with the thought of him. She didn't love him, she could never love him, not in the way she had loved Light (and sometimes, especially in these few years since his death she found herself unsure of even that much). But if it weren't for him she might've been stuck in that phony life for the rest of her existence, trapped with the chaos tearing her apart inside in spite of her career reaching its zenith and having her sister back.

Freedom. What a horrible, frightening, glorious thing.

As the sun beating down on her intensified, so did her nausea. But she couldn't throw up. There was nothing to throw up since she hadn't eaten for the past two days.

Finally a dark maroon Jaguar™ with tinted windows pulled up. She grabbed the handle and tried to pull open the door, but another wave of fatigue crashed over her and she leaned against the blistering hot metal of the frame as he opened it for her from inside the backseat. Misa practically swooned her way inside.

"What took you so long?" she slurred.

"Did you check yourself for bugs?" was the first thing he said to her, a chunk of chocolate dangling from his teeth. He didn't bother explaining his lateness. Or perhaps it only felt like he was late to Misa. She hadn't looked at any clocks since she'd snuck out.

"Yeah. I didn't find anything or else I wouldn't have come out here. Mello-yellow, be a dear and help me out of this, will you? It's too hot."

"I thought I asked you not to call me that," he growled, but he obliged her anyway by grabbing the hem of the hoodie and ripping it over her head. From there she wrestled it down her arms and into her hands, balled it up and tossed it down to the floor. She kicked it under the front seat where Lumen was situated, leering at her from over his shoulder with amusement.

"I'll call you whatever I want. I can't help it if I think about the soda when I say your name. So have you guys rescued Matt yet?"

"Not yet, but if everything goes as I laid out he'll be out of there soon enough." Suddenly Mello was cut off by her hand pulling his chocolate away from his mouth to replace it with her own lips.
The contact was abrupt and sloppy and she could taste the familiar strains of cocoa and bitterness and salt and spit and unbridled testosterone-fueled rage on his breath and skin.

Matt had refused to kiss her during their fake-out make-out. In fact she'd done most of the work making it look convincing while he'd just sat there. Whatever moves he made had been to try pushing her away. Although she understood why he wouldn't kiss her—and to be fair she felt no real attraction to him either—it had left her unfulfilled and hungry. Misa enjoyed kisses, touches. She had needs, certain needs that had been denied for far too long, partly for her reputation's sake, partly because of her silly romantic fantasies for boys that would incidentally turn out to be prudes. When she was with Light she was lucky to get him just to hold her hand or give her a hug. They'd only kissed once and even when she offered him a chance to sleep with her he'd passed it up, acted like he didn't know what she meant when she couldn't have been more obvious.

Light was just a gentleman that way, she'd reason. He was too stressed out about the case to be in the mood and besides Ryuzaki probably would've sat in on it as with all their dates like the mood-killer he was.

Mello was the opposite, at least in this sense.

He let her linger there for maybe half a moment before snatching her up by her matted hair and tearing her away. His eyes had that icy look to them as if to say, Don't you ever interrupt me while I'm eating my chocolate.

"Oh Mello, can you honestly blame me? You're just so handsome and sexy," she teased with a grin, a new kind of heat surging through her that this time had nothing to do with the temperature outside. The way his gloved fingers tangled up her hair and scratched at her scalp drove her almost crazy enough to shake her out of her hangover. Almost. "You're lucky I'm not back at full strength or who knows what I'd do? I'm not wearing panties right now, y'know."

In the rear-view mirror she thought she could see Eddie start to look flustered and purse his lips. He let her do and say these sorts of things because in his own way, he liked it too. It stroked his ever-fragile ego. Mello didn't have a god complex but he still wanted followers, and Misa liked being a follower. They both craved attention. What more could they ask for from each other?

"Got any more coke on you?"

"Hmph, no. You're still hung over. I think you should lay off it for a while. Sleep it off."

I don't know why you're bothering to tell me this. You don't care what I do, not really. Not if it doesn't have anything to do with your agenda.

Lumen snickered at the two through his bony fingers while Eddie, once again, tried to focus on the road. Misa ended up conceding and lay down sprawled across the back seat with her head on Mello's warm lap and a hand trailing down his bare arm. She stared at his navel (an innie, just like hers) and lifted a tired finger to trace the smooth creamy skin outlining it. The gesture made him jump slightly and he grabbed her wrist. "Will you cut it out?"

"Sorry, I'm just admiring you. You have an excellent fashion sense and the body to go with it. Just like me," she purred, snuggling into him like a cat. "Wouldn't you agree, Lumen?"

The shinigami could care less about fashion, but he agreed with one thing. Things had gotten much more interesting since these two had gotten together.
"By the way Mello, when you wrote in the notebook—"

"Don't worry, she was spared. As long as they didn't make her official between then and now, which I doubt they did, she should be fine."

Apart from Lumen's grating sputters of laughter the rest of the ride continued in an awkward silence. By now Ill Ratt (AKA Isaac Detrieve) should have done everything Mello had instructed. Ratt had been a mole for the mafia for several years, even before Mello and Lumen had joined them. While he couldn't be certain if he'd learned all the names of the agents working under Near, he thought that Ratt should have learned enough of them to cripple his task force. Intimidate him. Let him know that he had the upper hand.

Sean Dunleavy, suicide by gunshot. On September 9th at 10:30 pm he receives a pack of cigarettes confiscated from a suspect arrested by his task force and finds a piece of notebook paper hidden inside one of the cigarettes. He is assigned to watch the suspect for the rest of the night after the suspect has been interrogated.

On September 10th at 9:15 am he writes down on the piece of paper the names of as many of the official agents on his task force that he knows and then swallows the paper. He releases the suspect from jail, and then takes his gun and shoots himself in the head.

…

Being locked away from the others, Near did not see every one of his men in the adjacent room save for Roger start to drop dead like roaches sprayed with pesticide. But the instant he heard the first groan, the first thump against furniture, his pale hand jerked against his city of dice. Even this was all it took to send the hundreds of dice tumbling off the coffee table and around his feet, their hard plastic clatter almost enough to drown out the sounds of death pounding beyond the door.

Almost.
"You sonofabitch! How could you kill him?"

Had he not had Eddie and Jose holding him back by the crook of either arm Jack might have had his fingers wrapped around Mello's neck by now. He had never liked Mello and couldn't understand why their boss would put so much trust in some punk-ass kid who for all they knew was leading them on by the nose to certain death. If he could bring them the head of a rival mafia boss that even Kira wouldn't have been able to kill without batting a lash, who was to say that he wouldn't do the same to them?

And now his fears had been realized, at least where Ratt was concerned.

He turned to stare at Rod Ross who sat on the zebra-striped couch with one buff tan arm slung around bubble-headed blonde Tina, one of his many chicks. Tina seemed to shrink into Ross's massive rock-hard body at this outburst, but the boss himself simply swirled the champagne around in the glass pinched in his fingers, his dark eyes glazed and narrow with complacency.

"Ross, did you know about this? Did you know he was gonna kill Ratt?"

"The hell kinda question is that? Of course I knew. Who d'ya think gave the green light, Neylon?" he answered with a smirk.

"What the fuck for? What did he do to deserve it?" Jack lunged again, mostly at Mello who sat perched on the couch frame like a hot shot, with one knee hiked up and a chocolate bar clutched in his gloved hand. He too remained unperturbed. If anything, he looked amused and almost challenging. Like he was daring Jack to come at him.

"C'mon Neylon, these are the risks when you run with us. We couldn't let 'im live after having him write all those guys' names, are you nuts? We gotta do what's best for all of us, know what I'm saying? And this is for the best. When has Mello ever steered us wrong?"

Ever since Mello and his pet shinigami came into the picture Ross seemed to be getting lazier. He green-lighted just about everything Mello wanted to do, these days. Whatever seemed to work so he could make more time for the grape and pussy. Really, Ross might have thought otherwise but Mello was the ringmaster now. It'd only be a matter of time before he rang the bell for him, and maybe the rest of them too. They needed only to stay on his good side to stay alive, but even that would only save them for so long.

You smelly little cunt, I've never met anyone in my life that deserved an ass-kicking more than you do. You think you're such hot stuff with that killer notebook. You're lucky no one here knows your real name or else you'd be dead by now. And for some reason Ross doesn't see a problem with that.

When Jack stopped resisting, Eddie and Jose made the mistake of relaxing their grip on him. After all, in spite of his not-so-secret contempt for Mello, he had always backed down regardless. He had very little power here being relatively low in rank. Everyone but the boy in question jumped when Jack forward and swung back his fist, tight and aching with the desire to smash his fair face like a window.

Only to stop when Mello whipped out his Beretta 92FS™ in response with unnatural swiftness and seemingly even less natural calm. His smirk broadened that much more at the sight of Jack flinching in front of the barrel, literally falling over himself to get as far away from it as he could.
"Neylon, if you really want to trade blows with me then by all means go ahead," he said, his voice smooth and dark with invitation. "Hit me with your best shot. But do it at your own risk. You heard what I did to Ratt. You should know by now that I'm capable of anything."

What could Jack do? Except for his fury he was unarmed, completely at the boy's mercy or at least his own twisted version thereof. Slowly he backed down and away like a low-ranking wolf challenging the alpha male in the pack, though the sneer never quite left his face. Tina had tears glistening in her wide eyes at this point as she trembled with fear under Ross's arm.

The otherwise tensely silent room echoed with Lumen's cackles from the shadows where he'd been watching this all unfold, his jaws full and gargling with his favorite potato chips mashed between them. It was moments like these that made him believe that he might have just found an even more interesting human than Ryuk had. From what he'd heard about him, Light would have never pulled out a gun and shoved it in someone's face to assert his dominance. Light had tried to bring order and justice to a chaotic world and broke himself in the process, but Mello had been a smoldering hungry ball of chaos from the start. He did not labor under delusions of moral superiority, or morality as a whole, and so had no reservations about pulling stunts like these.

All that kept him from slaughtering everyone in this room right here and now was plain and simple pragmatism.

... Since they got back Matt had kept to himself and refrained from speaking to anyone. For the past five and a half hours he had holed himself up in his room, either playing on his console or lighting up another cigarette and always trying to push out of his mind the distant blast of Ratt's gun firing into his own skull and the fact that he'd been an accessory to a massacre.

Or to be more accurate, many massacres. And here he would have thought that it would get easier the longer it went on. Then again, he hadn't been around to see all the others before him actually die, had he? It's so much easier to put something out of your mind when you only hear about it secondhand.

When Lumen fazed through the wall Matt at first pretended not to hear when he said his name once then twice, instead keeping his heavy eyes trained on the tiny screen rocking back and forth in his hands.

But being of the sort that hated being ignored, Lumen grabbed his attention by lumbering over to his side and then pulling out his weapon to rapidly slam it on the ground in front of him like he used to do in the shinigami world—thrice for good measure: the first two times for the number of times he'd said his name, the third for the sheer fun of it. It was enough to rattle the console out of his sweating palms and topple him to the floor on his back, his head making impact with the bed frame in the process.

When he got back enough of his composure Matt propped himself up by one elbow and nursed the back of his head, hissing, "What the fuck was that for?"

Lumen grunted in satisfaction and slipped his weapon back into the sheath strapped to his back. "You're supposed to answer when someone says your name."

"Go away, Lumen. I'm not in the mood."

"Aw, what'sa matter? You got away from Near, didn't you? Oh, I wonder if he's pissing himself right now after Mello's latest stunt. You're back with all your friends—"
"We're not friends. I'd appreciate you didn't call us that."

"Oh, why not? We both like Mello and we're working towards the same cause. From what I've seen, you humans only need a couple flimsy reasons like those to call each other friends."

We're not working towards the same cause at all. You're just here to get your jollies off. You could care less whether Mello brings down the legacy or dies trying. All you're worried about is making sure no one gets in the way of your fun.

"You missed out, y'know. Just a while ago Jack got all mad at Mello 'cause he killed Ill Ratt with the rest of Near's task force, and he took a swing at him, and then Mello whipped out his gun and looked ready to shoot him right there on the spot. I can't say I'm not a little bummed that he didn't. But knowing him, he's probably not gonna let that guy live much longer."

Sadly, Matt knew that Lumen was right about that much. Mello discouraged mutiny by offing the rebels and Rod Ross as far as he knew seemed fine with all of it. What difference did losing a couple of insubordinate grunts make to him? He could always recruit more. Even in this pack of wolves there was little loyalty to be found.

"You know what really surprises me, though? The fact that you went along with that whole stunt. Did you know that he smuggled a piece of the Death Note in your cigarettes for Ratt to get at when they brought you in?"

Matt didn't answer. Mello hadn't exactly told him that little detail but given how he'd asked him to get caught and all, it made perfect sense. Matt had asked no questions; there was no point in doing so. After all, what would have happened if he'd refused? He doubted Mello would get so pissed off as to kill him over it…

But what about Lumen?

He understood then. Lumen had come to gloat and taunt him for his decision. He was waist-deep in the blood now, though he hadn't killed anyone personally like Mello or Misa or any of those guys outside his door (yet). He couldn't walk away now, that is if he wanted to. There was nowhere for him to go and besides what would walking away accomplish? Abandon Mello like all the others had before him: his mother, Brother Ivan, even L? No. The thought made him ill enough to stumble back onto his feet, flop back on the bed and fumble around the nightstand for his pack of cigarettes to soothe his nerves for the fiftieth time.

He tried to remain stoic as he did so. He was not going to give this thing the satisfaction of seeing him shaken by what he'd done.

Roger and Near must still be alive. There's no way Ratt would have found their names anywhere like he did for the others. And maybe that wasn't Mello's intention anyway. He just wanted to scare him. Get revenge for that stunt he pulled on TV. Damned if I knew if it worked, though. Maybe Near wouldn't care? He could always get more people, right? Unless he's broken their morale too much for anyone else to want to volunteer…

"Of course, I knew. But why would I give a fuck about some cops? It's too bad it had to work out this way at least for them, but aren't those the risks you run when you work under L?"

Lumen snickered. "You know what's funny? Ross said the exact same thing about you guys when Jack complained about having Ratt killed off."

Luckily the shinigami didn't stick around for much longer after that; his prodding of Matt wasn't
going far enough to get the reaction he wanted and he probably got too excited then about seeing Mello orchestrate his next big move to try pushing it. However, Matt only got about five minutes of privacy when someone else came to call. The other last person he wanted to see right now.

"Who is it?" he grumbled in response to the raps on his door.

"It's Misa. Can I come in?" She'd been spending most of the time since they'd come back sleeping off her hangover. She sounded so cheerful in spite of what had transpired in the past day and a half Matt didn't know whether to feel disturbed or annoyed by it.

He didn't bother to answer. He knew no matter what he said she'd invite herself in. She was like Mello in that way: no was not an answer for her.

Sure enough she did just that, plopping down on the edge of the bed by his bare feet while he lay on his back puffing clouds of smoke towards the ceiling. He saw enough of her in his peripheral vision to watch her nose wrinkle. "Pee-yew, it stinks in here. Just how many of those do you go through every day? At least get an air freshener in here." She was wearing one of her night gowns, a short silk black one with matching robe and stockings. He saw this because she hiked one leg up to rest on the mattress while the other stayed planted on the floor, using her arms to support her pose. She had left her hair down and briefly reached up a hand to push some locks back behind her shoulder.

"What do you want?"

"Me? Oh, I just wanted to check to see if you were okay. I hope there are no hard feelings about what we did at the hotel. You know it was all part of the act."

"I was starting to forget about it until you brought it up just now."

"Oops. You were? Sorry." Was she mocking him? It was all too obvious when it came to Lumen, but he couldn't quite tell with Misa. She always acted so friendly around him. She acted sweet and friendly around most everyone really, to the point where you could easily forget how vicious and mad she actually was and could be. He had to pity the ones who hadn't known her well enough to see this at all.

"Did you know that Mello was using us to give Ratt a piece of the notebook?" he asked, not really knowing why.

"Yeah, sure I did."

Matt took another drag and exhaled the smoke through his mouth. He inhaled through his nose to catch some of that sweet burning tobacco as though he were trying to catch some of the thoughts that had escaped his lips. "That doesn't bother you at all? He just used you to kill at least a dozen people in one sitting. And the only thing they probably ever did wrong was work with L."

Misa shrugged. "Why should it? Not like I haven't done it before. That thing with Sakura TV, I did that all by myself, y'know. Sure, I can't remember all the details now but that doesn't mean I didn't do it."

"He tells you everything you might have done when you were the Second Kira and you automatically believe him? How do you know he didn't make all that up?"

"Why would he lie? Why bother seeking me out in the first place if I didn't do all that stuff? You know there's nothing Mello does without a reason. That's one of the things that makes him hot. Besides…given everything that's happened to me since Kira offed my parents' killer, it makes the
most sense."

She seemed to have adjusted nicely enough to the concept of being a murdereress who had had her memory wiped and replaced with false ones. "You had so much going good for you until now. I'd say you got a lucky break when L destroyed your notebook. Why throw that all away for some bloke you hardly know?"

"I've done it before," she repeated with the same calmness that most that knew her wouldn't think she was capable of. 'First of all, I don't like calling it 'throwing away.' I like to call it 'giving away.' I gave up most of my life to Light; I would've given him all of it if things hadn't turned out the way they did. So it's not like there was that much left to give away when I met you guys. Just enough to be useful."

Of course. To say 'throw away' would mean that you ruined your whole life for nothing. You're a funny girl, I'll give you that. You're one of the most reckless nihilistic sorts I've ever met and yet you still want this all to amount to something in the end. And you know what, who am I to tell you that it won't? I'm not even sure what it is you're after.

Misa glanced up towards the ceiling as if to stare at whatever interesting thing Matt was right now, like the cracks running along the center before branching off like roads to nowhere. "I mean, just imagine it. Four, five, maybe six years from now, not many people are gonna remember Misa-Misa, if anyone at all. No one will want to work with me on my new album or ask me to appear in their films or magazines. Just four more years from now I'll be a chalky-skinned dried-up sack that not even a pervy old man like Higuchi would want. I'll probably do even crazier stuff just to get attention like flashing my flappy boobies at some reporters or start a feud with a younger and prettier star that's taking my place and write mean stuff about her on Twitter™ out of jealousy. Maybe go on a cross-country trip wearing a diaper to hunt down some slut my boyfriend's been seeing behind my back. Then one day I might end up dead on the cover of the tabloids with a needle stuck in my arm or my hair all soaked with my own vomit after I choked on it. That's usually how it goes, right?"

She crinkled her nose again. "No, I don't want to go out that way. I'm too vain to settle for that. When my time comes, I want it to be a beautiful occasion. While I'm still young and pretty enough to pull it off."

What about your sister? And your friend? Don't they matter? Whatever it is you're planning, don't you care what it will do to them, Matt thought about asking but didn't. To ask would have implied that he cared which he didn't, at least not enough to try talking Misa out of her morbid fantasies. He'd have no bearing on what she ultimately did with herself even if he did care, any more than the love Kimiko and Erin had for her would, or any more than he would on what Mello did.

"What are you telling me all this for, Misa?" he asked flatly.

She was twirling a lock of her hair around a small dainty finger as she shared her thoughts. "You asked me why I'm going along with you for the ride, so I'm telling you. That's what friends do. They tell each other things they wouldn't tell anyone else."

Friends? You're joking, right?

The two were silent for a moment, with the exception of Matt tapping the ashes from the tip of his cigarette into the ashtray sitting next to him and vaguely noting that he'd need to empty it soon as it was getting full. Then Misa broke it with the following: "You know we're not in an actual relationship, right?"
"Huh?"

"Mello and me. We're more like, what do they call it, friends with benefits."

What the fuck are you telling me this for, he thought with a scowl. You think I didn't know that? What else are you screaming hysterically about when you're in Mello's room? He turned his head to the side away from her so she wouldn't see the look on his face as he tried to will it away. Against his will a wave of heat washed over him as his mind echoed the obscene duet that had gotten fairly frequent play as of late.

"I'm only saying so you don't feel like you're breaking up anything if you wanted to tell him how you feel."

...

That same sort of paralysis he'd gotten from hearing Misa make that suggestion at the Marriott™ coursed through him momentarily before he could answer. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh Matt, I understand completely where you're coming from. I may not have known Light as long as you've known Mello, but I still get it. I know the other guys here wouldn't like it if they knew so we'd still have to keep seeing each other to cover for you, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't tell him how you feel. I know he doesn't say so but he seems to care a lot about you. I mean, he could have left you there to rot or be killed with the rest of them but he didn't."

Matt would be lying if he said—that is if he were so prompted—that he'd never thought of Mello in that way. He just didn't dwell on it often. What would be the point? Not that they wouldn't be compatible; he knew that Mello had been with both women and men (he'd had to get by somehow in those first few years since leaving Wammy's). But the chances of Mello reciprocating whatever Matt felt towards him were slim to none. And so what if he did? He didn't need the distraction, never mind want it. Matt would have to be content with knowing that Mello did give a damn about him, if not the same way he gave a damn about Mello.

After all, at this point I must be the only one he hasn't slept with.

"Give it a rest, Misa. If you're trying to talk me into some kind of weird-ass threesome thing with you and Mello, I'm not buying it. It was hard enough faking that snog with you; what makes you think I'd enjoy doing it with you for real?"

"I never said you had to do anything with me. I'm saying we could share him. But if you don't want to...oh, well. Just throwing it out there. You never know when one of you is going to die, after all."

"Well whatever it is you're asking for, there are plenty of guys here who I'm sure would be more than willing to oblige you," he huffed, pulling out yet another cigarette from the pack after crushing out the previous one in the ashtray.

"Yeah, but I don't like those other guys. They're all too big and muscly and gross. I have a type."

She paused to indulge in her own new habit; she took out a tiny vial of cocaine, tapped it against the bedframe a few times, and opened it up and put it to both her nostrils where she snorted from it as much of the powder as she could.

"And you're saying I'm your type?"

"You could be," she said, wiping her nose. "But I know you don't swing that way so I won't bother."
Was Misa ever like this with Light and L? Or was this a new thing that developed from joining the mafia? Never mind that, who would've thought that they'd partner up with one of the Kiras who had brought down the first L?

"Anyway, back to why I came here. I just wanted to see if you were okay. He didn't torture you, did he?"

"Unless you count chewing my ears off with questions, no. If he wanted to torture me, he didn't get the chance."

"And you didn't tell him anything?"

"What kind of question is that? Of course I didn't say anything. I turned down everything they offered me and combed myself for bugs."

She smiled. "That's good to hear. I like you, Matt. You and me are a lot alike. If you want to talk about anything, you know where to find me."

With a light pat on his jean-clad knee she hopped off the bed and strolled out the door, leaving him alone with his thoughts once more. She was right about one thing. It was then he remembered the real reason he didn't like her, her murderous past notwithstanding.

Talking to her was like looking through a broken funhouse mirror.

Maybe, maybe if Matt weren't too tired and dry and jaded to, he might have started to cry at that point. He lit up his new cigarette instead.

…

"Hi, Umbra."

Umbra looked up from the delectable-looking birthday cake to see Sidoh looming in front of him, his long thin stick-like arms and paws curled against his chest. A mother preparing the picnic bench for her daughter's party passed through them both as she made her rounds of setting up the plates and utensils and straightening out the corners of the colorful plastic table sheet, completely oblivious to their presence.

"Sidoh. I didn't expect to see you here," said Umbra in rather dull surprise. There were very few things for shinigami to truly get excited over. "What are you doing here?"

Suddenly Sidoh reached out across the table to clap his paws over either of his shoulders. "Look Umbra, I know I've told you this like, a million times already but I'm sorry! I didn't mean to make you drop your notebook! Please don't be mad at me! I've got enough people mad at me already!"

Umbra scratched at the back of his mane. "Why would you think I was mad at you?"

"W-well, you never came back with my, I mean, our notebook, so I figured you stopped trying to find it. Then when I went to see Armor Justin to ask him what I should do—"

"Armonia Justin?"

"Um, yeah, that guy. He let it slip to Midra that I lost the notebook, a-and then she started beating me to a pulp! I can't go back without the notebook, Umbra. Midra's so mad at me right now and if I don't get it back soon we're both gonna die! Please Umbra, you've gotta help me! You know I'm no good at tracking stuff down; I got lucky finding you he—"
"Ssssh!"

Umbra pinched Sidoh's gaping mouth shut in his claws.

"Let's take this somewhere more private. There's a bathroom nearby. I want to give you something but I can't do that with all these humans watching. Follow me."

At a loss for any better ideas, Sidoh obeyed and hopped behind him into a men's bathroom inside a department store as Umbra still had his lips pinched in his claws. When they stood in front of the urinals lined along the pristine wall, Umbra let Sidoh go and pulled something out from his pants: a chocolate bar.

He ripped the foil off the top of it and handed it to Sidoh. "Here, eat this. Humans eat a bunch of this when they're stressed. It's supposed to make you feel better."

Sidoh sniffed at it using the two slits under his eyes that functioned as nostrils. "Wh-what is it?"

"Chocolate. I was saving it for later but I can always get more."

"I don't know how chocolate's supposed to solve my problem...hmm, but I guess I'll give it a whirl." Timidly he took the bar from Umbra and held it by the bottom in both paws by the tips of his claws. He nibbled off the top and chewed up the chunk with his jaws open for a few minutes to savor the flavor, his tiny sharp teeth glistening.

After he finally swallowed, his beady yellow eyes widened in astonishment. "Hey! This is pretty good! I can see why humans like it so much."

"I knew it would work. Now tell me Sidoh: when was the last time you killed a human for lifespan?"

"Huh? The last time I killed a human? Oh gosh, I don't really remember...maybe over a year ago? I think."

"And how long did the human you killed originally have left to live?"

"Uh...two years? Three? D'oh, I don't remember now! And I couldn't tell you how much lifespan Midora still has, though she's probably killed more than I have."

So perhaps there was still time? Sidoh didn't know it but Umbra owed quite a bit to him, hence his sense of obligation to help the poor fellow. He had learned many interesting things about the notebook's mechanics by watching Sidoh's many bungles. For instance, Sidoh was terrible with names, not just the names of his fellow shinigami but those belonging to his prospective victims too. He had to have a complete and constant view of a human's face to get his or her entire name, but humans being as restless as they were rarely stayed in one place for long. This made killing a pain for Sidoh.

Once Umbra saw him try to write down a human's name in the notebook four times and misspell it each time. When he got it right the fifth time, nothing happened. The man went about his business none the wiser (which had entailed breaking up a squabble between two young boys under his care). Somehow a human gained immunity from the Death Note if his or her name was misspelled four times in a row.

As he listened to Sidoh munch away at the chocolate bar, Umbra's thoughts drifted to Erin. He had briefly toyed with the idea of trying that himself to give her such immunity but had decided against it. He knew her name too well to be able to "accidentally" misspell it. Besides he knew that any
shinigami who deliberately tried to use their Death Note to save a human's life would die for it. He wasn't sure how he knew that when he hadn't sought after Ryuk to hear his story like Lumen had, but he didn't really question it either. He'd known that, among other things about the Death Note for as long as he could remember.

Besides it did sort of make sense. Why would a god of death contradict his very duty, and how could he expect to get away with that without consequence?

Since Sidoh was here, though…

"You know, Sidoh. If you'd like you can stay with me until we can both get our notebooks back. I'm following the human I'm attached to in hopes that she'll eventually lead us to it. In fact, I think I might know a way for you to buy yourself more time in the meantime."

"Y-you do?"

"Yes. I have a few pieces of my Death Note on me. I can let you borrow one to write on. Humans can't use the Death Note to lengthen their lifespans but we can. I wouldn't think it matters which Death Note you write in. And I know a human with a long enough lifespan for you to kill."

This was a very risky move he was making, but he knew that the Death Note wouldn't work at all unless Sidoh knew what she looked like. From his waistline he pulled out a folded-up picture of her that he had printed out when Kiyomi wasn't looking. He unfolded it and smoothed it out on his knee with unusual tenderness for a shinigami which Sidoh paid no mind to, for he wasn't terribly bright and was consequently quite gullible. He didn't question why Umbra would carry around a picture of a human with him. All that mattered to him was getting more time.

"This girl here should suffice. She has about four decades left in her lifespan. That should be more than enough time for you to get your notebook back from Lu—"

Just then the door swished open and a man hobbled inside on a mahogany cane with dragons carved into it, presumably to use one of the toilets. Remembering what Kiyomi had said about eating where humans could see, he snatched up from Sidoh's grasp the rest of the chocolate bar that he had yet to finish and quickly phased through one of the stalls. Sidoh cried out in protest and stumbled after him.

Umbra wasted no time accidentally-on-purposely dropping both the crushed chocolate and the photo down the toilet and pulling down the lever to flush it. "Aw man, I wasn't finished with that!" whined Sidoh as he watched the mass swirl down the hole at the bottom of the porcelain pot.

"I'm sorry. I was warned that even though humans can't see or hear us, they still see the objects from the human world that we're holding in our hands. We don't want anyone to know that we're here. It's just easier that way."

"Oh. Well, all right then, if you say so. So where's that picture you showed me and that piece of the Death Note you promised?"

Umbra handed him a page of the notebook that he had collected from his many weeks of subservience to Kiyomi, but admitted, "I'm afraid I just flushed the picture down the toilet. I didn't mean to."

"WHAT? Oh, that's just great! Now how am I supposed to kill that human? You know I'm no good with names."

"I have faith in you. You did see her face, right?"
"Uh...uh-huh."

"Then you had to have caught her name too. Do you have your pen?"

"Uh-huh. I don't feel too confident in myself, but what choice have I got?" He turned around and was about to press the page to the wall to begin writing when the stall door flew open to reveal the man peering inside. Sidoh had the page still crumpled up in his paw so hopefully the man didn't see it.

Umbra noted the red letters and numbers floating over the old man's head. Soichiro Yagami. According to the numbers he didn't have that much longer to live. He looked pale and seemed to be catching his breath, as though he had seen or heard something in here that had startled him. Whatever he was looking for he must not have found it, because he slowly pushed the door shut. The two spirits listened to his footsteps until they could no longer hear them. He must have left the bathroom.

Sidoh groaned. "I'm not sure I like this place except for the chocolate. There's so much going on it's all a big blur to me." With that, he proceeded to scratch down Erin's name on the page to the best of his memory while Umbra hovered over his shoulder to watch.

Eri Booger.

"Hmm...no, that doesn't look right. Better try again."

Erin Blooger.

"Still doesn't look right."

Errin Bloger.

"Nope."

Errin Blogger.

"Ah, this looks like the right spelling. But just in case I'd better try one more time."

Erin Blogger.

If shinigami had lungs and could breathe, Umbra's might have hitched in his throat. Instead the claws on four of his paws dug into his knees and shins while he bit down on the forefinger on his fifth when he saw that Sidoh had gotten her name right the fifth time. "Gee, I hope it worked," said Sidoh as he put the pen away back into the folds of his wings.

Yes. As do I.

"Thanks, Umbra. I owe you one."

"It was nothing."

"It was nothing." he replied, extending his sixth paw outward to ask for the page back. "I'll hold on to it for safe keeping in case you need it again," he explained. At this point unconfident in his capacity to keep track of such precious things, Sidoh reluctantly agreed and handed the page over.

As Umbra folded it up and slipped it back into the space behind his belt he announced, "Now let's find some more chocolate. There's a birthday party going on at the park. I don't know why humans would want to celebrate the fact that they're one year closer to death but there's usually cake and other good foods involved so I suppose it balances out."
"Yippee."

Umbra let Sidoh disappear behind the wall first. He stopped to pull out another page he had printed out: a different picture of the same girl from her Facebook™ page. The first one had her sitting around with her cat, but this one was taken by a park overlooking the bay of her hometown, where the Statue of Liberty stood far away on the horizon. She was leaning against the railing giving a thumbs-up with one hand and tipping her hat up out of her face with the other.

By now over forty seconds had passed and nothing had changed. He could still see her name and lifespan as clearly as he could before.

From underneath the rags over his face, the corners of the bottom of his two mouths curled upward into a smile mirroring the one she flashed back at him. Or at least as much of a smile as shinigami could muster.

…

Could it be that Soichiro's mind was playing tricks on him again? When he had come in he'd heard a toilet flush in one of the stalls. At first he'd thought nothing of it, but even after he'd used the urinal (could it be his prostate? He did feel like he had to go more often than usual. He'd better get that checked as soon as possible) and washed his hands at the faucet, still no one had come out of that stall where the flush had come from.

In fact no one else was in here with him. His paranoia trumped over his sense of decency and he'd taken a look inside all of the stalls. All of them were unlocked with no one in them.

The toilet couldn't have possibly flushed itself…

"Uh, you OK, Dad?" asked Sayu when they met out by the water fountain. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

A ghost. That's one way to put it. Before this all happened I never would've believed in such things but now…

"I'm fine. It's just, ah, someone in there before me forgot to flush…"

Sayu made a face. "Ugh, how piggish can people get? I know how that feels; it seems whenever I visit the bathroom at school it's almost totally trashed! It's like some people forget that the bathroom is for everyone."

Sayu had decided to take a day off to go spend the money she had earned babysitting for their neighbors and rather than go with her friends as usual, she had asked him to tag along with him. Why not? They hadn't spent much time together lately, so they might as well.

As it turned out, she wanted to take him shopping for new clothes, reasoning that he'd feel much better about himself if he had new stuff in his wardrobe. Coincidentally (or perhaps not), his and Sachiko's anniversary was in a few days. While there would be no formal celebration of it, Sayu was probably pushing him, in her own way, to do something nice for her mother nevertheless.

She thumbed through the racks of clothing and pulled out a white silk shirt. "How about this one, Dad? Do you like it?"

He wasn't exactly a huge fan of shopping, but at this point he'd have done anything to make up for lost time with his daughter. So far the day had been spent talking about school and whatnot in between trips to the dressing room. "It's nice," he answered noncommittally, not quite looking in
her direction but more to the side. No. He couldn't appear distracted. He didn't need her prodding.

"D'ya wanna try it on? Then we'd know for sure how it looks on you." He felt ashamed for having so little to say to his own daughter. In a way it almost felt like they were strangers; when was the last time they'd spent quality time together? When she was nine? If that. Where did the time go?

"Erm, okay. Hold on, I'll be right back."

"You don't need any help putting it on, right? It's a button-up."

"No, no, I got it," he insisted, feeling rather uncomfortable with the idea of having her in the dressing room with him. Please stop asking me that. I can dress myself.

Eventually he came back out again to show Sayu. It did feel nice and cool on his skin, he'd give it that.

She grinned at him. "Oh Dad, you look so handsome in that! And I'm sure if Mom were here she'd think so too!" Sachiko had gone to work on a project with a friend for the day, something about a book. Before they'd had Light Sachiko used to be a teacher, as Sayu now aspired to be. The teacher in her never quite left although she had left the classroom to become a housewife (someone needed to be there when the kids were home), as she would be the one insisting on keeping an eye on their children's academic progress. He hated that he'd forgotten what this supposed book was going to be on. She had told him but his mind had wandered elsewhere at the time.

He tucked in his chin and pursed his lips, his ears turning warm at the compliment. "Thank you."

"Do you want it, Dad?"

"I guess I'll take it…but I'll pay for it myself. I have the money."

Sayu decided to take advantage of this by stopping to look for a bargain on a new pair of shoes. Soichiro cringed inside whenever she eyed a pair of high heels or pumps. When would she ever need shoes like that unless a man was involved? He knew that she was responsible and that he couldn't keep her away from that forever, but he couldn't help himself.

Fortunately Sayu must not have been in the mood for heels today and started looking at flats instead. While she sat down to try on a pair of tan…whatever brand those were, Soichiro was no good with clothing brands, he said from out of the blue, "Sayu, can I ask you a question?"

She slipped her bare foot inside one of the shoes and started to put on the other. "Sure, Dad. What is it?" She wiggled her toes a bit to check for comfort before standing up.

"Do…do you think your mother and I push you too hard?"

It was rather late to ask these sorts of questions now but better now than never, he guessed. While nothing catastrophic had happened to her as of yet.

Sayu looked up with her eyebrows quirked in bemusement. "Huh? Do I think you guys are pushing me too hard? No. I'd say you push me enough. Sure I might whine sometimes, but doesn't everyone have their bad days? Then you have a good whine and then you get over it."

Was that really how Sayu felt or did she just say that because that was what he'd wanted to hear? He didn't want to read into everything she said or did with the worst assumptions on his mind, but after what'd happened with Light…
"Why do you ask?"

Soichiro clapped a hand over the back of his head. "Well...I just don't want to put you under undue pressure. And...maybe I haven't said this as often as I should but I'm proud of you. I'm very proud of you," he affirmed, cursing himself for fumbling with that last part. He never was that good at expressing his affections, but that didn't make them any less real.

"Yeah, I know," she said with a beam. "Where's this coming from, Dad?"

"Nowhere. Nowhere, it's just, I just think it's funny. I've got all this time now and yet we still don't spend that much time together, not since you started college. So I don't get many chances to tell you these things."

Sayu gave him a funny look. A look that suggested that she was beginning to suspect that Light was back on his mind, though not for reasons she would have ever conceived. She and Sachiko had told him time and again: You didn't kill him. You shouldn't have let him work on that case but you didn't kill him. Kira killed Light.

And so he would keep telling himself, even though his guilt knew better.

They didn't push the subject any further; this was not the place for it. Once Sayu picked out a nice affordable pair of flats to add to her collection they headed out front for the shortest check-out line they could find. Along the way he felt Sayu briefly reach over to touch his shoulder in quiet assurance as she balanced their items in her other arm. He slackened a bit at the gesture. He should've been comforting her, not the other way around.

As they walked alongside the park to catch the bus back home Soichiro thought he saw someone familiar sitting at one of the benches. In fact it looked like Kiyomi Takada.

It was Kiyomi Takada, one of Light's old girlfriends from college. What was she doing here? She used to work as an anchor at Sakura TV before she'd left to join the ranks of NHN. She was a known Kira supporter.

Hitoshi Demegawa and her parents had all died. Mogi and Matsuda had found the former hanging from a baby swing dead by septic shock and the latter two had died in a fire that had destroyed their entire house and had been officially been ruled as a double-suicide.

This had all happened in too small of a time frame for him not to notice and find it all suspicious. But how could he prove that she had had anything to do with any of it? Unless he found a notebook in her possession detailing their deaths with these exact conditions, he couldn't. And for a while he wondered if he should pursue it. Aizawa still wanted nothing to do with him and he couldn't have Sayu or Sachiko catching on or getting the wrong idea.

Plus Kiyomi was about as old as Light would have been if he were alive.

Until he caught a glimpse of her face. She was on her cell phone talking to someone, and although she did her best to hide it she looked increasingly distressed. He squinted at her. He was too far away to hear what she was saying even without all this noise pollution going on around them, and even if he could read lips that well she had a hand instinctively cupped over her mouth as though she were getting the inclination that someone out there was watching her.

He quickly thought back to the mysterious toilet flushing back at the store.

Was there a shinigami in there with me?
In spite of the warm weather chills of terror seized his body, which Sayu failed to notice as they were now standing at the stop. He couldn't fathom what business a shinigami would have in a public restroom since as far as he knew it lacked the need for toilets that people had, but the store was so close to the park. Could it be that a shinigami was following Kiyomi around?

You're making way too many assumptions, Yagami. You could just be going crazy for all you know.

…

But the only way I'll know for sure is if I investigate. Damn! But I can't just run off, not now. I'll have to wait until Sayu and Sachiko are both out before I do anything. They can't know no matter what. Should I tell Aizawa and the others? Would they believe me? I wonder if they've already come to the same conclusions…

He peered over his shoulder with his breath trapped under the lump forming in his throat, like he were looking back at a demon that only he could see, a demon he had been wrestling with for the past five years. Takada. I hope you're not who I think you are. But if you are…

…

Restricted number.

For a moment Kiyomi wondered if she should answer, but on instinct ended up doing so before the call could go to voicemail. She brushed a short lock of her black hair back behind her ear and spoke into the phone: "Hello?"

"Is this Kiyomi Takada I'm speaking to?"

Her eyebrows furrowed. Who on Earth was this calling her? The voice was scrambled but it sounded like a male's. "Yes, this is her. Can I help you?" she asked, her response slightly guarded.

"You can call me M, and I'm calling to let you know that I know your secret, faux-Kira."
Faux-Kira?

Faux-Kira!

Kiyomi was frozen right there in her seat in the exact position she was in, like her body had turned to metal and she a piece of bench art for passer-bys to stop and briefly look over before carrying on their way. She suddenly lost the feeling in her crossed legs and was unable to find the strength to uncross them. She frantically dug through her mind to find some kind of response to this, but those last words the caller had hissed into her ear kept echoing through it like white noise.


Who the hell was this? How could he know her secret? Did he really know her secret? Then again what business would some random trouble-maker have to be calling her cell phone to accuse her of such a thing? How did he get her number in the first place? Who. WAS. He?

"Excuse me?"

"I know you have a killer notebook. I'd ask you to try to deny it but it's not like you could if you wanted."

He sounded so loud. It felt like everyone in the whole world could hear him although none of the people passing by indicated as such. No. She needed to remain calm. If she looked too distressed, someone might stop and ask questions.

"Sir, whoever you are, if this is supposed to be a prank call, I'll have you know now that it's not at all funny." That was the best she could come with as a first rebuttal. Her voice didn't sound at all like her own. It sounded meeker, breathless. This wasn't the Kira debate on Sakura TV; this was someone from out of the blue bragging about his knowledge of her secret for all of the world to hear. She needed to get up, she needed to hang up. She needed to do something.

"Please don't bother with the act, Takada. That's one of the things I hate about people like you: you act like you're somehow above everyone else but when push comes to shove you're not nearly as smart or clever as you paint yourself to be."

Could it be her mother's cantankerous spirit coming back to haunt her?

"I'm not here to waste your time or mine, so let's get to the point. I'm not with the police and I have no interest in turning you in to them; if I did I would have done it by now. It makes no difference to me whether what you're doing is right or wrong or even legal, although personally I find this self-righteous crusade of yours pointless and more of an excuse to act out your power fantasies than anything. But you shouldn't have offed Demegawa and your parents like that, Takada, especially in such a small time-frame. Those were bad moves. They know more about the notebook than you think and it won't be long before they put two and two together and start to close in on you, if they aren't already.

"But I have a proposal that can benefit us both."

"M" knew about Demegawa and her parents? But how? She'd taken care to make their deaths looks like an accident and double-suicide. Unless…if M wasn't with the police, did this mean that he had a notebook of his own? If he didn't, then how would he know what the police knew about how the
notebook worked, or even that the notebook existed at all?

Unless he was powerful enough to spy on them.

"How would you know all this?" she asked lowly, trying to keep her voice steady. "Have you been spying on me?"

"Not feeling so omnipotent now, are we? In a way, yes, I've been watching your activity. It's been kind of hard not to. I haven't bugged your residence if that's what you're asking. But the police are probably on their way to, maybe even as we speak."

"No, they wouldn't. That's illegal. The police wouldn't sink to that."

"Says the woman who's bypassing the criminal justice system to play God. They'll do it; they're desperate enough. Which brings me to my deal: give up your notebook to me. If you do this now they won't have anything to pin on you. You can walk away from all of this unscathed."

"And assuming that I have a—such a thing to give you, what if I should refuse?"

"Are you expecting me to say that I'll come after you? Don't. It wouldn't be worth the effort or the risk of getting caught. It's not like you could report me without incriminating yourself in the process and this number isn't traceable. But mark my words, the authorities will. In the end only you would be hurting yourself; that's what you get for being such an attention whore."

Attention whore? Blistering outrage swept through her body and licked at her insides like fire at the insult. How dare he? Oh, if only Kiyomi knew this man's name and face. Then she could end him as soon as she got home! "If you're not going to retaliate if I don't give you what you want, why bother calling me to ask for it at all?"

"Obviously I want the notebook for my own purposes. But even if you don't give me the notebook yourself, I have ways to take it from the police if it came down to it. I just don't feel like wasting resources that I don't need to waste. The difference comes down to whether you value your life and livelihood enough to take the easier option for both of us. If you do then I'll give you instructions as to how to send it to me. I wouldn't suggest sleeping on it, though. You should look at it as me doing you a favor."

Never had Kiyomi felt so much rage or hatred towards another human being, regardless of whether she knew them or even knew what they looked like. Not only that, and she hated to admit it, but this had to be the first time she had ever been stricken by such fear and dread, like a mouse trapped in a maze that would lead her into traps no matter which path she took. She couldn't even recall feeling this way towards her own mother. She couldn't possibly hand over the notebook, her sacred power, to this scoundrel. Who knows what he'd do with it?

But what if he was right? Were the police zeroing in on her? If she was discovered she would be ruined, to understate it. Kira's paradise would sink back into the world's mind as nothing but a glorious pipedream realized only in the paintings and scriptures of the artistic and faithful. She could not let that happen.

Besides, how could she truly believe "M" wouldn't retaliate? He said he had no reason to; damn! She really couldn't turn him in to the authorities without making trouble for herself. She needed to kill him. But how could she when she didn't know his face, never mind his name, his location, pretty much anything about him? He may not have even been Japanese. He didn't quite sound like he was, but his handle on the language was otherwise flawless.
"Well? A yes or no would be nice now. We're burning up minutes."

A bolt of inspiration rocked her out of her dread and put enough feeling back into her legs for her to uncross them.

Teru.

She was hoping it wouldn't have to come to this, but what choice did she have? She needed to see Mikami. He could help her. He would help her. He'd always been there for her, much like a loyal servant.

He just had to. Besides Umbra, Teru was all she had left—and she couldn't be sure as to whether she could count the shinigami. Umbra had no real stake in her crusade, though so far she could easily sway him into doing her bidding with sweets.

With as much confidence and grace as she could muster, she gave M her answer: "All right. I'll give you what you want. That is, under a few minor conditions. I will need some time to prepare, seeing as this is the weekend. Also, I'd like your word that you will not try to kill me when this transaction is done."

"Don't worry. As long as you follow my instructions to the letter, I'll have no reason to take your life except out of plain spite. You're lucky I'm not like you, at least in that way."

Kiyomi's fist clenched in her lap, her nails jabbing into the soft flesh of her palm like tacks. Why, you—

Around this time, Umbra and Sidoh were coming back from a relatively successful adventure. It turned out that there wasn't actually any chocolate at this party, which Sidoh found out when he hid under the table and snuck a slice of birthday cake while the humans had been distracted by their game of suikawari, which was similar to the piñata game except that a watermelon placed on a large towel on the ground was the target rather than a candy-filled papier-mâché pony hanging from a tree. Umbra did his best to distract the children by "guiding" their arms to make them miss the fruit when they took a swing.

Then when Sidoh slid back out unsatisfied, he made up for it by helping the now seven-year-old birthday girl Kiku Gato crack the melon wide open in three solid whacks. It was the least he could do for her; her numbers said that she only had two more months to go after today. He'd always felt a twinge of heaviness somewhere in his core to see children meet their end though he knew there was nothing he could do about it, such was life. All the same, though Kiku never sensed his presence, he wished her a pleasant two more months and a gentle death when her time came.

It puzzled him how easily excitable human children were over little things such as fruit, but then, it wasn't like he couldn't relate. He helped himself to a few delicious juicy chunks during the commotion of the kids grabbing at it like animals over a choice piece of meat.

The mother ended up whacking the girl's brother over the ear with her two fingers, having mistaken him as the culprit when she turned around and saw the cake picked at. No one suspected any differently.

"You lied, Umbra," whined Sidoh. "You said this party was gonna have chocolate. That didn't taste like chocolate at all."

"I saw many parties like that one from the portals in our world," explained Umbra. "Maybe I was
mistaken to think that they all featured it in some form? Never mind; Kiyomi can buy more chocolate while she's out. Oh. That's right. Sidoh, she won't be able to see or hear you since you're not attached to a notebook. It'd be rather difficult to prove to her that you exist so I think we should save the trouble and keep going on like you're not here. As least when she's around."

"Uh…okay. Humans make me kind of uncomfortable, anyway. Did you see how those kids were with that, what'd you call it, melon? Gosh, and here I thought shinigami were scary."

The two made their way through the crowds to find Kiyomi on the bench where Umbra had left, just snapping her cell phone shut. A very thin, almost unnoticeable film of sweat had appeared on her face, which looked rather ill from Umbra's perspective. He hadn't seen her in such distress since the night they'd first met.

"Are you all right, Kiyomi? You look pale, more than usual."

Her plum-red lips twitched like she was about to say something, but she caught herself in the nick of time. After taking a moment to think, she gathered up her purse, arose and began her brisk trek down the concrete path, her heels clacking with every step.

"Kiyomi?"

She didn't answer. She didn't turn back to look at him.

"Kiyomi? Yoo-hoo, Kiyomi." While Sidoh floated along his heels unnoticed, Umbra hovered over her head, bent deeply at the waist and neck and peered into her eyes. She looked about ready to swing her purse at him, even though it would have just passed through him harmlessly if she tried that.

Then it dawned on him. "Oh, I see. You can't talk to me in public. Are you going someplace where you could?"

No response.

"Hm. I'll take that as a yes."

Eventually Kiyomi entered a different store from the one Umbra and Sidoh had been in and made her way to the women's restroom. She checked for the stall with the cleanest-looking toilet seat and upon making her selection stepped inside, hung her purse on the hook, and put the lid down on the toilet using a balled-up sheet of toilet paper before tossing the tissue into the feminine hygiene box (which thankfully was empty and appeared clean; Kiyomi could stand very few things in this world and blood was not one of them).

She momentarily stepped back out to wash and scrub her hands clean for about thirty seconds, then after drying them she came back into the stall, locked the door and sat down on the toilet lid with her skirt pulled as far down her thighs as she could. Unbeknownst to her, Sidoh had decided to wait for them outside the restroom, for he found that the idea of entering a room exclusively for females unnerved him a bit.

Kiyomi reached forward to fish out a pen and an old receipt from her purse. Then she twisted to her right, pressed the folded-up receipt against the wall of the stall and began to write.

Have you seen anyone that looked like they were following me over the past few days?

Umbra read her question aloud before providing an answer. "No, I haven't seen anyone follow you." He was telling the truth. What he wondered was why she was suddenly so concerned about
someone following her. Had something happened out on that park bench while he'd been wandering around with Sidoh?

She wrote another question, her penmanship small and slightly shaky which was unusual for her. Growing up she was lauded for her many talents, one of which being her elegant handwriting. Have you seen anyone strange come in or out of the apartment?

Again, he read her note aloud. "No."

He heard Kiyomi sigh under her breath. Then she squeezed another two lines under that. There's a chance that someone is going to start following me and bug my apartment, if they haven't already. I need you to be look-out. Do this for me and I'll give you all the sweets you could ask for into next week.

Rather than read this word-for-word, Umbra said, "You want me to look out for you? Hmm…does my reward include chocolate?"

Anything, including chocolate.

Umbra scratched at his jaw from inside the rags around his face. "Okay. I'll be look-out for you. If I do see someone following you, should I try to throw them off?"

A smirk now played at her lips. Yes, within reason and without drawing attention to us. Thank you.

As far as Umbra knew, Kiyomi really only had to worry about the police catching on to her. Perhaps she was referring to them all this time? Indeed, if the police got the notebook it'd make it that much harder for him to be able to find Lumen and get Sidoh and Midora's notebook back.

Actually come to think of it, what or who had tipped Kiyomi off about the police to begin with? Just hours ago she was so sure that she'd never be brought under even a sliver of suspicion. Why the sudden change in attitude?

Could it be that the human Lumen was attached to found her first? Had he contacted her at the park? If so, what had they talked about? And what was Kiyomi going to do?

Something told him that helping Kiyomi cover her tracks would lead him to Lumen faster than if he let her get caught. Sidoh and Midora certainly depended on it.

With that out of the way, he watched her clench the receipt in one hand and put the pen away with the other so as to replace it with her phone. She flipped it open and went straight for her contacts to select the one she wanted. Though the reception was not as good as it would have been outside, it was adequate enough for the purposes of this call.

"Hello?"

"Mikami? It's Takada."

It would've been barely noticeable in someone else's ears, but the second she said her name his tone sounded lighter. "Ah. Hello, Takada. How are you?"

"I'm fine. But please tell me, what does your schedule look like for the rest of the day?"

"I go home at five, will have dinner at six, and then go work out at nine. Why do you ask?" Mikami didn't believe in vacations or weekends, his rationale being that crime never took a break, so there was no reason he should. Kiyomi had teased him once or twice about doing overtime
without enough time to rest; besides she couldn't imagine he'd get much done on the weekends or holidays when not many others shared his work ethic. If he hadn't already cracked from all of this exertion, he hid it well.

He never mentioned having any other friends or social engagements aside from her and their lunch or dinner meetings. In fact, she wouldn't have been surprised if she was the only meaningful human contact he'd had, possibly in years if not his whole life. And a part of her sincerely hoped that it would stay that way.

Teru could never resist someone in distress. "Oh, I don't mean to impede on your time, but…I really need to see you, tonight at your place, preferably. I'm afraid I can't tell you why over the phone. If you'll have me, I'd like to come over for dinner."

…

Misa didn't know Kiyomi, at least on a personal level, but the latter was hard to forget even before she'd skyrocketed to recognition in Japan. They'd only met once. Kiyomi had been one of Light's many flings in college, although from the looks of it she had fancied the relationship to be much more than that. She was stuck-up like that, a textbook example of an ojou of an especially virulent type: the kind that might have looked graceful and respectable in public, but if you got close enough to look at her core you'd find one of the biggest, haughtiest bitches you'd probably ever meet in your life. The kind that put on a smile when she passed you like she hadn't just snuck out of the closet after making out (and likely more) with your boyfriend, doing so only because she felt entitled to have anything she wanted including all the men, taken or not.

And this was all before Kiyomi had made that move to off her parents. As terrible as she and Mello were as people, the news had left a very sour taste in both of their mouths, being orphans themselves who unlike Kiyomi had had no choice in the matter.

In hindsight, maybe Light and Kiyomi would have been a more suitable match. The day he died, he'd said and done something that Misa didn't like. She couldn't remember what exactly, but it'd had something to do with his father. She couldn't trust her re-written memories anymore. He'd probably tried to kill him using the notebook. Misa would have been able to justify everything else he'd ever done, even seeing other girls in spite of her protests, but not that.

As for Mello, he never knew either of his parents. From what he'd gathered over the years his mother had been the disgraced ballerina Rane Keehl, who went into hiding as a nun while she was pregnant with him. Although aware of the controversy that would have surrounded the church for this, Brother Ivan took her in and assisted in delivering Mello in secret when the time came.

That night she quietly slipped out into the winter darkness and thereafter was never heard from again.

While Mello doubted he'd ever be able to forgive her for leaving him—as irrational as it was to begrudge someone he never met and chances were never would—he didn't think he'd kill her over it either. After all, she'd had enough decency to leave him at a convent to be cared for and not say, a dumpster tied up in a trash bag.

Then again, given what he'd grown up to be, maybe she should have picked the dumpster?

"I still don't see why you don't just kill her after she gives you the notebook," Misa muttered into his ear. The two sat on his bed decorated with leopard-skin sheets with Misa slumped over him, her firm breasts pressed against his back and one hand snaked under his leather vest to stroke his chest with her fingertips, her other arm strapped over him like a sash so she could squeeze at the opposite
shoulder. "She totally deserves it."

Her hair was draped over his shoulder as she dropped kisses along his jawline and neck as he spoke. "You know why. I'm not interested in playing judge, jury and executioner, and I don't really count on her giving me her notebook. More likely she'll give me a fake and pass the real one on to someone else, someone she trusts will carry on her 'mission.' More importantly, someone who'd be more willing to make the Eye Deal."

Misa clicked her tongue. "Why don't you save yourself all that trouble, force Kiyomi to give you it with your notebook and then let me make the Deal? I did it for Light; I'd be glad to do it for you too, Mello-yellow."

In spite of the tiny jolts of pleasure shooting up from where Misa landed her fingers and lips, he scowled. "And let you find out my real name? Fat chance."

Mello had found a way around the ownership rules so that he could always keep his memories no matter what happened. As long as he didn't use the notebook when he was the owner, and used it when he wasn't, his memories would stay intact. He only trusted one person in this whole place to pass ownership onto when he saw fit, and when he'd tentatively suggested to make the Deal Mello almost socked him in the eye.

Instead he'd pinned Matt to the wall by his shoulders, got up in his slightly startled face and snarled his rejection with no uncertainty. "How dare you come to me with such a stupid idea?"

No, it wasn't. It might have made everything easier if he let him. Mello only said that because he couldn't bear the idea of Matt giving up half his remaining lifespan. He hadn't rescued him just to have Matt throw away half his life, even for his sake. Also, Matt would see his real name and while he knew he'd never betray him, someone else here might use that against him. Neylon, for instance. He'd be taken care of soon enough.

"Okay, okay! I didn't really wanna do it anyway. I was just making a suggestion."

"Don't ever do that to me again. And don't even think of doing it behind my back; Lumen will tell me if you do."

Lumen would, too. Not because he cared but to stir up drama for drama's sake. The mafia had become his personal live-action soap opera: the more drama, the better.

"Well, I know you won't let Matt do it. At least if I did it you'd know the job would get done. Taki might not do what you expect of her after all."

"My answer is no, Misa. Takada will do it. She isn't above us. She's got her habits like everyone else. Why are you pressing the matter at all? Unless you're having second thoughts about—"

"I don't second-guess anything. I told you, you can do anything you want to her short of physically hurting or killing her. Or her family."

He quirked his neck. "Are you sure you want to let me fuck her over like this? There's no going back once this goes through. Your friend may not be able to work as a journalist again. We could be ruining her whole life."

"It's for a good cause. If she's going to do what I need her to, I need to break her the way I was. You've said yourself that revenge is the greatest motivation there is."

"That I did."
She fit her head into the crook of his neck and squeezed him tighter. "But you know what? I think love is even stronger than revenge. Without love, you wouldn't be so inclined to get revenge."

A brief moment of silence dropped between them as Misa started to get grabbier.

"Mm. For now I think you deserve a treat for showing that bitch what for," she purred, releasing him so she could slink around him on all fours like an animal in perpetual heat (which if Mello thought about it, was what humans seemed to be among other things, never mind that this analogy was technically biologically incorrect). At first it looked like she was going to offer her hindquarters to him like she often did but instead she guided him up to the headboard and captured his lips in a wet, hungry, tongue-filled kiss.

"I'm going to suck you off," she announced upon pulling away, her fingers temporarily tangled in his hair. The two of them were already becoming breathless from all of this tension. "Would you like that?"

"Wait," he panted. He pushed her away to get to the nightstand and dig through the drawer. From it he pulled out one chocolate-flavored condom and three Trojan™ condoms of different types from the Pleasure Pack™. He figured from experience that Misa might not stop at a simple blowjob, so he'd best be prepared.

Misa pouted when she saw the flavored condom posed in his hand. "Aw c'mon, Mello! Wearing a rubber when we have sex is one thing—even though you know I'm on the Pill—but for a blowjob, too? Don't you trust me? You're the only one I've been with."

"Trust you? Really?" he chuckled darkly. "Don't take it too personally, though. By principle, I don't trust anyone."

Almost anyone.

"But I want to taste you," she moaned.

Mello undid his vest and slipped it off to toss it over the headboard. "It's not all it's cracked up to be. But I'll tell you what: when I'm finished, I'll give you the rubber to drink out of if you want to taste it that much. And I'll get to watch. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Misa didn't answer that time with words but with a soft moan of excitement. The heat blooming through her body from her core outward was becoming too much to bear and her thighs quivered with need, that familiar wetness and sudden hollowness building up between them.

"I thought you would," he hissed, reaching over to ball her gown up in his fists and yank it off her like he wanted to tear it to shreds. His eyes seemed wild and sharp like icicles about to drop and pierce her skull if she didn't get out of their way. She didn't want to. She wanted him to pierce her, in every way possible.

As she wiggled her way out and he left her in only her panties, he continued: "You like being humiliated. Being hurt. Dominated. Punished. I'm like a surrogate for you. I do to you the sort of things you would have wanted him to do. Things that he might have done if he'd just had the time. Then again, maybe he wouldn't have? No interest. Or maybe he was too scared that you would have seen how small he actually was? The god of the new world has a cocktail frank between his legs he could barely tickle you with let alone fuck you. Perish the thought! Too bad we'll never know, huh? It's long since rotted with the rest of him."

"Th-that's just a rumor, y'know! Some racist made that up," she snapped, hurriedly ripping off her
panties so she could be completely exposed to him. If it weren't for the fact that they lived with other men she might have forgone wearing panties altogether. Everything he said, even the parts she didn't like to hear, they were all true. Barring the part about Light's manhood of course, if only because she never got to see the proof either way for herself. "Just because he was Japanese doesn't mean he—"

"And how would you know? You just told me I'm the only one you've been with. Mine's the only one you've seen that wasn't in a textbook or porno. And you don't want anyone else's, do you? I'm the best there is. Ha, Hideki must have been on the same boat. It's really no wonder you cheated on him with me that easily."

"Yes," she gasped, her breasts jiggling slightly with every breath she drew like he was already fucking her with his mere words. "Oh yes Mello, you're the best." She got down on all fours once more and crawled up to his lap. Her fingers fumbled with the strings holding his leather pants in place. As she did this, Mello combed his own fingers through her hair and brushed the tender skin of her neck and back, making her shiver. The gesture felt complacent and possessive, like he was stroking a pet. And like a pet, Misa wagged her nonexistent tail by wiggling her rear end in the air. Would Light have touched her the same way if she ever got moments like this with him? Or would he have simply ignored her like he did when they were together as he thought of himself too good for her, shelling out only scraps of affection if she hung around long enough and yowled for it loud enough?

"Tell me Misa, who are you madder at: Kira for betraying and abandoning you? Or L for stealing him away and wrecking your already doomed fairy tale?"

"I—I don't know," she gasped, her mind too foggy with lust at the moment to really think over his question. Even with what little she remembered on her own, she knew they had both wronged her. But exactly how much of her misfortune had been their fault and how much of it was hers? Damn it, why wouldn't these strings come loose?

"We're a lot alike, you and I. We both dove blindly into empty causes and ended up deserted by false idols we thought gave a damn about us, or at least that they might if we tried hard enough for them. Kira was your justification for everything you did, L was mine. And now that they're gone, what have we got left to excuse ourselves? What gives our lives meaning now? We're alone, both of us to our own sins with no one to repent to. Not even to each other. You can't play the victim anymore, Misa. You can use me all you want to try forgetting it but you'll always be alone even as you're about to shove my dick down your throat and up your cunt and pretend that it's his—"

"Mello please shut up and gimme that rubber!" she cried out with more intensity than might have been appropriate but she didn't care. By this time she was tearing his pants down to his ankles, which he aided by raising his hips just high enough to let her pull them off his waist which was slightly red and creased from the constrictions of his wardrobe. She felt him brush against her flushed cheek underneath the fabric, stiff with frustration and desire.

Mello tilted his head back with one hand supporting the back of it and laughed again. "As you wish."

…

Matt knew right away what was happening when he heard the telltale moans, pants and shouts from under the locked door, and saw Lumen leaning against the wall gobbling down another bag of chips.

Aw Christ, they're at it again?
The two locked eyes. "They started to get nasty in there so I stepped out," the shinigami said smugly. "But it sounds like they're having fun. Boy, you're really missing out."

Matt would not dignify that with a reply. He simply clapped his hands over his ears and picked up the pace, trying to drown out the noise in his mind with a song his father had taught him, "The Ball of Kerrymuir." Not a child-appropriate song, but his old man had been a drunk.

... Although the task force—or at least what was left of them—had since moved to a new hotel following the massacre, the eerie silence that had fallen after the fact seemed to have followed them. In all of the chaos Erin didn't get time to confront Near on the matter until two days later, when she rapped on the door to his room. When he didn't answer, her rapping increased to pounding.

"L? Are you up?"

"Yes," said the computer sitting on the coffee table. "What do you want?"

"What the hell, man? Why didn't you tell us that Matt was from Wammy's House? He was standing right there the whole time; we coulda brought him in sooner!" Two solid days and she couldn't recall one moment when her face wasn't damp and swollen from tears. It'd gotten to a point where she'd had to forego her contacts for the time being and switch to her glasses.

"And risk you taking matters into your own hands?"

Erin slammed the heel of her hand into her forehead. "Oh for Chrissake, I don't mean just me. You should have told all of us. I warned you about being honest. If you'd have been upfront about this from the beginning maybe this wouldn't have happened? You seem to like being the boss so much so why don't you act like it?"

"And what about you?" Near's altered voice asked coldly. "I tried to warn you about Amane, Ms. Blogger, and you wouldn't hear it. So was there really a point to tell you about M2 when you're already prone to missing the obvious? It's a wonder you still have a job with the paper. To be honest, from the moment I met you I pegged you as someone who's much more useful when she isn't told everything."

"Th-that's just weak! That doesn't excuse you for not saying anything about him!" she shouted, before sinking against the wall to the floor. "What about Anthony and Halle and Stephen? I get if you've got a problem with me but you don't even trust them? You see? This is what I was talking about!" She wrapped her arms around her knees taking off her glasses so she could wipe her eyes dry on the fabric of her jeans. Against her will she sobbed a bit more into her legs for a moment or two, the revelations from these past few days still ripping out her insides.

Having seen this sort of thing before she'd have thought it would have toughened her up, but it didn't feel like the case.

Out of everyone in the task force, only Near, Roger, Anthony, Halle, Stephen and herself were still standing. Isaac probably didn't kill the other five because he either never got their real names or he hadn't had enough time to write them. But what about her? He knew her name and it was simple enough. Why wasn't she killed?

Misa. She was in cahoots with Mello and Matt after all. She must have requested that they spare her, for what reason she couldn't be sure.
Misa…oh, Misa. Why? How the hell did this happen? WHEN did this happen?

Roger cracked the door to Near's room open and saw her sitting there on the floor. He disappeared for a bit before coming back with a box of tissues. Upon sidling out past her and closing the door, he cleared his throat and said, "Ms. Blogger?"

She looked up. "Oh. Thanks," she sniffed, taking the box from him and helping herself to several sheets.

"Erm…would you like to sit down elsewhere? The sofa, perhaps?" Comfort didn't come as naturally from him as it had from Quillish, but he tried.

"Uh-huh. H-hold on." With Roger's help Erin staggered back onto her feet and ambled towards the sofa where she sat back down in front of the laptop. She blew her nose. "Fine. So maybe this is both our faults."

"Well, yours more so than mine."

"Hey, you shut up! If anything I'd say it was more your—no. No, I-I'm not gonna play that game with you. That's how we got in trouble in the first place. The first L used to do that a lot and I didn't like it then either. We gotta trust each other more from now on. But at the same time, we need to be more honest with each other. I just wish we didn't have to learn this at the expense of…just about everyone. Elliot, Larry, Ellickson, Darryl, John, Kurt, Adolf…my God."

There was a pause before Near gave a response to this. "If you're wrong, you need only to say you're sorry and move on."

"Sorry? Sorry! That's all you've got to say? Huh, do you even mean it? The only thing worse than not saying you're sorry is saying it when you don't mean it."

"Well, I'm sorry if it sounds as though I don't care about these men. But I'm not like you, Ms. Blogger. I don't become unnaturally involved with people. It's indeed unfortunate that this happened and the families have my condolences, but we can't drop everything because of this one setback. Therefore, while the victims are all going to get funeral services, I think it's best that none of you attend them."

"WHAT? Dude, these guys have probably worked together for years, long before you ever came along! At the very least they deserve to get to see them off!"

"They can see their graves whenever they want after this case is resolved. Until then, the sentiment will have to wait."

This was horrible. Near sounded like L in his worst moments. When Ukita had died, L wouldn't let the gang go to his funeral either. Not that she was there to see that; Matsuda had told her about it. Apparently he didn't want to flirt with the chance that Kira or the Second Kira would be there to see the others' faces and kill them too. Since most of the police had withdrawn from the investigation by then, L couldn't afford to lose any more men. Or so was the reason he'd have given if anyone asked.

She was about to protest how that wouldn't be the same when she stopped and remembered this. What if the CIA or FBI or whoever these men had been with wouldn't send Near any more help after this disaster? What if he wouldn't accept it if they did? After all, one of them had turned out to be a mole for Mello. And there was no way he was going to want to show this face to the others now.
She sniffled, "You know L, there's a difference between staying distant for the sake of your job and just being a misanthropic psychopath."

"That depends on how you would classify either one."

She was getting nowhere with him on this. Erin had no choice but to change the topic: "Have you talked to Aizawa lately? I don't remember you ever telling him about Mello. We gotta warn them about him and Misa, and whatever else you might know. Oh God, I hope we're not too late."

"No, the M I know is not the type for wanton murder. At this moment in time he has no feasible reason to bother the former Kira task force. But you may have a point; it's best that they be alerted now. Watari will tend to that immediately."

Not the type for...what the fuck d'ya call this then?

Roger came back from around the corner with lunch for Near. Upon seeing the frustrated look on Erin's face, he spoke up. "I know he sounds unreasonable right now, but please try to understand his point of view," he said softly. "He finds it preferable to close himself off from the world rather than try to make sense of it. I promise you, I will see to it that Director Aizawa is brought up to speed about the situation."

"Hmph. If you asked me, I think he's too closed off. And you let him be. He couldn't trust us enough to tell us about Matt and now look where we are. You're the adult, Watari; you're supposed to take charge. He's freaking seventeen. Contrary to what he mighta been told at school he doesn't know everything."

Roger's face took its turn in hardening. "You don't think I've tried? We go by a certain philosophy at the House: we take the necessary precautions but the best way a student learns and grows is when he's allowed to choose for himself, to make mistakes and reap the consequences."

"Mistake? Eight people have just died, Watari! L made a mistake and we had for pay for it! Fuck, that came out wrong," she growled upon realizing what her comment might have implied. "I-I'm not saying he shoulda died too but this is pigeon shit! You can't just let them run wild! Look what happened to M."

"Well forgive me if I sound rude, Ms. Blogger, but as someone who as far as I know has no children of her own nor any experience in raising them, especially children like L or M, I don't believe you have a right to pass judgment."

"Yeah right! I don't know if you have any kids of your own either but I don't think I need to know that to know you'd make a pretty lousy father if that's what you think. And if that's what the first Watari believed then what the hell does that say about him?"

Suddenly Roger looked stunned, like she'd just punched him in the irritable gut but was trying to maintain the stiff-upper-lip composure of an English gentleman in spite of it. Anger flashed through his eyes for a moment or two but rather than say or do anything to act on it, he regained balance of the lunch tray and passed her by to get back to Near's room. She wasn't worth losing his temper.

She shouldn't have said that.

"He might not show it, Ms. Blogger," he said before opening the door and stepping inside, "but believe me, he's suffering over this as much as we are. He is not going to make this mistake again."
Erin needed to go outside for air, cool her feathers. She felt as rotten as moldy two-week-old leftovers that had been forgotten. Regardless of who had screwed up worse here, flipping her lid wouldn't help anyone. Right now she needed to lend her support to the survivors. And Kimiko. Poor Kimiko had no clue what had happened to Misa, and of course they couldn't tell her the truth. A missing person's report was already underway of being filed, they'd do their best to find her, hopefully alive.

Oh God.

But first she'd better go wash up her face. Once she got down to the foyer of the hotel she slipped into the bathroom and picked a sink. After taking off her glasses she cupped her hands under the warm running water and splashed her face several times. As she blindly groped around for the paper towels, she heard a stall swing open followed by heels clacking up next to her.

Erin drew the balled-up towels away from her face to see Halle in the process of washing her hands. She rubbed and scratched the suds off of them quite vigorously, leaving not one place untouched, including the commonly neglected areas highlighted by the health poster to Erin's left. Every few seconds she would reach over and squirt more soap into her palm.

When she finished Halle turned the water off, only to curse under her breath when she realized that she'd done so without a paper towel. She turned it back on and started all over again. Unlike Erin Halle showed no signs of crying, but that didn't mean she wasn't shaken by what had just happened. She could see her choppy blond bangs pasting to her forehead by a very thin sheen of sweat.

"Halle? A-are you okay?" Erin asked weakly. "You've been washing your hands for three minutes straight. You're only s'posed to do it for twenty seconds." She'd never seen her like this before.

"I'm fine," she said curtly. "I'll be fine."

No, you're not. How could you be? Almost all the guys you worked with just died. And you could've been one of them.

"Keep that up and you're gonna scrub your fingers right off." Erin tossed her used towels into the trash and started to get more from the dispenser to pass on to Halle.

"No. No, don't do that," the older woman said quickly. "Let me get them."

"My hands aren't that dirty."

"Please, just let me get my own towels! Jesus, I don't need everyone treating me like I'm an invalid," snapped Halle.

Erin drew back and granted her access to the dispenser, remembering how flustered she looked when Isaac had made fun of the fact that she took Zoloft™. She wondered how much flack she'd gotten for it in the past, especially from her male co-workers. "I-I wasn't trying to do that, I was just offering you towels."

"Thanks but no thanks. And in case this is your next question, no, I don't want to sit and talk about it right now. I don't have time."

"Uh…okay, Halle. But you know when you want to, I'll be around."

Erin picked up her glasses and started to walk out, turning back once to see Halle moisten a few towels so she could dab at her neck and face. If she hadn't felt so crummy and helpless before…
It was almost always the same: she'd get mad, say whatever mean or stupid thing that first sprang up in her mind, and then have no idea how to soothe things over after she'd calmed down (relatively speaking). Old habits died hard.

She saw Stephen out in the lobby on a couch like he was waiting for someone. Stephen, oh Stephen! He could have died too. Sorrow, horror and relief crashed over her once again the moment she saw him there. His posture was more slumped than usual and he was staring at the floor with his hands dangling between his knees. She couldn't tell if he was racked with grief or lost in thought or both, but something she couldn't describe came over her then that compelled her to run across the room to him.

"Stephen!"

He glanced up, looking a bit surprised. "Erin?"

She flopped into the couch and pulled him into a desperate hug without a single thought as to who saw. And then, she did the unthinkable.

Before he could respond, she grasped the lapels of his suit and kissed him.

For a first kiss, it was not particularly romantic. It was mostly hard and clumsy and coffee and spit and lips smushed against each other and her eyes squeezing shut and their noses crashing together and Stephen trying to pull her away, which he managed to do about five seconds into it. It might have been shorter had he recovered from the shock of the gesture quicker.

"Ow!"

Before she knew it he had her by the upper arms and both were slightly out of breath. Her head felt light enough to detach from her body and Stephen was grimacing on top of it, his lower lip protruded outward to reveal a growing spot of blood over the top of it.

"I fink 'oo pit my lip," was the first thing he said.

When she saw and heard that, Erin wanted to shrink down to the size of a dime and fall between the couch cushions. How could she force herself on him like that and in public to boot? She'd ruined their first kiss. It was Danny and the second grade all over again. No, this was worse. What if Stephen wouldn't want anything to do with her ever again?

She adjusted her glasses and turned away, ashamed to look him in the eye. She rubbed at the corners of her mouth which suddenly felt wet and crusty. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry! Stephen, I'm sorry, I-I don't know what came over me I swear—"

"No, i-it's okay," he said with as much of a smile as he could muster as he started to instinctively lick and suck at the wound. "I won't hold you to it. You're only human, and they say that the threat of death is a tremendous aphrodisiac."

Erin's face was on fire like she'd fallen and laid it on a hot frying pan. That Stephen, trying to be funny and sweet about this whole thing. It just about killed her. "I still shouldn't have done that. I'm so sorry. That was way outta line, especially after…you know."

Stephen slowly drew her back in by one arm so she could place her head on his shoulder and he put his head on top of hers. "I have to agree with you on that; something never felt right to me about making moves on a woman when she's emotionally vulnerable. Feels like you're taking advantage of her, in a way."
Erin gasped. "Oh no, is that what I just did to you? I'm not a user Stephen, I swear to God I'm not —"

"Ssssh. I believe you. That's not what I meant, please don't put words in my mouth. For now let's put this behind us. I believe in do-overs. We can try that kiss again when the mood's more appropriate."

She sighed, eventually allowing herself to return his embrace. "I just…I wanted to trust her, Stephen. I thought she'd gotten past all this Kira PS. But I was wrong. Again. Somehow M's got a hold of her and they're working together now. I feel like this is my fault…"

"Hey. You didn't know. Misa shouldn't have remembered anything; of course you wouldn't suspect her. If L had told us everything about M and Matt from the start we might have been able to respond differently and averted this. And there's no way anyone could have guessed that Isaac was a spy. I thought there was something off about him but I never—"

"Hm. With that in mind though, I wonder if this would have happened anyway. I guess we'll never know. Say, did you see Halle anywhere?"

"In the bathroom. She hasn't come back out yet, has she? She was really getting into washing her hands."

Stephen frowned. "That's what I was afraid of. Listen, I couldn't look up any nearby synagogues but I did find a non-denominational chapel. I was planning to stop by there to pray for the guys since we can't go to their funerals. I want you and Halle to come with me; I think it'll help a little. Anthony's gone to do the paperwork and prepare their bodies."

"Y-yeah. Okay. You've known Halle longer than I have. Maybe you can persuade her to go? She seems really on edge and I don't think I helped that very much."

…

"Stephen, do you believe in God?"

"I don't follow religious practices as closely as some would say I ought to—first of all I don't think some of them would be practical with the kind of job I have—but yeah, I like to think there's a god. Why?" He stroked her shoulder and arm.

"Well, I know I mention Him a lot when I swear and all but these past few years and lately I've been wondering if He really exists, or if He does what His angle is. I didn't think about it much growing up, I didn't have a reason to question it then. Never mind all the other bad stuff that happens in the world; how could an all-knowing, all-powerful and benevolent god allow something like you-know-what to exist?"

Stephen shrugged. "Most religious leaders might chalk it up as the work of demons. The Devil and all that."

"Somehow that sounds too convenient, and it contradicts a shipload of other things too. I'm starting to think that maybe God doesn't exist after all. Or at least not the kind of God we think of."

"I never really bought into the idea of God being perfect myself," Stephen admitted. "Or all-powerful or all-knowing. If He was perfect and He made us then why aren't we perfect? I know I'd get in trouble if I said that to the wrong people but seriously. Have you seen how He's like in the Old Testament? Arrogant, jealous, hair-trigger temper…he sounds like an alcoholic dad or bad boss. But I think even that's a bit exaggerated. If God were actively malicious or vindictive I think
life would suck much worse than it already does. I think He is intelligent and does care about us... but we've still got minds of our own. We're gonna make mistakes and He can't clean up the messes we make. He doesn't want to smite everything and everyone that goes awry, assuming that He could. We have to clean up after ourselves. After we've done all we can, He'll step in to tie up the loose ends. At least that's what I believe. I could be wrong. I'm still baffled myself about the whole you-know-what."

She thought about the first Kira case and all the people that had died and the many more left to grieve them and pick up the pieces. God was basically like any of them, just with a few super-powers.

People that use the Death Note can't go to Heaven or Hell. They turn to nothingness.

"Do you think praying for them will help them at all?"

Stephen then had a look on his face like he wanted to give her a comforting answer to that, but knew that he couldn't. "Well...it helps us, at any rate. It's helped me through a rough patch or two."

...

What could Kiyomi want to see him about so urgently that she couldn't go into details over the phone? He didn't question her, but ever since that call Teru had stewed over it for the rest of the day and on the train ride home. He couldn't imagine her to be in the best shape emotionally, not since her parents had died in that fire. All the publicity surrounding it couldn't be helping her either. It had been ruled as a double-suicide.

Teru never met her parents but he knew that the Takadas were a prominent family. What would drive them to do such a thing? Marital issues that had spiraled out of control? Or had the police misinterpreted the evidence at the crime scene and it had actually been an act of arson? Teru would have looked into it personally, but he already had his plate full with other criminal cases.

Since this visit had been rather short-notice he'd went and got takeout, having only had enough food to make dinner for himself. Normally even the slightest changes to his schedule agitated him, but he could always make an exception for dear Kiyomi.

He made sure to go over his apartment at least twice over so that all would look presentable when she arrived. They both had a taste for classical music so he put a CD with Mozart's symphonies from his collection into the stereo and set the volume to 10: loud enough to hear, soft enough to stay within ordinances and enjoy.

He had just finished straightening himself up when he heard her rap on his door. Few things got him truly excited but for some reason he found his heart beat a bit more rapidly in his chest than usual as he promptly went to answer her. Why did he get the feeling that something great and wondrous was about to happen? He did feel in higher spirits lately since criminals had started to die again (which he longed to believe with all his being was Kira's doing but after almost four years of inactivity on his god's part he had to settle for cautious optimism), but there was this strange swell of intuition that after tonight his life would never be the same.

All dressed in white with the dim street lights creating a halo around her, she looked lovely. Like a Prime Minister's wife or royalty. Maybe even an angel.

They shared a bow in greeting. "Hello, Kiyomi. You look nice. Please come in, dinner's all set."
A smile creased her painted lips at the compliment. "Thank you, I will."

She took off her heels and placed them on the mat next to the door. "I...hope you don't mind takeout. I didn't have time to prepare a home-cooked meal for both of us."

"Oh no, I don't mind. I trust your tastes. Is that Mozart I hear?"

"Yes," he replied as he shut the door behind him. "If you'd like I can switch it out for someone else, like Beethoven or Tchaikovsky—"

"Mozart's fine." Why was she just standing there holding her purse? Perhaps he should cut to the chase?

"Kiyomi, is something the matter? You sounded rather anxious when you called me this afternoon. What did you want to talk about?"

She looked as though she were searching the walls and ceiling for something he couldn't see. He dared not press her any further until she answered him. When she finally turned to him her face seemed to glow, like she'd found the answer to all of her troubles. "All right, so it's safe here. They haven't come yet."

"Safe? What do you mean by that?"

She took a deep breath. "Teru, there's something I need to tell you. I am Kira."

Those last three words knocked all the wind from him and he held on to the doorknob for dear life. Kiyomi, KIRA? He always found something special about her, but he never would have thought—he always thought that Kira was male, for one thing.

But maybe that just showed what he knew, which after this revelation was clearly nothing. All of a sudden she looked so radiant in his eyes, which began to water with weakness and emotion as his rattled mind was brimming with a million questions. "Kiyomi...y-you're Kira? You are God? But, I-I don't understand. If you're Kira then why did you stop punishing the wicked for four years?"

Her smile had a twinge of sadness in it. "I admit, I wasn't always Kira. Someone else was carrying out righteous judgment before me, but he disappeared. I'm afraid I couldn't tell you who he was or what happened to him, but it doesn't matter now. His power has passed on to me, and now I am Kira. I am the second avatar of Kira, Teru, don't you see? I'm the one that killed Demegawa."

"And your parents? What happened to them?"

"That was me, too. I didn't want to but I had to. They didn't support my crusade. They deserved to be punished."

Why would she lie to him? If she said that they deserved it, then they must have. God was never wrong and besides he could relate at least about this much. When he was growing up his own mother had been unsupportive of his personal crusade against evil, and she too had paid for her insolence with her life.

Kiyomi had been the only person he ever really meshed with. Now she had revealed to him her true divinity. He was special. Somehow on some level he always knew it and now that he had his confirmation it made him want to cry. It overwhelmed him so to hear God say his name so tenderly. But he withheld his tears for a while longer.

"So...why have you chosen to reveal your identity to me, Kiyomi? Or, should I call you God..."
"Either one is fine, although it's better to call me Kiyomi or Takada when we're in public. I have decided to tell you this because I need you," she pleaded softly, holding out her arms to him in beckoning. "I had a premonition that the police are starting to suspect me, and someone called me earlier today demanding that I hand my power over to him. I don't trust him. But I trust you. Please help me, Teru. I will lend you my powers and you will become my right hand, and have a special place in the new world as the guardian of the gates."

She shouldn't have bothered with the offer. With his head bowed in reverence, he let go of the knob and approached her slowly, his clammy hands trembling and clasped together to his chest. When he felt he had gotten close enough to her without violating the league separating them, he dropped to his knees and touched his head to the floor.

"I am your servant. I will do all that you ask of me," he whispered, his heart now pounding painfully against his ribs.

"Excellent. Thank you, Teru. I knew I could come to you. First I'll show you the instrument of my power and tell you how it works. It's in my bag. When you touch it you'll be able to see Umbra, one of my other servants. Try to keep calm. He might look frightening but he's pleasant, if a bit dull."

Kiyomi bent over him to lift him up by the shoulders, where she could see his dark eyes large and shining with devotion and awe. He looked like what he truly was: not the quiet and collected attorney with the impressive winning streak, but the tenacious, wide-eyed bully-hunter that never really grew up.

She pushed his glasses back up on his face for him. It felt good to have power over someone again, a man no less. Good enough for her to give in to her own temptation and catch his quivering mouth in a slow kiss. He went rigid against her for a few seconds like he couldn't believe how God could be so affectionate towards him in such a way, but he gradually gave in and melted into her lips like he wanted to taste the wisdom dripping from them.
"A cynical young person is almost the saddest sight to see because it means that he or she has gone from knowing nothing to believing nothing."

- Maya Angelou

"Remember, you cannot be both young and wise. Young people who pretend to be wise to the ways of the world are mostly just cynics. Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it is the farthest thing from it. Because cynics don't learn anything. Because cynicism is a self-imposed blindness, a rejection of the world because we are afraid it will hurt us or disappoint us. Cynics always say no. But saying yes begins things. Saying yes is how things grow. Saying yes leads to knowledge. Yes is for young people. So for as long as you have the strength to, say yes."

- Stephen Colbert

"I'm so sorry if I'm sounding forceful, Mr. Wammy, but we've done all that we could for him. We think he'd be better off somewhere else, somewhere that would be...better suited for children like him."

"No, no please, I understand. If I may I'd like to speak to him personally, see what he thinks about this arrangement."

"Very well. But be careful. He seems to enjoy playing with people's minds." Cold warning laced Mrs. Wheal's words that had not slipped by Quillish. Even though the boy they had been discussing had just turned eight she had spoken of him like he were a burgeoning criminal mastermind, or worse. While he hadn't tortured or killed any small animals (at least as far as they knew), he sounded like the textbook problem child. He spent most of his time ignoring the other children and the rest of it antagonizing them, and if not them then the staff and faculty. He had been involved in several fights and hoarded most of the puzzles and whatever sweets he could find.

Though they hadn't had the chance to speak before this point, Quillish knew of him from before. Four years ago Roger had rescued him by calling the authorities after luring the boy's kidnapper into his office for an appointment. Karol Ackart, a manic-depressive French woman who had worked for Lamar and Adele Lawliet as a maid, had been on the lam for four years prior to that. Her madness exacerbated by her private struggles with infertility and a string of miscarriages, she'd fatally shot the couple in their home and whisked their at the time newborn son out of the country, killing her own husband Martin along the way when he'd tried to stop her.

The trial had been a sensational affair while it'd lasted only to sink back into obscurity as abruptly as it had sprang up, as it happened for all high-profile criminal trials. Currently Mrs. Ackart was in prison serving a life sentence; had it not been for her gender, illness and somewhat sympathetic story that had swayed the jury—for all of her instability she did seem to genuinely love the boy and allegedly had kept insisting for nothing more than that they let her see him—she might have gotten the death penalty.

Meanwhile the boy, curiously named L, had had no other relatives to claim him (or if he did have any no one stepped up due to the strong suspicion that he was the product of an affair Adele had had under the old gentleman's nose; his mild Japanese features were a tip-off to his true paternal origins). So he'd spent four more years hopping from place to place, this time through foster care.
and eventually children's homes of various conditions. The longest he'd stayed anywhere was four months.

He found him in one of his usual spots: in the closet perched under the bottom shelf like a bird locked in a cage. His face was hidden behind a newspaper that he held up by the top corners pinched between his thumbs and pointing fingers. On his right shined a lamp that he had likely stolen off someone's desk; on his left, a jar of biscuits.

Without moving the paper to glance up at him, the boy's soft flat voice asked, "Close the door please. It's too bright in here now."

Quillish twisted his neck slightly and smiled down at him. He did not question why he was hiding in the closet. He believed children responded better if he approached them as one of their friends would, like an equal, without interrogation. They'd tell you anything once they felt safe enough around you and with proper incentive. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to have more light in here?"

"I like it dark." In spite of the boy's nationality, his grasp on the English language was remarkable, especially for someone his age. According to one of his tests, he'd scored an intelligence quotient of 170. This had been one of the reasons Quillish had been consulted in the first place.

"Ah. Well, if those are where your preferences lie, you could sit in one of the armchairs with the curtains drawn."

"No. I prefer my closet. It's the only place here where I can get total peace and quiet. I don't like sharing a room. But no matter how much I say so, Mrs. Wheal says she can't treat me any differently than she treats everyone else."

"Hm. I see. That annoys you, doesn't it?"

L didn't answer then, at least with words. He grunted to himself. Quillish took that as an affirmative. It was then that he noticed a blanket balled up in the corner. Mrs. Wheal had mentioned that he liked sleeping in the closet rather than his assigned cot.

"I'd tell you to go away but I've been told that that's not very polite and people respond better when you're polite. So I'll say please go away."

"I'm sorry if I'm bothering you. I won't be for much longer. Please, call me Quillish, and if you don't mind may I ask what you are reading?" Although no longer as limber or light as he used to be, Quillish knelt down so as to be more at L's level, physically and psychologically. He seemed like a harmless enough boy. Strange, aloof, precocious, blunt to the point of rude, but not quite the little psychopathic beastie Mrs. Wheal had painted in her office. Best to get the boy's side of the story before moving any further.

"I'm reading today's paper," L answered flatly, still without looking at him. Though he did reach over to pick a biscuit out of the jar. It disappeared behind the paper and Quillish could now hear grunts and sloshes of open-mouthed chewing.

"Anything worthy of note?"

He heard a loud gulp. "I wouldn't have bothered to pick it up if there wasn't. Quillish, what business do you have with me? No, don't tell me: you're here to take me to a different home, aren't you?"

He noted the small stack of newspapers set off to the side. Judging by its size, they must have spanned back at least two weeks.
Hmm… why would he be collecting the paper for this long? Is he following a story? Come to think of it, there has been one story of great interest that has been covered for this long, and it's still ongoing.

"Why, whatever would give you that idea…I don't believe you've told me your name."

"I don't have to. You already know that it's L. And that's the only reason anyone would seek me out anymore. You and Mrs. Wheal were talking about me and her intention to send me someplace else. Not that I mind leaving if that's your concern; I have never been too fond of this place. It's boring. But I don't feel like packing right now. I have a more pressing matter to get to."

A pang of sadness shot through Quillish when he heard this, but his smile broadened a tiny bit more. At least he was opening up, if in increments. "This pressing matter wouldn't happen to have to do with the bombings in Winchester, would it? A terrible business, that."

…

"Maybe, but it's interesting. A shame that they've gone this long without catching the culprits. At this rate another World War could break out if something isn't done. I think I could solve it if I were allowed. But I need more information than what the press has presented. If I could only get in touch with the Hampshire Constabulary and have them tell me what they know…"

Quillish raised a thoughtful finger to his lips while he rested his chin on his thumb. He was already piecing together his own theory behind the enigmatic boy. He felt unsettled and unchallenged. That was why he stirred up trouble, although he probably didn't think of it that way. He was only eight; it was unreasonable to expect he have a strong sense of right and wrong yet. A strong and conventional sense, that is.

Give him something to do and he could actually be somewhat agreeable.

"Well, if you've had so much trouble just trying to negotiate with Mrs. Wheal on room and board, I'd imagine the constables to be much more stubborn. But what if I told you that I had some experience with the authorities? If you'll allow it and come along with me, I could speak to them on your behalf."

For the first time since this conversation had begun the paper dropped to reveal a pale, sunken face framed by a wild mass of black hair peering back at him, his wide dark unblinking eyes probing him for the validity behind his claim. Though it was almost unnoticeable, Quillish thought he saw his bottom lip quiver in a very restrained kind of excitement.

His voice didn't sound quite as flat as before. "Are you serious?"

Quillish nodded. "Always."

Was it pure chance that Quillish should meet him this way or grand design? In the end, he would come to decide, it mattered not.

Some—Roger for instance—might have chastised him for indulging a child's whims like this but he always believed that anyone no matter what their age could accomplish something great if they were just given the chance. And his instincts had turned out correct. What started as an innocent game, relatively speaking, went on to solve what history would dub the Winchester Mad Bombings and avert what could have escalated into the Third World War. L's very first case, even though he was not publicly acknowledged for his contributions. And maybe that was just as well?

 Barely a week after the fact, Quillish got up to check on L and bring him lunch only to find him
missing from the guest room, his temporary room until he'd finished constructing his new one. A slight shuffling and even quieter sniffling from the walk-in closet clued him in on where he had gone off to.

"L? Is everything all right?" he called out gently as he rapped on the door.

"Go away." The boy's voice sounded uncharacteristically small and broken for him, like he was willing himself not to breathe lest his words came out as sobs instead. He had never heard or seen the boy cry before. So he was capable of feeling hurt after all. But what had caused this distress in the first place?

For a moment he dreaded that using the bombings to fake L's death, faking his death at all, had not been such a good idea. The two had spent all night in his home—the estate that would earn its place on the map as Wammy's House—talking about it in depth, the pros and the cons. L had seemed fine with all of it. It would give him all the freedom he needed to do whatever he wanted. "Besides, there's no one that's going to miss me anyway. And there's not anyone I would miss back."

What a thing for a child to say and so matter-of-factly, although given his past how could Quillish blame him for thinking that way? He hadn't had a proper home or family in what had so far been his whole life. He was struck by the temptation to retort, "I would miss you," but he held his tongue. L didn't need nor want pity. In fact he seemed averse to it, only invoking it if he thought it was the best way to get something he wanted, such as free shortcake from the sympathetic baker downtown.

Then he glanced down at the discarded paper in front of the mirror and got his answer as soon as he picked it up. It was a small article taking up the bottom left corner in the second page but still the words splashed out at him like acid.

Karol Ackart, aged 36, had committed suicide in prison. They'd found her topless body dangling from the bars in her cell window by a makeshift noose she had cut up from her own prison garb, no note. Around the time the Mad Bombings had been wrapped up.

He was wrong. Someone had missed him. She'd missed him enough to take her own life for him. Oh, L.

L had been much too young to remember his birth parents the night they were murdered, and in spite of what she'd done to him she had been for all intents and purposes his doting mother-figure for the first four years of his life, the longest he'd ever had a parent thus far. He'd never asked about Karol and had refused to speak of her whether or not he was prompted, but perhaps it was natural that he develop some kind of Stockholm syndrome towards her and mourn for her death. Maybe even bear some guilt over it, no matter how unfounded they both knew it was. Or at least as Quillish saw it.

He could hardly imagine the self-loathing L must have been struck with when he'd looked up at his reflection and seen the tears streaming down his pallid cheeks, reminding him of the weaknesses he derided others for having and preferred to dismiss in himself. How tightly he curled in over himself to keep from dropping his however odd heart on the ground and cracking it. How he took his entire jar of biscuits in with him to help sweeten the bitter salt of his tears that had snuck onto his tongue.

Over the next seventeen years he would indirectly spurn another suicide and an attempt thereof following a murder spree, and even take his own life at the end of it. Either way, he would never
cry again after that.

"You don't even believe me, do you?"

"It's not that I don't believe you. But I've told you this ad nauseam: you can't join the investigation."

"I can't take this anymore, Aizawa. I have a very strong hunch that Takada is the next Kira. Please, let me help! Even if it's just sitting around doing surveillance." Soichiro was vaguely aware of the fact that he sounded a bit like how Matsuda used to talk (and still did, if to a milder extent these days), but he was too swallowed up in his desperation to care. It had reached the point where he thought it better to go to Aizawa to discuss it lest he do something rash by taking matters into his own hands. Something that could end with him dead, or worse the rest of his former team. Or at the very least, land him in jail.

Just then Matsuda piped up from behind them: "Aizawa? Do you mind if I interject a bit? Oh, and good-morning, Yagami."

The two turned to see the youngest of them peering from around the corner of the doorway that led to Aizawa's den where everyone had gathered for their next meeting.

"Good-morning, Matsuda," Soichiro answered, more tensely than he meant to.

"What is it, Matsuda?" demanded Aizawa.

"Well, I-I was just thinking. Maybe we should let Yagami join us after all?"

"What? You can't be serious! Excuse us. I've got snacks laid out in the den if you want anything."

With that Aizawa stormed down the hall to snatch Matsuda up by the lapel of his suit jacket and drag him into the kitchen.

You know, you don't have to drag him around like a dog all the time.

Soichiro peered into the den to see Mogi and Ide sitting in either couch parallel to each other. They stopped whatever they were doing to return the look and all of a sudden things took another level in awkward.

"Ah…good-morning, Mogi, Ide," he greeted with a somewhat forced smile. Not that he wasn't pleased to see them again but they didn't look quite so pleased to see him here.

Mogi simply nodded. "Good-morning, Yagami," said Ide, gesturing to the coffee, juice, nuts, fruit and bars strewn across the table between them. "We don't have much but please help yourself." Ide had been on a health kick lately and was trying to avoid donuts and the like, to the mild detriment of the others (mostly Matsuda). If he couldn't have donuts, neither should they.

Soichiro mustered enough nerve to amble over and pour himself some coffee into a Styrofoam cup. Meanwhile he heard Aizawa and Matsuda's not-so-hushed argument carry on in the kitchen, not that they didn't try to be.

"Look Aizawa, please hear me out. I don't want anything to happen to him either, but…this is really important to him. This could be the only shot he has at getting any closure. I don't think there's going to be a lot of harm in just letting him do surveillance. Besides he's just going to keep coming back until you let him join. What if he snapped? Think about what I did when I was feeling useless. And remember when he was in the hospital when the Second Kira attacked Sakura TV?"
Aizawa sighed. "How could I forget?"

How could any of them forget? Soichiro saw the photos lined along the wall: some of them of Yumi and Anika, none of Eriko as he had taken those down, a few of them of Ukita with his large protruding ears and buzz cut and goofy smile. Besides Ide, Ukita had been Aizawa's best friend, his best man at his wedding and the only one capable of loosening him up; whenever Matsuda tried to it mostly ended up winding him up even more.

Soichiro swallowed a mouthful of coffee to dissolve the lump in his throat. Even now it felt too surreal knowing that his son, who had worked with all of them in the past, had had anything to do with his murder.

Had he let L bring Light in sooner, would Ukita still be alive? Then again, they hadn't known then about Misa…maybe it would have happened anyway?

"Yeah except he knows well enough to come to you about what to do this time around. C'mon, give credit where it's due."

"All right, fine, maybe you've got a point. You rarely have a point but when you do…"

Then there was an uncomfortable silence. Soichiro was frozen where he stood and from the looks on Mogi and Ide's faces, they were just as anxious about what Aizawa should decide.

Eventually the two headed out of the kitchen, their expressions stiff. Aizawa's even more so, like he were about to say something he feared he would come to regret later on.

"All right Yagami. Maybe I can make an allowance for you to join the investigation. But only to help with surveillance. That's it. You won't be involved in any actual arrests or anything else."

Admittedly a small job, but it was something. And frankly it sounded like the only thing he could do without messing up with his current state of mind. He bowed in gratitude. "Oh Aizawa, I can't tell you how much it means to me to hear you say that. Thank you so much. I promise not to be a burden."

"That's not what I'm worried about. I mean it, Yagami: do not take matters into your own hands. Let us do the rest."

While he doubted Aizawa meant to talk down to him in such a way, he felt his ears burn. "Yes. I understand."

Matsuda clapped his hands together, his face lighting up at seeing the whole task force together again, more or less. "All right! The whole gang's together again! Since you're here we're gonna need to brief you on what's been going on. Have a seat."

"No thank you, I'm fine with standing," he insisted, leaning in on his cane.

"Uh…okay. I just thought you'd want to sit down; it is a lot to take in. Well, we just got a call from L which is why we're all gathered here at Aizawa's place," said Matsuda. "It's a different L from the one we worked with on the first case—I know, we were all shocked to hear about this too—"

"What he's trying to get at," Aizawa cut in, "is that there's someone else who's taken L's place, and he wants our help. He had Blogger confirm to me who he is."

"B-Blogger? Another L? Since when, and what does Blogger have to do with any of this?" Blogger getting entangled in the Kira case the first time around had been a mistake, but a second time?
"He said he comes from a secret organization of detectives that all go by the title of L. I'm still trying to figure out how they found each other but apparently this L has been asking Blogger to keep an eye on Amane while she's in America working on her movie. He knew about her past as the Second Kira so he suspected her again."

"Unfortunately, he might have been right about her," said Ide. "She's gone missing as of last Sunday."

Matsuda stared down at his feet, too hurt to voice his opinion on the matter at this time. Mogi simply poured himself another cup of coffee. Back then Misa had had Matsuda practically wrapped around her finger and she had even wormed her way into Mogi's good graces. He couldn't imagine how hard they were taking this.

Not that Soichiro had hated Misa—although at times he found her overwhelming and would question his son's taste in women since she'd seemed so unlike him in just about every way (which in hindsight only showed what he knew)—but when he heard this he almost dropped his cane. "Wh-what? That's impossible! Amane shouldn't remember anything; how could she have anything to do with the new killings?"

He thought about the past four years Misa had darted in and out of his family's life, how she was there for Light's funeral and even tried to fill in the space he had left as an older sibling for Sayu in her own kooky, flighty way.

It was still hard to take that this same girl had been Ukita's killer; sometimes when she'd come over he'd had to excuse himself from the room just so he wouldn't have to look in her direction. But what could they do about it? Without her memories, Misa couldn't be brought to justice (whatever that meant).

Although lately Misa had stopped talking to any of them. Sayu had mentioned being worried about her but had written up the lack of correspondence as simply not having the time. Misa did have a life of her own. An acting and modeling job was stressful in all aspects, never mind working overseas.

He loathed to think about such a possibility of Light doing this to anyone, but he wondered: had he corrupted Misa? He vaguely longed for it to have been the other way around but given the timeline, and Light's intelligence compared to hers, it was too unlikely. If she'd never gotten the notebook and met Light, she might have gone on to live a truly normal if fast-paced and glitzy life. She probably would have never thought of killing Ukita or anyone for that matter.

Soichiro didn't know, any more than he knew why Light became Kira. One of the harshest truths he'd ever learned was that sometimes murderers had the decency to help the elderly carry their groceries home or their little sisters with their calculus homework.

Aizawa shook his head in disappointment, frustration and apprehension. "I'm not sure how she got her memories back, assuming that she did, but L mentioned that she may be working with someone who defected from his organization a few years back. He called him 'M'."

"You…I'd say you were kidding, but I know you too well to think that you would, especially about something like this." Soichiro commented, breathless. The first L had never said a word about being part of a group of detectives. But then, why should they have expected him to? He'd never trusted them any more than they could trust him, and when the case closed they'd left him there in that building without another word, coming back only to pick up his body and have it cremated when his time was finally up. Just as he'd asked. Soichiro had had his stroke in the middle of his eulogy.
He would struggle with this too in the years to come. As much of a bastard as he was, L was all alone with Watari gone and still so young, young enough to be his own son and in fact he'd sometimes remind him of the son he did have. Then again, maybe that's why he didn't go see him? He couldn't look at him without wanting to punch him in the face after what he'd done to him and his colleagues, and to himself. And for what else? Because he hated him for being right all along about Light? For knowing Light better as a complete stranger than he ever knew him as his own father?

"Is...M the one doing the killings?"

"L thinks that M might have a notebook, but he said that he thinks there's a second person who's been slaying the criminals too. We suspect that person is Kiyomi Takada, as you've said. If we're right then we need to bring her in and take her notebook before M gets at it."

It was a wonder why none of them had been killed yet, seeing as how Misa knew their names and faces and if what Aizawa was saying was true, could easily have them killed. But maybe in her twisted way she liked them too much to stoop to that just yet? It was the only explanation he could think of as to why they were still alive.

"I'm sending out Ide and Matsuda to tail her for a while. In the meantime L has informed me that he's sent a professional to plant bugs and wiretaps in her apartment."

Four years ago the task force would have protested doing this. But when the current L had suggested it just the other day it had made Aizawa think of what the first L had said about their initial resistance towards the idea:

You'd risk your lives to catch Kira but not your jobs?

How amazing it was that he, or Soichiro could remember that comment so clearly after all these years. Almost like a taunt. L seemed to love to do that, and so apparently did his successor. Sometimes you had to forsake one or two laws to uphold the ones that held more weight. And if you chose to resort to that, you'd better make sure not to get caught. After all, a crime was only really a crime if you were caught doing it.

Somehow Soichiro could see Light saying something like that if he'd never been caught and killed. If Kira's caught, he's evil. If he wins then he's justice.

"A professional, you say. You mean Wedy or someone else?" Soichiro asked.

"He didn't say but maybe it doesn't matter, just that the job gets done. Hey, do you need some water or something? You look kind of ill."

"I'll be all right. I've got coffee. You're right...this is a lot to take in."

"Ms. Blogger, please come into my office."

Erin looked up from her parfait and OJ to see the door leading to Near's room. Oh, it's your office now?

So he finally felt like talking to her face-to-face again? What brought that about? Nevertheless, she dug her plastic spoon into the swirled-up mound of yogurt and fruit and granola before standing up and following Roger's lead, like an employee answering her boss's call with great trepidation for what would be in store for her. Roger refused eye contact with her as he led her inside. As much as
she wanted to apologize for her latest comments she'd had no idea how to go about it. Would just saying sorry be enough this time? Would he accept it?

She found Near surrounded this time by a miniature scale of the city made up of Legos™, some of his robots and action figures and trains racing around him on suspended tracks in opposite directions. He sat in the middle of it all like a monster about to destroy the whole thing, but he was swinging his arms around instead to make the astronaut gripped in his hand fly through the air.

"So have you finally told Aizawa?"

"Yes. I've given him all the information I could at this moment in time so he and his men will be prepared for what's up ahead. Including the part about Kiyomi Takada."

Erin jumped a bit at this last part. She remembered Kiyomi well enough from when she'd studied at To-Oh, even though they'd only spoken once or twice. But what did she have to do with anything? "Whoa whoa, pause and rewind! What about Takada?"

"You may not have noticed—what a surprise—but criminals have begun dying all around the world as of late, albeit not currently at as great of a scale as Light Yagami accomplished during the first incident. Mello never believed in Kira's ideology regarding the justice system and he isn't one to change his mind on such things, so we can conclude that a second notebook has fallen to our world and has been picked up by someone else, a Kira supporter. Takada used to be an anchor at the pro-Kira station Sakura TV before moving on to NHN...in the wake of director Hitoshi Demegawa's death."

A second notebook? Since when? You've gotta be kidding me. Has Ryuk gotten everyone from his world and their grandma wanting to visit ours? Oh gosh, what's the notebook done to Kiyomi by now?

"And when were you gonna say something about this?"

"I'm telling you now, aren't I?" he snorted, turning the arms around on his astronaut figure in circles. Then in that uniquely offhanded way of his he added, "Also, you've gained weight."

"Hey! I thought we've had this conversation?"

Unfortunately it was true. She might have packed a few extra pounds lately, really ever since she'd moved to LA. This morning before she'd stepped into the shower she had pinched at her stomach to check out the flab accumulating around it—the old muffin-top in the making—embarrassed at how it looked in the mirror. She guessed that this was what happened when you were under so much stress, cortisol and all that, and unlike L she couldn't think it all away. In fact, with the sort of things her mind occupied itself with lately thinking would probably make it worse.

"Yes, I remember it well. But you said we need to be more honest with each other, right? You've gained weight so I'm bringing it to light. That's probably why Gevanni pushed you away when you were kissing him. He thinks you're gross but unlike me he's too nice and cowardly to tell you that."

How on Earth Near could have known what had transpired between her and Stephen the other day, she couldn't imagine. Stephen had never crossed her as the type to kiss and tell (God he'd better not be). But then, this was Near. He had his ways. All the same she felt tears pushing at her eyelids again, though not quite hard enough to spill over them. Even if it was true, who liked being told that they were ugly or fat, or worse that someone they liked thought that about them?

"What the hell is your problem, you sadistic little prick? I don't know if you're aware of this but
there is a difference between honest and plain cruel. I'm not gonna let you exploit my request just so you can say whatever the hell you want."

"Psh. I'm only giving back as much as you dish out."

"What is that supposed to mean? I—is this about what I said the other day?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. But not what you said to me; I've told you before, I couldn't care less what you have to say or think about me. Ms. Blogger, you may be partially correct about Watari's capabilities as a parental unit. He's always been more of a manager and assistant than a father figure. Nevertheless I will not tolerate anyone insulting him, unless it's me. Only I have that privilege."

For a moment there Erin didn't know what to say to that. She was stunned. This had to be the first time since they'd met that Near implied that he remotely cared for the welfare of another human being besides himself, never mind if he had no qualms about using said human being as his own proverbial punching bag.

The man in question had no comment about this. He just went about his business on his laptop in the corner of the room. Even if Roger had nothing important to actually do, he'd always be there to watch the two of them, make sure that their differences in opinion didn't get out of hand. If this room was the office and Near the boss, he fit well into the scene as secretary.

Could Roger be right? Ever since that stunt Mello had pulled to wipe out almost the entire task force, Near's attitude did seem to have taken a turn for the worse. If that was scientifically possible.

So maybe Near was capable of empathy after all? If a very stunted, vestigial sort of empathy that he liked to pretend didn't exist and which probably didn't extend to beyond a handful of people (if that). But for someone like him, it was something.

"All right, I'm—I'm sorry."

"Don't say it to me. Roger's the one you owe the apology to."

Her cheeks grew warm and she rubbed at her arm like she'd just gotten a particularly painful shot as she glanced over at Roger. "Roger? I-I'm sorry. What I said about you and Quillish…that was real dumb. And I didn't mean it. Well, I did mean it but not the way I said it—"

He only looked her in the eye briefly before averting his gaze back to the monitor. "I accept your apology," he answered, a bit too brusquely for Erin to believe that. Like he really didn't feel like talking to her right now but it would've been rude not to acknowledge her attempt at making up, again. She must have pushed a pretty big shiny red button of his pretty hard; he hadn't even been like this after the pedophile comment. "There's no time nor room here for grudges."

What do you want me to do? I can't take it back and I know you don't like McDonald's™ so that's out. Oh me and my big fat mouth, will I ever learn when to shut up? Maybe I should invest in a muzzle to put on when I get pissed off about anything…

Near set the astronaut down with his usual bored expression and resumed fiddling with his hair. "Sometimes I can't fathom what he found in you that intrigued him so much."

This next comment caught her by such surprise that it practically made her jump in place. "Huh, what?"

"I said what could he have seen in you that he found so interesting?"
"Who, Stephen?"

"No. L. The first L. As much as I don't want to believe it, I have a strong hunch that he was fond of you and you two had a relationship during the time you stayed with him. Why else would he have refrained from mentioning you in his post-case report? What still puzzles me is why he'd have such an inclination in the first place."

Now she was burning up from head to toe. Why was he bringing this up now? "Wh-what are you suggesting? I didn't sleep with him if that's what you're thinking. I mean sure, we might have gone on some double-dates with Light and Misa but i-it's not like anything happened."

"I don't think it was necessarily of that nature. You're painfully obvious when you lie; you tend to tug at your clothes as well as avoid eye contact and stammer a lot. You only stammered once and you're looking me head-on without pulling at anything so you must be telling the truth, at least as far as that goes. Besides that's too gross even for me to imagine." His tongue poked out from his puckered lips in what could be construed as disgust before quickly darting back into his mouth. For a moment he sounded almost like a child who'd resented that his father, or brother or idol or just someone important to him in general had paid more attention to someone else, who he personally deemed unworthy of the man's time, than to him. Never mind how close they'd actually been before this other person came along.

Or maybe he just couldn't accept the idea that his mentor might not have been as perfect or self-sufficient as he'd long believed, that he had been as flawed and needy and unbearably human as anyone here in this hotel, this city, this whole round world. What's more, like he couldn't accept that he himself could be wrong about anything, let alone something so near and dear to him (relatively speaking and pun not intended). That in his own quiet way he was as guilty as Mello for near-blind hero worship.

If L wasn't perfect, and Near had worked so hard to model himself off of L, then what did that make him? Talk about an identity crisis.

Poor fella. Erin couldn't remember being so torn between giving someone a hug and smacking him upside the noggin, not before she'd met L nor since. Well, there was also Light, and Misa.

"Well kid, to tell you the truth...I couldn't tell you exactly what we were. I said before that we were friends but sometimes I look back and get the feeling it was more than that, other times less. It's not like he trusted me that much; he never said a word about you guys for one thing, and the only reason I know his name is because he showed it to everyone after he wrote it in the Death Note. I'm not sure what he liked about me either. Although, if it means anything, he told me once that I was a good person. Don't know what he meant by that but at the time I thought it was a nice thing to say, especially for him."

"Hm. I suppose from a certain perspective, one could call you that. And you are somewhat amusing, much like a dog that will fetch the same thing over and over again no matter how far or how often you throw it. Or a cat chasing a laser light. Even if you're obnoxious and have a pesky sense of right and wrong, which I also find incredibly biased."

"Ex-cuse me?"

He rolled his large empty-looking eyes. "I'm not going to pretend that I understand what you must be going through emotionally, because I don't nor do I want to frankly. But if I were you, I'd let Ms. Amane go. She's let you down too many times and in too many ways for you to still cling to your friendship with her without making me question your sanity or intelligence. And that's putting it rather lightly."
"If only it were that simple. You may not be like me, but I'm not like you either. I can't just turn off my feelings towards someone no matter what they've done. And besides what about you and Mello? You guys grew up together, didn't ya? I'd think you'd feel at least a little conflicted about this yourself."

"We both spent the majority of our childhood in the same place. But we weren't what you would call close. Mello always resented me for having the intellectual advantage and always being above him on the roster. Our rivalry was completely one-sided on his part, though. I never bore any ill will towards him. I wouldn't have minded sharing the title with him at all; he has guts and good instincts. He just lets his emotions get the best of him, much like you do. Except he compensates for it by being exponentially smarter."

Erin bit back a growl. Not that she didn't agree that Mello was infinitely smarter than her—he had to be, given how much he'd accomplished at such a tender age—but why did Near insist on beating her down like this? She'd told Roger she was sorry and she'd meant it. What more did he want?

"But it shouldn't matter how close we were, or even that I know him in the first place. It doesn't change the fact that he must answer for how he's chosen to respond to his grief surrounding our predecessor. I'd say that goes for you and Ms. Amane, too. People like her don't change. They can't, not even on the highly unlikely chance that they wanted to. While I doubt we could ever bring her past crimes to light in any court, we can at least get her on charges regarding her association with the mafia—"

"Near, kindly shut the hell up!"

Before she knew it she'd had the collar of his pajama top balled up in her shaking fists as she hoisted him up into the air—he was alarmingly short and light for a young man his age. His sock-feet dangled maybe two inches off the ground and Roger sprang up from his seat like a triggered trap. He was behind her with his own arms snaked underneath hers so he could pin her body to his and keep her from throwing any blows.

For an agonizingly long minute the three were frozen that way as Erin snarled, "You know, I've met very few people in my life that deserved an ass-kicking more than you do. And the only reason I can think of as to why no one's done that yet is because you're too small and wimpy for any decent person to be able to justify it!"

Near returned her glare with a stony look this time. "Ms. Blogger, if you really want to hit me then by all means take your best shot. In fact, I dare you. Don't worry, Watari, she won't do it. She's bluffing like always."

And the longer she stared at him, totally stiff and seemingly unruffled in her fists, the more she realized he was right. The way his curled split bangs shadowed his unblinking stare made her think of L then, the way he'd looked at her when she'd grabbed him and screamed obscenities and condemnations in his face before she'd seen his own strange brand of helplessness and tenderness beneath the icy front she might have cracked after slapping him around in his chair at least eight times. After all this time she still felt no pride for giving him what-for.

She didn't think this was the case for Near. At least as far as having any feelings for her went. No, he could never. But still this too was a front. He was bluffing even more than she.

Eventually her arms lost the strength to hold him up and with slackened shoulders she dropped him back on the ground. She half-expected him to plop down on his rump again but instead he stayed on his feet to her mild surprise, although he did wobble a bit on his legs.
He flashed them both one of his tiny smartass smirks. "See? What did I tell you?"

"Hitting you'd be like punting a kitten," she panted. "A really, really nasty kitten that lashes out at people just to cover up how weak and helpless he feels inside."

Roger eased up on his grip on her and guided her back out of the room before another potential crisis erupted. Almost as soon as she heard the door shut behind her she could hear Roger demand, "L, I'm sorry but what in heaven's name was that for? What were you trying to prove by provoking her like that?"

"I can't help it that Ms. Blogger can't accept the truth, Watari. But for hers and everyone's sake I hope she can change her mind soon."

She wanted to cry again but found that she couldn't this time. She'd squeezed her tear ducts dry like lemons and her eyes felt much too sore. It ached just to blink. The issue of Misa she would have to work through more or less on her own, but more and more she got the feeling that that display back there wasn't so much about her or even Roger as it was about Near's own insecurities. She flopped back into the sofa with her fingers massaging circles into her temples. She shouldn't waste food but suddenly she'd lost most of her appetite. Her stomach felt like it had jagged rocks jumbling around in it.

Oh L, if only you were here again. Then maybe you could talk some sense into these boys? Tell them you're sorry and that you did care at least a mite about them. That you didn't mean to abandon them. Tell them that they've misunderstood everything and you only had their best interests at heart. Of course you did. Didn't you?

But that's never gonna happen. You don't even have a body to come back in. And even if you could come back it wouldn't be enough, would it? Not at the point this has reached. Your boys aren't gonna stop until one or both of them die. And maybe take a few dozen, hundred more lives with them. Chips off the old fucking block, they are. Doesn't matter how much they might hate you right now. They remind me so much of you and Light sometimes I just want to vomit.

Bottom line, you're never coming back, least of all to fix this.

I have to do something.

But what? I don't know if there's anything I can do. All I know is that if we find Mello, chances are we'll find Misa too. But what should I do then after that?

…

The weekend flew by and before long Monday night hung over their heads but Kiyomi and Teru were more than ready. M had requested that at 12:30 she was to come alone to the Yellow Box Warehouse on the Daikoku wharf, an abandoned building with no windows and only one entrance. One of his associates would be waiting there to pick up the notebook and he would be wearing a mask to cover his face. "And in case you were thinking of sending me a counterfeit, I'd better let you know that I'm going to have him test it before he leaves with it. Don't worry, he won't test it on you or anyone you know. I'll have him show you after he's written the name of the subject, and I'll confirm that it works."

Afterwards, she was to leave the wharf entirely without once turning back or putting up a fight, go to the nearest train station and after ensuring that there was no one around to listen, say aloud these exact words with no uncertainty: "I hereby give up ownership of the notebook." Her memories would be gone and she could go about her business a free and innocent woman again.
Or so M had counted on.

As Umbra had explained to her, even if she should choose to give up the notebook to Teru, she could always regain her memories by touching the notebook again. However she would only have them for as long as she was in contact with it unless she somehow regained ownership while holding it, such as by killing Teru.

"You don't say. Hm...would I have to be touching the entire notebook? Or do I simply have to be touching say, the cover?" she'd asked while drying herself off in front of the bathroom mirror that Sunday. By now she had gotten well over having Umbra in the bathroom with her as she went through her rituals. It was much like having a pet in the room, a big ugly talking pet. She knew her naked body had no effect on him.

Before this she had briefly considered having Mikami who was waiting dutifully outside come in and dry her off for her, like a servant tending to his goddess after she'd just stepped out of her bath. Perhaps make him kiss and caress and worship her as he went about it. He was so articulate in public whenever prompted to give his opinion; how good could he be with his mouth and hands at other things?

But then she thought better of it. It was too early in their relationship for that level of intimacy just yet, and letting him see her in all her unveiled glory now might prove too much for him. He was a virgin if she ever saw one despite being older than her—and/or extremely repressed, perhaps a demisexual or something along those lines—and this excited her so. He could be all and only hers. For now though she could be satisfied with the idea that if she asked him to do it, he would without hesitation.

Umbra, unaware of her not-so-wholesome train of thought in the meantime, scratched his head. "Just the cover? Hmm...to tell you the truth I don't know if it works that way. I know that a page isn't enough to restore your memories but the cover, I'm not so sure."

Kiyomi threw him a look that would have intimidated most but Umbra just returned it with that vacant stare of his. "What do you mean, you don't know? How can you not know how your own notebook works?"

"We shinigami don't know all there is to know about the Death Note. I couldn't tell you why that is; we just don't. Armonia Justin knows the most of all of us besides the King so he's usually the one to see if you have questions, but I bet even he doesn't know everything."

Kiyomi rolled her eyes and dabbed at the nape of her neck before moving down to the tender skin under her breasts and eventually her loins and lastly her buttocks. "It's too bad I couldn't have him as my shinigami. Then again, he's probably too smart and careful to drop his notebook in the first place."

While he had noticed that Kiyomi had gotten snootier lately and started to wish he was somewhere else with another much nicer human girl he found himself missing quite a bit, Umbra took no great offense to that catty remark in itself and replied, "Well, you could test whether your theory is true. You have nothing to lose by doing so, unless you don't trust Teru as much as you say you do. I think he'd be very upset if he knew that. He seems to like you very much."

"Mind your place, Umbra. Of course I trust him enough. My problem is being able to do this without prying eyes. That said, I don't want you to kill anyone if you see them following us; that would look way too suspicious. Just steer them off our path."

"Okay."
Teru had booked a hotel room for her for this weekend and once she dressed and groomed herself to her standard of presentation, the two sat across from each other and did a quick experiment by each placing a hand over the cover of the notebook and taking turns giving up ownership to each other. Then Kiyomi requested that Teru cut off the front cover of the notebook. He looked mildly bemused for a moment but obeyed, using the blade from his Swiss army knife to neatly and slowly slice the front cover off from the book's spine like a Westerner carving a Christmas hen (he loved to be prepared and a Swiss army knife was just about the perfect tool for a man such as himself).

She took a breath to steady her nerves and placed both hands on the detached cover this time. What if this didn't work? But she'd never know unless she tried. "Teru, put your hands on the rest of the notebook."

He nodded and did so.

"I hereby give up ownership of the notebook."

...

Nothing happened. She was just as aware of her surroundings, thoughts and actions as she'd been before saying the magic words.

"Teru's the owner now; Kiyomi, can you still remember me?" asked Umbra.

It was the first time either he or Teru saw a full triumphant smile on her face. "I do. It worked. As long as I'm in contact with the cover I still remember everything, even when you own my notebook. I'll have to get a corset or brassiere to keep this with me at all times. Teru, give me back ownership of the notebook until I can find one. Until then, I'll lend you the notebook until further notice."

He passed it back to her. "A corset? I think your figure is fine the way it is, but if that's what you want that's what I'll get you." Personally he felt rather shy about the idea of buying women's lingerie, seeing how he'd never had the need to handle it before this point, but what was the point in arguing? He had no right to question God.

"Oh Teru, you never struck me as the type to flatter," Kiyomi said warmly.

He pushed his glasses back up on his face. "I'm not flattering you. That's exactly what I think. You are beautiful, Kiyomi. The only beautiful thing in this whole world."

Well! She didn't think he had it in him so say something like that, and for a moment there she wondered if he still would have told her that had she never revealed her secret to him. But she decided it didn't matter. Most everyone she'd met thought of her as beautiful; she wasn't called Miss To-Oh in college for nothing. Teru loved Kira and she happened to be Kira. What more did she need?

She cleared her throat and willed herself not to blush. "You needn't worry yourself with that either way. I think it's best that I go shopping for myself. To keep anyone from catching on to us we won't be able to see each other as much as we could before, at least for now. Anyway, have you finished making that counterfeit using the pages I gave you?"

"Yes. It took me two days straight without any food or sleep. But please don't think I'm complaining, it was worth every second of toil." Now that he'd mentioned it, his face did look slightly paler and gauntier than a few days before with a sunken look in his eyes and his voice sounded weaker. Kiyomi couldn't have that.
"Poor Teru. Be sure you get something to eat soon as a reward for your sacrifice."

"Also Teru, in case you were interested since Kiyomi wants you to take over the killings for her, you can make a trade with me that will let you know someone's name even if they're using an alias," explained Umbra. "I can lend you my eyes so you can see a person's true name by looking at their face. But you have to be the owner of the notebook to make this deal with me and it will cost you half the years you still have left to live. Also, if you should ever lose ownership of the notebook you will also lose the Shinigami Eyes. And I'm afraid you can't get back the time you traded for them."

Kiyomi didn't know whether to feel thrilled or alarmed by his calm yet quick answer to this offer: "Then I'll make the deal with you as soon as Kiyomi officially transfers ownership to me." He'd never struck her as the type who did such drastic things without at least thinking it over first.

She turned to him, taking his hand in hers. "Are you sure about this? You'd be giving up literally half your life…"

His nod was resolute. "Half my life is nothing. It's only the amount of time I have left in this world. You promised me eternal life in the next; that's what I look forward to most. Until then I will make the most of whatever time I have left here by serving you."

Actually there wasn't supposed to be an afterlife, at least not for humans who used the Death Note. But Umbra kept this to himself. Neither of them would want to hear it. Over in the far right corner behind him Sidoh cowered, both out of a craving for chocolate and a fear towards the intensity of these two humans in front of him.

Rather than give M's mook the real notebook, they would present him a fake that just happened to be made up of pages from the real one, to ensure that M would be tricked into thinking it was the real one. Kiyomi couldn't be sure how much M knew about shinigami, but as long as he was given something that could kill as well as the real thing, where was his room to complain?

Before this she had originally thought about handing over an entirely fake notebook that she would trick the mook into thinking it was real by having Umbra copy his test subject's name onto a clipping she would entrust him with. But that wouldn't work for long. Once it reached M, he'd discover for himself how bogus it actually was. She was certain he'd retaliate for that, despite his promise otherwise.

In spite of his protests, Kiyomi warned Teru not to accompany or follow her to the wharf that night. After they'd leave the hotel (at different times, at least an hour apart) he was to find a sufficient hiding place for the notebook, go straight home after work and wait for her to contact him, not the other way around. Until she officially gave up ownership, she would be loaning it to him. "Don't worry Teru, I'll be fine. Umbra will warn me if there's trouble."

Sidoh did the wise thing and dawdled in the background, suffering in silence over his hankering for chocolate. As drab as his and Umbra's home was, it was quite easy for one to develop an addiction to something so captivating to the senses, no matter how petty it was thought to be in the human world.

Eventually Teru took the notebook and his leave, tensing up a little when Kiyomi bade him farewell with a squeeze of his broad, chiseled shoulders and another kiss on the lips that her frustrations made rougher than she'd meant it to be. But just as before he didn't resist otherwise. His reciprocation of the gesture felt rather timid for him, probably because he felt so lowly next to his goddess. In his mind he had done nothing yet to remotely deserve it.
Already he had been reduced to putty in her hands. She hadn't thought it possible to sway him in such a way until now, and now she almost wished she'd have told him her secret sooner.

... "Umbra, I want chocolate. You promised there'd be chocolate."

Umbra didn't answer. The two sat on top of the cab that Kiyomi had called, watching the traffic roar and blare past them like two misfit runaways on a makeshift raft battling the weather-rocked swells and dips of a river. He had been watching the white undercover car from three car-lengths away for about ten minutes now. Everywhere Kiyomi's ride turned, so had it.

Could those be the policemen she had fretted over? Only one way to know for sure.

"Sidoh, I think Kiyomi's being followed by that car over there," he announced, pointing a long sharp paw to his target. "I'm going to have a look. Stay here with Kiyomi; you'll get your chocolate soon enough, I promise."

"Huh? Oh. O-okay, you do that." Sidoh, being the type who preferred to have someone else do the work if it could be helped and especially if they were more competent than he, curled into himself and started to hum absently while Umbra made his way over to the suspicious vehicle leaping on all eight of his limbs from car to car.

The two men inside had no inkling of his presence as he phased through the roof and settled into the back seat. He could see their names by looking at the reflections of their faces from within the rear-view mirror.

Hideki Ide. Touta Matsuda.

Recognition surged through him almost instantly, at least where the latter was concerned. Ah. I know him. Erin talks to a man going by this name over the computer and the phone and exchanges gifts with him from time to time. This must be her friend. But what is he doing here?

"I still don't think it was a good idea to let him on the team," grumbled Ide, the driver. "He's still traumatized from the first case. There's no telling how he's going to react this time around."

Matsuda sighed from the shotgun. "I don't know, Ide. What were we gonna tell him? No? And have him come back again, or worse not come to us at all? And you say that like you're not still shaken up over it yourself."

"I may not have been there to see everything but don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying I don't get where he's coming from; I'm just worried about what he'll do if she turns out to be the next Kira."

So he was right. These two were from the police. They were following Kiyomi. She'd explicitly told him not to take their lives so he'd have to distract them another way.

Then he looked down and noticed a cell phone wedged between the shotgun seat and the door. Matsuda's cell phone?

Hmm. Could Erin's number be on it? He'd sometimes thought about talking to her directly, not about anything in particular (there wasn't much for shinigami to talk about) but more for the mere unexplainable enjoyment of it. But as much as he longed to hear her nasally voice again, he knew that unless she touched his notebook she would never be able to hear him. If he took that phone now and dialed her number, she'd only hear the traffic in the background if she answered.
But calls weren't the only way to communicate on cell phones, were they? Humans sent texts to each other on them too. Erin and Matsuda certainly did. Sidoh's claws were thin enough; maybe he could have him type and send her a message the next time they were alone. For now, though…

A shinigami's ability to phase through solid objects at will had never been more useful until now. Umbra wasted no time gliding into the car's engine to look for the distributor. If he took the cap off it would cut off electricity to the rest of the engine; that should be enough to stop the car, he reasoned. Not wanting nor in any need to cause an accident however, he waited until Ide stopped at the next red light, which Kiyomi's cab managed to miss by about a hair.

The two men jumped in their seats when Ide stepped on the gas when the light changed to green and nothing happened. They were stuck, and the drivers building up in a line behind them started to lose their patience. If they weren't switching into the next lane, they shouted and cursed and laid on their horns in demand that they move.

"Wh-what the hell?" Ide turned the key in the ignition over and over to no avail. "What's going on? It was running fine just a second ago."

"Ide, we're losing her!" Matsuda cried out, frantically pointing at the cab as it quickly disappeared from their sights.

"I'm perfectly aware of that but the car won't go," snapped Ide. "Shit, we gotta get this thing off the road before it starts a pile-up…Matsuda?"

Matsuda didn't answer his partner. He had unbuckled his seat belt and bolted out of the car the instant he realized they weren't going anywhere, clamoring for a taxi with his arms waving over his head as he stormed up to the curb. In all of his haste he left his phone there next to the seat, which Umbra snuck away with along with the distributor cap as soon as Ide took his turn to get out so as to inspect under the hood.

He let his connection to Kiyomi guide him back to her cab, stopping only to throw the distributor cap in the first trash can he saw. That should hold those two up for a while. And if by any chance Matsuda should flag down a cab that could still catch up to them, he'd take care of that too. He figured Kiyomi owed him a whole box of chocolates and a cheesecake for this service.

"I was right; those men were following Kiyomi. I've taken care of them for the time being, though," he said to Sidoh upon resuming his place on top of the cab next to him.

"Oh. Gee, you're pretty smart, Umbra. Am I glad I've got you on my side...say, what'cha got there?"

He settled back into a crouched position like a predator ready to strike at the next even slightest stimulus. "A cell phone. I took it from one of those men. I think it will be good to have around."

Putting on her best business face Kiyomi resisted the urge to wrinkle her nose at the smell of low tide permeating the air and made her way down to the warehouse M had mentioned, her heels clacking against the concrete with well-prepared decision (or so she liked to think).

Umbra had ordered Sidoh to stay back and watch for any more stalkers. "I'm going ahead of her to check out the warehouse. When everything's all clear, I will give you a signal. If this fellow is working for the human Lumen is with, you could follow him back to your notebook."

Sidoh nodded in agreement, although this did little to settle his doubt over the whole situation.
Then again, he was not the type to make plans, certainly not better ones than Umbra's. "O-okay. Thanks for all the help, Umber. I can't thank you enough."

"Actually you can. You can stop; it gets a tad annoying to hear the same phrase from someone over and over again."

"Uh, sorry."

"You could stand to say sorry less often, too."

"Oops! Sorry—darn it!"

Without much more ado after that, Umbra found himself perched on an iron rafter flecked with rust around the edges, eyeing the man standing far below him under the only working lamp in the whole building, like an actor under the spotlight. He was dressed in a fine white suit and a black mask covered his face; his eyes and mouth were shielded by thick mesh wiring, giving him a rather mummy-like appearance. Why, he looked almost like a shinigami himself if Umbra looked at him at a certain angle.

He also noticed large bulky shapes poking out from the corners and in between the support beams. Naturally curious, he slunk across the beam on all eight of his limbs like a feline towards the shadowy object nearest to him.

Meanwhile the only door to the warehouse groaned in protest as Kiyomi mustered the strength to push it aside.

"Y462?"

"Yes. Kiyomi Takada?" the man called out to her.

"This is her. I've come with the notebook." For some reason a deep sense of foreboding wracked her as she peered inside, like something bad was going to happen. She did her best to steady her voice but the tremor simply coursed into her hands and knees instead.

Umbra would have said something by now if there were any traps. That was what she'd sent him out to do. If there were traps he'd better say something now before she gave this man the counterfeit—

"Great. Bring it over here. Before I can take it, I gotta test it to make sure that it's real." Kiyomi cringed inside at the way her native tongue jostled around in the man's mouth like half-drunken gibberish. How she loathed Americans, and how could you blame her? What pigs.

"I understand. Let's not waste any more time than we have to. Here, I'll hold the notebook for you while you write the name." She forced herself to approach him quickly as she reached into her purse to pull out the book and open it to the halfway mark.

"Hey, thanks." There was something rather off about this masked man. In spite of his vernacular his tone sounded robotic, like a cyborg whose every motion and comment was being remotely controlled as they spoke.

Kiyomi wondered if she should take this time to try persuading M through his mook to establish a—not partnership necessarily, gods didn't have partners in mere mortals, but some kind of collaboration. She had the notebook and her own hidden knowledge of its mechanics and he had his alleged power to oversee the police. They could help each other out; she could only benefit from having that kind of power backing her.
"Are you in contact with M at this moment?"

"Yeah. 'Course I am," answered Y462, scribbling a name in English onto the top line of the page on Kiyomi's right side. M had kept his word about this much. That name didn't belong to anyone she knew.

"Well, has he considered cooperating with me on the matter of the police? I do believe we could help each other out with my knowledge of the notebook and your oversight of the police."

"Sssh, hush up lady!" Y462 hissed, a hand now up where his ear would be. The nerve! "What's that? Miller's dead? Okay, so I guess this is the real deal. You can hand it over then."

If Kiyomi didn't have the amount of self-control she did she may well have taken off one of her heels and stabbed him in the no-doubt pudgy hairy gut with it. But that would be, needless to say, too messy to be worth the satisfaction.

"Kiyomi!"

She resisted the reflex of turning her gaze upward from where Umbra shouted her name. Who knew that the shinigami even was capable of shouting? "There's bombs everywhere. Get out of here!"

Every nerve in her body seemed to short-circuit all at once. You wait until now to tell me this? That bastard. I should have known—

"Also, he wants me to tell you that he's not interested in a partnership, sorry. It's not like you need to team up anyway. Once I get outta here, it ain't your problem anymore." If Y462 had any kind of reaction to hearing Umbra speak after having touched his fingers against the pages, he didn't make this apparent. His words now sounded final. The words of a man about to take his own life.

With survival now her only priority, she threw off her heels and jabbed the toe of one of them into the man's gut, not deep enough to cut him but enough to knock him off his feet—despite his appearance he was unusually weak for a grunt—so she could buy herself enough time to sprint back out the door. Adrenaline inflating her skull and the darkness outside blurred her vision and her heart blasted against her ribs as though it meant to break free from her body to escape almost inevitable demise.

What could Umbra do? Disabling a bomb was not the same as disabling a car, and even if he found a way to do it there were too many planted around the place for him to be able to decommission them all in time.

Only after she had gotten maybe ten meters away, Y462—Jack Neylon—gathered enough of his bearings to pull out the remote and push the button on top of it.

Oh dear, thought Umbra, unaffected by neither the barrage of blasts nor the flames suddenly engulfing him. I didn't expect this at all.

…

Kal Snydar, Suicide by bombing. On September 18th he volunteers to fly to Japan to collect a notebook from the new anchorwoman at NHN at the Yellow Box Warehouse at Daikoku wharf. On September 20th at 12:40 am after taking the notebook he activates the bombs planted all around the building after the anchorwoman escapes. He dies in the resulting explosion and everything on him is burned with him.
Sept 19, 12:55pm

From: Matsu

To: Me

Hi erin
Erin felt Lawliet rub his soft head against her temple in a way she couldn't tell was playful or a quiet but desperate bid for attention as he pawed at her shoulder and breast. From the way his claws pricked at her skin underneath the fabric of her shirt she knew she'd need to trim his nails soon. She could hear him purring in her ear, feel the vibrations of it against her bare neck, but she couldn't assume that his purring was out of contentedness. Cats purred for a variety of reasons, such as to ask for comfort when they were sick or hurt.

Lawliet didn't do this often. Normally she'd be the one that got too touchy-feely for him. Then again, how often had she been home lately to play and get cuddly at all? She'd only stopped by to handle his food, water and hygiene. He missed her lap and her chest and her shoulder and her hands.

She leaned into him so she could nestle him into the crook of her neck, one hand gently scratching the scruff of his while her camera rolled around in the other as she balanced it on her lap. "I know. I know, I've been neglecting you. I'm so sorry," she murmured. "I promise I'm not doing it on purpose." Erin could only twist her neck enough to plant a kiss on the end of the scar that stretched along his shoulder. His tail flicked in her face in response.

But even with his distress on her mind, a wave of nostalgia had struck her coming home that had made her pull out her camera to look at her photos from her trip to Japan. It was a wonder she'd gotten to take any pictures at all, really. She'd argued with L about that in the first few days of her "stay," pointing out that it would look suspicious if she came home with no pictures at all to show for her adventures. He eventually relented, his main conditions being that she would not share or post any photos online until after the case was closed (by then she would be able to go home), and that Watari would hold on to the camera and screen the photos she'd take every day she went out. Whichever ones he deemed "inappropriate" would be deleted, no ifs, ands or buts. Sentiment meant nothing to him. She got his paranoia as much as she could get anything, but he didn't have to be a tool about it.

One particular picture held a special place in her heart: the five of them—her, Matsu, Misa, Light, even L—at a parade for Shubun-no-hi or Autumn Equinox Day in Osaka, Misa's hometown. Matsuda was squeezed into the edge on the left with an arm around her and a broad grin on his flustered face, followed by her arms around him and Misa, who tangled her arms around Light's trunk. They had never looked happier (although looking back on it now with the horrible truth they had not yet known at the time, Light's smile did look a bit forced. Like no matter how much he might have tried something just wouldn't let him enjoy life like others did, though she'd have chalked it up to gas, shyness, anxiety over the case or a combination of the three).

You know Light, if you really didn't love Misa and only liked her as a friend—if that—you could have just told her so. She might not have accepted it right away but maybe if you didn't keep leading her on she'd have come around eventually. You might have had your reasons but you can only fake and pretend your way through life for so long.

L was the only one whose face wasn't visible. You couldn't see him except for the top of his untameable bed-head and his pale spidery fingers poking out from either Light's shoulder or between her shoulder and Matsu's arm as he scrunched everyone together and ducked behind them in hiding. "Oh that Ryuga, what a funny guy, he had some kind of phobia of cameras," she'd say. It wasn't a great picture but it was the only one she had of him, proof that he hadn't been just a figment of her imagination (she doubted that she was creative enough to come up with a character
like him). Of course she'd never posted it online or anywhere. It was all hers for her private reminiscing.

They sure were a strange, unlikely bunch. But moments like this one would make her forget that. In those moments, they looked and almost felt like a normal group of friends goofing off on the weekend.

Now those days were over.

No matter how much she wanted to, there was no way she could separate Misa from the Second Kira. They were two sides of the same coin. She had never been brainwashed except by herself. If she let one go like Near had said she ought to, she'd have to let the other go too.

A frightening thought began to saturate her mind then, something she hadn't had time nor reason to consider until this point. If L had listened to me and destroyed the notebooks from the get-go, would this have happened to Light too? I don't know what's happened that triggered Misa to go back to the dark side, but would Light have eventually suffered this kind of breakdown himself? Back then he seemed so anxious to prove his innocence. Anyone would be worried about wanting to clear his name but he went to some pretty great lengths…

I wonder if it's because deep down he always knew, but he didn't want to believe it? Sure as hell couldn't talk about it. And then what, Light? You got your notebook and your memories back. You could have turned back then. No one would've been any wiser. So why didn't you?

Because that would have made all those lives you'd taken pointless, and you just a homicidal maniac. I don't know if I should call that a case of ego or an uber fucked-up sense of honor. In any case, failure was never an option for you or L. How could you live with yourself had you given up on your revolution and shot at godhood? Short answer: you couldn't. And it looks like in the end Misa couldn't go on like that either, could she? What about Kiyomi and Mello?

People like her…can't change even if they wanted to.

Damn. Why does Near have to always have a point? You're like L in that way: as assholish as they come, but when you've got a point, you hit the nail on the friggin' head—

The sharp twitter of a bird rocked her out of her meditations, the sound her phone made when she got a voicemail or text. Cradling Lawliet to her, she put the camera down and reached for the phone from across the table. Who could that be?

She unlocked the device and selected the bubble on the screen, perking up a bit when she read the name of the sender.

From: Matsu

To: Me

Hi erin

"Hey. Hey boy, you gotta get off. I need to answer this," she coaxed Lawliet. "C'mere, get on my lap. Get on my lap. Good boy." The cat complied, turning over on his back to flash his belly at her for a moment before curling back up into a ball when she didn't reach down to rub at it as she often did. Had she and he would have snatched it up in his paws, as part of their game.

Wait. Near said that she couldn't contact the task force on her own.
Well, he probably had Roger bug my phone before I went home just in case I did. What the hell, I've got nothing to hide. Besides, he said he brought the guys up to speed about everything already.

Hi matsu. Whats up?

She glanced at the corner of the screen for the time. 8:58. It should have been almost one over there in Tokyo, lunchtime. God, she was exhausted. But sleep wouldn't come to her. Stephen and the others were busy; she could use Matsuda's company right about now, and surely he needed hers. He must've been taking the news about Misa pretty hard.

Minutes later her phone tweeted again. The clouds

How are you

She chuckled softly at his joke in spite of herself. Normally Matsuda abbreviated his words down to letters and used lots of emoticons but she didn't think much of it for the moment. Hangin in there. Hows evry1?

Lawliet squirmed around in her lap, batting at her arms to ask her to put that silly phone down and focus on him instead. She lifted her arms up higher out of reach of him. "Don't do that Lawliet, you might scratch me."

Doing the same

Fgr hes alrdy told u guys. Im so sry bout Misa.

Dunno whats happened to her or what shes up to.

Kims worrying herself 2 death.

Im scared touta.

It took a bit longer for him to respond than with his previous texts.

Dont worry

Ill protect you

This brought a small smile to her lips and a soft warmth to her aching heart. That Matsuda, always trying to be the knight in shining armor. When she couldn't talk to Farley much, he had filled in as a surrogate big brother and years later she still considered him family. They were all still family to her.

Thnx.

Rlly sweet of u, but id b watchin my own bacon.

Ill be awright. Plz b careful, touta. Pass it on.

Ilu.

She added a beating heart emoticon at the end of the fourth text before sending it. It took even longer for Matsuda to respond to this. She expected him to send back something along the lines of "Ilu x 10" with a bunch of hearts and smileys and hug emoticons. It was one of their stupid little inside jokes—whoever said "Ilu 2" would outdo the person who'd said "Ilu" first—but that didn't make the affection between them any less genuine. One reason they got along so well is that they
were both so sentimental. They didn't have to cap it as they did for the others. It was one of the few things about him that hadn't changed much since the Kira case and she hoped it never would.

Instead, she got the following:

Likewise

That was it. No smileys or hearts or hugs.

Erin frowned, absently scratching between Lawliet's twitching ears as she read the message. He must be really upset about Misa. I don't blame him but maybe I should call him, make sure he's okay? You can't really tell how someone's feeling either way from a text.

So she dialed his number. To her surprise he didn't pick up. The phone rang four, maybe five times before it moved on to his voicemail. Rather than leave a message she hung up and tried again.

Huh, that's weird. Why isn't he picking up? He always picks up. If he's got time to text then I'd think he could answer a call too. I don't know, unless he's at a library or something.

This time the phone didn't ring at all; it went straight to voicemail.

As it did the third time. "Hey, this is Touta Matsuda. Sorry if I missed you; please leave a message and I'll get back to you ASAP! Have a great day."

Eeeep.

"Uh, hi Matsuda, this is Erin. I don't know why you're not picking up if you're texting me right now but call me back please? I'm kinda worried about you. Thanks."

She hung up, and suddenly her stomach started to flip-flop with apprehension she couldn't explain. On the one hand this was probably no big deal. But why the hell wasn't Matsuda answering his phone? Maybe he had a sore throat and just couldn't speak at the moment? But wouldn't he have said something about that by now if he did? Unlike the rest of the task force he was the first to admit a moment of weakness. Aizawa would call some of those whiny bids for attention.

She went back through the menu to send him one more text: U sick 2day? Got a frog in ur throat?

Yes

Will talk later

Goodbye

For some reason Erin found she couldn't believe that as much as she wanted to. What was he in such a hurry for all of a sudden? Unless he was conducting surveillance on Takada at the moment. No, he wouldn't be texting her during a stakeout, he wasn't that lax.

Not anymore.

…

Oh my God. Have I even been talking to Matsuda at all this whole time?

Her grip on the phone became lax enough to make her drop it on Lawliet, who promptly darted out of the way to hide under the sofa beneath her feet with a short yowl of protest.
"I'm sorry, Lawliet, I didn't mean to do that!"

…

"Has Misa Amane turned up yet?"

"No. My task force is doing all they can to find her. If we can find her, chances are we will find M, too. How has your surveillance of Kiyomi Takada turned out so far?"

Near could hear an exhausted and frustrated sigh on the other end. Without hearing a word he concluded right away that it hadn't gone over well. "Well, I sent two of my men to follow her from her apartment but…the strangest thing happened. Their car stopped running right in the middle of traffic while they were tailing a cab she flagged down. Ide says that when he looked under the hood, the distributor cap was gone."

"The distributor cap spontaneously vanished while the car was running in traffic?"

"I know that sounds ridiculous but yes, according to him that's what happened. Then Matsuda tried to hail another cab while Ide was tied up with the car, but by then we'd already lost her. Ide got the license plate of the cab so I've just sent him and Mogi to the taxi agency to ask about where she was headed that day, and we'll have to go from there."

"Hmph. I'll give you points for trying," said Near dismissively, his pointer finger once again entangled in his hair. Still he couldn't deny what an interesting development this was, nor the growing irritation in Aizawa's voice as he continued.

"I might also want to add that one of my men's cell phones went missing we think around the same time, though it wasn't noticed until a while later. Matsuda swears up and down that he'd had it on him when we'd started tailing Takada and he's looked all over the car. He hasn't found it yet."

"And now this morning, or it might've been last night…someone blew up the Yellow Box Warehouse at Daikoku wharf."

"Do you think it has anything to do with the case at hand, Director?"

"I don't know, but either way the crime scene's being checked out as we speak. I'll give you the full report when I get it. I'm starting to think that Takada is the next Kira and she's got a shinigami attached to her that's helping her throw us off. What else would explain the missing cap and the phone? I'm afr—worried about sending any of us out again; it could get us killed."

"I have come to the same conclusion. However I don't think the shinigami will kill you. If it wanted to it would have done so by now. And it can't tell Takada your names even if she wanted to do the job herself, or else there's no reason for the Eye Deal to exist. Still, this is going to make watching her difficult if she's having the shinigami cover for her like it has."

"Director, has Detective Matsuda had his phone deactivated yet?"

"No, but I've asked him to get that taken care of immediately."

"Wait, don't."

Naturally Aizawa didn't like that suggestion one bit. "What do you mean, don't? L, this is a major security breach! The shinigami could hand that phone over to Takada to—"

"But none of you are dead yet, are you, Director? Either Takada is refraining from killing you
because she knows it would make her look that much more suspicious, or...the shinigami stole Matsuda's phone by its own volition and for its own purposes. In which case, Takada may not know about the phone at all."

"What? Wh-why would you think that?" The Director rarely stuttered. It took something quite shocking for him to be so inclined.

Near rolled his eyes. Bearing the title of the greatest detective in the world was indeed not an easy task. All the explaining he had to do. "When did you say this happened?"

"The car got stuck in traffic around 12:20, maybe 12:25 pm."

"Tokyo is 16 hours ahead of Los Angeles in regards to time zones. Ms. Blogger claims that last night she received a text from Matsuda's phone and from there she had a conversation with the sender thinking that it was Matsuda. The text was sent at 8:55 pm, which would be 12:55 pm the next day from where you are. But when she tried to call him, he never picked up or answered her voice message. The shinigami can't be seen or heard unless a person touches the notebook it's attached to, so that must be why."

After a tense moment of silence, presumably an attempt to digest all this information, Aizawa asked, "But why would the shinigami contact Blogger? What did they even talk about?"

"Ostensibly, nothing important. Mostly Ms. Blogger whining about how overwhelmed she feels by this entire situation and 'Matsu' assuring that 'he' will be there for her. The usual diabetes-inducing cute subjects these two seem to enjoy. My point is, this shinigami knows her somehow and has an interest in her or else it wouldn't have bothered to contact her, not to mention it sounds fairly intelligent for its species. Enough to navigate its way through some forms of technology, at least. And there's no reason Takada would have texted her. So I recommend that we keep the phone active. We could use Blogger to extract information from it, perhaps persuade it to turn on Takada."

"Honestly L, I don't like that idea. Blogger's been placed in enough danger already that she hasn't needed to be in. I can't endanger a civilian any further in good conscience."

"You have my word, Director, nothing will happen to her. Besides if your men can't get close enough to Takada to catch her in the act, then we don't exactly have a choice, do we? Also, we won't be able to trace it if we decide to do so if it's deactivated." Aizawa wouldn't have been able to see him but he was on the floor with the computer in front of him, spread around him his Tarot deck. Not that he placed much if any faith in psychic phenomena but he did like the intricate art printed on the cards at least.

At this moment three of them were spread by his knees: Strength, The Tower and, perhaps predictably, Death.

"Well what about Takada's home? You said you'd give us the feed to the inside of her apartment but clearly I'm not the only one that's failed to deliver."

"I am well aware of this, Director Aizawa. I will get back to you as soon as I've spoken to the person I hired to install the bugs. Although I do have a theory as to what is the hold-up..."

The two signed off for the time being, only for Near to ask Roger to dial another code. "Wedy? Come in, Wedy."

A white screen with a small, bold black "W" in Old English font blinked on. "Yeah."
"An update, please. Have you installed those bugs in Takada's apartment yet?"

The woman huffed in exasperation. "Only for the third time, but I'm still not getting any feed. Somebody keeps removing and destroying them. I go back in there and it's like I was never in there to start with. It's really pissing me off…"

Near tugged at his hair a little harder than before. This was worse than even he'd have thought. "I trust that you've been going to her residence when she's at work. Are you saying that they are all gone? Every bug in the apartment, even the ones hidden in places a person couldn't reach?"

"Yeah."

"The shinigami. It must be scoping her apartment for bugs, too. Sounds like this one is much more cooperative with the owner of its notebook than the ones we've encountered previously. Director Aizawa reported having trouble following Takada too."

"We? I don't know where you were when Kira first appeared, but I think you mean the guy that was L before you took over."

"That I did. I fail to see why you should be complaining; I'm paying you more than he ever did for this sort of job, and that's all you should be concerned about. I guarantee that you will still get something for your troubles even with this minor setback. Provided that you do something to justify the payment, that is."

"I'd better. This is expensive equipment that I'm blowing through. All right, so if I can't bug Takada's place I guess I'll just have to watch her the old-fashioned way. I could go undercover, ask around about her from co-workers at her old and current workplaces. Maybe if I'm feeling bold, see if I couldn't get an interview with her myself. She sounds like the type who'd lap up the attention."

Near took a sip of his juice from the bright green curly straw. He untangled his finger from his curled hair and lightly smacked his mouth, both in concentration and to moisten his drying lips. "A sound idea. The shinigami should have no reason to obstruct you as long as you don't look suspicious. You could pose as a pro-Kira biographer collecting information you need for a book you're writing. It's best that you wear a disguise if this is what you decide to do. Preferably with a mask. Even if something goes wrong, Takada would need to know what you actually look like before she could dispatch you. Let's not give her that opportunity."

"No need to remind me. This isn't my first rodeo, you know. By the way, L, about the girl—"

"Nothing is going to happen to her, Wedy," he answered, slightly wearily for him. "Don't concern yourself with that. It's out of your hands."

Wedy made a clucking noise of disapproval. "I told her not to dig into it. Does she listen? Hell no. Dumb millennial. I would've thought she learned her lesson the first time around. It's honor before reason with people like her."

Near for obvious reasons refrained from mentioning the fact that he technically came from the same generation Wedy disparaged, that he was far from dumb and in fact was probably better off than she could ever hope to be. After all, who was under whose thumb here? "It annoys me as well. But you tried to ward her off and that's all you could have done. And to tell you the truth, it wasn't entirely her fault. But we will go no more into it. Now if you'll excuse me I need to get back to Director Aizawa. Stand by for when I call you again."
Near had to be pulling her leg. He must be. He did seem to enjoy watching people squirm.

While the task force did the best it could to shake off the recent blow Mello had dealt them, Near coming out with this couldn't be helping their anxieties in the least. Anthony and Halle looked like they weren't sure who they should be staring at, and Stephen, having taken a spot next to her, glared at the laptop bearing L's insignia head-on.

Every synapse in her brain seemed to fire at once as she tried to process a response to this. "Aw for Chrissake, Near, for real. Do I seriously look like someone who would use a killer notebook?" she sputtered. Her entire body had grown so flush at the accusation it felt like her flesh was going to melt straight off her bones and leave a sticky puddle on the floor like a creamsicle dribbling off the stick in July. To make things worse, he'd gathered everyone into the den to make his announcements regarding the new developments of the investigation here and abroad, and he chose to open discussion with…with that. How did that come about?

"Yeah, what the hell kind of accusation is that?" Stephen demanded.

"Not really," said Near, completely ignoring Stephen's comment. "Whatever personality you do have doesn't gel with the type I would associate with someone who would use the notebook, intentionally, that is. You do look dense enough to use it on accident though. If you ever did, chances are you would panic as soon as you realized the notebook for what it was and destroy it, thus wiping the memories of it from your mind."

What? Against her will, Erin's hands found themselves clapped over the top of her head. She had come to the conclusion that there were few things more terrifying than the idea of killing someone, never mind many people and not even remembering doing it. It was akin to having no control over your own mind. No wonder Misa had gone insane, and it very well could have killed Light if Ryuk hadn't done it first.

Had she made a grave mistake back then thinking everyone could be saved by trying to erase their memories again?

"L, where is this coming from?" asked Anthony as calmly as he could before Erin could get back the bearings to ask the question herself. "This is a serious accusation you're making here."

"I'm not accusing Ms. Blogger of anything. I'm just trying to figure out how Takada's shinigami could know her and why it would want to contact her."

Now everyone was sitting ramrod straight. "Takada's shinigami, sir? What are you talking about?"

So Near went on to relay everything Director Aizawa had in turn relayed to him less than two hours ago: Ide, Matsuda, Takada, the missing distributor cap, Matsuda's phone, the time difference, Erin's text conversation and the lack of a response to her calls. "Therefore I've come to the conclusion that the shinigami possessing Takada stole Matsuda's phone and used it to contact Ms. Blogger shortly after. It might still be in possession of it in case it wants to speak to her again. Somehow it knows who you are and is interested in you. Now why do you think that is?"

"I-I don't know! How should I know?" She couldn't argue the evidence he'd presented on the matter, however. It all made too much sense, or was it that she couldn't think straight enough to come up with a good rebuttal? "I wouldn't use a Death Note though, that's for damn sure!"
"Well you can't necessarily argue the point either way if you can't remember doing it, can you?"

"Hey, that's enough," barked Stephen. "I'm with Erin: I don't know what business this—this thing could have with her either, but there's no way she could've used a Death Note before."

"Of course you'd be on her side. And Ms. Blogger will most certainly reward you for your support later today the best way that she can." That sonofabitch. Did he have nothing better to do besides mock them in front of everyone? God, he was like one of those snot-nosed kids that pointed and laughed and led the class in taunting, "Stephen's got a giirl-friend! Stephen's got a giirl-friend!" Except laughter was much too far beneath him.

Stephen remained unflappable. "Look, couldn't the shinigami have just dropped its notebook in her general vicinity and not Takada's if it wanted her to use the Death Note again? Or at the very least it would've killed Takada by now so that it could do just that."

"Perhaps. So the only other scenario that makes sense is, simply put, you have a stalker. It may have other motives driving it to help Takada, but still it knows enough about you to be aware of your friendship with Detective Matsuda, hence why it stole his phone to contact you with and not someone else's."

... I think I'm gonna wet my pants.

Mercifully that didn't happen. Two fingers from her clammy hand fitted around her forehead like an imaginary hat as this sank in. "A—a stalker? I've got a stalker," she muttered hoarsely. "Wh-why would anyone wanna stalk me?" She felt Stephen's hand rub slow, light circles into her back at an attempt to soothe the chills now banging up her spine like mallets against a xylophone. He seemed to have an instinct for those sort of things.

"Hard to say. You're one of the most vanilla people I've met so far. But then stalkers aren't known for their rational thought processes to begin with, supernatural ones less so apparently. That said, if what we're thinking is true, I want you to maintain a correspondence with the shinigami. See if you can't get information out of it and maybe convince it to help us trap Takada."

She jumped in her seat at the mere audacity behind this suggestion. "Ex-cuse me? You want me to keep talking to it? I'm sorry but that's some pretty crappy advice on how to handle a stalker, especially coming from a detective!"

"I wouldn't be suggesting this if I thought it was going to hurt you, Ms. Blogger. I don't think it will. If it wanted to kill you I imagine it would have done it already, having the capability to do so. To the contrary, it did say that it will quote-unquote 'protect you.'"

Erin felt herself turn beet-red at that last part in spite of her fears. Near made what she would've thought was an innocent and good-natured remark sound dirty somehow. Or maybe it had been ruined by the fact that an otherworldly being who had been stalking her for who knows how long had told her that rather than someone she knew and trusted.

But something else about Near's plan bothered her as well.

"I don't know if I could do that. Even if they're not rational, this guy—could be a girl for all I know—still has feelings, and...I don't like the idea of manipulating anyone's feelings. It's like beating a hornet's nest: you're just begging for trouble doing that. Light tricked Rem into killing for him by using her love for Misa against her and then she ended up dying for it. I can't do that. I won't do
"I'm not asking you to make it kill anyone for your sake. Nowhere since this discussion began do I recall asking that of you. All I'm requesting is that you talk to it so as to get information on Takada and if you're persuasive enough, ask it to help us catch her. Killing her or anyone should not be necessary as it stands."

"I'm not sure I like this idea either," said Anthony. "Not to say that you don't have a point, but we're basing this on a lot of assumptions about an unpredictable…er, creature."

"I agree with Anthony," said Halle. "We have no way of knowing it won't turn on us and play along just to help Takada weed us out."

"Perhaps, but it's also a creature with a track record for being easily swayed by petty incentives. It's no different from an animal; it's only loyal for as long as the material benefit is nice enough. It doesn't care for silly ideals. Besides the fact that it contacted Ms. Blogger in the first place, putting Takada at risk of being exposed, suggests that its loyalty to her isn't that strong."

"If it really bothers you that much you can always ask it to drop in for milk and cookies afterwards if that will help you sleep better. It's especially imperative that we get the notebook from her before Mello does, assuming of course that he hasn't already made a grab for it. This could be our best chance at ruining Takada from the inside if Director Aizawa and his men can't get close enough to her. Even Wedy has been having problems spying on her."

Erin jolted with instant recognition at that name. "W-Wedy? You mean, Wedy-Wedy?"

"Yes. You probably know her from before. I believe you visited her only weeks ago."

No one else had any way of knowing what Near was talking about, or so she presumed, but Erin did. "Bu—but she told me—"

"Whatever she told you was a lie. Then again, having worked with her before did you seriously expect her to be honest with you?"

She scratched at the nape of her neck and glanced down at the toes of her beaten orange basketball shoes. Her mother would sometimes criticize her for having no taste in color when it came to her wardrobe, a serious reporter may wear neon sneakers when she goes out on an evening jog but not on the job, Bunny, sorry to say. ("Then why d'you keep calling me Bunny if you want me to be taken seriously?" "That's different. I'm your mother, I can call you whatever I want.")

Her heart and some of whatever dignity she had sunk in her chest. "Well, I—no, I probably shouldn't have. But the thought was nice."

"And therein lies your problem, Ms. Blogger. You prefer the nice scenario when the real world very rarely conforms to the nice scenario. I would've thought you'd learned that by now."

…

"Well…here goes."

Erin selected Matsuda's number from her contact list and opened up a text box. Hi.

She didn't expect an immediate response, but once again she set herself up for a shocker. She really should work on not getting so worked up; it could kill her one of these days. It was a wonder why it hadn't yet. Two minutes later her phone twittered.
Hi Erin

She gulped. "Oh. That was quick. He just texted hi back."

A resounding grunt of surprise rippled through the suite, with the exception of Near who ordered from beyond the computer, "Keep talking and read aloud every line in the conversation."

Erin briefly thought about asking why Near would think that she'd hide anything, never mind how when everyone was positioned on either side or behind her. But she didn't and read out loud her message as she typed it in:

Ur not rly matsu. R u?

"Are you sure you want to open up with that?" asked Stephen, reading the message from over Erin's shoulder.

"Sometimes the best way to make a deal is get down to business," said Halle to her right. "Although it might try to deny it if you start with just that."

This felt like communicating with the spirits through an Ouija board at a séance, or writing in that enchanted diary in the second book of the Harry Potter™ series through which the young hero met Tom Riddle™...aka Lord Voldemort™. Or was that in the third book? Erin hadn't read them in years so her memory of the stories was fuzzy at best. Assuming there was one, God help them if this turned up similar results. Or worse.

Matsu emailed me. He lost his phone the other day.

I wont turn u in. Couldnt if i wanted 2.

I just want 2 know.

Who r u rly?

Her pulse seemed to throb straight out of her wrists as she sent that last message. On the tiny smudged screen her responses floated in yellow speech bubbles, "Matsu's" in green.

A friend

A friend forever

"'A friend forever.' How cute."

"Hey, shut up! He said that, not me," Erin snapped, growing flush again at the dubiously sweet reply. She'd expect to hear Misa spout this sort of thing. And shucks, she probably would too if it felt right, but not to someone she didn't even know.

"There's no way Takada would give these sort of answers, not even to lie. She's far too proud. Go on."

Thnx. But srsly what can i call u?

Umbra

"The shinigami's been unusually cooperative so far," commented Anthony to her left, a hand supporting his well-defined chin as he pondered the ongoing conversation.
"If what L said is true, it must trust her a good deal," said Halle. "Time will tell if that makes a difference."

"I hope this doesn't jack up my phone bill too much," muttered Erin as we made her next reply. "This could take a while."

Umbra i dont think weve met b4. Hv we?

No

But I do know you

I wanted to call you but you cant hear me

So I texted you instead

Ok

1. R u a god of death? Is that y?

2. Y contact me at all?

1

Clever girl

2

I missed you

"Oh my God." Temporarily looking away from the screen, Erin wiped the film of sweat building up around her hairline though the weather had been marginally cooler those past few days. This Umbra character talked like he saw nothing wrong with stalking a person. But being not of this world, maybe he genuinely didn't see the harm in it? Stranger still, how could he be so willing to fess up to his true identity? Either way, Erin thought she'd better slow down before getting too far ahead of herself. Establish rapport or something like that.

I wouldnt say that. I had help.

What r u doing rite now?

Helping a friend

He lost something important

I have to get it back before its too late

"A friend…what could it mean by that?" Stephen wondered aloud, propping himself against the couch by his elbow. "It called the friend a 'he' so it can't be Takada. Or, ah, as far as we know…"

"Stephen!"

"What? I don't mean any disrespect, Anthony, but you gotta consider all the possibilities."

"Whoever it is, I've got a hunch that this 'something important' is a notebook," said Halle, choosing to ignore her friend's remark. It wasn't worth dignifying with a response. "Maybe it's tagging along
with her to use her to find what it's looking for?

What's gonna happen if you're too late?

Hell die

Anthony's pale blue eyes widened. "He'll die?" What could it mean by that? Is its friend the sort that Takada would target? Is the friend even human? Or could it be—"

"A shinigami?" Erin blurted before she realized she'd said anything. All eyes were on her then and as much as she didn't like it, she had to say something as a follow-up. She tugged at the hem of her shirt.

"I—I dunno, but what if his friend is another shinigami? That could better explain why the notebook is so important to him. I-I don't think it's the one Takada has 'cause that's his and he woulda killed her for it by now if it wasn't. What if the shinigami depend on the notebooks to, uh, stay alive or something? I mean, they gotta have 'em around for some purpose. But I'm just guessing here. Could be wrong, I've been wrong before…"

"An altruistic shinigami…unlikely but perhaps not completely impossible."

I'm looking 4 smthng 2.

A friend of mine went missing not 2 long ago.

She's done bad things n the past. She might be at it again.

Mayb we can help each other out?

If ur looking 4 what i think u r.

…

"It's…incredible, how well it seems to comprehend text," said Anthony. "I wonder if all shinigami are this intelligent, or if they are whether they all have an interest in our world."

All of a sudden, no sooner had she sent that last text that her phone began to vibrate in her hands and play a sample of the piano section from "Somebody to Love™ by Queen™. Erin jumped in her seat as she scrambled to keep the phone from falling out of her grip. "Shit, it's my mom."

"Direct her to voicemail. We've got a more pressing matter to attend to."

Reluctant as she was to do so since she and her mother hadn't spoken in a while, she did as Near asked before going back to check whether "Umbra" had answered her. He had.

Do you mean misa

You mentioned a misa the day before

I'm so sorry

I'd like to help you

The phone rang again. Again, "Mom" flashed on the screen. "Ugh, it's Mom again."

"So direct it to voicemail."
"N-no, I really think I should take this. She's just gonna keep calling until I answer. I'll try to keep it short."

"Then put it on speaker, and hold it up so we can all hear."

Her mother typically did that when she had something important to talk about, or if she was extremely displeased with you and wanted to make sure you knew. Erin dreaded which it could have been as she answered, turned on the speaker and held the device up to her ear, hoping all the way that it wouldn't be something too mortifying.

"Y'ello?"

"Erin, this is Mom."

"I know, I saw you on my caller ID. H-how are things going at home? Have you and Farley—you know?"

"Tch. He's getting over himself slowly but surely."

"Well y'know Mom, it was bad enough Penny played him the way she did. He didn't need you pouring sand in the wound." It hadn't helped much that Mom had recently started an(other) attempt at kicking her caffeine habit.

"It ain't my fault he couldn't take me being right. I never liked her and I can't help it your brother didn't listen to me. I don't not like someone without a damn good reason to."

Erin tried not to look at anyone or anything except her fist balled up in her lap, her nails digging into the tender flesh of her palm. "Yeah I know, who doesn't?"

"Anyway, the reason I called. What's this business I hear you've gotten into about that school in Winchester?"

Every muscle in her body went rigid like clay kilned into ceramic. Just the slightest twitch and something could snap right off and shatter into pieces at her feet. "What? Mom, wh-what're ya talking about?"

"I've got the fucking thing right in front of me: you wrote about some reporters who did an exposé on, let's see...Wammy's House. Says it tortures and abuses the kids that go there. Mother of Christ, it goes on for at least five pages. Okay, first of all when the hell did you ever go to England? Unless you're dating this super-rich guy you've neglected to mention who takes you to all these exotic places. Is he married? God help you if he's married! I raised you better than that."

Oh dear. She could just feel Stephen and company, though mostly Stephen, shoot her looks, while she never looked up at any of them. Her ears buzzed like the snow on a TV with poor reception. That was exactly what her mind felt like: no reception. She pounded on it in the hopes of getting a clearer picture but to little avail.

She cringed inside. "No, I—I'm not seeing anyone right now. Mom, I don't—I never wrote anything about any Wammy's—"

"Bunny, it's got your name on it clear as day. Unless there just happens to be another reporter out there who's also named Erin Blogger, I'm inclined to think that this is you."

"Uh...MomIgottacallyouback."
All the breath in her seemed punched out of her by the time she ended the call. What the hell was going on now?

Then Roger burst into the room with grocery bags clutched in his gnarled hands and a paper rolled up under his arm. He had gone downstairs to collect his order from the delivery outside and on the way he must have picked up the paper out on the lobby. He looked like all the color had literally been erased out of his face with a pencil, leaving smears of panic in its wake. Gasping heavily, he turned his gaze to the girl in question. She couldn't bear to meet his for fear what how distorted his face had truly gotten.

And all Near had to say at that moment was, "Welcome back, Watari. It seems we have another problem."
"If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed."

- Albert Einstein

The team had the story up on Halle's Dell™ for all to behold the excruciatingly detailed (and hopefully for the love of all decent things in the world, fabricated) horrors that allegedly took place behind Wammy's closed doors, mostly from the perspective of "alumni" interviewed for the story. The little geniuses that had the misfortune of winding up in this hellhole, cleverly disguised as a sanctuary, were reduced to little more than lab animals subjected to the worst kind of psychological and even physical experiments that could make Milgram™ turn wan and call BS on the spot.

The only dirty business Wammy's wasn't up to was molesting their—oh wait. Did their "breeding program" between the older charges in order to produce the next generation of super-mad geniuses count towards that? Surprisingly, or maybe not, the thing about L's successor wasn't brought up at all. Then again, they had to keep things somewhat believable, didn't they? So that was probably how the breeding thing was inspired.

Everyone had a look on their face that each demanded the same thing: What the flying fuck am I looking at? Roger looked like he couldn't keep his head up, like he could throw up any minute. Hell, he looked like he'd already chucked his cookies on the way up here. And how could she blame him?

"Roger! Look, I know what I said when we first met but y-you hafta believe me. I didn't write this! I didn't write anything! How could I? When would I have found the time? I got my passport back at my place; there's no stamp in there anywhere for when I went to England, which I never did! And even if I wanted to I ain't nearly creative enough to come up with—"

"We know you're not. Your mother must have been referring to the new article we published to counter the original story."

"Wh…what?"

Halle was the first to break out of the train-wreck trance so she could clear the search bar and type in another phrase. "The writers credited are Halliday and Everist…I'm going to look those two up right now," she announced, her voice strange and cold. Like she were bracing herself for another round of un-pleasantries.

"Sir…is Wammy's House connected to your organization in some way?" asked Anthony when he could get himself back together. "I don't mean to sound callous but that's the only reason I can think as to why this would be important to us."

Once again Near and Roger had no choice but to come clean, and this time it wasn't because of Erin. Not primarily, at least. "Yes. Wammy's House is where L comes from. Where M and I came from. Chances are, M threw some money and threats around and had the story you've just read published. I shouldn't have to add that this particular detail best be kept only between the six of us, but just in case."
"But why would M smear Wammy's House like this? And what about Erin? What did you guys have her write?" asked Stephen, his crystal blue eyes narrowed at the "L" on the monitor glaring back at them.

"M has a massive chip on his shoulder regarding L's legacy. He seems to have reached a point where he will do virtually anything to bring us down. Knowing M, he would have had this story published in most of the world's major cities. He always was over-the-top in his methods. What I'm concerned about is the publicity that's bound to follow this and how the institution will be affected, since L's organization makes up only a fraction of Wammy's program and is disconnected from public record.

"So we concocted a rebuttal and published it under Erin's name."

Erin leapt up from her seat like a fire had been lit under her, accidentally elbowing Stephen in the face as she did so, too panicky to notice him flinch away with his hand clapped over his nose. "Are you friggin' kidding me? You couldn't be bothered to ask me first before you did this?" she cried, her arms flailing out like one of those wacky inflatable tube-people outside a car dealership which prompted Anthony to quickly back away lest he be struck in the face as well. "Do you know how much trouble I could get in for this shit? I-I could get fired! I could be sued! I could go to prison!"

"Thus indicating how much you truly know about the law and how easily it can be bent, now if you'll please sit down and let me finish before you hurt yourself or someone else. In fact, in all your excitement you've smacked Gevanni down with your elbow just now."

As Erin floundered around on the couch to sheepishly offer Stephen an apology and ask to look at his nose, Near continued:

"I did consider asking for your input, but then I decided that you were going to say yes ultimately so doing so would have been superfluous."

Erin was still panting when Stephen nodded at her in painful affirmation that she hadn't broken his nose thankfully enough. She whipped around (getting a lock of her hair in Stephen's mouth in the process that he picked out as quietly as he could) and huffed, "And how the hell do you know that I would have agreed to it? 'Cause you weren't gonna give me a choice either way?"

"I may have told you before, you're not hard to figure out. The whole reason you became entrenched in this is because you want so desperately to do the right thing. You are practically incapable of leaving well enough alone. Also, I've already taken care of your employers on the matter, and in the event that you do end up losing your livelihood you will be covered as is everyone here. Weren't you the one who suggested that we trust each other more?"

Erin's shoulders slackened. "Y-yeah, but that means we gotta talk to each other about these things, not blindside each other with 'em. You heard how riled up my mom was; what am I gonna tell her? Or the rest of my family for that matter?"

"Yes, I can see where you got your temper from. But you said you'd call her back and you haven't given her enough information so that she could prod around on her own, so we will address that later. Right now we need to focus on how to follow up on the matter at hand. Now that you've established a connection with Takada's shinigami, we can use it to possibly catch her. Lidner, what have you found on Halliday and Everist?"

"Nothing good," Halle announced gravely. Everyone gathered around her to have a look at what she'd found online regarding the writers credited for the story. "It seems Halliday was struck by a bus three days ago and Everist apparently committed suicide two days after that in his bathtub."
Near's response to that was cold as always. He didn't seem to have the capacity to reach out in comfort. Either that or he simply lacked the patience for it. "You don't say. How convenient."

Erin bit down on her lower lip so hard she all but punctured it with her teeth. Either those fellas were struck down by really bad luck, or more likely M had disposed of them after forcing them to publish his story to keep them from talking. Before she could stop herself, she snarled, "What were you saying before? You said M wouldn't go around killing people willy-nilly."

But Mello had a Death Note. Had he fallen under its corruptive influence already as Light and Misa had? Or, like either of them, had he always been a monster and the Death Note simply unlocked the cage?

To her surprise Near didn't answer her, at least not about that point. Could it be that he was secretly as shocked as she was that Mello would do something this drastic? Was he too far gone to be saved after all? Come to think of it, Near never specified how exactly Mello would be punished once they'd caught him though despite insisting that he'd have to answer for his crimes somehow.

Was that because he hadn't thought that far yet? He hadn't seemed like the type to not think about the future. If this was true, maybe he hadn't wanted to think about it? Erin wanted to check on him but that would have to wait.

"With Takada still at large, there's a chance that she'll kill all of the staff and faculty at Wammy's. True, she's chiefly gone after criminals who either have or have not been caught and convicted, but I predict that she will begin attacking entire institutions soon enough if they come even under the slightest scrutiny. We'll have to bait her out somehow, and whoever she may have working with her."

If Roger didn't look sick before, now he looked like he might drop dead right there on the spot. The worst part, that probably really could happen any minute if what Near said was true. Was this what Mello, Matt and Misa had been building up to all along?

"You think Takada could have other accomplices?" asked Anthony, cupping his chin in his large hand and looking away in thought. "Hm, you know, now that you mention it, she doesn't sound like the type who would trade for the Shinigami Eyes no matter how useful they would be to her. She'd prefer to live a long time like the first Kira."

He had a name, Anthony, Erin thought even if she felt a bit like she shouldn't.

"We're in trouble if she's managed to get outside help. Though I think it'd be difficult for her to recruit someone reliable and trustworthy enough to do that for her."

"Yes. But that's where Ms. Blogger comes in. She can convince her shinigami to divulge whatever information it can about Takada and whoever accomplices she has if any."

By now Erin couldn't look at anyone or anything except the olive-green carpet under her hot suffocating feet, although she could feel everyone's eyes drilling into her. As hesitant as she still was to keep talking to Umbra, what choice did she have? Umbra could be a great help in at least stopping Takada and from the sound of things he was willing to do just about anything for her as much she couldn't yet fathom his reasons for it.

No matter how much of the current problem was actually her fault, it was her duty as an American and an involved human being to do something about it.

Sheesh, that sounded corny.
Her spine tingled from the base of her skull down to her coccyx as a crazy idea began swirling around in her pounding head. No matter what she might have said or liked to think to the contrary, Erin never could quite do ideas that weren't at least one degree of crazy. If there was one and only one thing she and L would've had in common, that was it.

She lifted her head up high enough to see Near's "L" insignia on the laptop sitting on the coffee table. Her phone became slippery in her palm with sweat and oil. "Hey you guys, I'm getting something—"

"You want to try baiting Takada."

She sucked in her cheeks and blew out air like she was extinguishing a candle. Somehow she hadn't noticed that some of her thoughts had been broadcasted for everyone to hear. Then again it was just as likely that Near read minds, much like his predecessor. She switched her phone to her other hand and tugged a bit on her shirt collar. "Uhm, well I—yeah. I was thinking about something like that. In the meantime I'll see what I can work out with Umbra but...I was thinking maybe I could go up on TV to talk about my 'article' and—"

"Hey now, wait just a minute! Are you sure you'd want to do that, Erin? You could get killed," Stephen interjected, the urgency in his voice triggering another wave of heat and affection for him to wash over her. Still, she should've guessed that he'd have his objections and right away she began to regret having brought it up. But it was too late to take it back as far as she was concerned. She had to help out somehow.

"She could be. On the other hand, this sounds pretty similar to the stunt the first L pulled four years ago with Lind L. Tailor. Takada might be savvy enough not to fall into the same trap, or at the very least risk tarnishing Kira's image by making Erin out into a martyr," said Halle. "It all depends on how insane with power she's gotten at this point."

"Look guys, just hear me out. L, didn't you say that Wedy and my buddies from the old task force are trying to do surveillance on Takada, right now?"

"Yes."

"Well then, I can trick her or, you know, whoever's got her stupid notebook right now to take it out and write in it. If I've learned anything about the Kira cult it's that they don't like it when you talk trash about them or so much as suggest that they're even a mite in the wrong. And then the guys can bust them right then and there, and hopefully no more people will get killed over it. Let me bring it up to old Umbra, see what he says. He could help us track them down so we have 'em surrounded and can catch 'em red-handed."

"Are you sure you want to take such a risk, Ms. Blogger? As Gevanni astutely pointed out, you could lose your life."

She inhaled deeply to steady her racing pulse and nodded, scared near shitless but not enough to make her take back her proposal. She imagined that Matsuda must have felt this way when he'd volunteered to go on Sakura TV to lure out Higuchi as she harnessed the nerve to answer. "Y—yeah. I'm pretty sure. As much as I don't like the idea of having kids be the new L, I don't think you guys have done any of the things M said you have. Or at least I don't want to believe you have. Just gimme enough time to get ready."

From behind her, Stephen grunted. She felt him touching her shoulder. "I still don't think I like this.
We need to set up some kind of safety net for you."

Erin looked back into Stephen's narrowed blue eyes and wanted to kiss him again, but she couldn't. Not with everyone watching. Oh no, she'd learned her lesson from the last time she'd acted on that impulse. Instead she flashed him as calm and even of a smile as she could muster, which admittedly didn't feel that calm or even at all. In fact it felt more like one of those large toothy sheepish smiles she would make when caught up in an awkward moment or when she'd gotten in trouble, hoping that maybe the gesture would soften the anger of whoever she had unintentionally offended.

She always did find it incredibly attractive when guys acted protective towards people they cared for. In retrospect that was probably one of the things that drew her to L, though it was offset by the more…dysfunctional way he expressed that aspect of himself.

"Then hurry and see if you can't resume your conversation with 'Umbra.' We could grant you three days at the maximum. We have to catch them before the names or faces of Wammy's staff and faculty are broadcasted, which is almost certain that they will be should law enforcement and social services become compelled enough by M's story to investigate them."

…

Only Umbra noticed Sidoh's trauma over the night's ordeal. The fellow had taken cover on top of Teru's refrigerator, shaking and curled over himself like a frightened cat but without the accompanying hissing and scratching. "Wh-what're we gonna do now, Umber?" he squeaked. "I still don't have my notebook. Gee, I wonder what Midra's up to right now? I wonder if she's gonna tell on me to the Old Man? Oohhh, I am so toast!" He covered his bandaged head with his spindly paws.

Umbra turned from his place in the threshold between the den and kitchen and scratched a paw down the front of the rags covering his face. He kept the phone shelved inside his second smaller mouth, above the larger one that he used to speak and eat sweets. "I think it's punishment enough that you've been forced to get the book back yourself," he whispered. "Besides if Midora went and told on you to the King, she probably would get in trouble too. I have more pages to spare if you need to supplement yourself. Now hush for a moment, I'm trying to listen."

"I'm so sorry. I promised to serve you and I've failed," Teru lamented, keeping his head bowed deep enough to avert his dark reddish-brown eyes from Kiyomi's while still being able to see what he was doing with the bandages.

Of course Teru blamed himself for what'd happened at Yellow Box. Kiyomi tried to assure him as calmly as she was capable as he tended to her leg and wrist (she must be divine after all to have gotten away from this with such minor injuries), "No Teru, it's all right. There was nothing you could have done. At least if something happened to me, I'd still have someone left to take up my sword."

Umbra doubted her words. Something in her bright bluish-black eyes simmered under the surface that Teru may or may not have noticed, like deep down she wanted so much to take out her pent-up wrath on him just because she could. He'd let her too, given how Umbra had seen them interact so far. He remained silent for the whole affair, itching to talk to Erin again since he'd bade her goodbye and generally puzzled about what to do next seeing as how the only direct connection they'd had to M and possibly Lumen had just been disposed of.

"No, there is always something to be done in the face of evil. The only thing worse than committing an evil act is doing nothing in the face of it. You should know that better than anyone.
Without courage, all over virtues lose their meaning. Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak."

"Winston Churchill," Kiyomi noted. "I believe he followed that up with, 'Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.' Which is what I'm asking of you right now. The important thing is that I escaped and M still doesn't have the Death Note."

When she said this Teru began to regret having the audacity to talk back to God. But something wasn't adding up to him. "But why would he do this? Why try to detonate you and the notebook instead of just taking it from you?"

Kiyomi bit back a scowl that was both in response to the pain throbbing up her leg and her secret humiliation and rage. With the exception of Teru and Umbra (if indeed she could count Umbra as a man), her distrust and scorn for most of the male persuasion had strengthened over the past four years, more so these past few months. She let Teru hoist her leg onto the table and gingerly lift her foot to place a cushion under it. Going to the hospital had not been an option; had she gone, people would start asking questions that didn't need to be answered. It hadn't seemed necessary anyway. If she could still walk on her leg then surely nothing had broken.

"It must've been a set-up. M must have figured that I'd never give him the real notebook and was trying to set me up at a crime scene to be caught by the police so they would take the notebook from me. He mentioned that he had enough power to take it from them if he had to."

"He must be stopped," said Mikami, his face as hard as a samurai's as he made a quiet declaration of battle in defense of his shogun in the days of old. "The sooner you give me ownership and I get the Shinigami Eyes, the better. I'll make it up to you and more. I will do all I can to find him...and delete him."

Umbra perked up a bit when he heard this. Although the more he thought about it, the more he started to suspect that Teru killing M would be rather problematic. If M died and he happened to be the owner of Sidoh's notebook, Lumen could very well take it and move on to someone else. The chase would never end.

Although he had to confess at least to himself that this pursuit had at least given him something interesting to do. He wouldn't have discovered the joys of cake and ice cream or gotten to talk to Erin had he stayed back in the shinigami realm.

Something she'd said during their conversation had struck him in a way he couldn't describe if anyone had asked him about it. Ilu. He'd seen her text it time and again to family and friends and he knew that in this case she'd most likely meant to say it to Touta Matsuda, but he felt strange when Sidoh read it out to him (as confused as always, he'd pronounced it as "ee-loo."). "Ee-loo? What the heck does that mean?"

Umbra hadn't said a word about it, but he knew it was shorthand for "I love you." But that was pretty much the extent of his knowledge on the matter. He'd heard that word more than a few times since he'd dropped into the human world and before that from his observations of it, but what did it mean? Something positive, he guessed. "Love" was not a word often uttered among the shinigami, even if they tolerated the company of some of their fellows over that of others. Was it just something humans said to each other like they would say "Hello," "Goodbye," "Check, please," and "Thank you?" He'd seen humans say it to their mates over the phone right before they'd hang up and crawl into bed with someone else they hadn't gotten permission to be with, or to their children after they'd beaten them within inches of their lives (the latter type of human Umbra would often prey upon for their lifespan).
Whatever it was supposed to mean, he presumed it held as much weight as the person saying it put into it, as with any other word or phrase. He'd seen how the girl was with her family, cat, neighbors and friends overseas, so coming from her it had to have meant a lot. Not knowing how else to respond to it at the time, he'd had Sidoh answer with, Likewise.

Likewise.

It'd felt like the most correct reply. Not just because it was something Touta Matsuda would say but it felt like he would've wanted to say that too, had it been directed at him.

"Are you sure you should go back to work?" asked Teru when he passed through Umbra with a glass of water and two OTC pain pills. "With your leg the way it is?"

"I don't think I have a choice," said Kiyomi, accepting his offering with a thankful nod. "It will look too suspicious if I don't show up for work, and it's too late for me to call in sick. Besides I have a duty to continue spreading the word of Kira to the people while you take over the punishments. I have a suit I can wear and I spend most of my workday sitting down anyway. Now, get me my phone and the rest of that bottle. I need to call a taxi. Umbra, you can transfer ownership of the notebook to Teru as soon as I'm home."

"Hm? Okay."

…

"So, um, why are we talking to this human again?" asked Sidoh. "Isn't Kiyomi gonna be mad that you're talking to somebody else?"

"She can't get mad if she doesn't find out," he answered nonchalantly. "Besides, I've got a feeling that if she and Teru don't work out, this person could help us instead." That wasn't entirely true; Umbra's reasoning was more of an excuse to talk to Erin than anything. Luckily Sidoh wasn't much of the prying type; he deferred almost entirely to his judgment and was even more pliable when he offered him half his chocolate stash in exchange for his services as transcriber.

Incidentally his fib started to look like there could be some truth to it after all, if their most recent conversation was any indication. "I think M is the current owner of your notebook, Sidoh. If Teru kills him, Lumen could just take the notebook and find someone else to give it to."

"Oh. I-I guess that would suck. Umbra, do you know this human from somewhere? Ah, I'm not judging you! I'm hardly qualified to judge anyone. I'm just wondering."

Umbra's answer to that was slow and deliberate: "In a way, yes, I do know her. I've seen her a few times from home. We can trust her. If we ever get to meet her, do not try to kill her."

"N-never! On the contrary if she helps me gets my notebook back, I think I'm the one that'll owe her my life! H'oooh…a shinigami owing a human. Now doesn't that sound like the most pathetic thing you've ever heard?"

"If you wanted my opinion, being a god of death is rather overrated. I can't imagine why any human would want to become one of us," said Umbra, remembering Kiyomi and the man Lumen had mentioned from Ryuk's story. "From what I've seen between our world and theirs, we're not that different, really."

By this time he'd taken the phone back to store it in his second mouth. If she replied to his latest message he didn't get the chance to check because then he heard Teru's alarm go off, just as the hazy light of the morning sun started to flood the apartment through the opened blinds.
Oh joy. Time for breakfast. For Teru, coffee, grapefruit, toast and broiled salmon with natto and rice on the side. For Umbra and Sidoh, chocolate sandwich cookies.

Before this Teru had had no need nor interest in stashing junk food around his home, but Kiyomi had advised him before they'd parted at the hotel to stock up on desserts for Umbra; the more well-fed he was, the more cooperative he'd be. After the meal, Umbra watched the new owner of his notebook wash his face, brush his teeth and adjust the square, thick-rimmed glasses on his stern-looking face.

"I found the cookies in the pantry," he called to him, having ripped six from the package and given Sidoh his share when Teru left the kitchen after washing his dishes to change into the clothes he'd laid out for the day. He was quite meticulous for a human, almost robotic in his rituals. Like he knew nothing better. No, more like he didn't believe there was better. If he suffered any regret for making the Eye Deal or exhaustion from having gotten three and a half hours of sleep, he didn't show it.

"Were they to your liking?"

"Yes, very much so."

"Good. If I can make a small request if you're going to be staying with me, please don't drop crumbs everywhere. Well this is interesting: I can see numbers over anyone else's head but not my own…"

"I'll do my best. Oh, and that's because the lifespan—that's what the numbers are—is hidden for people who own a Death Note. I'm not sure why, that's just the way it is. Teru, may I make a request of my own?"

"What's that, shinigami?"

Umbra scratched at his mane and cocked his head. "I'd like to know why you're so determined to help Kiyomi so much. Is it because you love her?"

Teru stared at him like he'd just asked why a rock falls straight to the ground when dropped. "I do enjoy her company and care for her immensely, but it's more than that. I'm doing this because it is my duty as a servant of God and a human being to carry out Hi—Her will and dole out justice. Seeing as you are not human yourself though, I don't suppose you would understand."

"But I'd like to, or else I wouldn't have asked. Have you always felt that way even before Kiyomi told you that she was Kira?"

The man nodded before exiting the bathroom to fetch his briefcase, already packed the night before, and do up his navy blue tie. "Yes. In this world there is only good and evil. It was one of the first universal truths I grasped from watching the world around me. Every human being without exception will eventually fall into one category or the other."

"And what did you see that made you think this?"

"I've been aware of this fact since grade school. And even when I got out of school I found things to be no different in the outside world. If anything, the problem seemed amplified. Unfortunately you can't approach an adult offender like you can a child. With children you still have a chance to re-educate them. But the older they are, the less likely they will ever reform."

"Teru, were you bullied a lot when you were young?"
"Yes. From elementary school onwards. Not so much because I was easy to victimize as it was because I fought back and came to the aid of those who were. Evil has to be confronted, but I will admit there were times when it seemed like evil would triumph over good. More times than I want to remember, but I do." Teru paused to recall all the times he rushed into the thick of battle and was promptly treated to a beatdown while onlookers just stood by staring blankly, walked away or even got in on the action on the side of the bullies. Meanwhile the adults, who were supposed to protect those victims and teach their students to know better, were nowhere to be found. There were few things Teru had not been subjected to by the hands of his crueler peers. He had had his head dunked in toilets, been stripped naked and photographed, hung from a tree...you name it, Teru had been through it.

Umbra could only imagine that a person could only take so much abuse from his peers with little to no restitution before he finally went to pieces. He gleaned this much just from looking at Sidoh, who hid back in the kitchen to stuff his face with more cookies. Though Teru hid it well, it seemed that he reached his breaking point a long time ago, except he responded to it the opposite way Sidoh did.

As Teru picked up his briefcase and headed towards the door, Umbra followed suit. "That sounds like so much to handle on one's own. Had you no allies at all?"

"Only one, my mother. Then even she turned on me and became like all the other adults. She told me that there was no reason for me to make a martyr of myself and that I should stop trying so hard. She was wrong, of course. Very wrong. And she paid for it with her life."

Umbra's eyes widened to the very slight degree that they were capable. "Did you kill her? Kiyomi killed her parents too when she was displeased with them."

"No. It was an act of God: she was killed in a wreck involving four of the worst delinquents from my school while they were joyriding. They all died as well. At first I was terrified, until I noticed that my class became a much happier and more peaceful place without them. When I saw that I came to the conclusion that evil...must be deleted. Either by divine judgment or in the absence of the former, by human action."

Now Umbra didn't know what to say to that. Weren't humans supposed to be sad rather than happy when their mothers died? Especially when it didn't sound like this mother had done anything except disagree with her son's ideals out of worry for his well-being, as any parent typically would. Unless that in itself was the problem.

Not that he would know personally as he had no parents of his own. The closest that all the shinigami had to a parental figure was the King—commonly referred to as "the Old Man"—but even then he was quite the distant and largely apathetic sort, aroused only if it'd come to his attention that someone had broken a major rule.

Then again, this sounded no different from what Kiyomi had done to her own parents. What strange, twisted creatures humans were.

Not all of them, though.

"And how, Teru, do you define good and evil?"

Teru locked the door behind him, oblivious to Sidoh scrambling through him to catch up with his mouth still stuffed with cookies. Kiyomi had mentioned the shinigami being dense. "Good is achieving your fullest potential to contribute to the society at large. If you are trying to destroy the order of things, or simply not contributing to the overall greater good, then that is evil. Our justice
system as it stands has got it backwards: it operates on the assumption that the accused is innocent until proven guilty, when it should be the other way around."

Hm. So by that definition, am I evil because I kill humans to survive and don't stop other humans from doing it? Or am I good because I'm helping Kiyomi and Teru make the world a better place to live? Could I even be classified as either/or since I'm not human anyway?

That was the end of their conversation for the time being, as Teru had a train to catch and for obvious reasons could not speak to Umbra in public. He grabbed a copy of today's newspaper at the station and started to read it when he took his seat on the train, to be interrupted when he noticed a trio of students in uniform harassing a fourth one on the way to school on the other side of the car. Unsurprisingly no one said a word or even looked their way, so just like back then he took it upon himself to break them up. All it took was a touch on one of the boys' shoulders to get them all to look up at him in surprise, embarrassment and hopefully understanding. One never would have guessed that for a moment he wished death upon every other adult around him for their complacency to such a great social ill.

Umbra caught a glimpse of the front page of the paper Teru had placed onto the seat as he got up. Something about a place called Wammy's House and how it was being investigated for the alleged past and present mistreatment of its charges.

Whether the allegations were true or not (hopefully they weren't, some of those allegations sounded quite ghastly), Teru was not going to like that at all.

…

Hanging upside-down and peeking in to Teru's office through the window, he saw the newspaper still open on the corner of his desk and a window up on his computer with the website for Wammy's House displayed inside it. He minimized it for the time being as he carried out his appointments for the day. Surely he wasn't going to start killing now, not in the middle of work? Theoretically he could since he'd taken a page from the notebook and stashed it inside his wallet before hiding the book in his safety deposit box at the bank. But he ran the risk of getting caught and Umbra didn't think he was that reckless.

He crawled back up along the slope of the roof to meet Sidoh, who tried to hide away from the sunlight as much as he could by curling up inside the shadow cast by a vent. Umbra himself found the environment too bright for his comfort and shielded his eyes with a hiss.

"Umber, it's too bright out here," whined Sidoh. "Can't we go someplace shadier?"

"Good point. There should be closets around this place where we can take refuge."

They found a broom closet to hide out in, at least until lunchtime. Inside Umbra pulled out the phone to check it.

"H-heh, looks like you got a message. It's from that human from earlier."

Hi Umbra

Sorry we got cut off

Can u do me a favor?

Umbra promptly handed it over to Sidoh and spelled out for him what he wanted to type.
Anything

Name it

Theres a story goin arnd

Bout a school clld Wammys House.

Its not tru n we need 2 set thngs str8.

But we need sum time.

Plz dstrct kira 4 us.

"Huh? Kira? Does she mean Kiyomi?" asked Sidoh.

"Kira is the name of a shinigami that humans proclaim belief in because he apparently kills criminals and other supposed undesirables," Umbra explained. "A human named Light started the charade first, and now Kiyomi and Teru are picking it up."

"H-how does this Erin know we're with them?"

Umbra didn't answer for a bit, realizing the interesting if dreadful implication behind this request. Could it be that Erin had somehow gotten entangled with someone tracking down Kira when he wasn't looking? Someone connected to this "Wammy's House?" Why else would she ask this of him? That could be tied into why she offered to help him retrieve Sidoh's notebook in the first place. She had after all implied that her friend Misa was a wanted criminal.

Though Sidoh had granted her immunity to the Death Note, this didn't mean that Erin was invulnerable to the other common and natural causes of death in humans. The mere idea of her being in the slightest sort of danger troubled him, as futile as he knew it was to get worked up over something as fleeting as a human life. If only there was some way he could break away from Kiyomi and Teru and get to her.

Well, there was a way. But it would involve either killing them both or some very, very heavy persuasion. Or if not them, then the police after getting them caught.

"Uh…Umbra? Should we answer her?"

"Hm? Oh yes. Tell her done. D-O-N-E."

"O-okay."

Done

She promptly answered back:

Thnx.

But u cant kill kira. Just stall.

If u can, try 2 pnt us twrd em. I wrk wth the cops.

Im guessin u know them alrdy.

Yes I do
Theres milk n cookies innit 4 u.

K?

"What should we say?"

"Tell her okay."

Okay

Just as he thought. He had established her to be a brave one, perhaps too brave. The milk and cookies sounded nice, though. In fact…

"Oh, and also, tell her the following…."

I will help on 2 conditions

1

When they are caught I want your allies to bring you my book

I want to see you

2

You must help me help my friend

…

…

K. Ill c wut I cn wrk out.

Will gve u mor dtls l8r.

Who r u with rite now?

Her reply took considerably longer than her previous ones but nevertheless this pleased Umbra greatly and a remnant of a smile unfurled under the rags concealing his face. He couldn't wait to see Erin again and this time up close.

I cannot tell you who I am attached to

But I will give you a hint

He is a friend of Kira and an attorney

A prosecutor from the looks of it

Thnx.

It was after this part of the exchange that poor meek Sidoh decided to speak up. "So, uh, I'm confused. Are we gonna work with this human now?"

"I believe we are. For now we need to distract Teru from targeting Wammy's House until Erin does whatever she has to for them." Umbra scratched at the side of his face. "Unfortunately I might have already chased the police away with my previous stunts. We'll have to draw their attention back on
Kiyomi and Teru somehow. Hmm…Sidoh, I'm still attached to Teru so I can't go very far from him, but you aren't attached to anyone at the moment. Make your way back to Kiyomi. You can't make yourself visible to anyone else without a notebook, but you can try to draw attention to her in other ways."

"L-like what?" Sidoh asked, trembling. He didn't take very well to being put on the spot.

"Oh, drawing signs, something like that. Humans eat those sorts of things up like gummies."

"I—I'll see what I can do. So, uh, where does she live again? I forget."

Umbra grunted but filled him in all the same, recommending that he first go to NHN where she worked at the moment. Then to ensure he wouldn't lose his way, he wrote the address of the station on a scrap of a notebook page that he kept stashed on his entity.

…

A thin puff of water vapor streamed from Wedy's full puckered lips that had been painted coral pink per her disguise. Her babe Stephanie had introduced to her e-cigarettes as a cleaner and supposedly healthier alternative to Marbolo™ and Salem™, claiming that they smelled better and that she could switch between flavors. This week's selection was pomegranate, the fruit of the Underworld.

It satisfied her nicotine cravings well enough and yet…something was missing. That soothing warmth in her mouth that empowered her enough to tell the world to kiss her ass. The sweet scent of burning tobacco and the glow of embers crawling towards her fingers with every drag.

Wedy closed her eyes and weighed the information she'd gathered from Sakura TV. Kiyomi Takada had provided the bulk of their pro-Kira reports and statements but up until recently had received little to no credit for her work. She had a tense relationship with Saeko Nishiyama and an even worse one with director Demegawa before they'd died. Not long after that she'd moved on to NHN and had been anchoring there ever since. When asked if she had any friends outside of work or perhaps a boyfriend it had been mentioned that on one occasion after a debate she met up with a man in glasses and a suit who had participated in the event. Teru Mikami.

Her source couldn't give her much more than that, but then she didn't have to.

She had already passed this on to "L," who in turn told her that he would pass it on to the task force. In the meantime she should continue to follow Takada to work and back and report any abnormalities immediately. The task force would do the rest.

Yeah right. Then again Wedy was probably biased. She never did have much faith in figures of authority. Not that she exactly blamed them for what'd happened to the first L (who himself was a bit of an asshole) but maybe recruiting the prime suspect who said cops happened to trust and like wasn't such a great idea. Even the best came up with lousy ideas sometimes.

She opened her eyes and fixed her gaze across the street from the café she sat in front of. Barring an unforeseen catastrophe, Takada should be coming out of work soon. Wedy had noticed something interesting this morning. Takada walked into the building with a limp in her gait that hadn't been there these past few days. What could have happened? Maybe it was nothing; she could have just twisted her ankle at her apartment while making herself up. Without the cameras she had no way of knowing either way, and she'd heard from L that her shinigami had been holding off the task force too.
Then she put down the e-cig and lowered her shades. Well, look what we have here. What's he up to?

She could see none other than Soichiro Yagami two buildings down from her with his cane and a notepad. Whatever was left of his black hair from the last time she'd seen him had faded to gray and he looked ill and almost haggard. Poor man looked so much thinner than she remembered. As much as Wedy didn't like cops she couldn't help but have a soft spot for him after he'd taken a bullet Higuchi had fired at her out of panic when they'd cornered him at Sakura TV. Barely a week later he'd had his son die in his arms on the same day he found out that he was a megalomaniacal serial killer while she had collected her pay and moved on with her life. She couldn't imagine he'd been the same since then.

Was he here for the same reasons she was? On the one hand Wedy wasn't sure she should go over there and bother him. Maybe he wouldn't remember her. On the other, what if he did something drastic and frightened Takada? She wouldn't put it past him after what'd happened on the first Kira case. Either way, he could blow everything.

I've got fifteen minutes, give or take.

With well-practiced ease she rose from her seat, put her cigarette away and made her way down the street to him. "Excuse me sir," she addressed him in polished Japanese, "you look thirsty. Do you need some water?"

He blinked back at her in surprise, the crow's feet stretching out from the corners of his dark watery eyes and the sun casting a slight glare on the frame of his glasses. "Oh, hello. No miss, I don't need any water but thank you for your concern…er, do I know you? I don't recall seeing you before but…"

Wedy rolled her eyes. "It's me, Chief Yagami. Wedy. From the Yotsuba case?"

"Ah! Now I remember. Your voice sounded familiar but your appearance is so different. You look almost Japanese yourself."

"That's kind of the point."

"I—I didn't expect to see you here. Are you on business for—wait. You don't have to tell me if you can't. And I'm not the Chief anymore. Aizawa has that title now."

"I already know the former task force has reassembled to catch the new Kira. L sent me to help you out by watching Takada. Do they know you're out here?"

His lips formed a small taut line and his head bowed, making the old man look like a boy who'd been caught out past curfew. "Well…not exactly. I said I was going home but—"

She smirked at him in understanding. "Pulling a Matsuda, I see?"

"Please don't put it like that. I feel guilty enough as it is. I just thought I could find something we might have missed."

"Sorry. In that case, I'd call it serendipitous that we ran into each other like this. Hey. Sorry about…you know."

He looked that much more pained, knowing exactly what she was referring to. "Th-thank you."

Soon the doors to NHN flew open to unleash the swell of tired employees going home for the day.
Proud regal Takada trickled out last hiding her limp as best she could, today dressed in a navy blue women's business suit.

"Wedy, a few days ago someone committed suicide by detonating the Yellow Box Warehouse at Daikoku wharf. This is just a guess but do you suppose Takada had anything to do with it, for instance she was there?"

"Nothing's impossible," she answered noncommittally, personally finding the idea ridiculous. But then so was the concept of gods of death and killer notebooks.

As Takada turned the corner to walk up the street to the subway station, the two noticed something stuck to her back. A piece of notebook paper, scribbled on it a crooked arrow pointing up to the back of her head and the words: I'm with kira.

"A—are you seeing what I'm seeing?" gasped Yagami, laying down the notepad to point an incredulous finger at the woman. Wedy froze in place for a moment. Someone could have very well taped that on her back when she wasn't looking as a dumb joke.

Takada didn't get too far when a passerby stopped her to point this out to her and help her to peel it off. Neither Wedy nor Yagami could see her face as she looked down at the note clutched in her hands but from the hasty way she folded it up into as small of a square as she could and crammed it into her purse there must have been something about it that shocked and horrified her.

Suddenly from what seemed to be literally out of thin air, another note materialized on Takada's back with the same message as the last one. Wedy exchanged looks with Yagami, who looked two millimeters away from another stroke.

"D-did you see that?"

"Yeah." Wedy didn't know whether or not to laugh at how cartoonish the scenario unfolding in front of them was. "Well this is getting interesting."

"This doesn't make any sense. I thought the shinigami was on her side; why is it suddenly trying to draw attention on her?"

"Looks like Blogger must have contacted it and made a deal."

"Wh...what?"

Wedy huffed. Men could be so pig-headed and un-talkative, especially to each other. "Aizawa didn't tell you? Ugh. It's a long story. I'm sure they'll give you the details if you ask. For now, let's go. I'll see if I can get a few pictures of the next note appearing on her back."

…

No one man should be allowed to have so much power, Erin thought on the way to the station after Near had managed to squeeze out a 10-minute time slot. There were checks and balances in any halfway decent government for a reason. She could only imagine how much this authority and the pressure that came with it finally did L in, but for all their differences she couldn't bear the possibility of Near suffering the same fate.

Wonder if I should bring that up to him? L's system could really use some work. Then again, this is coming from someone who got a B– in American Government. Near probably wouldn't listen to anybody with less than an A+. And maybe not even then.
But when has that ever stopped me, really?

She shivered from the AC cranking out at full blast (not that the alternative was much better) and was getting tired of the tense silence and fiddling with the switch that rolled the window up and down. Stephen had given her a square of bubble wrap to help relieve some of her stress, claiming that it was his secret to keeping a cool head when the situation heated up, but they hadn't gone four blocks by the time she'd burst all the plastic bubbles. So the sheet lay broken and discarded on the seat next to her.

She glanced over at Halle's reflection in the rearview mirror. The woman always appeared so deep in thought.

Erin wanted to reach out to her. She needed to. Anything to settle her nerves for what they were heading over to do. She dared to speak up just when the car braked at the next red light, hoping that there'd be many more red lights before they reached their destination. "H-Halle?"

"Hm?" Halle didn't once take her eyes off the road.

"So, uh, how long have you been with the CIA?"

"Why do you ask? You're nervous about the broadcast, aren't you? Have you practiced your script?"

"Oh yeah yeah, 'course I have. Know my lines like the ones on the palms of my hands, which is conveniently where I've written them, ha ha!" Erin cleared her throat when she noted the lack of a smile on Halle's face. "It's just that chit-chat helps me to relax before speaking publicly. And since we haven't spent much time together and this is about the time where we go through padding to develop our characters before something exciting happens—hm."

"O…kay. What are you going on about?"

"I-I just wanted to know how long you've been in the CIA. And I wanted to tell you that you're pretty brave to stay on this case after everything that's happened."

Halle exhaled through her nose. Erin could be so sappy but she seldom said things without meaning them. "I've been an agent for four years."

"Wow, that's not very long. Wait I mean, it's a long time but not like...d'oh. Strike that off the record. What were you doing before that?"

After a pause on Halle's end her response was slow and measured. "I used to be in the Secret Service."

This tidbit had Erin springing out of her seat and lurching closer to the back of Halle's, or she would have if it weren't for the seatbelt. "What? No way! You were a bodyguard for the President? That's—that's awesome! What's it like being around the White House?"

"Sit back, please. I don't need you getting us in an accident. Without going into details it has its ups and downs like any other job. President Hoope was nice enough, although he could be a hardass sometimes."

"Oh! Sorry." Erin flopped back against the lukewarm leather that stuck to the backs of her arms. "Okay so what are you doing here then?"

Oops. Maybe that came out too insensitive. Then again she had to act like Stephen hadn't told her
about her motivations.

Halle got quieter as she stepped on the gas when the light turned green. "I want to help catch Kira. Not that I ever subscribed to his ideology but it's more of a...personal thing than anything else. He's killed people that were close to me. Stephen told you about my uncle—"

"H-hey, please don't be mad at him, I made him spill the beans!" Erin sputtered.

Halle slid a cool glance at her from the rearview mirror as she reached up to adjust it with one hand maneuvering the steering wheel. "I know. I'm not mad at either of you, though I can't say I'm pleased about that either. As I was saying, Stephen mentioned my uncle but...there's someone else too. I had a friend from school. A good friend, Naomi. I owe my surviving high school to her," she said with something that could be construed as a laugh, if a sad and hollow one from under her breath. "She used to work in the FBI and from what she told me got in trouble fairly often. Not that she wasn't a good agent; no, she was first-rate. She just had a tendency to cop an attitude and rush into things thinking her way to do it was the right one.

"But if her higher-ups ever wanted to really get rid of her she quit before they had the chance, to get married to her boyfriend," she said with a shrug. "Raye was one of the agents that were killed by Kira early on, and just the next day Naomi went missing."

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...

"W-was she...?"

Halle started to shake her head but stopped mid-way. "Her body was never found. Everyone said that she must have killed herself after losing Raye but I never believed that for a second. Naomi was too strong to do something like that. Knowing her, she probably went after Kira herself. I think somehow he found out about her and made it so that her body could never be found."

She sighed as they pulled over for another red light. "Given that Kira turned out to be a kid fresh out of high school I bet he exploited that. Naomi always did have problems dealing with younger criminals. She had something of a big sister complex which is how we got to know each other. Unfortunately I was stuck where I was in the Secret Service at the time and I thought the President would need more protection than ever, so there wasn't a lot I could do to look into it. Then my uncle..."

The tendons of Halle's wrists protruded as her grip on the wheel tightened. A brief heavy silence fell between her and Erin as she put the car back in drive at the green light. Unsurprisingly Erin didn't know what to say to all this. She was paralyzed with the need to wrap her arms around Halle from behind and tell her it would be okay as she remembered how ashamed she had looked before when she'd handed back her pills.

"It got to a point where I found I wasn't fit to have the job of guarding the President's life. So I quit and transferred."

"Oh, Halle...I'm so sorry."

Halle's face softened in her reflection. "I know I'm too late to get direct retribution on the men who killed them, but the least I want to do is make Kira disappear for good. Problem is, since he's gotten a cult following I don't know if that's possible. You can't exactly destroy ideas...Erin, are you crying?"
Erin quickly hid her face by tipping her hat over it. "N-no."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. But you can't start crying now, not when you've got a broadcast to do."

"God, I'm not crying! Okay, yes I am but my eyes are just stinging. I think I caught something in them. And please don't be sorry; I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want to know."

Erin thought about the way Halle kept more or less to herself and did as she was asked. Not because she was incapable of thinking for herself but could it be that she was afraid to act on her own and end up like her friend Naomi? She wanted to tell her that they would stop Kira once and for all, but she couldn't make a promise that couldn't be kept try as they might.

As they stopped at the final traffic light Erin took out her phone to text Umbra once more.

Umbra

We r at the sttn.

Make sure he sees it.

I will

Dont worry

You are protected

Thnx.

Guess well b cn each othr soon.

Yes

I am looking forward to it

...

Erin felt like she was being sat down for an interrogation. The lights beat down on her face white and blistering hot and she cursed social decorum for forbidding her to wear her hat. The cards clutched in her hands that she hid under the glaring black desk became moist from the perspiration accumulating on her hands.

Why did I even bring these things, she wondered, folding them up and cramming them into her pocket. They got the notes for me to read next to the camera. She proceeded to brush her palms against the knees of her khaki pants to dry them.

As she watched the camera crew prepare the stage from where she sat their faces were reduced to silhouettes indistinguishable from one another, and as she waited for the countdown to launch she took up inhaling through her nose and exhaling through her puckered lips. Just relax. It's only gonna take ten minutes. Just like you rehearsed…just keep breathing, in and out in and out hi Mom hi Dad hi Farley look I'm on TV.

She couldn't see Halle anywhere but she knew she was there. She could feel it. Halle was her bodyguard for the day, although given that the fellas they were up against didn't even have to be here to kill her, would it matter whether she was here after all? Ah well, just having her around was enough for her emotionally.
Good thing I used the bathroom before we left. That'd be mortifying.

"…5…4…3…2…"

The sign overhead flashed ON THE AIR in neon red and already Erin could feel crushing chest pain coming on, but she kept her hands under the table and resisted the reflex to grab at her breast. Those antiperspirant folks were liars; she could feel new Great Lakes forming under her arms and they were in the middle of turnover as she spoke.

"Good evening, this is Erin Blogger. As some of you have probably heard, British institution Wammy's House, founded and funded by the late inventor Quillish Wammy, is under investigation for allegations of child abuse that were cited in reporters Harold Halliday and John Everist's story. I've been working with an investigative journalist team on the matter and based on what we've found—"

I wonder if I should smile more. No, child abuse ain't nothing to smile at. Oh I hope I don't look too nervous. Poker face, Erin, poker face.

Her ears wouldn't stop roaring despite the almost complete silence in the station.

Hear that? That's the sound of your career all your ass-busting circling the drain. Even if you survive this you'll probably have to shave your head grow a mustache change your name and move out to Greenland ironically named for all its ice and snow. You learned Japanese so Greenlandic can't be that much harder.

"—and let me say that we've found several facts that blatantly contradict their allegations."

But…you kinda brought this on yourself, didn't you? Maybe not all of it, but a good portion. You thought Light could be redeemed. It was the notebook, all the notebook. You've always told yourself that L killing himself wasn't your fault but what if some of it was? You may not have made him do it, but was there something more you could have done, that you should have done?

"—for the sake of protecting her identity we've hidden her face and changed her name to 'Linda,' but here's what she had to say regarding her time at Wammy's House…"

You thought you could trust Misa again and now you've gone and gotten so many good men killed. It's a wonder anyone's still talking to you, especially Halle and Stephen. Fuck, it's a wonder that you aren't in prison.

All of her sudden her mind was going back to those places she'd sought to avoid for the past four years, and it felt like her mouth and her brain were totally separate functions from each other; her mouth echoed the words flashing across the screen but her mind read a different note. Things she'd dared not repeat even to her own therapist. What had triggered her feverish train of thought? Maybe because this felt way too familiar. Matsuda had been up here alone risking his life to catch the Yotsuba Kira. Now she was there, inside looking out.

To say nothing of all those reporters killed or threatened to be for speaking out against Kira. So many brave souls, Ukita, Naomi, people stronger than she could hope to be, gone forever.

Oh what does it matter how much of it is your fault? Fact of the matter is you're tied into this mess and you're never getting out of it. It's stuck into you like the big fat mole on the back of your head no matter how much you try to style your hair so it doesn't stick out so much.

You never learn, do you Erin? All this time you've been hardly anything but a cowardly passive waste since you got swept up in this pigeon shit. You like to blow smoke and all but that's all it is,
smoke.

I don't want to believe that what I'm saying right now are lies and what M said was the truth but—

"What's unfortunate is that neither Halliday nor Everist could be contacted to comment by virtue of dying right after their story was published. Mr. Halliday was killed running in front of a bus and Mr. Everist was found dead in his bathroom just days after that."

Well no more.

"Coincidence? We don't think so."

It's time you started trusting your gut and taking your shots. No, you can't do this all on your own. But let's face it, L didn't have all the answers and neither does Near. You have a mouth and you sure as fuck love to run it. So run it and run it right.

The flame flickering somewhere in the recesses of her mind (or heart, or gut or some other place in her person) burst like a lit firework on the 4th of July.

I…I don't wanna die. But if setting things right somehow ends with me getting killed…

I'll take my chances.

"Is this it? Is this what we've been reduced to? And nobody sees a thing wrong with it? I'm not talking about checking the facts. I'm talking about not checking the facts. We may never know why those men wrote that story; maybe they were just acting out of concern for the students or maybe they were coerced into writing it. What's sad is that we'll never know because they're dead. Why did they both commit suicide and just days between each other? They must have been threatened. If not by the party that coerced them…then by Kira."

Palms flat and splayed on the desk, she stood up and rode out the hypotensive dizzy spell from getting up too fast. "Those men couldn't win either way. And you know what? None of us can. These past few days Kira hasn't gone just after criminals. He's targeted entire governments, schools and religious institutions because of the crimes done by some of their own. And now we have to worry about him killing a school of innocent kids and teachers just because no one can get their facts straight and Kira as much as he wants to play judge, jury and executioner can't be bothered to do his own research!"

Someone out of the corner of her eye started to swipe their hand across their neck, beseeching her to stop. Probably Halle. She thought she heard someone else say, "Cut it."

Erin jabbed a finger at the cameraman. "No! Hold on, I'm not done. Okay so there has been a cut in the crime rate, but where d'ya think it's coming from? Fear. The police are being forced not to make public reports on the crimes they investigate. And—and how can we be okay with a world where anyone is prone to get killed for even the slightest screw-ups? Moreover innocent cops and reporters with friends and families of their own have been killed by this lunatic just for doing their job! I've lost some of the best friends I've ever had to him, and I know people who lost friends to him too!

"To all you Kira supporters out there, I have to say if you think you're that much better than the rest of us just because you've never had brushes with the law, th-the whole idea that we're only good because we're scared of getting punished for it or we're hoping to get rewarded for the most basic acts of decency makes us all sound like one big economy-sized package of butt-wipes!"

A small eruption of gasps and snickers ensued in the shadows beyond the lights. "Did she seriously
just say that?" someone whispered. Erin had a problem where she was her funniest when she was trying to be the opposite. But there was no stopping her now. She was on a roll. Getting so caught up in the moment it barely occurred to her that the crew probably should have cut the production by now, but they hadn't.

"I'm sorry, pardon my language. Look, I'll say this: the world is in big trouble. And maybe...maybe it'll never completely get better," she panted, her legs wiggling under her weight like she were standing in a moon-walk tent and ready to fall over. "Crime and corruption...is never going away. It's just gonna get smarter and less hands-on; take cyber-hacking, for instance. Not a lot of those guys get caught. But killing each other is not the answer. Kira is not the answer. If we want any kind of change to happen, we have to make it happen. Together. We have the power to get governments, schools and churches to wise up if we just do it. Not violently," she emphasized with a wave of her hands, "but calmly, intelligently and peacefully. We're better than Kira thinks we are. Let's show him. I have faith that Winchester's bureau will uncover the truth in due time. Please, protect Wammy's House."

By this time—and Erin was surprised that it'd taken them this long to show up—her exhausted eyes had welled up with unshed tears. It was as if a scalpel had been run across the veins of her arms and legs and her strength was progressively leaking out of her in a puddle at her feet. Still, she gathered enough to make a salute like she were tipping her hat to the audience. While she was up here she might as well conclude her performance with something she'd always wanted to say if she ever got on the news.

"Good-night everyone, and let's have a more pleasant tomorrow. This is Erin Blogger signing off."
The first thing Erin did as soon as she found enough footing to stagger off the set was hurry to the nearest restroom, scramble into the nearest open stall and lurch over the yellow-tinged toilet to purge into the pot, her damp hand sticking to the wall of the stall to hold her up. The full weight of what she had just done had attacked her as soon as the "STOP" sign blinked on, gripping her body like a squeeze toy and forcing her breakfast back up from her stomach—which in itself had been quite small, so she spent most of the next three or so minutes dry-gagging with a few ounces of yellow-orange sour-tasting semi-liquid chunks heaving out of her throat every half a one.

Stephen had insisted she eat something to keep her blood sugar up and stay focused. With how little she'd been eating lately it was a wonder she hadn't lost any weight yet. But then, mounting the scale had plummeted down to the bottom of her priorities so how could she know either way?

When she was done, Erin wiped down the seat, flushed the evidence of her breakdown down the toilet and whirled around to grip the top of the stall door, giving herself time to catch her breath and blink the hot sting in her eyes. Her cheeks moist with the tears she'd shed while purging and her stomach just starting to uncoil, she rested her forehead against the cool metal of the door.

If I'm weak enough to throw up after a stupid broadcast, how much of a cast-iron stomach must you have to intentionally kill hundreds of people in one day, never mind in weeks or months? Maybe it's easier 'cause you don't have to see the people actually dying…I wonder if this is what Matsu did after he got off the set…

For some reason this also made her think back to this one time in Japan when she'd thrown up in a restaurant after eating what had turned out to be a platter of bad oysters. She hadn't exactly appreciated the gesture then (why would she when he was the reason she'd gobbled down the oysters in the first place? It'd been for a bet which he had cheated on, long story) but L had surprised her and probably everyone there when he'd scooted over to hold her hair back while she did it.

But there was no hand to hold her hair or her hand this time. Not L's, not Stephen's, not anyone's. It was just her in a musky-smelling stall with her fragmented thoughts and a gross acidic aftertaste plaguing her mouth.

Umbra had promised her that she'd be fine. But how could she bring herself to totally trust the word of someone, a shinigami at that, whom she'd never met and had just learned even existed? What could he have meant by that? Was he going to kill Takada the instant she raised her pen to try to kill her? Erin didn't want anyone to die on her behalf no matter how bad they were, but what could she do about it? She was here, Umbra and Takada were an entire ocean away.

She'd be hearing from either him or the task force soon enough. When exactly, she couldn't guess. She exhaled and stumbled her way out of the stall and to the sinks to wash her hands, her face and the inside of her mouth. Somehow her eyes looked like they'd sunken into their sockets as she caught a glance of her haggard reflection in the mirror. Is this what she'd looked like on TV too?

Please Umbra, whoever you are don't fuck us over.

Don't fuck me over like Misa. Don't fuck me over like Light.

Don't fuck me over like L did.
Maybe she never had quite gotten over the past as much as she'd once thought?

Erin had gotten so caught up in the moment that she hadn't stopped to check which bathroom she had run into. She realized her mistake upon looking up from the faucet to see a balding pudgy man, presumably an employee, stopping in front of the mirror behind her just as she spat out the water she'd been swiveling around in her mouth. He stared at her with wide eyes and his mouth cracked slightly open in awkward surprise.

"Uh…"

Erin had already felt rather feverish before this point but was too sick and tired to feel that embarrassed about it. She just hung her head to face her feet, cupped a soggy hand around her forehead like a brimmed hat and shuffled past him without a word.

…

"Are you okay?"

"Y-yeah. I'll be fine. Let's just…go back already."

Despite the mild concern on her face, Halle didn't press the issue and the first third of the drive back to the hotel was accompanied by a tension thick and hot enough to carve through like an overdone filet mignon.

At the start of the second, Erin murmured to the window, "I blew it, didn't I?"

"Hm?"

"The broadcast. I totally blew it. I— I dunno what happened. Something about being up there on the set j-just made me snap. I guess I was thinking about what you said about Naomi and your uncle, and about Matsuda and how he got on TV during the first case and… I got mad."

"You were probably having a flashback," Halle commented, giving off an air that she knew exactly what had been racing through Erin's mind as she may have experienced such a thing for herself in private. "But anyway, I don't think you blew it. L would have let me cut the broadcast if you did."

Erin looked up towards the back of Halle's blonde head. "Huh?"

"I tried to tell the camera crew to cut but L told me to let them keep rolling. He said you were doing what he wanted. The whole point was to provoke Takada, or at least her accomplice into using the notebook. Come to think of it, I doubt he would have let me cut the broadcast if you did."

Erin didn't respond to that for a moment. Near had purposefully set her up to have a meltdown on TV? Why hadn't she expected that he would? Little shit. It made sense when she thought about it but for whatever reason she hadn't really considered it before today. Maybe because she'd been the one to have partly come up with this idea in the first place, going into it with an expectation different from how she'd actually act being the dumbass that she was. And yet, if she wanted to shout and curse and pound her fists into something the urge was too weak to act on this time. She merely rested her head against her arm along the window and stewed in silence.

Her chest tightened. Could it be a heart attack? She clasped a hand above her breasts and lightly grimaced. Halle naturally caught this in the rearview mirror and began to veer over to the side of
the road out of traffic. "You okay? Are you having chest pain?"

"A little. It's not that bad, though. Just a twinge. The notebook takes 40 seconds to kill you when you don't specify a cause of death but I think it's been over that. I think it's just my nerves, is all."

Was this how L felt in his final weeks of life with the end having become imminent in such a palpable way that most wouldn't feel if they weren't old or sick? She knew the risks going into this. "Um… I can get out and walk if you're, uh, worried about getting into an accident or getting shot or something."

"I'm not. The notebook can't be used to kill multiple people at the same time. Have you heard from Umbra yet?"

"No. I don't know what's taking so long. The guys must be busting Takada as we speak. I hope. God, I hope this works out like it should."

"Erin, have you ever taken Zoloft™?"

Erin massaged craters into her temples. "Um… I don't know. I did used to be on something but I'm not now. Didn't think I needed it anymore and besides drugs are expensive. Figured I'd save my money for other things like the rent. Can't remember for the life of me what I was on but I don't think it was Zoloft™. Why?"

"Hn. I was thinking of offering you some of my pills to help you relax but you really shouldn't share prescriptions, especially when you don't know how someone will react. When we get back, I'd recommend taking a long hot bath and then lying down with the lights out. You're still alive so either Takada hasn't seen your broadcast yet or she's not in a position to kill you with the notebook right now."

Erin smiled feebly at her companion. Halle did her best to remain professional about things which Erin admired but that didn't at all mean she was as cold as the latter's first impression of her had implied. "Thanks, Halle. I'll try that. Thanks for putting up with my sorry ass."

Halle didn't smile back, not that she smiled much to begin with, but she nodded at her through the mirror. "Mm-hm."

...

"I'm… sorry about Naomi, and your uncle. And Misa. I—I'm so, so sorry about Misa. You think I'd have learned my lesson from the first time she did this shit but nope. I honestly thought she'd changed." Her voice lowered as she diverted her gaze to her lap and sniffed. "I should have listened to L from the beginning about her. I mean really listened. Then maybe I wouldn't have gotten everyone killed… nothing I do to help from this point on is gonna take that back. I understand if you guys hate me for that."

It was out. That burning dread she'd had on her mind since she and Halle had left for the station. Ever since that awful day, really. If Halle, Anthony and Stephen did in fact resent her for offering up their partners to Mello they hid it adeptly.

Halle made a soft noise that could be construed as a grunt; what response it was supposed to indicate, good or bad, Erin couldn't tell.

"Don't be. There's no point in feeling sorry now. And I don't hate you. None of us do."

Who was to say that Halle was only saying what Erin wanted to hear and not what she really felt?
But Halle didn't sugarcoat. Either way, she was too afraid to press the issue further for the time being.

...  

Except for wearily declining Stephen's offer to get her anything to help re-establish her equilibrium —"Thanks but I just need to freshen up. I feel gross; I'll keep my phone with me and update you as soon as I hear back from Umbra"—Erin spoke very little to anyone for the first half-hour or so after the task force regrouped at the hotel. Taking Halle's advice she used up four complimentary soap bottles to whip up a hot bubble bath for herself. As tense as she had been before, soaking in the steaming warm water made her bones and muscles feel so liquefied she had to cling to the rail along the wall to slowly ease herself into the tub after undressing.

I wonder if that came out too standoffish.

While she may have done a poor job at showing it, she was immensely thankful that Stephen had been so chilled out about it and let her have her space. Except lately she couldn't help but wonder if she was taking too much space. They hadn't spent as much one-on-one time together as they had in the beginning, mostly because they just didn't have it with the investigation ongoing.

Or was something else going on, with her?

I'm starting to wonder if a relationship could work between us. Not because I don't like Steve but… fuck. I'm so out of it I can't even pinpoint what my problem is. I just know it's not you Stephen, it's me. Really. I don't want to hurt you. I should talk to you about it right now but for some reason I'm too scared to even make an opening. It's not like we've been seeing each other long and I didn't think it was right to bring up but now…

What would he think if he knew about me and L? Would he not like me anymore?

Wow, that's a pretty shitty thought. Stephen's not that flaky.

But then…if I was him, would I still want to date me?

She kept her phone next to her and rested her bare back against the wall, her vision clouded by either the steam filling up the room or unshed tears. Maybe it was because she hadn't had a proper night's sleep in two weeks (who had, these days?), but with the way the water cradled her body like a warm layer of blankets, the suds tickling her skin like the ripples of crisp sheets, her head lolled briefly onto her left shoulder until she fixed it back upright again lest she sink into it as she would into a pillow. She couldn't afford to drift off. Umbra could contact her any minute.

But sure enough, her head found itself back on her shoulder, her eyelids growing heavier by the second as she drew her knees up to her chest. Over the years she had come to realize that even a good dream couldn't compare to a dreamless sleep. Dreams took you to places in your mind that were unconscious for a reason. Everybody had to turn their brain off once in a while.

Go to sleep.

"No."

Go to sleep, a familiar voice whispered into her ear, breathy and somewhat warm. Go to sleep. You need it.

"Fuck off. You're dead," she murmured to no one, wrapping her arms around herself. "Leave me alone." I left you alone like you asked. Why can't you do the same for me? You were always
hypocritical that way.

Since coming back from Japan, Erin would sometimes—mostly when she felt particularly depressed—find herself playing back in her mind things L had said in the time they'd spent together. Some of it she couldn't believe she remembered on account of how minor it sounded in context. But, L almost never said anything that wasn't memorable in some way, for better or worse. Sometimes she'd ask herself "Hey remember the time we did this or that?" and other times, "What did you mean when you said this?" or "Why did you do that?" She'd never get answers of course, but that didn't stop the questions from playing again and again like a skipping record.

She didn't even do that so much with Light, as much as she also missed him and realized how wrong it was to. Or at least, she missed the man she thought he was.

Not that that man and the man he actually was could be separated.

Erin didn't stay in the tub for much longer after that.

A near-inexplicable urge to speak to him led her into a beeline for the door to Near's quarters as soon as she stepped out back in her rumpled clothes. Trying to ignore the strange looks directed her way from Anthony and Stephen, she rapped on the door.

"Yes?" asked Roger from the other side.

"It's Erin. C-can I come in? I need to talk to L."

"Please wait outside."

"Huh? No I mean—uh, it's kind of personal," she said with a hand rubbing at the back of her neck. She couldn't be sure but if she strained hard enough she could hear the two mumbling amongst themselves. Eventually Roger conceded with tired and justified reluctance still in his voice. "Very well, allow me to get the door."

Erin stepped back to let Roger step out and usher her inside. Although the task force had long accepted the fact that they'd probably never see the current L's face this didn't stop Roger from staring them down as he kept the door only open enough to let Erin pass through and then himself. After all the mistakes he'd made, he was not about to let his young ward become another casualty on his watch whether the threat was real or imagined.

As Roger locked the door behind them, Near addressed her from the other side the room: "Let me guess, you've come to pitch a tantrum to me about setting you up for that broadcast. At least you've got the courtesy to do it in private this time."

"True, I'm a little pissed about that. But I'm too tired for a tantrum."

After a moment's hesitation she got down on the floor and lay on her back, staring up at an incredulous Roger. When she'd pulled these kind of stunts in front of Watari he'd just smile warmly at her and occasionally chuckle a little, being so accustomed to eccentricity from his own young ward. Roger on the other hand frowned at her in confusion.

"What are you doing?" He was only used to eccentricity from the children he looked after.

"I am showing you that I come in peace."

"Er…wouldn't you prefer a chair?"
"No. I'll stay here on the floor. Thanks, though." If I'm going to get through to Near I need to do it on his level. For real, this time. With that she covered her eyes and rolled herself across the room with considerable effort, leaving herself out of breath by the time she got within three feet of Near who was tinkering with a small inflatable pool full of rubber duckies he controlled with a remote.

"This isn't necessary, Ms. Blogger. I wouldn't have let you back in here if I thought you posed a true threat to my physical well-being," he said flatly. "I'm beginning to suspect that the broadcast may not have been such a good idea after all."

Erin mustered the strength to position herself onto her stomach and turn her head to see him. "Why, 'cause it looks like it's made me go bananas? Don't worry, this ain't new. Ask anyone who knows me, I've kinda always been bananas."

"I can see that." The ducks continued to splash and whir and crash into each other and against the pool like bumper cars. "Have you heard from the shinigami yet?"

"No. Don't know what's taking him. I hope the sting goes over okay."

"It's possible that the person with Umbra's notebook hasn't had the chance to see it yet. Though thanks to the hint it gave us we've been able to narrow down the possible identity of Takada's accomplice significantly."

"Oh yeah? Who do you think it could be?"

"Based on it and the information Wedy provided, it can be no other than...criminal prosecutor Teru Mikami. Have you heard of him?"

Erin shook her head, her heart sinking into her stomach like a stone at the idea of another life going to waste over a notebook. Could this man truly be crazy enough to kill her for the things she'd said on TV? "Doesn't ring a bell. What're ya gonna do with him, and Kiyomi for that matter?"

"We'll have to catch him in the act first. Although Takada's arrest should be underway by now, there is little concrete evidence we have on her that would link her to the killings. We could pressure Mikami to tell us what he knows, although it's likely that he'll prefer to take the fall for her. I've instructed everyone to pursue him assuming he has the Shinigami Eyes."

Erin tried to gulp down the lump budding in her throat. "And after that?"

Near held the control stick pinched in three of his fingers and twirled it around to guide the yellow duck into a circle to herd two black ducks together along the wall. "Obviously it's too dangerous to disclose the existence of the killer notebooks, or for that matter the identity of Kira to the public at large so we can't bring that into court. On the other hand it's also too dangerous to merely destroy the notebooks and let them walk free."

That was a jab at her, wasn't it? Whether that was the intention or not, it stung like a quick slap across the face.

"So we could go about this a few ways. We could seize the notebook and have Takada and Mikami write their own names in it, assigning each of them conditions that would make their deaths look inconspicuous—"

"No. Fuck no, we're not doing that. I said I wasn't having anyone killed and I meant it."
"I knew you were going to say that."

Erin raised herself up so she was sitting upright, barking. "Then why bring it up? Please don't ever do that again."

"Gevanni said that we must consider all possibilities and you didn't complain then."

"He wasn't suggesting we go out and kill people. Fuck that. I have standards. You gotta stand for something Near or else you'll fall for any stupid rotten thing."

"Right. As I was going to say before you interrupted me, alternatively we can confiscate the notebooks and bring them to court on fabricated charges. We can set them up for minor offenses compared to what they've done already, but still major enough to warrant long sentences for them."

Near paused and rolled his huge gray eyes up towards the shadowy ceiling. "In a way, I can think of few punishments that would be more humiliating for them than to lock them up among the very people they despise."

Another viscous wave of nausea washed over Erin upon hearing that. Gee, this kid was one sadistic fucker. If L had been as bad he'd hidden it better, and Light even better than that. But more importantly, that idea hardly sounded a mite better than the last.

You let Misa go free after destroying her notebook. Remember how that turned out?

It came down ultimately to what was worse: forcing Kiyomi and Teru to kill themselves, or forcing them to do time on trumped-up charges. If she knew anything about Near, he'd probably make them commit crime X directly so that no matter what happened to their memories surrounding the Death Note, they couldn't refute doing it.

No cleaner alternative appeared in sight, or else she just wasn't smart enough to see it. She inhaled deeply and massaged a crater into her right temple. By now she was no stranger to lies and conspiracy. "Don't suppose we can come up with anything better?"

Although she'd just stepped out of a bubble bath her next line made her feel dirty again, if not more so than before. The words tasted like vomit in her mouth as she spat out, "F-fine. We'll go with that. But we're not gonna have them hurt any more people, you got me? Reckon we're gonna do the same for Mello, Matt and Misa when we find them?"

"Yes, I believe we are. Their affiliations with the mafia alone should earn them a fair number of years in prison."

Erin dropped back down on the floor with a hand behind her head to cushion it, knowing that no matter what they went with she would sorely regret it. Oh fuck me, she thought. Or at least she thought she'd only thought it.

"Thank you for the offer but I'm asexual. And even if I wasn't, I don't believe we could be each other's type."

The room fell into an almost deathly silence as Erin's eyes shot open and Roger cupped a gnarly hand halfway over his mouth.

"What? Oh my God did I just say that out loud?"
"Now who's the pedophile? Though technically given my age you would be classified as an ephebophile."

Suddenly she began scooting away from him in case Roger wanted to shoot her for seemingly coming on to a minor. "No no no I didn't mean it like that I swear I'm just—quick quick what's the word I want—"

"Calm yourself, Ms. Blogger. I know what you meant. I was just testing your reaction." While it didn't quite show on his face Erin thought she could hear the tiny smirk in his voice. "I said before that you were amusing. Also, I believe the word you're looking for is 'exasperated.' Or in your lingo, 'teed off.'"

Erin clasped a hand over her chest, certain that this whole scene had just given her atrial fibrillation if she didn't have it already. "Y-you're an ass-blossom."

"Well it's good to hear you finally starting to use reason at any rate," Near answered, resuming the original subject like nothing had happened. "Was that all you wished to discuss?"

"I, uh—no, actually. Why did you let me go up on TV when you knew I would—you know?" She didn't come back any closer but sat back up again, this time supporting her upper weight on her elbows.

Likewise Near resumed herding the rest of the duckies in the pool, cutting off the brief and typically infrequent eye contact they had shared. The remote-controlled duck skirted across the water leaving frills in its wake until it came to a stop near but not completely against the wall where Near sat.

Where does he get all these toys? Moreover, where does he keep them?

Near set the remote down on the floor by his sock-feet and maintained control of the stick with one hand. The other hand that had been switched from the remote climbed up to twirl a lock of his hair between his fingers. Erin watched him let go of the remote and reach into the pool to pull out the duck, his other hand still occupied with his bangs. As it turned out the duck was not remote-controlled. It was actually just another rubber duckie attached to the spiny back of a jaw-snapping mechanical crocodile toy that whirred angrily as it writhed rapidly from side to side before coming to an abrupt stop mid-sway.

Something occurred to Erin then. Did Near use his toys to help him solve cases by acting out scenarios with them, assigning each of them roles based on the relevant players? Why toys in particular?

Was that not the same as asking why she liked bowling, hated oysters or wore an old secondhand Fedora?

Another thing she somehow hadn't noticed until this was that he played with his toys using both his hands, although he seemed to prefer tugging and twirling his hair using his right hand. Was Near ambidextrous? Born or trained?

"The point of that broadcast was both to debunk the accusations surrounding Wammy's House and to provoke the current Kira to use the notebook. I must say you completed the latter objective with aplomb. I reviewed the Kira debate hosted by Sakura TV and given both Takada and Mikami's reactions throughout it it's unlikely that they will brush off your comments, especially Mikami."

So he'd basically put her on TV for her knack for pissing people off. "Uh…thanks?"
"The fact that you are still alive suggests that either Mikami hasn't seen your segment yet or the task force is taking him down as we speak."

Erin hooked a finger into the collar of her shirt to pull at it, both to keep it from riding up her neck and to let air in under the fabric. That fever she got whenever she got anxious was surging back. "But how do I know that you didn't have me go up there to get me killed? I know you still don't trust me much. Wouldn't things be so much easier for you if I was dead?"

In the background Roger grunted uneasily at the computer but as usual did not contribute to the conversation and remained an observer.

Near didn't answer for a beat but when he did his response was low and thoughtful. "Don't forget that it was also your idea; I merely refined it. I didn't realize you had a death wish…though now that you've brought it up, that might explain some things if you did."

Erin blinked at him. "Huh? Wh—what're you talking about?"

"Lately you have exhibited some of the textbook signs: poor impulse control, angers easily, cries easily, rapid and dramatic mood swings, significant changes in appetite and sleep patterns, gives away possessions to friends and family…and just now you said that you'd be better off dead."

"Wait a minute wait a minute, that's not what I meant," Erin protested, sitting erect again to flap her hands in front of her. "I said it'd be better for you not me! And yeah I did drop off Lawliet at Kimiko's place but that doesn't mean—st-stop putting words in my mouth!"

Erin had figured that she would be home even less often with the case picking up as quickly as it had been, and with Misa still missing Kimiko could use the company and comfort only a cat could give. They'd get along fine as long as Kimiko played with him every day and let him approach her first for cuddles and petting. But she certainly hadn't done that because—

"Statistics propose that a person who was close to someone who committed suicide is three times more likely to become suicidal themselves. To say nothing of the guilt you've been struggling with regarding the deaths of most of our task force."

"Statistics are also mostly pigeon shit, I thought you knew that! I'm telling you I love life! I'm just really stressed right now and a little scared. What the hell makes you think I—"

She couldn't say it. She didn't want to say it. The rest of that sentence melted away into the lump in her throat.

"I just told you my reasons, not that it surprises me if you weren't paying attention. Oh yes, poor concentration and work performance, those are two more. As well as withdrawing from friends and family—"

"Like I have a choice! I thought you didn't want me to talk to them anyway."

"You are correct insofar that we'd prefer that you kept them out of the loop about present matters. But I never said that you had to stop speaking to them completely."

By now Erin was clapping her clenched fists against her head which had begun to throb with frustration and even a bit of fear. "Look, just stop it! You're trying to twist up my mind again. Damned if I know why but I'm not falling for it this time."

"You know, I never believed that people were capable of real altruism, if indeed such a thing exists. Certain species of animals evolved it because it just so happened to help them pass their
genes on to the next generation if in a roundabout way compared to overtly selfish behavior. No one truly does a good deed without hoping to gain something from it, even if it's as trite as relief, acceptance or self-worth."

"Seriously, where do you come up with this shit? Ugh, I mean…where exactly are you going with this? Yeah, I volunteered to go up on TV knowing what the risks were b-but so did Touta. That doesn't mean we were looking to—"

"Heroism is the most socially acceptable form of suicide."

…

…

I told myself I was willing to die if it meant setting things right. But that doesn't mean I want to kill myself. Risking your life's not the same as all-out throwing it away.

Right?

What I did today isn't the same as what L did.

Although she'd never gone as far as to construct a plan (extrapolating that even if she did have a plan she'd probably either get too scared to go through with it or fuck it up like everything else she'd set her mind to and be worse off than before), deep down there were a few dark periods in the past four years where her mind had drifted towards death. What it was like, whether there was an afterlife, the stark inevitability of it even if there wasn't one, whether it would matter if she threw in the towel now or kept going until it came to her first.

Despite her tendency to vocalize her thoughts she'd dared not speak of those particular ones to anyone, not even to her doctor. After all it wasn't like they came that often and besides compared to thousands of other people in the world she had no reason to despair. Plus her family had been so worried about her already, and who besides Kimiko, Matsuda and Mogi could keep Misa in check? Or so she'd thought at the time.

Her mind had been in that place the day she and Farley paid a visit to the shelter and found Lawliet, but no one would have known that from the kissy faces she made at the poor scrawny kitten curled up in the far corner of his kennel like a shadow. If she didn't acknowledge these thoughts and kept herself preoccupied with little projects then maybe eventually they'd go away on their own? But…

Near's right, isn't he? He's half-right at least. I've got a problem.

She recalled then how Halle had said that Naomi had been too strong to want to kill herself after losing her fiancé to Kira.

I guess I'm one of the weaker ones, huh?

"What do you care, what happens to me? I hate to repeat myself but wouldn't it be easier for you guys if I was out of the picture anyway? N-not that I'd want to be out of the picture, mind, I'm talking about for—"

Damn it, why can't I form complete sentences all of a sudden? Did I throw up a piece of my brain back at the station or what?

"U-unless you're saying for whatever reason that my life does matter."
She heard him make a quiet huffing sound that she couldn't discern was out of annoyance or amusement. "In the macrocosmic sense, no, it doesn't. To use a metaphor for illustration, you're only one small Lego™ block in the toy chest of life, specifically the kind with two pegs. If you were to disappear or be thrown away nothing major would change. Life as a whole, whatever it entails, will go on without you."

"Gee. Thanks, Nietzsche."

"That said, you're still an important piece to the playset you belong to and you're a hassle to replace. Your family would obviously mourn you, as would Matsuda and Gevanni and probably Amane. The shinigami might be lethally upset if you died…and I'd prefer that you didn't die right away either. By the way it's pronounced 'NEECH-uh,' not 'Neech-EE.'"

…

No way. Did he just say what she thought he said?

"Oh my God, you do care," she half-gasped with a sweaty hand over her chest. "Be still, my beating heart."

"God is dead, and you're doing it again," Near deadpanned without looking her way as he searched for another lock of hair to play with. Whether he said this in jest or genuine concern was unclear, like many things about him. "Allow me to clarify: it's true that it would be safer for Roger and me if you'd never gotten involved. And for you, for that matter. You're the only person outside Wammy's House who knows what the current L and Watari look like."

"But…"

Near bowed his head to stare at the crocodile dripping onto the towel, the beaming yellow duckie still nestled on top of it. "As things stand now, you've become more of an asset than a liability."

"Huh, you don't say. Even after what happened with Misa?" Erin asked, her voice shrinking down to almost a whisper. Could it be that Near was beginning to honest-to-God trust her?

"I too hate to repeat myself but as we've discussed before, I have as much responsibility for that as you. Perhaps a bit more since I was more aware of what Mello was capable of and should have planned for it accordingly. But only a bit, and I can't allow myself to dwell on it or else I would be unable to move forward, as you are."

Holy sacred shit. What had gotten into the guy to open up about these things to her? In her surprise, Erin could not find a response.

"My point is, you're too useful to let go of. You're the only one of us that we know who is able to recruit Takada's shinigami."

"I…is that all I'm good for, though?" Erin squeaked, twisting her neck from side to side to crack the kinks out of it. While it wasn't that surprising, she wasn't sure whether or not to feel hurt about Near basically saying that he only kept her around and told her that she mattered for her usefulness, whatever that meant. "What about when this is all over? What'll you do when I stop being useful?"

"Nothing, because that will not happen. I told you in the beginning that you are unable to leave our sights."

Erin squared her shoulders and asked as calmly as possible for her, "Are you saying I'm some kind of time bomb that's gonna blow and take everyone with me? Is that why you brought this up in the
"Not quite, but I don't think we can be faulted for having some concern."

"Well you're worrying over nothing. Okay maybe not nothing but I think you're blowing it out of proportion. Maybe I have been feeling out of it lately but I'm not that crazy. Everyone else who still has one has been risking their lives on this thing since the beginning. It's not fair of me to expect to do less. That's all it is. If I really wanted to kill myself, don't you think I would've done it a long time ago? I sure as hell could have done worse today than I did. But I didn't. I brought the freakin' house down like you said.

"And...yeah. Maybe I do still have some baggage I haven't totally gone through. But I don't think I'm the only one."

After taking a moment more to collect her thoughts, she added, "Now it's my turn to use a metaphor. You heard of Batman™?"

"Yes. Who hasn't?"

"Just checking. I don't know what kind of relationship you and L had exactly, and you don't have to talk about it now if you don't want to, but let's say that L is Batman™ and you're Robin™. Dick Greyson™, to be exact." Having no toys around to make her point, Erin settled on her fingers and designated her left pointer finger as "Batman" and her right pinkie finger as "Robin."

"From what I can understand, you and Mello looked up to him. Then he let you down. You've been stuck in his shadow for who knows how long. But you don't...you don't have to be just like him to be a great detective. I mean, if that's what you really wanna do. Let's be frank, he sucked. Not always, but more often than a person should be allowed to."

Near remained silent, rather than argue with her as she'd partially anticipated. She took this as her cue to continue. "There comes a time when Robin's gotta learn to fly and leave the Bat-cave™ and become Nightwing™." She made a bird with her hands and fluttered it over her head. "He takes after old Batman except he's, y'know, better. He's more positive and has actual friends. Unlike Batman he doesn't burn bridges. Unlike Batman he knows his limits and isn't afraid to ask for help."

If Near's Dick, would that make Mello Jason Todd™?

"I take it that you've never actually read the comics, or at best you've skimmed through what you looked up on the Internet when you were bored."

"Hush, I'm on a roll! My point is, things probably aren't gonna change overnight but it's something to consider, getting out of L's shadow and being, y'know, your own person. Don't try to fill someone else's shoes. Wear the shoes that fit you. Or fuck it, don't wear shoes at all if you don't want to. L hated shoes himself, honestly."

Roger cleared his throat, probably in distaste over Erin's language. If Near shared that sediment it wasn't apparent, though he did ask then, with his mouth in a strange slant that made his face look like the ":(" emoticon, "And what makes you think you're in any position to give me life advice?"

"Remember when I said you were a weak nasty kitten and all? I know. I know because I'm the same way."

...
"Would...you like to know why I think I got as attached to him as I did?"

Silence. Neither rejecting nor encouraging. Erin decided to go with the latter.

She sighed, adjusted her position back to sitting upright and resumed looking up towards the ceiling like she was on the couch talking to a shrink with her hands in her lap. "I was...alone coming to Japan. Not to say that I've never had friends but you know how it is: you grow up, you grow apart, you move away or they move away and you promise to keep in touch but you lose each other's address and number and end up not, or they ditch you in hopes of getting in with the cool kids and you try to follow them in but it seems the harder you try the more you get pushed out into the cold. Not that I'm blameless of course; I know I'm not exactly a peach myself most times."

Roger rolled his eyes at this obvious statement but held his tongue like the gentleman he tried to be. It was then that Erin realized that maybe Near wouldn't know what she was talking about. He didn't seem like the type to have any friends. It didn't help when she noticed that he'd turned away from her to stare at something she couldn't see.

Wow Erin, you're an asshole, Jesus Christ. But what else is new?

"Uh, I-I'm sorry. Where was I going with this? Oh yeah: come college I was pretty much on my own save for my family back home, and I made the dumb decision to study abroad in a foreign country with one of the hardest languages to learn and people who are more or less the opposite of Americans in a lot of ways. I was looking for adventure, excitement, a story that would make me sound credible and get people to listen to me for once. Be cool, basically. But I think deep down I was really lonely and scared, not about anything in particular but in that general way when you aren't surrounded by people that like you and believe in you. Maybe that's always been my problem? I dunno. What with how I can barely get along with people from my own culture, you can probably imagine how well my attempts to get friendly with the locals panned out."

She paused in case Near wanted to throw in a snarky remark, but he had none. He was staring out into space with his finger absentely wiggling in his hair.

"Then this weirdo swoops in from out of nowhere, speaks perfect English, approaches me first and actually seems to want to talk to me for reasons I don't understand and don't really question then. I don't recall him ever telling me I was dumb or crazy even when I probably deserved it, though I sure as hell loved to tell him that. Actually, the worst he ever really said to me was that I was annoying. And I did get to meet the rest of the task force through him, especially Matsu. Matsu helped me with Japanese.

"I know what you're thinking: 'I just happened to be useful to have around and he exploited my weaknesses to use me to help him solve the case.' You're probably right. That is a pretty pathetic and crappy foundation to start a relationship on, friendship or...otherwise. Not that playing tennis with a guy you know is literally out to kill you is any better, I guess. A-and no sane person would want a thing to do with a dirty egg-sucker like him after seeing him do the things I saw him do. But...that's it. I'm kind of glad to have met him as much as I also wish I hadn't. I can't explain it any better than that."

She shrugged. "I think he did care about me too, somewhat. There were plenty of chances where he could have tossed me out to the wolves and made it look convincing but he didn't. The SOB goes out of his way to protect me. I know, I shouldn't be mixing up pragmatism with real caring. It's just that looking back on it all now I find it hard to believe that every halfway-decent thing he ever did was only because he had to do it.

"Then again, maybe that's why it's so hard for me to let go of Misa, or Light for that matter."
"It's mildly disconcerting that you have no problem with telling me these things."

Erin snorted. "Yeah well, I said we gotta trust each other more. So that's what I'm doing. Real trust is when you tell someone a secret that they could use to destroy you if they wanted to but you know in the cockles of your heart they won't. You don't have to tell me any if you don't trust me enough yet, but that's why I'm going first."

"Hn. You really are a stuffed animal my granny would make."

Huh, that's the second time he's said that. I wonder…does his fixation on toys have anything to do with his grandma? Or is he messing with me by making me think he's dropping a clue on his past? Erin didn't comment on this out loud, not expecting Near to elaborate much more on it. He could only open up so much at a time. She didn't like reading into everything people did or said; it almost drove her nuts and kept her running in circles. How did guys like L or Light stand it?

Still as corny as she sounded, she did hope that her words had gotten through to him at least a tiny bit. Drill a little hole in the wall he'd built around himself.

"Regarding your previous concerns, we will keep you useful. As mentioned before, in light of recent events I wouldn't expect to keep your current employment when this is all said and done. We're considering offering you a more permanent arrangement working under us. After you've had some basic training."

"W-we?" sputtered Roger, abruptly turning in his seat. Apparently he hadn't been told beforehand that 'we' in this case meant both him and Near.

"Yes. We can negotiate terms and conditions when this case is closed, so long as you are willing to consider it. And even if you refuse, we will grant you and everyone else compensation for your help. So long as you continue to cooperate."

Erin almost choked on her own spit. Was Near seriously offering her a job? After accusing her of being a suicidal maniac, no less. He was as bad as L, if not worse. "I'm—I don't know what to say…except I'll think about it. Thanks. I think."

She exchanged looks for a moment with Roger, who had a tiny uneasy smile on his lips as if to say, I told you he cared. But I'm still not too partial towards working with you.

She hadn't considered it before, working with Near on a regular basis. She had assumed he wouldn't want anything more to do with her beyond this case. L hadn't, or so he'd said but knowing him he could have lied and anyway Near was different from L for all their similarities. Erin wasn't sure if she could handle having Near as a boss.

For one, she preferred that they be partners on equal footing.

On the other hand he had a point. Unfortunately. With the economy mediocre at best jobs were tough to come by these days whether one had a degree or not, never mind good ones that paid well, and after that stunt she'd pulled on TV she doubted many other places would hire her, to avoid backlash if for nothing else. She'd be a glue-sniffing idiot to turn down an offer for total financial and physical security. She obviously couldn't rely on her parents for that anymore.

That's right. I still have to get back to them. They gotta be worrying themselves into an early grave
right now. What am I gonna tell them, though? I can't have them getting nosy on me. The less involved they are, the safer they'll be.

Maybe Near did set me up after all? Not to get me killed but to trash my reputation so I'd have no choice but to stay with him even when this blows over. I can't believe I didn't think about that. Three days to get ready and that never once crossed my mind. Manipulative conniving little…

But, it was my idea too. And can you call it being manipulative if he did warn you about it beforehand? Face it Erin, you never really had a reputation to begin with and if it wasn't this you were probably gonna blow it some other stupid way like you always do. At least this way you'll have blown it for a worthy cause.

I hope.

He's got Roger to care for him and all but even he's a little too permissive towards him. Someone's gotta try to keep this kid in check, at least.

…

"Try to relax, Yagami. I'm sure they had their reasons for keeping you out of the loop. Not saying that they're good or bad ones. Hash it out with them on your own time if you can help it," Wedy advised, noticing the rigid aura to his posture while trying to distance herself from the problem as much as possible.

Soichiro didn't respond, at a loss for how he was supposed to feel or think about any of this. He should have known that Aizawa would want to keep his involvement to a bare minimum but that didn't make this sting any less.

He couldn't tell who he was angrier with: them, or himself.

Aizawa answered the door seconds after Wedy rang the buzzer and warily—especially towards Soichiro after recovering from the initial surprise of seeing him here in the first place—invited the two inside. "You must be Wedy. L notified me that we should expect to hear from you today," he said tersely. His dark eyes appeared dull and puffy from insomnia and anger over matters besides the rising stakes of this case.

From here, Wedy decided to get straight down to business. "That's right. Director, I've got some interesting pictures of Takada that you'll want to see," she said, fishing out her chip from her white leather Gucci™ bag.

"Er…sure. Right this way. Have a seat, Yagami," said Aizawa, quickly averting his gaze upon noticing the distress clouding the older man's expression. Feeling brushed off, Soichiro did just that and took a spot on the sofa next to Matsuda after exchanging tense greetings with both him and Mogi.

"Has something happened?" he murmured, keeping Aizawa and Wedy in his periphery as they worked on downloading her photos onto the computer. "Aizawa looks troubled today."

Matsuda shook his head as he helped himself to a cup of coffee from the pot Mogi had prepared just moments ago. "Seems Eriko's found a new beau. I guess it was bound to happen eventually but poor Aizawa isn't taking it too well. Not that I can blame him. He's risking his life to save the world as we know it while this random guy's moving in on his family—"

"Matsuda, there's a reason why they're called personal issues," whisper-snapped Ide upon entering the room from just having taken a bathroom break. "How would you know this, anyway?"
"Uh, I overheard him this morning. He had to cancel on his kids again and then Yumi said something about how they'd be spending the day with the new guy instead. Sounds like they already like him a lot—"

Matsuda had an unfortunate inclination for gossip that seemed to have steepened over these past four years, especially on high-pressure cases like this one. Soichiro speculated that this was his attempt to keep himself and the others calm and relaxed, but most times it only helped to sour everyone's mood further such as this time, although he did sound less facetious and more genuinely concerned about Aizawa's feelings.

This time the man in question didn't spin around to put Matsuda back in his place as he usually would have. Either he didn't hear them or he was pretending not to. Like if he ignored the subject, then it would somehow negate its existence.


"Ah, I see. You have no problem filling me in on Aizawa's home life but can't be bothered to tell me when there's a lead in the investigation?" Something about all this gossiping suddenly made Soichiro's feelings too slippery to retain and once his words permeated the air he was left with a bitter taste in his mouth.

"I-I'm sorry? What do you mean?" asked Matsuda with his mug shaking in his fingers millimeters away from his lips. His response only helped to pour salt into the wound.

Soichiro gripped his cane in both hands and kept it planted to the floor between his legs. He must have looked horribly old to them. He felt old, ancient practically. His joints seemed to creak like rusty gate hinges and his bones felt porous like holes gnawed into wood rotted by the elements.

Not long ago before the stroke, before Light's death, before any of this he didn't used to feel his age nearly as much as he did now. How was he not dead yet except for his sheer will to survive? And even then for how much longer could that save him? "For some reason you all neglected to tell me that you used Blogger to contact Takada's shinigami."

From across the room he thought he heard Wedy grumble, "Oh, here we go."

"Uh, I thought Aizawa told you already," sputtered Matsuda, clearly trying to deflect the blame elsewhere. This was enough to make the man mentioned turn around to glare at the rest of them.

"Excuse me?"

Soichiro took a breath to calm himself without much avail. "Did you or did you not have Blogger somehow contact the shinigami to convince it to turn on Takada? Wedy told me that you've done just that."

All eyes rolled to Wedy, who scoffed and continued the process of installing the chip. "Don't look at me. It's not my fault you don't talk to each other. I ran into Yagami in front of NHN and we caught Takada walking to the station. These weird notes started appearing on her back from out of nowhere, which I took these pictures of. We think the shinigami wrote them to draw attention on her. Naturally I concluded that based on what I heard from L, Blogger made some kind of deal with it."

She kept her eyes glued to the monitor and apart from the staccato tapping of her fingers on the keyboard the room fell silent as everyone else's eyes rolled back onto Yagami, whose ears turned red and crispy with fever. He should have known beforehand that bringing up the shinigami would
also implicate him for his own unauthorized activities. His emotions had bested him again.

"What were you doing at NHN?" asked Ide.

"I—I was just trying to follow Takada."

"To do what?" asked Matsuda warily.

Soichiro's heart froze in his chest as he realized what they were thinking. "No. I promise I had no intent on doing anything to her. I only wanted to see if we'd missed something. I-I thought since I wasn't with the police anymore the shinigami wouldn't notice me, and…"

Ide shook his head. Mogi put down his coffee and folded his arms. Matsuda took another large gulp of his, his eyes nervously darting back and forth. "I told you that you could help with surveillance. That's it," said Aizawa, his voice climbing.

"Well yes, that's exactly what I was doing."

"I meant watching cameras, not tailing suspects. Or did that fly over your head? What could have happened if Wedy hadn't—"

"But nothing did happen," snapped Soichiro.

"How can I be sure of that? I can't keep worrying about whether you're going to do something drastic when none of us are looking."

"It's not as if I went there carrying a weapon, Aizawa! Just what do you take me for?"

It was out.

"W-well technically in the right circumstances couldn't you use your cane as a wea—"

"Gentlemen, can we please not do this right now?" Wedy cut in, herself growing irritated at how childish the men were starting to sound. Even in death, Light had the astounding ability to keep the team together and yet tear them apart at the seams. "Let's get this over with so we can arrest Takada already." Click, click. "Here, look at these photos. As you can see there's no one behind her. Every time she took one off, another one appeared out of thin air. They all said the same thing: 'I'm with Kira.' I'm mildly surprised no one else noticed it, but this being Japan…"

Everyone except Soichiro got up to gather around the monitor. Along the way, he saw Ide whisper something to Matsuda along the lines of, "I knew this was a bad idea."

Soichiro couldn't believe it, and then he let it sink in like he'd eaten spoiled fish and was just feeling the onset of food poisoning. What was going to happen from here? How could they put Blogger in danger like this? Was he that much more of a liability that they'd resort to using her over letting him follow Takada?

"...keep an eye on Teru Mikami. One of Takada's old co-workers from Sakura TV that I spoke to said that they..."

How could his friends really trust his word? On the first case he had admitted to everyone that if it'd turned out that the first L was right about Light being Kira, he might have killed him and then himself. Surely the fact that he had done neither had been enough to clear their doubts about his self-control?
Then again, had he only not killed Light because the chance had been snatched from him? When they had finally confronted him and Misa he had not brought a gun with him unlike Aizawa and Matsuda. Civilians weren't allowed to have guns, but there was more to it and they all knew. They hadn't forgotten. How could they?

He couldn't be trusted not to fire it without provocation.

Had whatever moral superiority he'd thought he had over Kira been an illusion all along? Would he have acted like Kira if someone had hurt Sachiko or Sayu and gotten away with it? If he'd had that gun in his hands—fully loaded this time—would he have blown Light off the face of the earth?

Maybe there was a killer in him after all. And that killer had passed on to Light, flourishing in the pure permeable mind that only a child could possess and choking out whatever good he might have had until only the killer was left in the end. The type that they were warned about in the academy but somehow still missed, him most of all.

These were some of the things that kept Soichiro awake at night and holed up in the bathroom in front of the mirror while worried Sachiko knocked impatiently on the door asking for her turn.

What if they're right? If Wedy hadn't found me, would I have…no. No, I wouldn't! The worst I can ever do is lose faith in myself and in the law, no matter how imperfect we both are.

But they've lost faith in me. I never thought it would happen and I don't know how to fix that. Maybe I should have never gotten involved…

I'm losing my mind.

Finally Aizawa stood up straight, taking his turn to fold his arms. "All right, here's what we'll do. Mogi, Matsuda, Wedy, you follow Mikami and wait until he takes out the notebook. Go after him assuming he has the Shinigami Eyes. Wedy should be able to bug his residence now that we've gotten the shinigami on our side. Ide and I will take care of Takada."

"Right."

"Gotcha!"

"Hm."

"Yagami?"

Eyes met, two against eight and a pair of black sunglasses. He was outnumbered.

Soichiro pushed his glasses back up on his face. It took all he had to hold Aizawa's gaze as he processed his orders:

"I'm going to have to ask you to go home. You've done enough. The rest of us will handle things from here. I'll call you a cab."

They didn't need him anymore. They never did.

…

"Delete…delete…delete…del—ack! Guh-uhhh…"
"Shit. Guys, you'd better get up there quick."

"Come in, Wedy? What's happening?" demanded Matsuda into the ear piece. Already he had popped open the car door with a leg sticking out as he fumbled with the seat belt. Mogi was in the process of doing the same.

"Mikami, I think he's...he's having a heart attack."
As a scientist and inventor, it makes sense that Mr. Wammy—or Watari, as law enforcement knows him as—sees ideas and possibilities in all and everyone. Their common knack for analysis is one thing that's bonded them over these past eventful years.

With that, perhaps it shouldn't surprise L when the old man begins drawing designs for a successor. He first raises it for negotiation when L is between 15 and 16 years of age. They had just seized victory over Deneuve after a tumultuous confrontation that had ended with L convalescing in Watari's home following a brush with arrhythmia, the newest of several inconveniences brought upon by Marfan's syndrome.

Watari approaches him with tea, a prescription for Sotalol™ from Roger and the idea while L's lying in bed as instructed. Or rather, L pries it out of him when he observes the look he wears when he is brainstorming despite Wammy's insistence that it's nothing L should hear about now when he should be focusing on his recovery. He lies on his side curled into himself like a sick cat and Watari lurches over in his chair so the level of their eyes is approximately even.

L lets go of the straw protruding from his cup of tea after slurping down his next dosage, and Watari hesitates as he searches for the right words to convey his thoughts. "Do…you enjoy being a detective?"

This isn't even a question in L's mind. Sherlock Holmes™ can eat his heart out. "Yes. Why would I not? These past eight years and eight months have been the most fun I've ever had. This recent mishap has done nothing to dampen that."

Watari smiles warmly at him, admiring the boy's fighting spirit belied by his gangly and listless appearance. There's no way to talk to L about it except to get straight to the point. "Yes, these past eight years have been wonderful for me as well. And for the world at large. Which has had me pondering…how do you feel about having a successor?"

L blinks slowly, processing what he's just said. "A successor?"

"Yes."

"To take my place if something were to happen to me?"

The smile on Watari's face fades away and his blue eyes become hazy with the precursor of regret. "Well…yes."

L curls tighter into himself. His scoliosis is another distinguishing feature of his condition but Watari knows that he does this when he feels he must defend himself. "You think I'm inadequate. You think I can't do this anymore because of my heart." He lays it out as a statement rather than a question. He just knows that that's what Watari is implying. While his voice does not rise, something sharp, burning and unpleasant does and juts out of him like a fork to the chest, except from the inside out.

"No, no, that's not what I mean," says Watari hurriedly. "It's true that your…injury may have helped to inspire the idea, but I'm not saying this to disparage you. You've done so much good for the world. I just want to be able to continue doing that good even in the very distant event when you no longer can."
"Are you going to abandon me?"

"No! Never. I will be here for you for as long as there's breath in my body. Actually to be blunt I might need a successor sooner than you will," Watari says with a hint of a chuckle in his voice.

But this doesn't do much for L except arouse more distress. His toes curl, his pale spidery hands clench into weak fists. He's so tired all he can do is roll over to face the window opposite him and watch the dust particles dance in the beam of sunlight pouring through the glass.

"Are you dying, Watari?"

"Not now, I have a clean bill of health...ah. I'm sorry, this is coming out wrong. Let's discuss this more in depth when you're well again. The last thing we need is to get you too excited too soon." L feels a set of knuckles lightly brush along the side of his arm a few times, one of the tiny comforting gestures that he has become accustomed to. He doesn't move nor say a word in response but starts to wish he hadn't asked.

"I'm proud of you," Watari mutters. "Don't you doubt that for a second. For now please rest; you've more than earned it."

L does recover like he always does, and even takes up tennis shortly after to prove that he's fine and fully functional as much as he rather detests exercise—tennis is the most strenuous activity he recognizes without being too strenuous as it only requires one to run back and forth in a line and hit a rubber ball over a net for as long as they can, plus it is Watari's favorite sport from the days of his youth. He makes himself a champion of it in Britain, unparalleled until he would meet Japan's finest another eight years down the line.

But this doesn't seem to significantly change Watari's mind, and L is no less displeased when the issue comes up again and he can't find a new case to work on so he can continue avoiding it. First he inquires what Watari means by a successor, whether he means biological offspring via—

Watari promptly refutes it, knowing too well what it's like to grow up without a father and hoping to avert that when possible. "You're barely an adult yourself. I would never put you through that. Besides, sexual reproduction is a tricky mechanism, as I'm sure Roger has taught you. Much like the National Lottery™."

"Yes. With it there is recombination of alleles, but it is totally random. You can put good alleles together, or poor ones together, or one of each. There is also a chance of spontaneous mutations, however remote. To say nothing of my..."

Marfan's syndrome is an autosomal dominant disorder. If L were to have children (perish the thought!), each one of them would have a 50 percent chance of inheriting the mutation that causes it, and if they did they were guaranteed to end up with the same problems as him, if not be far worse off.

What good would that do for anyone? New models are supposed to be better than their prototypes, ideally in every way.

"My genes are defective. I am defective."

"Your genes only define you in a physical and biological sense. It's up to you to define who you are as a complete person."
That's right. L never knew his own biological father, and has at the moment made it no priority to contact him despite having access to the means to identify the man, but as far as he's concerned Watari more than fulfills that role for him despite their lack of common blood. He estimates in that same train of thought that Roger fulfills the role of stuffy uncle.

"It's just as well. Personally I find that... disgusting." He quells the impending nausea by finishing off the last bonbon in the box, popping it into his mouth like it's one of his pills.

Watari then offers an easier and more sensible way to go about it. "You know that I already take in children such as yourself, and I offer a variety of programs to cater to their interests. We could begin a criminology program to screen for someone who could potentially take your place, and train them accordingly."

... 

"Yes. But they should have to want the title."

"Without a doubt."

"And I get to decide on who takes my place. It is my legacy, after all."

Watari concedes with a knowing smile, humoring him. "Indeed. I am merely a part of it."

So the legacy becomes one of pure intellect instead. While L also humors Watari on a fairly superficial level—it is a sound idea from an objective standpoint to have back-up plans for anything—deep down he can't stand the idea of someone else taking what's his. He's not going anywhere any time soon. In fact he'll never ever relinquish his title, not until he finds another on his level if not exceeding it. And what are the odds of such a person existing?

This is filed under the very few things that L doesn't want to know.

With the old man's advice on the forefront of his mind, he likens himself to the machines he's seen Watari tinker with. When a component breaks down, they get new parts. He wants to take out his malfunctioning heart and replace it with an electronic one. It sounds feasible at the time to him. The heart exists only to circulate blood throughout the body, an organic pump. It is not the source of one's thoughts, instincts, desires or feelings contrary to what the poets and ancient Egyptians said. And artificial pacemakers are already well-established and widespread.

While he's at it, he toys with the idea of replacing his brain with a computer. He's a billion live uninsulated wires tangled up in one another; he feels and wants for too much despite having virtually all he could ask for. All he wants to do is think, bask in the certainties only hard logic and reason can provide. On the other hand, the human brain is supposedly superior to any computer. Currently computers are incapable of free will, let alone acting on it. After all, was it not a human brain that conceived the computer in the first place? So Watari tells him.

This doesn't stop L from at least requesting that mechanical heart. Watari says he'll see what he can do but he does it mostly to placate him for the moment as it never materializes. Still, they integrate the mighty computer into his identity. The world knows and need only to know L as a letter on a screen and a synthesized disembodied voice. It's better that way. Safer and easier.

L is pushing 20 when he encounters the first two candidates, A and B. Alternate and Backup. Both of whom younger than him though not by very much. Three and two years respectively.

A—born Alfalfa After but prefers Allen—is a plump black transgender male of Nigerian and Jamaican descent, with a toffee-colored buzz cut and wide forest-green eyes hiding behind thick-
rimmed glasses, a prominent gap between his two front teeth and a penchant for twitching and excessive perspiration. B—born Blackjack Banks but prefers "Beyond Birthday"—is a lean fair half-American, half-Japanese cisgender male with shiny narrow rust-brown eyes and hair as wild and pitch black as his own, who tends to look at people's foreheads rather than directly into their eyes when speaking to them and grins far more than most sane people would on even a very good day.

(Not that L would know what it means to be sane beyond its legal connotations.)

L doubts them both from the get-go but Watari insists that it's too early to cast judgments on them yet, let them prove themselves first. Prior to this L's only encounters with either of them for the longest time are through weekly reports relayed to Watari by Roger, the coordinator and doctor of the house-turned-academy.

They're both notably intelligent but that alone is not enough to replace him. A is too psychologically fragile while B is too violent and cavalier. The latter is devious, and not in a way L would consider conducive to being a competent detective, never mind the greatest. B acts for reasons unknown from his viewpoint as both a tormentor and ally to A, harassing him with his constant fake-sounding laughter and the occasional small dead animal and yet stabbing another boy in the hand with a pair of scissors for doing the same thing and to get back A's binder (which ended up torn up and bloodied for all his efforts).

The incident puts B in the local psychiatric ward for three days. He might have been there for much longer were it not for the stellar acting skills he employs to trick the doctors into believing he isn't really the threat to society he would become in the near future; he was just "having a bad day and wanted to protect his friend." L will give him credit for that much.

The night before B is allowed to return, tragedy strikes. Neither L nor Watari can be sure what exactly pushed A out the window of the top floor in that moment, between the frequent bullying over his weight and gender identity and the pressure to succeed L and all the cruel realities it entails.

What L does know is that in hindsight he could have done something to intervene. Perhaps he should have. He knew it was happening and he wields more than enough power. At the very least he could have offered the boy some comfort and assurance.

So why hadn't he?

A series of rationales come to mind (or are they excuses?). Having any kind of significant interaction with them could lead to attachment, one of the last things that should happen when these boys are being raised to take his place when he…doesn't work anymore. Being the next L requires that one be "tough." Either A would grow a thicker skin or he would give up his candidacy, and possibly ask to be transferred elsewhere where he could pursue other paths and feel a little more at peace.

With all this, L hadn't anticipated that A would opt to kill himself instead. Or could it be that he, in all his stubbornness to keep the title for as long as possible, simply ignored that possibility? The risk factors were all there.

This doesn't at all mean he had wanted A to kill himself. He seems to have a penchant for making people that are of any relevance to him want to commit suicide. Whether this is true or not, he and Watari will carry A's death and the bloody aftermath with them for the rest of their lives.

For the time being, he decides to accompany Watari to the funeral, but they will not be recognized
as L or Watari. They are just Quillsh Wammy and his adopted grandson, "Lamar." Being a faceless detective indeed has its benefits, especially when combined with his appearance.

During the ceremony he observes B's reactions. He is not wearing his perpetual grin this time but he doesn't cry either. Actually for someone who's just lost their supposed close friend his expressions are neutral, even slightly bored. L would know very well what boredom looks like. It's as if whatever grief B might have experienced has already been resolved. Maybe B never felt any grief at all. Or maybe, as L would speculate much later, he had spent all his time with A grieving for his end and by the time the funeral commenced he'd grown apathetic, more than ready to move on to something else. An extreme case of anticipatory grief.

Could B have had anything to do with A's death? He hadn't been at the house when it'd happened. But he had been another tormentor of A's if of a different sort. In the end L's curiosity bests caution and he manages to break away and follow B around the back during the reception while Watari and Roger are preoccupied. He finds him at the pond under the oak tree with the tire swing. He's picking up rocks and tossing them towards the water. Each stone skips on the surface two to four times before sinking beneath it to the murky bottom, each contact triggering ripples that broaden and stretch over the entire body of water.

L hadn't thought of B as the type who liked to skip stones. Unless he's trying to kill something in the pond by throwing rocks at it to ease his boredom. Assuming the role of Lamar Wammy, he slowly and quietly approaches B so as not to startle him. He'd rather not get stabbed in the hand or elsewhere today.

Either he isn't quiet enough or B has super-sensitive hearing as B breaks the silence first with an initial passing glance over his bony shoulder, his face breaking out with a grin that seems to stretch from ear to ear. "Ah, Mr. Wammy's ward. To what do I owe the pleasure of your presence, 'Lamar'?" He draws out his alias as if he knows off the bat that it is just that, not that he could prove it if he wanted to.

L stays around the tree, a safe distance away from his other failed successor. "I wanted to extend my condolences. I heard that you and Allen were friends."

"Friends," B repeats like the word is from a foreign language he's never heard of before. "Why yes, I did enjoy his company and I can't say I won't miss him a tiny bit. But I prefer to look on the bright side of things: at least he's not suffering anymore, and I get all his stuff. By the way, thank you for at least giving him a suit."

"You aren't sad about him dying?"

B tosses another rock at the pond, watching it to see if it hits the frog sitting among the lily pads but it sinks before it can make it. "In all honesty, no, I'm not. There's no point in feeling sad about something you always knew was going to happen."

L hooks a finger into his lower lip. "What do you mean?"

"Oh please, everyone dies eventually," B proclaims with his fake grim laugh. "Don't you know? Even if you don't know when someone will die, you can at least be certain that they will. So there's no point in mourning for anyone, really. My philosophy is to enjoy someone while they are alive but don't miss them when they're gone. Even I'm going to die someday and when I do I hope you don't mourn me. Not that I get the feeling you'd be so inclined."

For some reason, L senses that this is a jab at him. Like B somehow knows him and his guilt. He doesn't respond and lets B ramble on.
"That said, I must confess that I've been a hypocrite in that I thought maybe I could at least delay the inevitable. I thought Allen would feel better about himself after reading Akazukin Chacha™. He just didn't feel the love and courage and hope enough, I suppose. Then again, I should have learned my lesson after my parents died. I tried to warn Daddy not to go out that night but his gambling was more important. I warned Mommy not to leave but her freedom from me was more important. And L was more important to Allen than me. Ah well. Third time's the charm, isn't that what they say?"

Finally L takes his turn to speak. "I can't decide whether I find your philosophy admirable or disturbing."

B, growing tired of throwing stones, pushes himself back up on his feet. Wiping his palms on his long-sleeved black shirt, he cracks his neck, looks L up and down and his grin shrinks—though not by much—into a smirk without bitterness. Then, as if he fancies himself a reflection of L, he hunches his posture and slides his own finger into his mouth. A fellow shape-shifter.

"Hah. Glad to know that I'm not the only hypocrite here. But for the record, I don't entirely blame you for Allen. He never had what it took. But look at me, I'm still here. At least I've still got a shot, right?"

B begins to shuffle past L, bumping him against the jagged bark of the tree with his shoulder as he passes by. Roger had mentioned that B had issues with dominance. "It was oh so wonderful to meet you, and whether we meet again or no, I hope you enjoy the small slot of time you have left. And when you die I hope no one will mourn you either."

B runs away from Wammy's House thirteen days later while L and Watari are away on a case. He is not seen or heard from again for another two years until he begins his killing spree and declares war on L in Los Angeles, California. It is from this case that L assimilates another identity, "Rue Ryuzaki."

Two years after that, during the infamous Kira case in which B becomes another casualty, L begins to hypothesize that the so-called special ability of B's to know the time of one's death had possibly been a reference to the Shinigami Eyes, origin unknown. Whether he had a Death Note or not would always be a mystery although L doubts it because if he had seen his name and had such a thing, surely he would have killed him with it.

Between the two cases, L meets Mello and Near and wonders if it would have made a difference to apologize to B that gloomy day at the pond, only to decide no, it likely wouldn't have. Maybe A could have been saved (or maybe not?), but B for all the potential he might have had is—was—always unsalvageable.

With that, he moves on and returns to being a machine. Though not for long.

…

Teru had been quite busy himself in the three days leading up to that fateful day. Umbra was right about him focusing on Wammy's House and attempted to divert his attention.

"Are you sure about that?" he asked from the ceiling, clinging to it like a spider. His blank sunken eyes rolled up into his skull to stare at the austere man researching at his desk below him. Teru had quickly adjusted to Umbra's grotesque form and did not return his gaze. Sidoh cowered in the corner as usual, having nothing useful to contribute even if Teru could hear him.

"I have to. The caretakers of Wammy's House are evil. This world has no place for those who
mistreat and exploit children."

"But how can you be certain of that? You've never met them. Does the media always tell the truth about these things? I hear that they're not always honest."

Mikami stopped, his pen still in mid-air. Right now he wasn't judging anyone, merely taking notes. But the time was rising upon him. "The story was published in official newsprint. If it had been published by Sakura TV or the like then I'd have more reason to doubt it."

"What does it mean to be called 'official'? Are NHN and The Mainichi Shimbun™ that much more trustworthy than Sakura TV because they lack their glitter and bells and whistles?"

Teru grunted, his patience with his companion and his incessant questioning growing thin. "I would like to think so. Any competent society couldn't exist without a reliable system to communicate news, trends and ideas."

"But who runs those communications? Who is to say that they make the press say what they want you to hear and not necessarily what you'd wish to know?"

...Had Teru seriously never considered that? Was his faith in the media as blind as the faith he had in Kira?

"Have you, for instance, any way of knowing that the names and faces of the criminals you see on television are real?"

"Of course I do. Why do you think I made the Eye Deal with you?"

Umbra hummed. "That is true. You would in fact be able to see a person's real name as long as you could see their face. But the Eyes can't tell you who is guilty and who is not. You are well aware of the...cracks in your justice system. Sometimes innocent people are convicted, and guilty people are not. Even as a prosecutor as gifted as you are, you couldn't possibly have been present for every one of their trials. Is it not better to acquit a guilty person than to punish an innocent one?"

"No."

Teru whipped his head back to lock eyes with Umbra, his face taut with a barely tranquil fury. "I wouldn't expect you to understand this but neither of those is an option. To do either is to do both regardless."

This did not perturb Umbra in the least, although he could see that this mild outburst had compelled Sidoh to curl up into a quivering ball. "Humans can be so scary," he whined.

"You may have a point. Still, as a man of the law you should know better than most that you need proof of one's guilt before you can convict them of a crime. All I mean to say is that you wait until more of this evidence arises beyond this hearsay to confirm your suspicions."

"Hn. Since when did you start caring about who I punish, shinigami? You've never said a word before."

"I don't. I have no personal investment in Wammy's House," Umbra lied, Erin's bright soft face glowing in the dank recesses of his mind like a candle in the dead of night. "I'm merely advising you against becoming too reckless in your judgments. Kiyomi believes in fair trial and would be so disappointed if you killed an entire academy that turned out to be innocent. She trusts you very
much, you know."

Teru balked upon hearing this. It was true. Kiyomi was in no position to act right now. As much as he believed in thinking for himself, how could he forgive himself if he made the wrong choice and let her down?

Maybe she didn't trust him that much after all if she had to make Umbra tell him this in her place? Teru and Umbra would be stuck with each other no matter what as long as he owned his notebook, and yet…

Was she afraid that he would take things too far too quickly and make them noticed? He had to admit that the temptation existed. He wanted almost desperately to make up for time lost since Kira had first disappeared. He still had no right to question God, but knowing this didn't completely settle the knots in his gut telling him to take matters into his own hands.

Teru craved validation as much as he did for order in life, if not more. What was the point in thinking for oneself with no one of significance to give their seal of approval?

Kiyomi—Kira—wasn't just a goddess, friend and lover to him, Umbra mused, recalling what Teru had told him about his past. She had become his mother-figure to replace the one who had failed him. He could see it in the way Teru responded to her commands. Humans rarely regarded another's whims heavier than those of their parents.

"Anyway, don't you think there's something more pressing you should address first? Like the identity of M?"

Teru collected himself, adjusting his tie. His client was running twenty-two minutes late. He loathed people who were wasteful of their time and everyone else's. On the other hand, he couldn't speak to Umbra with someone else here in his office.

"You're right. As long as M exists, God's new world continues to be in peril. He's the only person besides myself who knows Kira's identity. So M is top priority at the moment. First I need to identify the person Takada encountered at Yellow Box. If I can get that then I'll have a lead to go on. It won't be easy given the condition of their remains found at the scene. But with my position I enjoy certain privileges as far as accessing information goes."

He bowed his head as if to pray, to summon the strength he would need for the task that lay ahead of him. To Umbra's bemusement and Sidoh's apprehension he began muttering another quote from Winston Churchill. "We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, and we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender."

"I will wait until I have conclusive evidence of Wammy House's crimes. Meanwhile…I will focus on purging those whose guilt is established and irrefutable."

Umbra considered speaking out on that but held both his tongues. Knowing Erin she would want the killings to stop completely, such was her warm nature. But if he pressed the issue further Teru could become more suspicious, and then he'd have a much harder time talking away his concerns.

Apart from distracting him away from Wammy's House, Umbra would otherwise have to let Teru do as he pleased. She had explicitly asked him not to kill him, so what more could he do? And even if she had wanted him to kill Teru there was a good chance that Umbra would die for it, since killing Teru would mean saving other humans' lives.
Besides, so far he and Kiyomi had focused their attention strictly on criminals and the corrupted. Even if their deaths had no substantial or lasting benefit to the so-called society at large, surely there were few out there who would grieve for their kind regardless.

Hopefully she would understand.

…

With one hot bag burning in his arm and the other dangling from his wrist, Matt rapped on the threshold to signal his return.

"What?"

"It's Matt. I've got food. You decent?"

"Yeah. Come in."

Matt shuffled into the room and placed the bags at Mello's feet like a vassal placing an offering to his feudal lord at his throne. Mello was calmer tonight. It could have been a number of things that had improved his mood (such as Misa's "awards") but Matt knew from experience to not take these quiet moments for granted, for they rarely lasted longer than a few days at a time.

"Hope you're hungry. I got Mu shu pork just like you asked."

Someone had to make sure that Mello ate other things besides chocolate. Were it not for Matt, Mello might have wasted away a long time ago. Or so Matt liked to think in an attempt to feel needed.

With a grunt of acceptance, Mello dug through the bags and tore out his order first. Matt fished out what remained and took his share with him to the torn red bean bag the sat across from Mello's armchair. As he plopped into it and opened the plastic box he eyed Mello from under his bangs. His best friend noisily gulped forkful after forkful of the pork, egg, mushroom and vegetables without even unwrapping the spring pancakes that had come with it, like a lone beast who wanted to get its fill of its hunt before the scavengers caught wind of it. Or worse, stronger competition.

Mello had always eaten like that for as long as Matt could remember. He didn't know if it'd had to do with not having much food around as a child before coming to Wammy's or whether his inferiority complex was just that bad. But like everything else about Mello, he took it in stride without question.

He pushed his greasy lo mein around into piles that slid back on top of each other as he waited for the platter to stop steaming. "Is the pork okay?"

Gulp. "Yeah. I've had better but I've had a lot worse too." Mello stopped to rip out a napkin to wipe the sauce off of his face that his tongue couldn't reach. "Did you get Misa her order too?"

"Yeah. Dropped it off outside her room."

Whatever his reasons were for his absence, Matt found it a relief to not have Lumen hanging around this time. Not wanting to waste this precious chance, he set the noodles down on the floor and locked eyes with Mello.

"There's something I've been wondering."

"What about?"
"Was it a good idea to throw Takada under the bus like that? Having Neylon blow himself up and all?"

Mello froze in his seat, his icy eyes narrowing at him. "What do you mean? With Neylon cooked to fuck they're going to have a hard time identifying him."

"No, I mean…do you think it would have been easier in the long run to actually help Takada? You know, butter her up into giving the notebook to us?"

What if the cops use this to somehow find us? The question hung on the tip of Matt's tongue, ripening but never falling out into the open. He might as well be tossing a grenade given who he was talking to.

Mello snorted. "I think we both know she's too wrapped up in her power fantasy to ever do that. She'd only give the notebook to someone else under duress, and even then only to someone she trusts. Someone with a sense of justice as strong and warped as hers, and who'd do whatever they think they should to get rid of the threat for her."

…

Matt glanced down at his food, the heat from it making his face flush. "That's why you put out that story about Wammy's, huh? So this other guy takes them out," he remarked flatly, forcing down the wave of dread and illness that took away whatever appeal the platter had had previously. How did it come to this? How could he go along with it? Whether he should have or not, he himself bore no grudges against the place where and Mello grew up. And maybe if it weren't the cradle for L, Mello wouldn't have either?

What would happen to all the kids that still lived there? Was Mello going to kill them too? Surely he wouldn't cross that line. But then…

"What if he doesn't get everyone? Who's important, I mean? Near's bound to have plenty of friends in low places, people that this guy or anyone for that matter would have no way of knowing about."

Mello flashed a broad smirk as wicked and cryptic as his answer. "Don't you worry, I've got that covered too."

Matt thought about pressing the issue further but stopped himself. Whatever Mello had in mind likely involved the Death Note, and knowing him he'd already written the names and conditions of his targets. While he hadn't seen anything in its pages it wasn't outside the realm of possibility that Mello simply tore those pages out and disposed of them so nothing could be changed.

The pile of bodies on his mind grew heavier and heavier and higher and higher, casting a shadow on every other thought he was capable of, and Matt saw no way to stop it.

"Okay and then what?"

"Hm? What d'ya mean 'and then what'?"

"Well, suppose this all goes like you want and you tear down L's legacy. Burn it to the ground. Blow it to smithereens. Will you finally be happy then?"

Mello held the plastic fork in mid-air, the pork impaled on its tines dripping into the tin bowl. For a second it looked to Matt like he was going to stab him with it. While he did no such thing his words took on an ominous growl. "What the hell kind of question is that? Of course I'll be happy. Why would I be sinking so much time and money in this if I didn't want it to happen?"
"Oh yeah, I don't doubt that for a second. What I'm asking is, what are you looking to do after that?"

"That's not important right now," Mello blurted, shoveling the pork into his mouth. After swallowing he continued, "I'm sorry, unless you had plans I wasn't aware of?"

"Well, there is a comic convention coming up in November," said Matt, half-sarcastically. "I was thinking of checking it out." It'd been much too long since he had seen a genuine smile on Mello's face. He could count the number of those in the time they'd known each other on one hand. And even if they succeeded in blowing L off the face of the earth, Matt had a feeling even this wouldn't satisfy Mello for long.

Or maybe it would. But at what cost? Even if Mello was content with that, would Lumen be?

Matt never met Light Yagami, and frankly was thankful for that, but for a moment he entertained the notion of if the poor deluded bastard, aware or not, had gotten caught up in the same rotten deal with his own shinigami: Keep going or I'll throw you away.

"Then go. I'm not stopping you. I think we'll be done long before then."

He sighed. "Mello, I think we need to watch out for Lumen. And Misa, while we're talking about it."

This seemed to grab Mello by the collar of his leather vest and hoist him up to his feet. He slammed his tin bowl on the seat behind him. "Why? What'd you see them do?"

"Nothing. Nothing yet. Look, I gotta be real with you: I don't trust either of them. I never did, really. I don't think they're working together against you necessarily but—"

"You think I totally trust them or something? Well I don't. I trust Misa less than I do the shinigami to be honest. But think about it: we both know that his species isn't that smart or hard to please. We're still alive, aren't we? As long as we keep him occupied he'll do whatever we want. As for Misa, what reason would she have to turn on us now? She's on the same boat as we are. Unless she still supports Kira but even then I think she'd have done something a long time ago to stop us from messing with Takada." Mello rambled on like a child who'd just been told that there was no Santa Claus: a fact that he had deep down suspected but was nonetheless too painful to accept and so he continued to deny with ferocity.

"And I guess you can keep her on your side just by fucking her brains out every time you two are alone together?"

Matt hadn't meant to say that. It slipped out like the ball of noodles sliding off his fork.

Mello sneered, tossed his blazing blonde hair back over his shoulder before it draped into his pork. "What's it to you? What are you, jealous? If you wanted a piece all you'd have to do is ask."  

…

Did Mello mean jealous of him or jealous of Misa?

"Although we were both under the impression you didn't swing that way."

Ah. Jealous of him. Of course.

Matt's fingers twitched for a cigarette and he licked his chapped lips. "You're an asshole. Like that's
anything new." He pushed himself off the bean bag with the lo mein balanced in one hand and started to make his way for the exit.

"Where are you going?"

"I can't talk to you when you're like this. I'll come back when you've come back to earth. Maybe you'll calm down with another blowjob from your girlfriend."

"Matt? I'm sorry. I was just kidding. Matt, don't walk away from me. Matt! I said don't walk away from me!"

Before Matt knew it the box toppled to the ground with a splatter of vegetables, chicken and noodles—some of it splashed on his jeans, goddammit it burned—and he found himself pressed against the wall across the threshold, pinned there by a gloved fist clutching the collar of his shirt. As he tried to regain his breath he looked into a familiar pair of cutting blue eyes framed by mussed golden locks, shiny and wild with fury that he wasn't sure was directed at him or something else, with a dash of fear.

"Jesus, thanks a lot you dick. That was my dinner," he deadpanned.

"Have you gone deaf? You're not supposed to walk away when I'm saying sorry," he hissed. "You're supposed to say 'Apology accepted.'" He jabbed a finger into the tip of Matt's nose. He always did this. Every time they quarreled (which nowadays seemed to happen more than Matt would prefer), Mello would threaten to hit him. But he'd never follow through. He was like a lion: puffing himself up to look bigger and more powerful than he actually was to establish dominance. Not that this at all meant he couldn't be dangerous without bluffing. A lion could tear through humans and lesser animals like tissue if he wanted but pit him against a bigger and better lion and the bastard was good as dead.

If Mello took after L in any way at all, that was it.

In any case, this was no different. No one who didn't know Mello would think of it to look at him but he appeared most vulnerable when angry. No one walked out on him unless he told them to, and even then they couldn't go too far until he wanted them back. For a moment Matt thought about working his arms around Mello and holding him close, telling him that he'd never leave him and Mello was an idiot for even considering the idea.

(He wouldn't, no matter how much he might wish he could or wonder if he should.)

Instead he squirmed in Mello's grip, recalling one of a few tokens of wisdom—one of very few things in general—bequeathed to him by his old man: "Apologies are like checks: you don't endorse them, they ain't worth shit."

"What's that bullshit supposed to—what's your problem? We snipe at each other all the time and you've never gave a shit. Look, have you seen Misa or Lumen do or say something I ought to know about or haven't you? Let's get that straight first of all."

Matt snorted, wondering if in their close proximity Mello could feel the heat radiating from his face, partly from the latter's pork and chocolate-scented breath that scorched it, partly from the way he glared at him.

"No."

"Well all right then. Take half my food if you want it. I'm not that hungry anyway. I'll get Pitch to clean up the mess. Trust me Matt, everything's going just as we want it to. I'll take care of us like I
always have. Now come on, sit back down and eat."

Here was the side of Mello that virtually no one else was privy to: a neglected little boy hiding fear and naivety beneath all that leather, testosterone and lead. This was the same boy who came to Matt close to tears after the first time he'd killed someone (although obviously it'd gotten much easier since then and if you were dumb enough to bring it up now he'd deny it until he was blue in the face and you were black and blue in yours). Matt couldn't discern when exactly his feelings for Mello morphed into something beyond friendship, but he did know that he realized it when they first reunited.

For better or worse, Matt loved everything about Mello, but it was this vulnerability that he thought had made him drop his guard. The kind his old man oozed in the mornings after when Matt would fetch him his aspirin, toast, eggs and cranberry juice and he'd return the weekly offering with a warm spaced-out look in his eyes that throbbed red and shined with tears, from the sunlight pouring in or otherwise.

As Matt would scurry over to the offending window to pull the blinds, he'd burp and slur affectionately:

Boy, you're one in a million. I love you, little motherfucker.

I love you too Daddy, you big motherfucker.

He'd laugh his awkward belly-laugh and moments like these more than made up for the man he'd change back into for the rest of the week.

Sometimes Matt would wonder if he'd developed some kind of Oedipus complex by the time he'd met Mello. Or would it be Electra complex? Oh, who gave a fuck? Psychology wasn't his strongest suit. If it were then maybe he'd have the savvy to avoid this position.

Without a word Matt followed him back into the room, took up the tin lid and let Mello scrape half of his drowning dinner into it like a dog waiting on table scraps from his master.

…

Fff.

Fff.

Her nose twitching and tingling with the latest dosage, Misa screwed the vial shut and clapped it back on her vanity. From under the door she could very faintly smell Matt's delivery wafting from under the door. She let it sit outside.

How did we end up here? This place is awful.

It smells like booze, blood and balls.

But no matter how much she disliked it, this was where she belonged. She was a cold-blooded criminal like the rest of them even if the rest of them wouldn't take her that seriously. If there was such a thing as hell, or at least purgatory, this was it.

If she had been hungry earlier, she wasn't anymore. Eating had become like snorting and singing and writing and killing and sleeping and sex and dressing up and most everything else: a chore to while away time and fill herself up with temporary pleasure to numb the pain. Sometimes she'd throw herself into it and other times she just wanted to curl up and die already, let the emptiness
inside overtake her like frostbite took the poor little match girl in the storybook.

Too bad she couldn't. Not yet. She knew this much because she'd tried several times to end her life. Biting her tongue, jumping, overdosing...all of them failures. This had to be a sign (or just bad luck, but damn it if she wanted it to be a sign then it was a sign).

After eyeing her makeup in the corner Misa decided to leave it be. Who did she have left to impress? Most everyone found her good-looking with or without makeup. She turned back around and flopped on her bed back-first to resume doodling in her notebook in front of her laptop.

Besides the killer notebook Misa kept another one for sketches or miscellaneous poems or lyrics to songs, some of which would end up on her music albums for her fans to enjoy and others which never left their page. The ones that stayed were often too creepy or sad. Misa-Misa was never sad. She couldn't be anything less than cheerful and perky. Whatever "darkness" she felt was channeled through her wardrobe.

At the moment she was filling out the new details of a girl in a flowing frilly white dress and veil. To be more precise, herself on her fantasy wedding day, walking down the aisle in one of the dresses she'd designed with a bouquet in one gloved hand clutched to her heart and her other hand laced in her groom's, himself dressed in a sleek black tuxedo (Misa decided long ago that if she were ever to get married it would be to the tune of a Western one rather than a traditional Shinto one; the Western ones seemed so much more fun and extravagant).

Her groom of course was tall and handsome except for his lack of a face. In place of that was a dark smear with a tear in the middle, the result of a cycle of drawing and erasing and furious redrawing and more furious erasing. Ultimately she had given up and left her groom faceless. It was just as well.

The rest of him looked like Light.

He would have looked brilliant in a tuxedo, even more so next to her. Even lying dead in a box everything about him seemed immaculate. It'd taken every gram of what little restraint she had to begin with not to climb into the box with him, especially with his grieving family around. She wouldn't have minded being buried alive as long as she was with him.

Unfortunately, hardly anyone nowadays shared that kind of sentiment.

Mello was right. Four years later and she still wasn't over him. Maybe she never would be?

How were they doing? Not terribly well, she reckoned, and in no small part her fault. On her sticker-ridden laptop, her browser was open to Sayu's photo album. She had to admit, it got lonely and boring without female company. She didn't count the bimbos and gold-diggers hanging off the arms of Ross and several of the other men of rank. She hated them. They were little more than competition. She may have killed them a long time ago if Mello hadn't ignored them anyway.

(She preferred to think it was because he liked her best and not for the more plausible reason of avoiding trouble with her and needless fights with jealous cohorts, not that he couldn't put them back in their place if it came to that.)

Yes, even if she and Mello weren't in love that didn't mean she didn't still want him for herself. She hadn't totally meant it when she'd offered to share him with Matt, having known from the start that the latter would never make a pass at Mello. Misa imagined that Matt resented her for rubbing it in, though if he did he made no demonstration of it apart from staying as far out of her way as humanly possible.
Misa supposed that this was the main foundation of her friendship with Erin back then. Erin was safe, a big clumsy puppy with a nose for trouble and a ferocious bark that belied a decidedly gooey heart but not much else. Misa never could get along with girls who stood equal to her, who could possibly be better than her in any relevant way and take what she'd already claimed: the guy, the prestige, the fans, the art, the money, anything.

Somehow she didn't notice Lumen phasing through the wall until he came to a stop at the foot of her bed and cleared his throat as loudly and obnoxiously as he could. The noise made her jump a bit but she quickly recovered upon turning her head to see him.

"Oh, Lumen! You surprised me. How are you?"

"How am I? How am I? Feh! I'm bored," grumbled the shinigami, his large bony paws held up to his face in a shrug. "Nothing exciting's gone on lately! Everyone's just sitting around."

"Isn't that what you do when something's going on anyway?" Misa teased with a smile. Fantasy and reality had become so blurred together, and her knack for pretending so ingrained into her instincts, that many times she couldn't tell whether her own smile outside the spotlight was genuine or another act.

"Har-de-har-har. What'cha got there?"

Misa glanced back at the old mildly worn notebook Lumen targeted his finger towards through her hair. "This? Um, it's my sketchbook. I draw and write stuff in it when I get bored. Maybe you could keep one of your own—hey!"

Before she could get the bearings to stop him Lumen had reached over her and hoisted the book up to his face in one paw, his fiery sunken embers for eyes scanning the pages with an unimpressed grunt. "It's just you in a dress."

"A wedding dress. Give that back, please," Misa pleaded, bouncing up and down on the bed to grab it back. But Lumen kept pulling it out of reach before her fingers could even brush against it.

"Who's the guy?"

"No, I'm not telling! You're just going to tell on me to Mello and make him mad at me."

"Eh, I won't. I don't think he'd care one way or another."

Misa stopped jumping. That's right, he wouldn't. Why waste energy seething with jealousy for a dead man, never mind over a woman he didn't love in the first place?

After stopping to catch her breath, she sighed and grabbed a tissue to blow her nose. "He's…an old boyfriend of mine."

Lumen cocked his head to one side. "Where's his face? How come he's got no face?"

For the same reasons I don't have a real face.

"Well I—Light was incredibly handsome. No matter how many times I try to draw it, I can't do it justice. So I decided to leave him that way."

"Oh?" A smirk infected Lumen's gravelly voice, and if Misa looked close enough and squinted she could almost see his lipless toothy mouth curl up from the corners to match. "Why aren't you with him anymore? You dump him?"
"Actually it's more like, he dumped me."

Lumen flipped through the front pages that revealed a series of very faded sketches of dresses that had yellowed with time. "More dresses? Is that all you draw in this old thing?"

Misa felt herself turn flush. Truth be told, no one had ever looked through it. No human, at least. Not since…

"Those are my mom's drawings. She designed clothes for a living. She's kind of where I got my inspiration to be a model. After she passed away I took that book with me."

Lumen grunted once more before tossing the book over his shoulder, having depleted whatever novelty it might have had for him.

"Hey! Don't do that, you'll ruin it!"

As Misa hopped off the bed to fetch the notebook, her black silken gown swishing to and fro along her chafing thighs, Lumen helped himself then to her laptop to examine the photos on display. "Ooh, that must be him. Doesn't he look sharp? You're right, he's quite a looker…huh. I can't see his name or lifespan. He must be dead."

Misa dusted the book off and clutched it to her breast. "Y-yeah. That's Light you're looking at. Light Yagami. His name was read as 'light' but written as 'moon.'"

Moon Night God.

Misa thought it was the most beautiful name she'd ever read when she first saw it. Getting so caught up in her passion it hadn't at all occurred to her then that he really was like his namesake and not just in terms of beauty.

Up close, the moon was a black barren wasteland that didn't even make its own light. It reflected the light from the sun to hide its true nature.

"Nice. So what happened? He get so sick of you that he killed himself or something?"

These words and the callously casual delivery thereof drove a twinge of anguish through her, but she played it off by returning his remark with a sly, bitter smile. "No. Actually…you could say that I killed him."

"Aren't you scary?" bit Lumen, not sounding at all scared. "Yeah, right. Seriously, you'd make a fine shinigami."

Tap-tap-tap-tap.

Misa noted the way Lumen drew back slightly when he stopped on another photo and said nothing else for a moment. "What is it?"

"This guy…who's he?"

Not knowing right away what he was talking about, she scoffed and sauntered back up behind him. "You tell me. I thought shinigami could see people's names without asking."

"Of course I can see his stupid name. It's Soichiro Yagami. I just wanna know who he is."
She froze in place. Something about the urgency in Lumen's voice didn't sit well with her. It sounded especially hateful. "That's Light's dad."

"His dad, huh?" Lumen stroked his pointed chin. "I don't like him."

"Why don't you like him? You've never met him." She was one to talk.

"Doesn't matter. I just don't like him. But I see he's still alive..."

Miraculously, thought Misa, but not for much longer. Seriously, now what's his problem?

She asked again, "Why don't you like him?" Even by her skewed standards the man was hardly dislikeable despite his opposition to Kira's cause. He had been little more than a victim of circumstance. Around Lumen's coat tail she spotted the offending picture: Soichiro sitting on a bench feeding birds and looking rather uncomfortable doing so, given the forced smile on his mustached lips.

Suddenly Lumen's voice took on a guttural growl as he reached back to pull out the weapon strapped to his back, to which Misa bounded forward to stop him. "Whoa-whoa-whoa! Don't destroy my computer! You may not need it but I do!"

"Come on, how can I not hate him? That old fart looks so pathetic, a coward if I ever saw one!"

"Hey, I've met him myself. He's not a coward."

"Oh what would you know? You're a dumb blonde," the creature spat.

"Ex-cuse me? Ha! The joke's on you, Lu-Lu. I'm not a real blonde." Misa had gotten so caught up in the moment that she'd just spilled one of her previously more guarded secrets. Not that it mattered anymore if anyone knew.

"Look, just leave him alone, okay? It's not like you're ever gonna meet him and it's not like he did anything to y—"

Time slowed down, at least in her mind. Her heart blasted up into her throat, clogging whatever words she might have wanted to say. Her pale deceptively dainty hands trembled before her, her nails shining like fresh spilled drops of blood.

No.

Lumen whirled around to glare down at her like a giant towards a fly. "Yeah? You were saying?" he demanded.

No way.

Before she knew what she was doing, and to Lumen's utter confusion, she reached up a hand to shield his gaze from her's. "Wha-huh? What're you doing?"

Without his sockets for eyes distracting her, the picture became horrifyingly clearer. Their chins, their body shape...their shared love of consommé-flavored chips...their arrogance...their mutual issues over the same man...

It...it can't be. How is that possible?

How could she have missed it?
"Lumen? Do you...remember Mr. Yagami at all from somewhere?"

"Pphf. No, it's like you've said, I've never met him."

... 

Misa's voice dropped to a whisper. "How about me?"

"What's that supposed to mean? I met you through Mello; I think I'd remember if I've seen you before unless I purposely made myself forget y—mmph!"

Misa hadn't gotten many chances to kiss Light in the time they were together. In the longest kiss they'd shared, she recalled how soft his lips were, how warm his breath and how he'd tasted of salt and a squeeze of apples—never before had she thought such a combination could work, but such was the magic of romance and its ability to bend your reality.

Lumen had no breath and tasted like neither. As she clung to his pointed neck and bristling mane for dear life she found him to taste more along the lines of dirt. Dirt with a hint of rust. She might as well have been smacking lips with a cake of dried mud. But Lumen was the first to shoot away, knocking Misa to the floor and gagging and spitting all over the place like he'd licked wasabi off of a homeless man's nether regions. He clawed at the air in utter and frantic disgust.

"GAH! Peh-pfuh! What the hell'd you do that for? Who knew humans could be so gross? Aren't you supposed to save that crap for Mello? Jeez you must be stoned, that's gotta be it. You humans act weird when you're stoned. Now I gotta wash this taste outta my mouth. I'm outta here."

Lumen was gone before she could utter another sound, leaving her there on the floor with the realization that she still had a remnant of a heart after all. Just when she thought it couldn't break any more, he'd ground it up like cocaine under a razor.

"L-Light..."

Maybe she was stoned? But not even that much could shake the terrible discovery she'd just made.

Once upon a time she would have dreaded the idea of forgetting Light and her love for him (or her version of love). He was her sanctuary, her god, her reminder that she wasn't as alone in the world as she'd once thought.

Perhaps that was all she really wanted from the start? A new world meant a chance to feel normal, accepted, loved for herself and not for who she pretended to be. Oh sure, there was also the whole justice thing but in all honesty Misa couldn't remember caring about justice for others as much as for justice for herself. If it'd been someone else's parents murdered, it'd be sad but not her problem. Light had probably picked that up about her right away. How could he not, when he was the same way whether he'd admit or deny it?

How did we end up here?

Even if he didn't feel the same she'd reasoned that she could make him fall in love with her too in time. She'd charmed the pants off of hundreds of others before him (sometimes and to her chagrin, literally). Why would he be any different? She was so woefully naïve then.

Where do we go from here?

Now for the first time she'd seen him for what he well and truly was, and what she'd been to him. Even in death he'd left her behind. What was worse: the fact that he'd left her with her hands full of
hollow promises, or the fact that if the roles were reversed he wouldn't spare her a single tear?

And I'm gonna end up just like him when I die, ugly and mindless. It's not over. It'll never be over, will it?

But…maybe it won't be so bad? It's not like I'm not ugly inside already…and if I won't remember anything I won't hurt anymore, will I? I can forget everything. L, Kimiko, Erin, Mello, Mom, Dad, Rem…Light…oh Light…

She curled into herself like she'd just been punched in the stomach, burying her face in the dampening skirt of her gown and wailing her agony into it until her throat turned raw and her spine ached from her constant rocking. She didn't know how long she stayed that way but by the time she found a moment to calm down she heard footsteps approach her.

Misa blinked and rubbed at her sore eyes to find a pair of black leather boots gleaming up at her. Oh, what did he want?

His face was too blurry for her to make out but she peered up at Mello briefly before burying her face in her arms and coughed, "Go away. I'm not in the mood."

"That's a first. Me neither," he retorted. He didn't bother to ask what was wrong. As far as he was concerned she was just fucked up on coke again. Although what he did next took her by mild surprise.

In a rare show of undeserved compassion likely triggered from having experienced something all too similar in the past, he reached down a pair of warm gloved hands to scoop her up from under her arms. If she wanted to or not Misa didn't resist him, her body having been reduced to putty from her outburst.

"If you're gonna have a meltdown at least do it on the bed," he huffed, setting her down on the mattress. "The last thing I need is for you to break something important with your thick skull."
The dream that followed played out like an art film adapted from the back pages of Misa's journal. The details changed as her life in the outside world dragged on but the basic plot was the same.

She sat on the ground as a toddler in a poofy frilly dress that would change color throughout the scene (first angelic white, then canary yellow, then robin egg blue, then pastel pink, and then a rich sinful black to hide the blood soaked into the fabric). Mommy, Daddy and Kimiko stood far away under a ray of light, either from heaven or a spotlight. It was always too bright for Misa to tell one way or another. Behind the three stood a shimmering gate. Home.

Daddy crouched near the ground with his long arms open to her, a broad grin splitting his face as he beckoned her to come to him. Mommy leaned in from behind him with a painted hand on his broad shoulder, her round face lightly wrinkled with age as she beamed and cheered for her: "You can do it, Misa-Misa!" Kimiko would wave at her wearing one of her rare lovely smiles.

These three were her first fans ever, her biggest fans.

Misa, always the go-getter, found her footing and rose on wobbly legs. Her own tiny arms outstretched to them, she cooed and giggled, unable to form the words to let them know how much she loved and needed them. How sorry she was for tearing them apart, she hadn't meant to.

As she approached a single step rose from under her family's feet, then two…four…eight…sixteen…too many for Misa to count. They and the gate kept rising higher and higher over her head, spiraling out of reach the further she pressed on. Misa climbed the first few steps using her hands and knees before finding the strength and finesse to walk upright, then to run.

But it was no use. The faster she ran the higher the stairs rose. The distance and light pouring down on them obscured their faces from her eyes, and an ominous howl drowned out their shouts and laughter in her ears.

Wait! I'm coming! Don't leave me!

Misa pointlessly grabbed at the image before her of Mommy and Daddy turning around to cross through the gate hand in hand. They could wait for her no longer. They had seen the bloody shoeprints she'd left in her wake. She was a naughty child tracking filth into their immaculate house.

Kimiko stayed and frantically calling out to her, begging her to hurry. She stumbled, her undoing. The steps began to collapse behind and in front of her. Misa didn't even get to brush fingertips with her big sister before she plummeted into the abyss below.

Instead of falling forever someone caught Misa in his arms. Who else but her handsome, brilliant, powerful Light? An entrancing aura of crimson and gold bathed him and her like the sunrise, bright enough for Misa to see the bones and skulls under his feet. The scent of decaying flesh hit her like the wind-swept sea, drowning her.

Forget them, he whispered. I'm all you need, now and forever. Let's make a perfect world of our own.

He hid it well under his honey-brown hair but from behind his ear Misa could see a thin leather strap connecting to his jaw. This beautiful face nothing but an ivory mask, she pried it over his head to reveal his real one: a dusty skull with gaping jaws and scorching red eyes deep inside the
sockets. Lumen's face.

Light heaved his manic, cruel laugh as she peered into her smooth reflection on the mask to see her own face: frozen and splintered like a discarded porcelain doll, framed with mangy gray hair and adorned with puckered slashed lips. One lifeless murky brown eye bulged from its socket; the other was empty. Blood and grime oozed from both of them.

…

However Misa had managed to fall asleep after her fit, the dream had rattled her back awake, returned her to the real world. No escape within or beyond her mind. She sat up to catch her breath and rub the dust, sweat and tears from her eyes, recalling all she had learned before her nap and pondered what to do now. Her head throbbed painfully in protest but she ignored it as best she could.

So Light was Lumen, and Lumen was Light. Light was no longer his name. He had become a god as he'd wanted. Maybe not the kind of god he would have wanted to be, or perhaps he had?

Should she tell Mello and Matt? Would they believe her? Did it matter either way? Lumen (Light) clearly didn't remember anything. He didn't remember her at all. But he must still have had some kind of feelings for his father despite forgetting him, if hostile ones. Otherwise he might not have reacted the way he had from seeing that picture of him. Did he remember his mother or little sister? What about the rest of their old friends from the police? Would this affect their future plans at all?

To think that this was the same man who'd avenged her own parents by punishing their killer…

I wonder if I should try to make him remember. But what would be the point of that? He didn't care enough about me to remember me in the next life, she thought bitterly. He'd probably just brush off everything I say like he did when he was alive.

With that in mind, would Lumen go out and kill Soichiro Yagami out of spite? He seemed to hate him enough to do that. She didn't want it to happen but what could she do to stop him?

No. Lumen (Light) wouldn't kill his father, not right away. He liked to play with his prey before eating them. Why else did the battle between him and L drag on for as long as it had? Light was bored then, and apparently even with all his new powers he was still bored.

She could distract him. Play with him one last time. It could be her only way to break away from him for good, prove to herself that he'd needed her far more than she'd needed him. Even if she couldn't evade death, not that she wanted to, maybe she could still escape the fate that had befallen him?

But how?

Letting that simmer on the back burner, Misa sighed and pulled up her laptop. Sparing the Yagami family one last longing glance she moved on to the search engine, her future with them severed by the shears of Fate (or was it Free Will? Misa was too tired to care anymore, she just wanted out).

She typed in another name she knew well and hit "Enter."

…

Was she still high, or was she actually seeing link after link about Erin being on TV?

When did that happen? Misa had been wavering in and out of reality a la cocaine binge for the past
few days. As such, she hadn't paid much attention to TV or the news.

With her heart squeezing up through her throat, she clicked on one link to a video. Poor thing tried so hard to stay calm but Misa could see the terror, rage and sorrow shining through her old friend's green eyes. She might as well have been held hostage, her captors forcing her to speak to her rescuers (if any) the terms of the ransom in exchange for her life.

"Is this it? Is this what we've been reduced to? And nobody sees a thing wrong with it? I'm not talking about checking the facts. I'm talking about not checking the facts. We may never know why those men wrote that story; maybe they were just acting out of concern for the students or maybe they were coerced into writing it. What's sad is that we'll never know because they're dead. Why did they both commit suicide and just days between each other? They must have been threatened. If not by the party that coerced them…then by Kira.

"Those men couldn't win either way. And you know what? None of us can. These past few days Kira hasn't gone just after criminals. He's targeted entire governments, schools and religious institutions because of the crimes done by some of their own. And now we have to worry about him killing a school of innocent kids and teachers just because no one can get their facts straight and Kira as much as he wants to play judge, jury and executioner can't be bothered to do his own research!"

Someone muttered in the background, to which Erin responded with a trembling finger jabbed at the camera. "No! Hold on, I'm not done. Okay so there has been a cut in the crime rate, but where d'ya think it's coming from? Fear. The police are being forced not to make public reports on the crimes they investigate. And—and how can we be okay with a world where anyone is prone to get killed for even the slightest screw-ups? Moreover innocent cops and reporters with friends and families of their own have been killed by this lunatic just for doing their job! I've lost some of the best friends I've ever had to him, and I know people who lost friends to him too!"

I've lost some of my best friends…to Kira.

Misa drew back like someone had thrust a needle into her ear. Once upon a time she would have killed people who spoke ill of Kira. She had killed them. Not remembering didn't mean she hadn't done it. Didn't sacrifices have to be made sometimes for good things to happen?

It's easy to make sacrifices of people you don't know, never mind care for. How the tides had turned.

"To all you Kira supporters out there, I have to say if you think you're that much better than the rest of us just because you've never had brushes with the law, th-the whole idea that we're only good because we're scared of getting punished for it or we're hoping to get rewarded for the most basic acts of decency makes us all sound like one big economy-sized package of butt-wipes!"

A crass way to put it, as expected of Erin, but otherwise she was right. Misa had only just started to accept that fact. She was a monster. Perhaps a little monster existed in everyone. Some tamed them and others let them loose. Others still, like herself, pretended they didn't exist or at least that they weren't monsters until they no longer could, when it was too late.

Oh yes, there was also Kimiko, but she was different. Unlike Misa Kimiko could change, and had. But some days before she ran away with Mello, Misa wondered if Kimiko only stuck around to atone for her own crimes, many of which Misa happened to be a victim of, and whether she too would turn away if she ever learned the ugly truth about her precious little sister.

What would your parents think if they saw you'd become like that burglar?
They wouldn't love me anymore.

That one thought alone had been too much for her to bear, even long after they'd died.

Best friend. After all this time, all the sins Misa had committed in the name of Kira—for Light—she still called her her friend. She had seen her at her worst, had been threatened and beaten and used by her and yet she still loved her, still took her back, still opened up to her and let her play with her hair and set her up with another boy. She'd tried to give her that second chance that L, or any sane person would have denied her.

Misa chuckled under her breath, wiping her eyes with her knuckles. A wave of pity, affection, contempt and shame (or some vague semblance of it) washed through her, thick and cloying as dying flowers with rotting fish. Stupid girl.

She'd had another friend like her long ago who had met a tragic end at her hands. Misa of course couldn't remember a thing about Rem and for now only knew as much as Mello did about her, but if she had to guess, it was because Rem was a monster like her, except literally. Rem encompassed everything Misa didn't want to be.

But then what made Light different from Rem? After finding out the truth about Lumen, Misa didn't know anymore apart from the fact that he'd never loved her. Thinking back on all the fairy tales she'd grown up on, perhaps she'd merely confused beauty with goodness.

Well, I am an actress. Hypocrisy comes with the territory.

She forced herself to get back to the matter at hand. Near, the little bastard. Using Erin as a smokescreen for Wammy's House. That had to be the explanation for this. But more importantly, this was directed at Takada, she just felt it. Takada wouldn't like what she'd said one bit. Her friend probably wouldn't either.

Her anger morphed into panic and she clutched the sheets in her fist. Erin could die. No, she can't die yet! I still need her! Ohhh, what if I'm too late and she's already dead? Takada. That bitch isn't getting a one-up on me, not now not ever.

With another search in a new tab, Misa couldn't find anything about anyone named Erin Blogger dying in this past week. But the comfort she derived from this was minute. News traveled quickly but not that quickly. She needed to be sure that Erin was still alive, and even better, find the person Takada had passed her notebook on to and kill them both. She couldn't wait on them to kill everyone at Wammy's like Mello.

On pure instinct, Misa hopped off the bed and scrambled out the door.

There is one way you can do this. You just have to convince the boys to go along with it.

…

"Guuuuugh, I feel dirty," growled Lumen, chomping down another handful of consomme chips. "I feel violated. I feel like how you might feel after a dog French-kisses you. With the tongue and all," he sputtered between chews.

"Okay Lumen, we get it, it was gross," huffed Mello, shifting in his chair to drape his lithe body across it with his legs hanging off the arm. "You know if you stopped talking about it, you'd get over it faster." He took another bite of his after-dinner chocolate.

Matt noticed Mello's midriff stretching out, his navel playing peek-a-boo with his leather vest and
his creamy peach-pink skin glowing under the flickering lights. He quickly turned away to face the stained brick wall, saying nothing.

Around this time Misa crashed into the conversation. Literally. She charged into the room like a mad goat, her pigtails thrashing around her head as she dove for the best seat in the house: Mello's lap.

"Oof!"

"Mello! Mello-yellow, am I glad I caught you!" she gasped, nestling into him as closely as she could. Bare nimble legs on either side of his hips, breasts pressed against his chest, the whole nine yards.

Once Mello caught his breath, he checked to find his chocolate bar still clutched in his fingers and then he pushed her back by the shoulder with his free hand.

"Welcome back to the land of the living. What do you want, Misa? Hey, what's this I hear about you making out with Lumen? I knew you were insane but I didn't think you were that insane."

Misa paused, hunching over slightly in disappointment and revisited sorrow. How could Mello be so nonchalant over her transgression? It briefly reminded her of when she'd broken things off with Ryuga after she and Mello had fooled around the first time. She'd told him that she needed space and that she just didn't feel the same about him as she had before and oh, was she so very sorry if she'd broken his heart.

Hideki didn't question any of it, granting Misa the easy way out. He'd just hugged her and flashed that tiny, sad, innocent smile of his that had dropped panties all over the country except hers, wishing her all the best and asking her if they could still be friends. She remembered how irrationally sick and angry this gesture had made her inside.

That's it? You're just gonna let me go after all this time and money you've spent on me? No no no, that's not how it's supposed to go! You're supposed to fight for me! If you cared you would call me out on my lies and do anything to keep me! Grab me by the wrist and twist it over my head and demand if there's someone else. 'Who have you opened your thighs to while you've kept them shut to me Misa-Misa you conniving little whore? I'll find the bastard and kill him with my bare hands!'

But poor sweet gullible Hideki wasn't that kind of man. On the screen for one of his roles but not for real. She didn't deserve a prince like him. She deserved monsters like Light (Lumen). And Mello.

She touched her fingers to her lip, assuming the role of coy damsel. "I—I don't know what you mean."

"Lumen says you kissed him a while ago. He won't shut up about it."

"Oh! I'm sorry, I must not have been in my right mind. It was only one kiss; I didn't mean anything by it."

"Why I oughta sue for harassment!" Lumen snarled.

"Oh hush. What use do shinigami have for money? Anyway, Mello! I want you to let me make the Eye Deal."

All eyes locked on her now. Lumen grunted in mild surprise. Mello narrowed her eyes at her. "What was that?"
She squeezed his shoulders in either hand and locked lips with him. She pulled away and repeated, "Let me make the Eye Deal, with Lumen. Please Mello, you must!"

She was about to kiss him again when he cupped a hand around her forehead and made them re-establish eye contact. "Why should I give you ownership of the Death Note, never mind let you make the Deal? Where's this even coming from?"

"Oh Mello, something terrible has happened! Did you know that Near put Erin up on TV to rebuke that story you put out about Wammy's House?"

Mello jolted a tiny bit, inadvertently pushing her hips up to hers which earned a quiet moan from her. He commanded Matt to check her story with a stretch of his neck and nod of his head. As Matt wordlessly fired up the computer that sat by Mello's chair, Mello said, "Is that right? Well what of it?"

Misa squeezed him tighter. "What of it? Mello, use that big brain of yours!" To his chagrin, she knocked on his skull like she were rapping on a door. "This could ruin everything! We can't wait on Takada to kill everyone at Wammy's. I know how people like her tick. They can't stand to hear people tell them they're wrong, not one bit. She's gonna kill Erin, Mello! You promised me that you'd spare her!"

"How can you know Takada? You only met her what, once?" said Matt, typing and clicking away. "Once is enough. More than enough. And even if she doesn't do it, her friend might. Please Mello, don't make me ask again! You're adaptable like me. We can make a teeny-tiny change of plans, can't we?"

Mello cocked his head, looking her over with a frown. "Maybe I didn't make myself clear before: I don't particularly trust you, especially with the notebook. If you had the Eyes you could see our real names and then—"

Desperate tears pricked at the lining of her eyes. "How could you even humor that dumb idea? If I really wanted to kill you or Matt, don't you think I'd have done it the old-fashioned way a long time ago? You boys are all I have now."

Matt rolled his eyes, feeling himself turn nauseous towards her melodrama. "She's right, Mello. Blogger came on this station just a couple hours ago. Near must have put her up to it. I don't think he'd have done it if he didn't think it'd evoke a reaction from Takada or her lackey. He might've already figured out who it is and what they're all about."

"Shit," hissed Mello.

"It's not like anything major would change," Misa pleaded, pressing herself onto him again. She slid her hands down and slipped one under his vest to stroke his chest and his ego. "If you gave me the Eyes and then went ahead with the rest of the plan, we can all still get what we want. Let them get the notebook. We can take that from them too!"

Mello took another bite of chocolate after maneuvering the bar around Misa's body and was silent for a long tense moment, processing everything he'd just learned. Everyone but Lumen waited on him with bated breath.

Finally he wrapped an arm around her waist and smirked. "I hope you realize that if I give you what you want, I won't be able to leave you alone with the notebook. I don't think I need to remind you about what you'd be giving up as far as life goes—"
"Oh Mello, I've never cared about that. The sooner I can die, the better."

"And we won't exactly be able to fuck anymore, either."

The subtle friction building up between their loins became more than Misa could bear, or bear to miss out on. "Wh-what, because you won't want me to see your face? We don't have to stop what we have just for that! I thought you were creative! You can just blindfold me!"

Like L did when he had me in jail.

Those fifty days in that dark cold cell were another point in her life that she preferred not to talk or even think about, but sometimes they would surface in the forefront of her memory at the most inopportune moments like most bad memories do. The first three days were the worst, when she was tantalized by the scent of food and the splash of water up against her lips that she was denied to lick up. The torture stopped after that and gradually L eased up on her. He continued to ask his questions but he gave her more time to move around, nap, eat and use the toilet, but she wouldn't see actual daylight again nor talk or see other people until Light's father had drove them out to the middle of nowhere to pretend to threaten their lives.

On more than one occasion she may have rubbed up against the leather strap that bound her to that board, particularly where it folded over between her legs. With her arms wrapped tightly around her body, she thought of Light every time. Her movements were obviously restricted and it would end up hurting her more than feeling good, but sometimes if she was restless enough and concentrated hard enough she could stimulate herself to the point of climax. It made for another excuse to sleep or be brought down to be cleaned up.

Disgusting? Yes, absolutely. But she had to do something to keep her sanity…or what sliver of sanity she had going into this mess. Misa had always been a sensual person by nature, for better or worse. And besides after she'd lost her memories the first time she had been under the impression that L was another crazy stalker who had kidnapped her for this very purpose. What choice had she but to comply with his unspoken demands?

What L had thought about seeing her that way would remain a mystery. He'd never said a word, neither encouraging nor stopping her. Had he enjoyed it? Had he gotten off on watching her suffer? Quite likely. And why not? She was a criminal. She'd given up her rights the moment she became one.

Yet even after all that Misa somehow still thought it a good idea to pair a girl like Erin with that pervert, creep, scumbag, freak, what have you. To be fair, Misa had thought at the time that "Ryuzaki" was someone who worked for L rather than L himself (although she might have had a few suspicions along the way). Still, no excuse there. Not anymore.

"Are you still high? Think about what you're asking for, Misa," chided Mello, bringing her back to the matter at hand.

Her response was automatic: "I don't have to. It's 100 percent what I want to do. Hold on to the notebook if you want but let me have the Shinigami Eyes. The next phase can go more or less as you planned. Come on, Mello, you must know deep down that Takada was never that useful to us. It's the end of the road for her. Let's cut her loose, like I've always said. Near will never ever see this coming."
"Tch. Fine, whatever. You'd better not be fucking me."

Pleased with his blessing, her tone became low and sultry. "Only in the ways you want, Mello-yellow." She descended upon him with sloppy kisses and caresses of approval and reignited desire. "Thanks baby, you're the greatest."

Mello cut her off after a minute of petting, their hair mussed from having combed each other's fingers through it. "If you don't mind my asking, why do you care that much about Blogger?"

For the same reason she'd cared about Light, or Light and L cared about one another. The same reason she was drawn to Mello in the first place. She was a narcissist. God, she might just be falling in love all over again.

"I need someone who will look after Kimi when I'm gone. I don't trust anyone else to do that but her." That wasn't necessarily a lie, more like a half-truth.

"Lumen, is there any chance Takada's shinigami will put up any resistance or help her out?"

"Nah. If he ain't done anything to help her before, he won't start now. He's probably just around for the ride."

Shinigami, generally speaking, saw humans in the light that humans saw lesser animals and sometimes each other: as a source of food and amusement.

... Matt had warned Mello not to trust Misa, and as such was surprised at how she'd chosen to be so upfront to him about her wishes. He'd half-expected her to sneak around and force him to give her ownership by threatening to tell the rest of the guys his secret, or something like that.

What could she be up to?

Moreover, why did it feel as if Misa was more in on Mello's schemes than he was? Matt had known the guy since they were kids; she'd only known him for less than a year. He'd been his yes-man far longer than she. What made her so damn special? Just because she was his personal sex pet and fangirl? Or was it simply that she matched him in madness? His was more of a quiet, unassuming sort to complement Mello's volatile, voracious kind.

As usual, he spoke only when spoken to, bottling the rest of his feelings. While he watched and listened to them try to shove their tongues down each other's throats, Matt's fingers twitched and shook and twitched some more. Except this time he didn't know what they craved: to light some cigarettes, or to light them and then crush them out in his own eyes. For some reason Misa felt it necessary to crank up the PDA in front of company, especially him. Rub just how much he was missing in his face.

Suppose this was his punishment?

... With all of today's dealings concluded, Lumen found himself alone with Misa again. After what'd happened the last time he naturally put up his guard. He had been thumbing through the notebook admiring how many names Mello had written in it when she approached him.

"Hey, Lu-Lu. Look, I'm sorry about earlier. For what it's worth, I didn't really like the kiss either," she confessed, peering up at him through her bangs like a contrite child. Or at least a child who
pretended to be contrite in hopes of charming her way out of being disciplined.

Lumen made a gagging noise at her. "What'd ya do it for then?"

She twirled one of her pigtails around her finger, glancing down at her stockings. "Now that I think about it, I'm not entirely sure. I guess I was just testing something."

"Testing what?"

"Whether I could make you fall in love with me. I've had a shinigami fall for me before, maybe more."

"HA! Those other guys musta been idiots, hardly fit to be shinigami. Sorry Misa, but you ain't getting any from me."

"Yeah. I know."

...

"So what d'ya want this time?"

"Me? Oh, I just wanted to tell you thanks for giving me the Eyes. But..."

"Buuuut?"

Misa suddenly looked him square in the eyes, a sad determination darkening them that Lumen had not seen before. "Don't think that just because I've given up half of my lifespan to you again means that I'm still beholden to you."

Lumen scratched his head, half confused and half amused. "Again? What d'ya mean, again?"

"Never you mind. I want to make another deal with you."

"Oh yeah? What, for wings? 'Cause that doesn't exist that I'm aware of." Lumen sat on top of Misa's vanity, making sure to knock over most of the trinkets and cosmetics to the floor by stretching his limbs. She seemed to ignore that for the moment.

"No. I know that when you partner up with a shinigami, the shinigami kills you when you've met your end. When you die. But anything can happen to a Death Note owner before then, right?"

"Phft. Yeah, I guess. The owner of a Death Note can't be killed by other shinigami except the one who possesses him. Otherwise, he's fair game. What're you getting at?"

Misa looked to the left, the right, and the left again. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Depends on what it is." Lumen liked Mello, but that didn't mean he had to be completely loyal to him like Door-Matt. Great name that guy picked for himself, it suited him perfectly. He was born to be walked all over on by everyone.

She tiptoed up to him and with a hand shielding the side of her mouth, whispered, "I'm planning to turn someone into a killer, just like me and you. If I can do that, then you have to let me die on my own terms. If I fail, you can kill me yourself."

The idea was so out of the blue that Lumen didn't answer for a beat. But upon remembering her crying to Mello earlier, it didn't take long to come up with a guess as to who she was talking about. So that's why she'd wanted to save that human's life.
He lowered his voice in kind, excitement coursing through him not unlike the kind he'd felt when he'd met Ryuk. "Oh? Who, that Blogger girl?"

He interpreted her silence as an affirmative. My oh my, what depths of cruelty was this tiny woman capable of?

Lumen didn't bother to ask why. He didn't care for the why. Only the how. He reached back to clutch the handle of his weapon. "And how are you going to do that?"

"Trust me, I'll do it. Just watch and be patient. You've already given me a great start by giving me the Eyes. It won't affect Mello's plans, I promise."

Lumen chortled. "Awright, it's a deal."

Misa clapped her hands in delight. "Oh Lumen, I could kiss you again! But you wouldn't like that, would you?"

"Yeah, no. Keep that crap far away from me."

She looked remarkably dejected for a second, but then she promptly switched back to a smile. "Then I'll just give you this back," she said, handing to him a rolled-up scrap from out of the notebook. Lumen didn't have to unravel it to know whose name, or names she'd just written on it. His only thought on the matter was, Sucks to be them.

It did, however, give him another fun idea. He had to do something to keep himself entertained while waiting on Mello, and now Misa, to make their next moves. …

Ra-ta-tap.

Unaware of Sidoh timidly trailing along behind her, Kiyomi put down her cup of tea and got up to answer the door. Her mind whirred with an inexplicable dread that something terrible was bound to happen. She tried to reason it away, telling herself that she and Teru had all under control as she greeted her visitors.

Her stomach dropped upon seeing two stern-looking men in suits waiting for her. "Good morning," she answered with a polite bow. "May I help you?"

"Kiyomi Takada?"

"Yes, that's me."

The taller of them with the slight goatee pulled out the last thing she'd wanted to see: a badge. "Miss Takada, we're Detective Aizawa and Detective Ide. We're sorry to disturb you but we came to ask you a few questions."

"Oh? What on, Detective?"

"You may have heard from the news about the detonation of the Yellow Box Warehouse at the Daikoku wharf. In fact you may have reported on it yourself. We gathered information that you may have been there that night. May we come in?"

Where on earth could they have gleaned that from? On a normal day Kiyomi would have kept her cool and talked her way out of their suspicions. Surely what "evidence" they had against her was
slim to none.

But instead her sense of dread grew and grew with every second that passed until she could bare it no longer. She could sense the curtain drawing on her. Who was she kidding? Everything she'd done to climb to the top, all her hard work, determination, cunning…it all meant nothing. She was nothing. Not a queen, not a goddess. Nothing. For goodness's sake, she'd had to resort to letting a man rescue her. But even he couldn't save her now.

At this hour, this minute, her mind was no longer her own.

Her motions became robotic, and she held the door open for them. "I understand. Please come in. I can make you tea if you'd like."

The men stepped inside, leaving her behind to shut the door. Detective Ide declined her offer. "No thank you, Miss Takada, we shouldn't be he—hey!"

The door slammed behind them. Aizawa thrust it back open in time to see Takada racing down the corridor, wasting her last breaths and last heartbeats to stumble to the end of the balcony. Her apartment was on the fifth floor. That should be high enough, especially with concrete below her to break her fall.

She climbed over the railing, sparing no rational thought on it. It was over.

"Miss Takada, come back!" shouted Aizawa. It was no use.

By the time he and Ide had stormed up to the railing, she'd already plunged over it, the impact of her fall against the lot squashing the life from her with a gruesome crack, her blood painting the ground like tea from a dropped pot.

Kiyomi Takada, suicide by jumping. She encounters police at her apartment on the morning of September 25th and falls into despair. She runs from them and jumps off the balcony at the end of her floor, landing in the parking lot below. Dies from internal bleeding and a broken neck.

As if Death itself was unsatisfied with this alone in making the former Miss To-Oh an example to all and everyone, the men peered over the railing in sheer ineffable horror as an unaware resident pulled into the driveway and over her body like a speed bump. Another terrible crack resounded, blood, bone and brain matter splattering everywhere like chunks of a watermelon smashed open at a party.

Sidoh squawked in fright, taking off the instant the wheels rolled over her.

Then a car runs over her head.

…

Across town in the business district where he lived, Teru plowed through his daily page, inscribing every name with dangerous precision and leaving even spacing between them. In a matter of days, he had managed to wipe out several Asian and African dictators, the entire Vatican and a number of universities caught up in sex scandals. On top of countless assorted criminals both in and outside prison.

"Delete…delete…delete," he chanted softly like a mantra.

Of course, that hadn't been all he'd done. Using the notes he'd acquired from the coroner and forensic lab (fortunately he hadn't had to kill anyone to get those; actually asking for the
information was almost too easy), he had narrowed down the man who had blown up the warehouse to a middle-aged Caucasian male. "Kal Snydar." A criminal from America.

From there, he had gotten a number of files from the FBI (he may have killed one or two people to do that), and was currently browsing through the list of criminals suspected to have affiliations with the mafia and other prominent gangs. Using his Shinigami Eyes, he confirmed that Kal Snydar was in fact dead with the lack of a name or numbers in his mugshot and went to work on plucking the life from each individual, one by one. One of them had to be M. Not a particularly effective method, but at least he could clean up the streets. For a moment he felt more powerful than the Yakuza, who he set his sights on next.

He didn't finish the first 24 profiles when Umbra called for his attention. "Teru, do you recall when we'd talked about Wammy's House?" The shinigami had to admit that this human's stamina was impressive. What a shame.

"Yes."

Umbra nodded to his computer. "I believe they have just released the details you are seeking. The broadcast is all over the Internet."

Teru, eager to delete the no doubt guilty parties off the face of the earth, put down his pen and opened a new tab. Umbra gave him the name of the station and his search was brief. He clicked on the first link he saw.

He said nothing for the duration of the video, his stony expression unaffected by Erin's increasingly distressed demeanor. One would not have known it to look at Umbra's face but something inside him was stretching to its limits like a rubber band ready to snap. Totally new to it, he didn't like the feeling at all. From behind Teru he held up a paw out to her image, cupping her face between a thumb and pointer finger. He wanted to reach into the screen and pull her out, cradle her in all six of his arms.

"Look, I'll say this: the world is in big trouble. And maybe...maybe it'll never completely get better. Crime and corruption...is never going away. It's just gonna get smarter and less hands-on; take cyber-hacking, for instance. Not a lot of those guys get caught. But killing each other is not the answer. Kira is not the answer. If we want any kind of change to happen, we have to make it happen. Together. We have the power to get governments, schools and churches to wise up if we just do it. Not violently, but calmly, intelligently and peacefully. We're better than Kira thinks we are. Let's show him. I have faith that Winchester's bureau will uncover the truth in due time. Please, protect Wammy's House."

His poor, brave Erin. The knowledge of her immunity didn't placate him as much as it should and he couldn't explain why.

Would Teru dare?

He picked up his pen seconds after the video ended. "What are you going to do?" Umbra asked, secretly challenging him.

"She's wrong, and she's lying. If she was set up specifically to provoke a reaction from Kira, it won't work," he stated, remembering well the stunt L had pulled to pinpoint Kira's location all those years ago. Umbra couldn't recall Teru sounding nearly as cold as he did then. "I can safely assume that she's not on the air right now, so if I kill her, whoever put her up to it will not find us."

"Are you sure about that?" said Umbra, his own voice dropping in volume. "It seems to me that
she's committed no crimes."

"Lacking a record doesn't mean you are not a criminal. She can't recant her own story and not expect comeuppance for it."

"What if she didn't do it voluntarily? She may very well be a victim in all of this. I would think that you would understand that very well."

"Irrelevant. This world has no place for liars and cowards." Umbra could tell that his comment must have pierced him a bit by the twitch in the corner of his eye. But not enough, it seemed.

Umbra stood back and let Teru jot down the name they both saw over the girl's head. "I'm curious, Teru: when did you stop caring about the victims? Is it because it's not your job as a prosecutor to care for them?" he murmured darkly. "You shouldn't have done that."

Teru didn't answer him, either not hearing him or not caring what he said. He dove back into his work like nothing had happened, back on his warpath.

Sidoh phased down from the ceiling then behind Umbra, jittering all over. "Umbra, Umbra! Y-you won't believe what's just happened! Kiyomi, sh-she's dead! Sh-she's dead! She's deader than dead! H'oh, it was awful!"

Umbra whirled around to take in the traumatized sight of him. "Huh? What did you do?"

"Nothing! I-I-I didn't do anything, I swear!" he stammered, chewing on the ends of his claws. "She went all crazy a-and jumped over the balcony, and then her head exploded—"

"Delete…delete…delete…del—ack! Guh-uhhh…"

Thump!

The pen rolled out of his loosened hand, the lone page landing next to his head. He used the last of his strength to pull it over his chest, crumbling it in his spasming grip.

Able to do nothing about it, Umbra and Sidoh watched him convulse for several seconds until he fell still, his frightened, bulging, bloodshot eyes burning holes into the roof above him. Begging to his god to help him when words failed him.

His name and lifespan vanished, extinguished from their sight like a candle flame blown out by someone who had grown bored of it.

"Oh dear. This was unexpected."

THUMPTHUMPTHUMP!

"Hm. Sidoh, it sounds like the company we have been expecting is here. Could you go and get the door, please?"

He wasn't granted enough time to ask himself what was happening, to let it sink in that the reign of Kira was ending once again and that he had failed her miserably. That he would never see, hear or touch her again and instead exit life as the very kind of person he despised.

A bully.

In this light, perhaps Teru Mikami's swift and sudden end was in fact an act of mercy?
Friend

Needless to say, Mogi and Matsuda were shocked to see Mikami's door swing open in greeting when the former was preparing to bust it down. But this became the bottom of their concerns as they hurried inside to find Mikami sprawled out on the floor at his desk, a balled-up sheet of paper clutched loosely to his chest.

A coverless black notebook had inexplicably materialized over his face. Wedy had said nothing about it before.

Though they both already suspected they wouldn't find one, Mogi crouched down next to the fresh corpse and took his left lean wrist into his giant hand to check for a pulse. His face hardened that much more. "He's dead," he announced, his deep voice soft with astonishment.

"Oh my God," breathed Matsuda, clutching his own chest in dismay. "B-but how? Do you think he wrote his own name in the Death Note? Or did Takada…?"

Unlikely, but the page and book sat right there for them to take all the same. The pair exchanged glances, mutely cautioning one another to keep up their guard and brace themselves for what was bound to happen next once they touched it.

Gulping, Matsuda mustered the courage to pick up the book and pry the page from Mikami's lax grip and unfurl it. He had to turn and face the wall as he did so to avoid the haunting twisted look of the bespectacled dead man's face. It swelled with (self-) righteous fury, as if to the bitter end he still strived to take as many evildoers as he could with him.

Perhaps it was unsurprising that they should find only this single page filled, the rest of the pages presumably destroyed by Mikami when he finished them. Something, or someone must have pulled out the notebook specifically for them to recover. The fourth to last name struck him the most. He recognized that name.

Erin Blogger.

"Oh no…"

"What is it?"

"M-Mogi, we're too late. Mikami, that bastard…he managed to write Erin's name before he died." Matsuda's eyes strung from the hot tears welling up in them. Why couldn't Mikami have dropped dead sooner? A savage thought, yes, but Erin had done nothing wrong. And now the girl he'd come to see as the baby sister he never had was gone.

Who was more deserving of his rage: Mikami, or the current L for making her go on TV in the first place?

Before he could come up with an answer to this question, though, a low breathy voice interrupted him: "Don't worry, she is very much alive."

Matsuda nearly jumped out of his skin. First he stared incredulously at Mogi, who went to take the wrinkled page from his shaking hands so as to hear the voice for himself.

"Although I'm afraid I can no longer say the same about Teru there. I removed the notebook from his safety deposit box in anticipation for your visit."
Sure enough they found the source of the voice peering out at them from around the corner: a tall, willowy black and white beast with blank, beady eyes accentuated by shadows underneath them, not unlike the bruises sported by an insomniac. His mouths were hidden under grey rags and his angular, bony head framed by thick, wild yet lackluster black hair.

One would think that after seeing two examples of shinigami previously, Mogi and Matsuda would be ready for a third one. This was not the case for Matsuda, who tried to bite down a scream as he left the page and notebook to Mogi and scooted away on his bottom. His back and head slammed against the corner of the desk, causing white-hot pain to shoot up his spine along with the shivers delivered by the scare.

The monster tilted his head. "You're Erin's friends. Therefore you are my friends too. Nice to officially make your acquaintance. I'm Umbra."

So this was the shinigami L was talking about.

Jesus, was it just Matsuda or did these shinigami keep getting scarier and scarier in appearance?

He shook his head. "Hey! You're the guy who took my phone, aren't you? Give it back! P-please…"

Umbra got down on the floor and approached the pair like a giant cat. If a cat had eight limbs instead of just four. And similar to a cat spitting up a hairball, he spat up the bright orange phone into one of his front paws, then tossed it to him. Matsuda exchanged another more terrified glance at Mogi, who now had one hand over his holster and his lips pursed tighter than usual. They had learned from experience that one could not physically harm a shinigami, never mind with guns, but such was his instinct and that of any officer confronted by a potentially dangerous situation.

"Go on," Umbra coaxed with a nod. "Call her."

Not taking his eyes off the creature (as much as he'd preferred to), Matsuda reached over to scoop up the phone, trembling every second of the way. "Erm, if you don't mind us asking, did you kill Teru Mikami?" Mogi asked.

Umbra shook his head. "I did not, nor do I know who did. Then again, humans are so very fragile, aren't they? It doesn't take much to kill one."

Mogi and Matsuda tried to brush off that comment. While Matsuda fumbled with his contact list, Mogi pressed, "Can you at least tell us how you know that she's alive?"

"In due time."

Not knowing how to pull the answer from Umbra, Mogi dropped his questioning for now. Meanwhile a man's smooth voice came on the line rather than Erin's: "Hello?"

This caused Matsuda to jump in his seat, partly fearful and partly furious. "Uh, who's this? Who are you and what have you done with Erin?"

"What? Oh, my apologies. You're Detective Matsuda, right? Call me Gevanni. I'm one of the agents working under L. Erin's taking a nap."

"A nap? You mean an actual nap or—is she alive or isn't she, Giovanni or whatever?" demanded Matsuda, rubbing the tears from one eye before they fell.

"Um…the last time I checked, she was fine. Do you need to speak to her? Hold on, I'll go get
her…"

Noticing the exhaustion washing out her face, Stephen had insisted that Erin go take that nap after all. He would wake her the minute something important came up. She hadn't thought it right that she sleep while everyone else was just as tired as her and yet they had to stay up.

Then she decided maybe it was best that she stayed out of everyone's way. Unlike Anthony, Halle or Stephen, she had no more use at the moment.

Erin had just about passed out the instant her head hit the pillow. Sometime after, she saw L again in another dream. Sometimes he'd talk to her and sometimes he was stone silent. When he did talk, she reckoned it was her mind's way of attempting to create closure where there had been very little if any, combining memory with blind speculation.

This time the two were sitting in a café not unlike the one where they'd first met. Just them. No Light, no Misa, no Matsuda, no Watari or Takada or Kyoko or Yuki, no one. Two cups of tea and two slices of cake sat between them but neither touched their food.

"Hey, so how come you're always stooped over?"

"Because I always have a hunch," he answered flatly.

This was an actual exchange that had occurred between them early into her stay. Not here in this café but at one of the hotels they'd stayed at. Not that she'd appreciated it nearly as much as she did now but L did have a sense of humor, if a dry and peculiar one that somehow managed to surprise her whenever he whipped it out. Her response to the corny pun was to lightly push his head back with the heel of her hand, laughing in spite of herself.

Could you count it as palling around or flirting? Well, it'd been some kind of bonding experience, one of many little and unlikely ones.

But as happened in most of these dreams, things soon became serious. "Why does Mello hate you so much? What did you do to him?"

L never took his eyes off her. He didn't even blink. One didn't need such a function when he was a figment from someone's memories. "Nothing. That was the problem. You could say that I… neglected him. I led him on and ignored him more than I should have. And then I left him when he needed me."

"You didn't try to make peace with him before you died?"

"No. I was…afraid to. That's no excuse, I know, but I was afraid. Much like you are. And I was being selfish. I'm sorry I've left you to clean up a mess that isn't yours. I suppose even I can't predict everything." Only in her dreams could L ever be this open.

She folded her arms. "Huh. Ain't that the truth?"

Then L surprised her once more. Slowly he unfurled himself out of his crouch and hopped out of his seat. He shuffled around the table and awkwardly looped his long arms around her neck. They touched foreheads, except here in dreams his hair didn't irritate her skin as it would have in real life. It felt like cool mink fur.

"You know I'm not a good person. I never was. But please believe me when I say be safe. You are
more important than you realize. I didn't give up my life for nothing."

"Y—yeah. I know." She locked eyes with him, enchanted by the fluid warmth flickering in his that had been locked deep inside when he was alive. Erin unfolded her arms to hug him back, slipping her arms under his and resting her hands on his crooked back.

L loll'd his head to nest it against her temple, his chest compressing hers as he breathed deeply. When did he become so warm? He melted her like butter.

"I…did love you a tiny bit. And I loved Watari, and Mello and Near. I've no right to ask this of you but please, if you can, let them know for me?"

Erin didn't ask what kind of love he'd meant. Strangely now it seemed unimportant. She just regretted that there weren't more moments like these when he was alive and it would have counted. In this same vein, she saw no reason he would lie to her. What did have to gain from it as a dead man?

"You know I will, and I love you too. I don't know how the hell that happened and honestly sometimes I wish I didn't, but I do. I still do. You're tied to me like the seams in my hat."

She felt his rare little smile brush her cheek. "Likewise, Erin…Erin…Erin…"

"Hey. Pssst. Erin," a new voice whispered softly into her ear, gently shaking her away from L, from the café, from everything. In a blink she came face to face with Stephen, his brow knitted with concern.

A loud, snorting, unattractive moan escaped her throat. "Stephen?" she called out groggily.

"Your one and only. I'm sorry to wake you up but Matsuda's on the phone. He sounds pretty upset."

"Wh-wha—oh God, what's happened now?" She waved him back. "Okay, okay, stall for me. Gather everyone around." Knowing Near, he'd want to listen in on everything.

"Will do."

After two minutes of stretching her body and wiping the sleep from her eyes, she stumbled out into the suite where everyone was gathered around on the sofa and armchairs. As always, Near's computer sat in the center on the coffee table. Erin plopped down between Halle and Stephen and took her phone from the latter. "It's on speaker," he assured her. "Just hold it up so we can all hear."

"Uh-huh." That was all Erin could manage. The more awake she became, the more tightly her stomach seemed to coil and wrap around her like an ill-fitted corset. Something terrible had happened, she could feel it in the air. Judging by the looks on everyone's faces (sans Near), they could all feel it too. "H'llo?"

"Erin? Ah thank God, you're okay!"

"Matsu? Y-yeah, I'm okay. Never mind me. Are you?"

"No way…but…I don't understand…how are you still alive?"

"Still alive? Man, what're you talking about, what happened?"

"Erin…Mikami, he's dead."

If she hadn't been wide awake before, this jolted her to full agonizing consciousness. "What? Since
when? How the hell did he—"

"W-we don't know! We caught him with a page of the notebook and he just dropped dead before
we could get to him. But there's something else…"

"What, what is it? Don't keep me in suspense!"

"He…he wrote your name on the page before he died. We started seeing and hearing the shinigami
after we touched it so it's gotta be the real thing…"

This news stunned Erin and company into temporary silence. So he was crazy enough to do it after
all. She was a dead woman, just like that? She hadn't even gotten the chance to say goodbye to her
family or make peace with Stephen—

"So…how long ago did he write it?" she asked, surprising herself at how calm her question
sounded. Was Near right about that secret death wish? Or had she simply accepted dying if that
was what it took to make things right?

"Well, it—it's been at least five minutes. Maybe more. He didn't write a specific cause of death,
just your name. That's what's so weird. You should've died of a heart attack 40 seconds after he did
it."

Erin nearly dropped the phone upon hearing this. Her brain felt ready to explode. Around her the
task force gasped, communicating their shock loud and clear. "Matsu, are—are you sure he didn't
like, spell it wrong or something?"

"No, I checked. Your name is spelled correctly. We think Mikami had the Shinigami Eyes so
there's no way he could have misspelled it."

Was nothing true anymore? "My, how interesting," commented Near. "It would seem that based on
what Mr. Matsuda has told us, Ms. Blogger is somehow immune to the Death Note."

Me, immune? Since when?

The side of her face burned from holding her phone up to it for so long, among other things.
Perhaps she was coming down with brain cancer? That might explain why she felt herself going
loopy. "Did…you get a chance to talk to Umbra?"

"Yeah. That's what the shinigami calls himself. Oh, hang on…what'd he say, Mogi? Oh. I'll tell her.
Umbra was nice enough to fetch the notebook for us, but he says he won't do or say anything else
until we pass it on to you."

Suddenly Erin thought she could hear a buzzing noise in the background, probably Mogi's phone.
"Sorry Erin, Aizawa's calling. I'll get back to you as soon as he catches us up on what's what. He
and Ide went out to get Takada."

Could this day possibly get any worse?

A word of advice: never ask yourself if your day can get worse. It unequivocally can, and
somehow when you do ask, it often does.

When Matsuda came back on the line his tone's decrease in pitch was inversely proportional to his
mounting anxiety. "Erin, I know you might not want to hear this but…Takada's dead, too."
"She drop dead of a heart attack, too?" she half-whispered, this news knocking what wind out of her that the first bit of news hadn't already.

As though wanting to spare her the gory details whilst answering her question, he said, "Sh-she jumped off the balcony in front of her apartment, and then a car ran over her."

Damn it. Why did the universe not listen when she said she'd wanted no more people to die? Umbra couldn't have killed them or else he would've turned into a pile of dust and sand. Even if he could and wanted to, why would he go out of his way to give Takada such a humiliating death that could make The Hills Have Eyes™ look tame?

Misa.

It had to be her. Somehow she must have saw her broadcast and found out that Takada and Mikami were using Umbra's notebook. Then she must have schmoozed up to Mello enough that he let her use his notebook. It was no secret that Misa hated Light's ex-girlfriend long before all this happened.

Misa had killed them for her. She'd saved her just as she had when Ratt had wiped out most of the task force. Was she trying to tell her something, and if so, what? Whatever the blood-splattered message was, Erin wasn't sure she wanted to hear it. It didn't matter if Kiyomi Takada and Teru Mikami were merciless killers who'd tried to put a hit on her. Or at least, it didn't take any noticeable weight off of this revelation.

Two more people are dead because of Misa.

They're dead because of me.

The task forces eventually got together and arranged for Wedy to fly over with the notebook to Los Angeles on one of L's private jets. Public air travel was deemed too dangerous since they'd caught a glimpse of how much influence Mello's gang wielded.

Erin of course would be accompanied by one of the agents while collecting it from her. She chose Stephen to go with her. It could be the only time for a while when she could be alone with him to talk about their relationship.

In the meantime, she mustered the nerve to call up Farley and ask how everyone was before she went to meet Wedy. Fortunately he sounded much better than he had the last time they'd spoken, having begun the road to recovery from the end of his relationship with Penny. As such, he and Mom had started to make up as well. In other news he was absolutely enjoying the new academic year so far at his fabulous new job at a new school, teaching PE to middle school kids (Erin noted the sarcasm lacing his voice as he relayed tales of breaking up fights and enduring a series of pranks, as per the tradition of initiating fresh meat).

"Well Farl, you made it through middle school once. I'm sure you can do it again."

"So how come we ain't heard from you lately? What have you been up to? Mom's super-worried about you, and when she's worried we all have to be."

Erin tugged at the collar of her blouse. Of course he would ask that. "Uhm, well, I…I landed a new job. I'm not entirely sure how I did it but here we are."
"Aw, you can be a real charmer when you want to be, sis."

"The pay's great and I'll get to travel the world but it's a lot more demanding. Yep, I'm getting into some pretty big stuff," she said lamely while trying to spin it as something fun and exciting.

"Wow, really? That's great, sissy! Little Miss Secret Agent or something like that? 'Cause Mom seems to still be under the impression you're fucking with some rich married guy."

She gulped. "Oh please! Just 'cause Mom did it when she was young and dumb doesn't mean I'm gonna. Anyway, that's what I've been up to. I'm sorry but I'm not at liberty to talk about much more than that. Not unless my boss gives the OK."

"M'kay. I get it. You could tell me but then you'd have to kill me." Erin balked on her end at the word "kill." What'd he have to go and say that for?

"So, you got any idea when you'll be coming back to see us? I mean not now obviously but like in the future. I miss having you to pick on."

The way things are going, I may never see you again.

D'oh, stop it! You don't know that. You will see your yahoo family again. Not now and maybe not anytime soon, but someday. I think you can hold on for that long.

"Uh…I dunno. Thanksgiving? Christmas? Sometime in between? I'll get back to you." An irrational fear began festering in the darkest corner of her mind that even if she could come back to them, they'd end up dead before she had to leave again. Suppose she did accept Near's offer. Would this fear become her daily reality?

Erin always did have a penchant for getting on people's nerves. Nothing made this clearer than her past two or three brushes with death at the hands of lunatics. In her own little annoying way, she could be dangerous to herself and people around her.

She didn't want to be. Couldn't we all just get along? Life is hard enough without all the fighting and killing and hurting each other.

"Sis? Sis, you still there?"

"Y-yeah."

"What's the matter? Are you crying?"

Crap. She shouldn't have called him so soon with all her emotions out of whack. She held back a sniff and said, "I'm fine. It's nothing. Why're you even surprised? You know I've always been a crybaby. I-I gotta go, bro. Got articles to write, errands to run."

In case I don't get another chance to say it…

"I love you, Farley. And I love Mom and Dad. W-with all my heart. Pass it on, will ya?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. We love you too, Erin. See you around."

"Yeah, you too."

Click.

Erin wanted to curl up against the wall and bawl into her knees, but with Anthony and Halle
watching her that was far from feasible. Instead, she crammed her phone into her pocket, tipped her hat to them and tried to keep her head up as she ambled to the door where Stephen waited for her. Always a gentleman and friend, he offered her a package of tissues to dry her eyes and wipe her nose on the way out, refraining from drawing attention to her tears with words.

On the ride over to the airport, they spent the first few minutes in awkward silence. Erin stared out the tinted window from her seat in the passenger's side, churning her brain for the right words to use to tell him the things on her mind.

At their first red light, Erin sighed and fixed her gaze straight ahead into the windshield as he did. "So, uh, Stephen. Since we're here, there's...something I've been meaning to talk to you about. Before you ask, no, I don't know how or why I'm suddenly immune to killer notebooks. Umbra might know so I'll wait until we see him to ask."

"Yeah?"

She clasped her hands together and took another deep breath. "I—I don't know if we should see each other anymore."

...

"Okay."

"No wait, hear me out! Damn it, I spend days practicing this and it still comes out wrong." She cleared her throat. "Look, Stephen. It's not that I don't like you. I do. I like you a lot. And I hope one day we can give actual dating a try. It's just that—just that I don't think now is a good time to pursue anything more than what we've got right now. Lately I can't even see past the next day. I keep thinking th-that the world's gonna end or something. Wh-what I'm trying to say is, my mind's not in the right place for dating. Right now. I'm sorry if I've been stringing you along, Stephen. I swear to Christ I didn't mean to."

She waited with blanched knuckles for his response. Just as the light turned green and his foot stepped on the accelerator, he gave it, kind and mild: "I get it. This whole thing with Misa and M's been really getting to you. I completely respect that. And don't worry, I didn't think you were leading me on at all. I was just waiting for you to say how you feel. I knew you would eventually."

Erin almost choked on her own spit. "What're you, psychic or something?"

Stephen chuckled. "I wish. No, I just have a good eye, and ear. It's kind of required to have the kind of job I do. It helps a lot in relationships, too."

"Y-you're not just saying that so I don't feel bad?"

"I promise I'm not. To be honest, I think putting...this, us, off is the best thing to do too. Wait until things have calmed down and we're sure the world's not going to explode."

Unfortunately, these days even without all this Death Note nonsense it did seem like the world could blow up at any time. Nevertheless, Erin managed a titter that she hoped Stephen wouldn't pick up as fake (or if he did, that he wouldn't say anything about it). "Yeah. Oh, but listen. If between now and whenever...you find someone else that interests you and makes you happy...I-I just want you to know that I'm okay with that. It's not fair of me to expect you to wait around on me for something that might or might not even happen. No matter what happens, I want us to still be friends at the end."

She got brave enough to sneak a peek at him in her periphery and was filled with soothing (if
momentary) relief to see that calm, handsome smile on his face. "Well for what it's worth, I wish you the same."

Jesus Christ. Even if they didn't end up together, Erin thought for a moment that she and Stephen could very well be soulmates. If indeed such things existed. Or perhaps like many concepts yet unproven by science (and really, how reliable was even science after all?), soulmates existed because people said they do.

When they stopped at another red light, Stephen looked her over. "Hm? Now what's wrong?" he asked, referring to her fidgeting.

"What? Oh, it's just…"

Should I tell him about L? What if it's too soon? Should he know about him now that we've put off dating?

"Well, now that I've told you how I feel I don't know what to do. I want to kiss you but I can't. At the same time a handshake seems too, y'know, impersonal—"

"We can meet in the middle."

Harking back to their first "date," Stephen smacked his lips against his free palm and then offered it to her. Realizing what he was doing, Erin's face broke out into a foolish blushing grin as she did the same.

After they shook kissed hands Erin blurted, "Can we hug on it, too?"

"Sure. But we'd better hurry before the light turns green."

Hastily Erin unbuckled her seat belt so she could scoot over to Stephen and wrap her arms around his chest. He responded in kind by reaching around to rub her back while keeping his other hand on the steering wheel.

"Thanks, Steve."

"No problem."

He affectionately bumped his head on top of hers. He felt so warm and he smelled so nice that Erin wanted to bask in him forever and forget everything else. The words "I love you" dangled on the tip of her tongue, but in a rare show of restraint she swallowed them back down. Best not to drop the L-bomb so soon, especially after the agreement they'd just made. For now this gesture should suffice for showing him how much she appreciated and cared for him.

The traffic light flashing green in contrast to the dusky skyline cut them off.

…

As they traveled to the terminal Erin was hit with the temptation to hold Stephen's hand again. Afraid that it would send him mixed messages, she stared at it as they walked. Why did social norms have to be so restrictive? Friends could hold hands, right? Did it really matter if they happened to be a man and a woman? Stephen might have noticed if she stared at his hand for too long, so she alternated between it and her sneaker-clad feet slapping on the linoleum.

Meanwhile she distracted herself by going over what to expect once they saw Wedy. She would finally meet the infamous Umbra, and accordingly she readied herself for his no doubt grotesque
appearance. Besides that, what was he like? One could not glean someone's full personality from their texts alone. How would he react to her? Was he violent? Would he kill her and Stephen and Wedy? No, he would've done that a long time ago if he wanted to. Right? Who knew what strange, ghastly things raced through shinigami minds?

But then, were human minds always that much better?

Stephen must have lied about not being psychic, because he reached out to grab her left hand to prevent her from tripping over herself in her excitement. Even after she recovered her footing, he didn't let her go. If anything, his hand squeezed hers tighter. They exchanged long glances, and he nodded at her. She could hold on to him for the rest of the way. Her purse dangled in the crook of her right arm, a bag of cookies and bottle of milk jostling around with the rest of her belongings. Chocolate double chocolate chip and chocolate milk. Umbra had requested the chocolateiest cookies she could get.

Well, I can at least assume the fella's a chocoholic.

Like Mello.

Erin's smile felt more painful than it should have, cracking her face open like a not completely healed cut after pulling off the scab. She wanted to throw up again. Not now, Erin. Get it together, woman! Be cool. Shinigami react to fear, probably.

On second thought, she'd made it no secret of being scared of Rem but the late shinigami woman hadn't reacted at all to her.

All extraneous thoughts flew away the instant Wedy's glamorous persona popped up in her field of vision. The woman in question of course wore her shades, wore her blonde hair up in a beehive, and showed off her enviable curves in tight leather pants and an orange, shoulder-less turtleneck top with a black stripe running up her torso. Her intimidating black stilettos clattered along the floor. In one hand she carried a Louie Vuitton™ olive-colored handbag. In her other hand, she dragged along an expensive-looking steel suitcase.

Having long since gotten over her anger at Wedy for lying, Erin let go of Stephen and charged to her (relatively speaking) old friend. Seeing her coming from a mile away, Wedy stopped in her tracks and braced herself. She figured it better to accept Erin's enthusiastic greeting rather than fight her off.

"Thank God you're okay!" cried Erin, holding her tightly as she tucked her head into Wedy's shoulder. She got so caught up that she half-attempted to pick her up and twirl Wedy in a circle. Wedy drew the line at this and planted her feet, grabbing Erin to stop her.

"Yeah, thanks, you too," Wedy grunted coolly.

"D-did you enjoy your flight?" asked Erin, pulling away while Stephen caught up to them both.

"Sure. Champagne, caviar, classical music, nothing to complain about. Stephen Gevanni?" Wedy locked eyes with Stephen, who offered his hand (the one he hadn't kissed) for a shake.

"Yes, ma'am. I work under L. I'm just here to ensure nothing crazy happens."

"Why thank you, but I can take care of myself well enough. I'm not so sure about Blogger here, though…"

"Hey!"
Before Erin could protest further—not that she had a strong case for herself to contest Wedy's insult—the older woman stretched an arm over her head and yawned. "All right, let's get this over with. My feet are killing me…"

"That tends to happen when you wear heels all day," shot Erin. She was ignored.

"…and you-know-who's itching to meet you. He was quiet for most of the flight but when he did talk he mostly asked about you. And a little bit about me."

Perhaps it was only in her mind but suddenly the air around Erin became chilly. She shivered, feeling a pair (possibly more) of invisible eyes on her, intent dubious.

"Welp, there—there's a bathroom over there. If you gotta go, now's a good time. And it should be empty."

The women slipped inside the toilet paper-laden restroom while Stephen stood guard outside the entrance. It was unlikely that an assassin would come at them through the vent with no windows to the outside present. Luckily, almost as if fate itself had staged it (if you believed in fate that is), it was a very rare slow day at the airport and so Wedy and Erin stood face to face in the handicapped stall, alone.

In terms of human presence.

Wedy slipped into her bag, pulled the cover-less notebook out of its plastic zip-loc bag, and held it out to Erin. "He says he wants me to pass on ownership of it. So here goes: I give up the notebook to you."

"Huh? Oh. O…okay." With shaking hands Erin took that wretched book, stepping back to hold it out at arm's length. She could feel its evilness crawling up her arms like cockroaches or slime. Or slimy cockroaches. Otherwise, she noticed nothing different. At first.

She swallowed hard and looked around the stall. "U-Umbra? I've touched the notebook."

A breathy, disembodied, semi-monotonous voice called: "Hi, Erin. Can you hear me?"

"Y—yes. I can hear you. But I can't see you. You hiding? Come on out. I got cookies."

She turned her back to Wedy, who stayed quiet. Scanning all four corners of the stall, she slowly made her way back out to the sinks, the stall door creaking along the way. Her heart seemed to jump up into her throat.

Then she saw him.

At least his head and torso no further than a foot from her face. An angular, tendril-like, black and white creature hung upside down from the ceiling, mangy black hair haloing his corpse-like head but the rest of his face hidden underneath a layer of tattered rags. A pair of small, sunken, blank, baggy eyes stared back at her unblinkingly.

In the position these two were in, one might have looked upon them and thought of Peter Parker™ and Mary Jane Watson™. If Peter was a full-bodied life-devouring monster.

Initially Erin didn't move or make a sound. She would later derive a mite of pride from the fact she hadn't screamed. Not that her throat was open enough to let her if she had a scream to share with the world.
The notebook rattled in her hands but she dared not let go of it. Umbra waited patiently for her reply. Wedy, not so patiently. Erin could tell this from the tapping of her feet echoing behind her. Something about him seemed mysteriously familiar to her. Was it his shape, his voice, his gaze? She was certain she'd never met him before. If she did in fact use his notebook at one time, wouldn't she remember everything she'd done with it? Apart from this vague sense of déjà vu where Umbra was concerned, nothing about killing anyone came to her mind.

Ha. Take that, Near.

So why did she feel drawn to Umbra in this way with that scenario ruled out?

The thought was transient at best. For now.

"Uh…hi. Y-you must be Umbra. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

She tucked the notebook under her left arm and extended her right hand to shake his. "P-put 'er there," she offered, forcing a smile. Every nerve end in her face and elsewhere fired and burned her from the inside out, pouring sweat from every smelly pore she was aware of.

"Are you afraid?" he asked, cocking his head.

Why the hell would I not be, thought Erin, amazingly coherently given the situation, but she said nothing.

"Please don't be afraid. I would never hurt you. I am your friend."

With that, Umbra dropped out of the ceiling, landing on his broad feet like a cat so Erin could get a full look of him. He had to be at least eight feet tall, taller than even Mogi, with six decay-gray arms and long, sharp, black claws on the end of each of them. Around his lower half hung tattered black rags for pants, a thick striped belt suspending it from his narrow waist.

As soon as he landed, he crouched down to make himself smaller. He took her hand in one of his six paws, gingerly cradling it in his long fingers. He eyed her hand in such a way that Erin couldn't tell meant he wanted to eat it. While he didn't eat it, Umbra did make a noise that sounded like sniffing—was he smelling her?—and then held it up to press her knuckles and fingers against the side of his face, by his left eye. His mane tickled like straw, his skin cold and crusty like sand paper. He seemed to sink into her touch like a child with their favorite blanket or stuffed animal.

Erin found the display equal parts creepy and yet weirdly disarming. Oh my God, he's not in love with me, is he? Why else is he acting this way? Why waste his time stalking me, helping me… protecting me?

Could Umbra have the answer as to why Mikami had failed to kill her despite correctly writing her name in the Death Note? From what she'd heard from Aizawa, he had refused to talk until he got to meet her. For whatever reason, he only trusted her.

Funny, Erin could have sworn she heard Wedy humming a tune to herself. It sounded suspiciously similar to the theme song for Beauty and the Beast™ but she wasn't sure. Either way, Wedy was likely mocking Erin and the scene unfolding in front of her. Erin shot her a quick look but this did nothing to faze the older woman, who merely passed her a plump red smirk in exchange.

"So, uh, I brought that milk and those cookies you wanted." Still keeping the notebook under her now drenched arm, she fumbled through her purse to pull out the goods. Umbra, having four more
arms than she, helped her burden by taking them.

"Chocolate double chocolate chip," he read the label of the package aloud. "Mmm, yes. Thank you, Erin. Sidoh and I are grateful. There was nothing edible on the plane."

Erin was taken aback. "S-Sidoh?" She recalled then what Umbra had said in one of their text conversations:

"I'm helping a friend…he lost something important…"

Oh God. So the friend was another shinigami. And he was here with them? But how? Weren't shinigami only allowed to visit Earth if they were possessing a human using their notebook?

"I will formally introduce you as soon as we go back to where you are staying. I find these current surroundings unappetizing." Aware that he should not carry the snacks himself, he handed them back to Erin, who put them back in her purse and then retrieved the zip-loc bag from Wedy.

"Well then, let's make tracks," announced Erin uneasily. As the group made their way out of the bathroom she stopped to get Stephen up to speed by offering him the notebook to touch. "Heads up: don't freak out," she murmured out of the side of her mouth.

The warning may have been unnecessary knowing Stephen's personality. He took Umbra's appearance in stride. "So you're Umbra. I'm Stephen."

Umbra stared down at him. "You are one of Erin's friends?"

"Yes, sir," he answered quite good-naturedly for one who was encountering a real shinigami for the first time in his life.

"Yeah, yeah. He's with us," Erin said hurriedly. "He's good, he's cool, we're all friends here."

Without warning Umbra backed Stephen up against the while tile wall, pinning him to it with his top two arms, and sniffed at his hair and clothes for an uncomfortably long time. Then he made a grunt that could be construed by some as a signal of disapproval. Oh no, what was his problem?

"What's wrong?" asked Stephen, his nerves steely like Wedy's. Much steelier compared to Erin's. Umbra turned away like a disinterested animal, letting Stephen pass at last. He prowled slightly ahead but kept close by, acting as if deliberately as a barrier between Erin and Stephen. He gave the trio (and Sidoh) nothing more than a dismissive, "You stink."
Reunion

Part of him longs to believe this is just another bad dream. That he's just imagining Watari lying there dead on the stretcher paramedics are carrying away and when he wakes up he will greet him with breakfast (tea and coffee cake), files of evidence and a reassuring smile, as per their routine. Their cozy 17-year routine.

But he forces himself to face facts. This is no dream. Watari, Quillsh Wammy, is dead at 71 years of age, and it's L's fault. Light Yagami and Misa Amane may have dealt the fatal blow through Rem, but L had offered up the old man's life in exchange for a hollow victory in a meaningless game. He had made a terrible underestimation of Rem's grudge against him. To keep him from harming someone she loved, she resorted to taking someone he loved.

And what exactly has he won? Winning tastes...bland. Bland, bland, overwhelmingly bland, not at all sweet as he'd anticipated from all those times before. He hadn't made Light see the error of his ways and himself for the deluded monster he truly was. Light got to die as a martyr in his eyes, living on in the hearts of Misa and all believers in Japan and elsewhere as a Christ-like figure. L will not have that privilege.

Not that he necessarily would have wanted it.

He's such a coward he can't even bring himself to follow them out. Watari had told him a long time ago that he would be there for him until he had no more breath in his body. His face will not leave his memory: that new grave piercing look in Watari's cold empty blue eyes that met him when he'd recovered from his momentary arrhythmia and deemed it safe to venture out into the hallway. They bore into him like no pair of eyes had in such a long time, frozen in shock and accusation (or is that just L's imagination?).

Should he have at least tried to say good-bye before they claimed his body to ship it back to the UK? Once again, he pulls out rationales (excuses). One's hearing may be the last sense to go but he had already died when L had seen his corpse up close. Watari wouldn't have heard him. The living cannot communicate with the dead nor could the dead correspond with the living.

What was there to say? Except so very much?

It feels like he's lost his right arm even though said arm is still attached and fully functional. He knows this much because he used it to sedate Erin just after his and Light's big climactic confrontation. Should he have gone with her suggestion of destroying the notebooks? Without their memories Light Yagami and Misa Amane seemed almost like normal people, individuals they might have been in another life. Light especially could have made for a handy, if reluctant ally, the one person he simultaneously feared and longed meeting long ago that could match him in intellect.

At the very least, maybe none of this would have happened.

But the Light and Misa he'd been treated to for the last six months were illusions, he reminds himself. Forgetting their vigilante personas did not necessarily make them less dangerous. He never liked to indulge in could-have-beens. What was the point? All that mattered was what was in front of him. Anyway, if those versions of them had been real, why did they proceed with their master plan without any noticeable hesitation as soon as they remembered that they had one? Clearly their "friendship" with one another had held no weight in the grand scheme of things.
Or is he just saying that to assure himself that he's done the right thing? L doesn't know anymore. It's alarming how out of focus he feels right now, like he's wading in the middle of a fever dream. Dying must have that effect on someone.

His lack of bravery regarding Watari is the reason he doesn't begrudge Erin for her coldness towards him the day after, or her insistence that Rem be given a proper burial despite being the old man's killer. In her frazzled mind, Rem was one of those misunderstood tragic monsters that no one loved or cared for, along the lines of Frankenstein's monster (or on some days, L himself, which she will likely remember thinking when she wakes up and regrets everything she'd said the day before). She didn't know any better, she was just a dumb animal tricked into killing to protect her surrogate baby. And perhaps in some ways, she was. Not that L had stopped to think it over that much. Maybe if he'd had the interest, he could have exploited that and produced a much more favorable outcome for everyone?

Or maybe not? Again, no point indulging in could-have-beens.

After their outing the pair don't speak to each other for the rest of the day. While she tosses and turns in the infirmary, L spends half the night packing her things by himself and the other half in Watari's computer room booking a flight for her. Pretending to be her, he emails her older brother Farrell, "Farley," to alert him of her return home. He carries a picture of Watari with him at all times in the handmade frame that Erin had made for him in one of her good moods.

He will treasure it always, "always" in this case being all nineteen days he has left to live.

This is the first time he's spoken to them directly but from watching Erin correspond with them her brother and parents sound more or less like good people. He can easily see where she got aspects of her temperament from. She's fortunate to have a family to go home to. People who can hopefully help her fix what he broke.

In that same train of thought, he plays with the idea of contacting Mello and Near personally. Tell them what's happened, choose his successor between them and say good-bye. But after staring at the monitor for fifteen minutes he once again picks the coward's way out, letting the timer activate instead. In the event that L has been inactive for roughly three weeks, Roger would receive a message telling him that he is dead. Roger will know more to the story than this, though. He'd contacted him prior to packing Erin's belongings to ask him to claim Watari's body. Hopefully he'll do so and also refrain from telling the boys what really happened to their mentor. He can't pick between them. Honestly, he'd rather they work together. Despite their rivalry they really do complement one another in personality and skill. As a team, they'd be practically unstoppable. If he doesn't pick between them, then they'd have no choice but to share the title. Their rivalry could end at last.

Or perhaps this is another one of his excuses and L just wants them to remember him as a hero (or something close to that) who died battling, and more importantly defeating, the worst serial killer in the history of human civilization. Not a weak washed-up armchair detective whose ultimate response to the ultimate challenge was to end his life as A had. He'd rather not give them any more wrong ideas.

That's right. If Light was just a crazy serial killer, then L's just a pathetic lying brat. Watari was the proverbial power behind the throne. Without him, there is no L. Being as smart as they are, maybe Mello and Near will figure him out and eventually come to terms with this on their own? It's not as if he was that close to either of them despite visiting once in a while. He'd made sure of that to spare everyone the grief.
At least when he's gone they won't have to worry about Kira breathing down their necks.

Dawn breaks and L forces himself to make breakfast, one of many things he'd had Watari do for him in life. Unwilling to waste what effort he can still afford in making anything fancy, he settles for laying out a few doughnuts, boiling a pot of tea and toasting two pre-made frozen waffles that he smotheres in syrup. The only way to eat waffles. The only way to eat anything.

Around this time he's supposed to take his medication. But after giving it some thought, he decides he doesn't technically need all these pills anymore. They're useless. He disposes of them accordingly.

She will likely be hungry when she wakes up. It might also soften her up, given he's never made anyone breakfast himself before.

She'd officially fallen asleep around 2 in the morning and she typically sleeps for seven and a quarter hours, less when she's stressed. To make it easier for everyone, he picked a flight departing at 2 in the afternoon. She'll be up soon enough. In half an hour, if his estimations are correct.

When he toddles into the infirmary balancing a tray in his hands with her meal on it, L stops to look her over. Her face, stained and slightly swollen from all the crying she'd done yesterday, is towards him but she continues to snore away. She looks ill, and he's to blame for it. He's the only person left to blame, at least.

Her hat sits on the table with the clothes he'd laid out for her, having observed her long enough to know her patterns and routines. She'll probably think she laid them out in her confusion. The rest of her things are waiting for the task force to pick up in the lobby.

You're welcome, he'd thought wryly after he'd finished packing and stretched the ache from his arms.

He quietly places the tray aside and approaches her, his thumb sliding back into his mouth like a pacifier. Apart from the disheveled look of her face and hair, she actually looks relatively peaceful when asleep, completely innocent. Doubting she'll be peaceful for long after she awakens in light of what's about to happen, he takes this time to take in her reclining form, listen to her comforting snores.

All of a sudden L's struck with an inexplicable urge to crawl into bed next to her, curl up into her side and bask in her warmth. He wants to hold her close, look into her bright green eyes and tell her about all the bad things he's done: about Karol and Coil and Deneuve and Misora and Ukita and A and B and M and N, everything. He's not so sure about the good things, mostly because he is unsure if he ever has done a good thing. The most pragmatc thing, the most effective thing, the most self-gratifying thing, certainly. But the right thing? The kind thing? He can't name one instance off the top of his head.

Except the time he and Misora had a brief chat about justice and kindness the night B had tried to set himself on fire. He'd been trying to help her focus on the danger ahead by consoling her about her then recent failure involving a 13-year-old criminal during a sting operation (he must confess that it'd made him think briefly of Mello for some reason). He was lucky Misora hadn't known him that well either. If she did, she might have quickly seen through his hypocrisy and turned away like the others since have.

In hindsight, considering all the times he found himself thinking like Kira, he wonders if Naomi might still be alive today had she figured him out then.
And when Erin would inevitably ask why he's suddenly opening up to her like this with a frightened shiver in her spine, he wants to tell her it's because she's given him something even Light couldn't, that he hadn't realized he needed in the first place until they'd started spending time together. True, he hadn't trusted her in the beginning as he virtually never trusts anyone at first sight—and often not even after the next dozen encounters. She's not special in that regard.

But that's changed. He wants to tell her that she—meeting her, saving her—may well be the best, maybe only good thing he's ever done and at this point will get to do, having missed all his other chances. All this time he's been testing her (not that that'd been his original intentions; like her, it'd just happened by itself), watching her go insane trying for whatever reason to break a hole in his wall over and over again. He wants to see whether after his big confession and she sees the ugly monster he is in all his entirety, she'll still love him and be his friend. She's all he has left, the one person standing between him and abject solitude.

Then he wants to shrink her to a size small enough to tuck her into his pocket where he can always keep her safe and near him.

He doesn't want her to leave.

But like every time before he snaps out of it, anchoring himself in place with ruthless reason by deconstructing every illogical thought that had just zipped through his mind. He's grieving, that's why he's not thinking clearly. The ringing in his ears is his lifelong tinnitus, not the bell of a dirge. He's mourning the loss of his mentor and arch nemesis, and with everyone else gone and wanting nothing to do with him, she's the last person left in this whole forsaken building. With his own mortality more imminent than ever, hanging over him like a broken holey umbrella on a stormy day, of course he'd want to latch on to the nearest available person for solace. That person happens to be her.

Anyway, when did he start caring about being alone? It didn't bother him before.

Yes, that's right.

Then again, maybe it's because I was never actually alone before. I had Watari, and Roger and Wedy and Aiber and this entire task force. I even had Light and Misa for a little while, despite being mutual enemies. And now that I am…

Okay, fine. But even if that's true, how can Erin help him? She doesn't know him, no one will ever know him, and besides he's betrayed her. How could she ever have feelings for him now beyond unbridled hostility?

But suppose she does still love him after everything. Are her feelings real? Not because she's faked them like Light or Misa to get something out of him but because he forced her into a situation where she saw no other option but to love him. Her prickly attitude towards him obscures the standard symptoms of Stockholm syndrome but it doesn't disprove them.

Love out of fear. Not a dissimilar relationship to the one Kira shares with the world. Again, not his intention from the start, but here they are now.

Assuming then that her feelings for him are real, why does it matter to him? In whose eyes does he seek redemption? God's? There is no god. He didn't spend the last year of his life fighting someone who pretended to be God only to arbitrarily decide that there is a god after all. At least a single, powerful, wise, benevolent one. So if not God, then who? And why now? Is there even such a thing as redemption? Or is it just another nebulous word people made up whose definition depends on whoever's saying it, like justice?
This is no fairy tale. He may be sick but he is not cursed and whatever love she bears for him won't change who he is. It didn't change Light, and it's unlikely to change Misa in any significant way. The ghost of a chuckle under his breath is dark and sobering. It says quite a bit for him to call befriending someone he only got to know in the first place by kidnapping her for his own ends the best thing he's ever done.

Then Watari's voice cuts through the silence. Much like he was, it's solid and patient, not at all condescending. Still the blunt question it poses stops L in his tracks.

Are you in love with her?

If Watari had in fact known about his strange personal struggle with Erin Blogger, he'd never said a word on the matter. It could be that he's hearing the old man now as a means to console himself, put off the reality that he'll never see or hear him again. Still, the question pierces his armor in the way only Watari had been capable. His first instinct is to say no, but something beyond description won't let him. If he truly lacked feelings for her, probably none of this would bother him as much as it does.

It could as well be moral guilt, until he reminds himself he is too selfish for that.

At the same time, he can't say yes either.

All he can come up with is, I don't know.

He hates putting those three words together in a sentence (four if you break down "don't" into its root words "do not"). It seems even the Great Detective can't know everything. Or, equally shocking, there are just certain things he'd rather not know.

Regardless of whether he does love her or not, he made a promise. If there's still one he hasn't yet broken, he's going to keep it. There's no justifiable reason to keep her any longer besides his own selfish desires. Even if it was scientifically possible to reduce someone to a pocket-sized pet, which it's not, and while the world is a cruel place, it'd be crueler of him to keep her from it. Yes, even by his standards. Unlike him, she still has people that care for her and are expecting her home. While his life is ending, hers is just starting.

He just hopes he hasn't ruined her to the point where she finds herself unable to live the life she deserves. He can sense another storm coming despite the forecast that today will be all clear skies. When it does, he'll let her get angry and demand answers and scream and spit and curse and even hit him if she wants to. And then he'll let her cry and hold him so tightly he can barely breathe.

It's not something he'd tolerate normally but it's the least he can do. They won't be seeing each other again after this morning.

If Watari were still here to see, would he be proud of what he's about to do? L likes to think so. His steely determination back, he takes his leave to fix his own breakfast.

After he carefully brushes her hair out of her face and drops a secret kiss on the tender skin of her brow. After which he steals her hat off the table. Give it back before she leaves, he reminds himself.

The bell rings louder. He'll miss her dearly.

…

Before they all got in the car Erin caught Stephen sneaking whiffs of himself after Umbra's offhand
comment on his body odor. She would have told him that he smelled fine, she would know, but she very well couldn't say it in front of company. Why would he tell Stephen that he smelled when she was the one who reeked of used gym towels?

Umbra might have been talking about his cologne. Aspen™ was not for everyone, she guessed.

The longer she hung around him, the funnier she felt. Oh yes, she was still wary him, how could she not be? But something else about him struck a different chord deep inside her, the vibration intensifying as the night and her observations of him marched on.

Was it the way he refused to stray far from her side and tagged along like an imprinted (giant mutant killer) duckling, to the point where she found herself relinquishing shotgun to Wedy so they could sit in the back seat together? Somehow Umbra managed to defy conventional science and scrunch himself into the car.

Naturally he scooted over to the driver's side of the backseat where she sat and with a little phasing through the upholstery settled directly behind her. To keep her from falling out of the seat, he pulled her back into him so she was nestled between his long grasshopper-like legs, all six arms strapped over her like three seat belts. As much as she wanted to protest the lack of personal space, the words wouldn't come to her. Besides, did shinigami even know what that was?

The seat behind Wedy stayed vacant, presumably for Sidoh.

"Erin, may you please bring those cookies out?" Umbra requested, rather politely for his species. She yanked out the package from her purse, which she'd situated between her own legs, and handed it up to him. Unlike his bare skin, his chest felt cold but smooth against her back like armor from one of those knights on display at the Met.

Was it the way he pinched each cookie between his thumb and pointer finger and stacked five at a time on the tip of his freakishly long, tentacle-like black tongue that poked out from the rags?

Or was it the way he gobbled half the cookies down five by five, his tongue rolling each stack inside? (Jesus, how huge was that cookie-hole of his? How many cookie-holes did he have? How many choppers?) She listened to him grunt and chew overhead, two of his paws suspended over her to collect the crumbs that fell out of the rags before they landed on her. Then Umbra would reach over, pinch his claws and sprinkle them on Stephen.

"Hey!" he protested. "Could you please not do that? That's gross."

Erin would have told Umbra to throw the crumbs out of the open window instead but no words came to her.

She was still grappling with how Umbra sounded quite like how L did when he ate.

... 

Oh my God.

That's it. That's my problem. He keeps making me think of L.

Erin wanted to turn into a bottle cap and roll under Stephen's seat, deep into the dark where all precious things fall from careless pockets never to be seen again. She tried to rationalize that previous thought by reminding herself that L had been on her brain a lot lately. Of course she'd see him most everywhere, even when it made no sense to.
Though she rarely learned her lesson in less than two goes, this time she immediately fell back into
dread bordering on shock. No. There was more to it. There was always more to it. Maybe all this
PS with Kira, L and the Death Note had turned her paranoid but Umbra sounded and acted way too
much like L for it to just be a stupid coincidence. In fact, if she squinted at him just right and
ignored all his monstrous features, she'd almost dare to say that he even kind of looked like him.

Could it be that Umbra and L…?

Out of the corner of her eye, as if to drive her that much further over the edge, she saw cookies
floating out of the opened package one by one. Each hovered in mid-air and slowly disappeared in
chunks into nothingness. As if an invisible being was nibbling on them right in front of her.

Probably because an invisible being was gobbling down cookies in front of her.

The last thing she heard before things went dark was, "Uh, you okay, Erin?"

…

Splish!

Erin woke up sputtering, shooting ice-cold water out of her mouth and burning nostrils. Oh no!
Had they been ambushed? Had Mello's cronies kidnapped her and the notebook and were now in
the middle of torturing her for information about Near?

Thankfully, no. She blinked and rubbed her eyes clear to see Wedy, Stephen and Umbra—mostly
Umbra—towering over her. She couldn't see who'd tossed the water on her face but the fact that
they'd found it necessary to meant only one thing.

She must've fainted. Sometimes that still happened when Erin was bombarded with too much
excitement at once. Honestly she found it somewhat a wonder she hadn't fainted many more times
previously since this whole mess started.

"Oh good, you're awake," Stephen sighed with relief. "Poor girl." Erin heard not a single trace of
sarcasm in his voice—whereas Wedy merely glanced down at her through her shades as if bored—
but that didn't make things any less embarrassing. As such, she struggled with finding the strength
to push herself back up.

"Uh…where are we?"

"Back at the hotel, in the parking lot. Come on, everyone's waiting. I've got you."

Erin reached out her arms to grab Stephen's…only to be swept up and backwards off the ground.
She found herself facing what she reckoned would be Umbra's chin and thin, crane-like neck. She
couldn't see beyond the hard lump bobbing up and down in Umbra's wrinkly throat with the rags
around his face, but she could discern this much: his jaw was broader than it looked from head on.

She groped helplessly in her mind for the words to ask him to put her down, she's fine, her legs
aren't broken. But she was still recovering from her previous loss of consciousness and frightened
out of her wits as to how suddenly close he was to her, how suffocating it felt being wrapped up in
his arms. She felt like a mummy, his scent intoxicating and pungent like dissection lab animal
cadavers and old moldy paper from a book abandoned to the elements. The smells of death.

How could shinigami even have BO when they weren't organic entities? Nothing about them made
logical sense.
Nothing always makes logical sense. Not even logic.

She managed this much: "Uh…U-um…"

Stephen cleared his throat. "That's very considerate of you, Umbra, but you can put her down—"

They heard a hiss vibrate from his rags. It was a very brief sound, no longer than a second, but menacing in Umbra's subtle style. The noise reminded Erin of a cat's hiss, a lion's growl and a rattlesnake's rattle, all rolled into one chilling and effective warning call.

And to think he'd been calm and fairly polite before.

Their primal fear instincts tapped by the sound, Stephen and Wedy stepped back. But Erin was trapped where she was, having to resort to curl into herself to look smaller. Umbra didn't look down at her but he did pull her closer to him, one arm reaching over her face to press her head into his shoulder. If his smell didn't overpower her before, she had to hold her breath lest it made her pass out again. His fingers felt so cold and rough against her skin.

Umbra turned up his nose to Stephen (assuming he had one) and lumbered between him and Wedy without another word. At this hour most people were either out on the town or in bed, so the group made an inconspicuous trip through the lobby and up to the suite on the top floor.

What a convenient night they'd picked.

Umbra only let Erin go before the entered the building, and even then he insisted on holding her up by three of his arms: two around her waist, one around her arm. His paws were huge, she couldn't get over how many many times his claws encircled her limbs. He could probably crush her skull like an orange and yet he handled her like how she would handle Lawliet: slowly, carefully and, as much as she'd rather not call it that, lovingly.

It seemed Umbra didn't like Stephen.

Unfortunately Erin could think of no other reason for this, assuming the two had never met before, except jealousy.

There could be no mistake. Umbra did have feelings for her. Strong, dangerous ones.

But wait.

L had never acted like this when he was alive. So maybe Umbra couldn't be—

No. That wasn't true. L didn't make it as obvious but he did soften up on her when it looked like she was suffering. Like when she cried (which happened a hell of a lot more than she would've liked) or the time she got the flu. For Christ's sake, he held her in his arms after her dumb ass got clipped by a stray bullet.

He'd even given up his life for her. Well, not just her but still for her. With the Death Note.

And then when he'd died…something happened.

Somehow he'd come back. As this.

What was it Ryuk had said after he'd killed Light?

Humans who use the Death Note don't go to Heaven or Hell.
So what's there for them after death?

Nothing.

Then L…and Light…and Higuchi and Kiyomi and Teru…and Mello and Misa soon…

The thought was so earth-shattering Erin no longer felt the ground under her feet. It also could have been because Umbra quickly resumed carrying her as soon as they all got in the elevator. He stepped backward and forced the other two into the right side, particularly Stephen into the corner.

She should tell the others. But would they believe her? The idea of dead people coming back as monsters through magical notebooks was preposterous all by itself, and besides none of them knew L like she did. Except maybe Near and Roger.

Oh hell. The whole idea of magical notebooks was wacky. And dark is light, black is white, left is right and so is wrong. Why was she still bothering to question things anymore?

She said nothing as Umbra gently placed her on the sofa and took the book from her slackened hands to pass around. While everyone had probably anticipated seeing him once they touched the book, Erin noted the paling faces of shock and wariness cropping up across the room. Especially where Roger was concerned.

"L, they…we've got the notebook," said Anthony. "We've all touched it and can all see the shinigami."

L…

Erin looked to Umbra to check if the name, or letter, meant anything to him. But what she could see of his face seemed unaffected by its mentioning. Not that shinigami had much of an inventory in facial expressions regardless of their feelings.

"Watari, please bring me the notebook. I want to speak to the shinigami personally."

"Sure. Here's a page of the notebook Aizawa's task force recovered from Mikami," said Wedy, fishing out a smaller zip-loc bag with said page folded up inside. "It's got Blogger's name on it like Matsuda said and several other names of known criminals, all in Mikami's handwriting." She strutted up to the front and passed Roger the bag. With a nod of thanks, the old man slipped into Near's room.

"Ooh, L? There's no way to see him at the moment but Umbra brought another shinigami with him. He calls him Sidoh," reported Stephen. "We know he's here because he polished off half the box of cookies Erin brought and left crumbs everywhere in my car. The other half came from Umbra."

Anthony and Halle exchanged bewildered looks.

"Is that so? Mr. Umbra, I can see you now through my camera. It's nice to make your acquaintance."

Did nothing faze this kid?

Umbra peered down at the computer bearing L's insignia (Your insignia, thought Erin, that used to be your title; don't you remember?) and nodded. He returned to his usual polite demeanor. "Hello, L. The pleasure is mine. Yes, Sidoh is here with us. If you'd like, he can introduce himself as well."

He briefly scanned the room and picked up a notepad from the corner of the coffee table. Turning to his left, he held up the notepad to the air. "Here, Sidoh. It's all right. They're here to help get
To everyone's astonishment, when Umbra let go of the notepad it quivered in mid-air, and soon a single word appeared on the top page in appalling scrawl that made a toddler's scribblings look like calligraphy.

Hi

Anthony looked Umbra as square in the eyes as he could for all the absurdity of this scenario. "So, erm, Umbra and Sidoh. How is it that you can be here without being attached to a notebook?"

"Don't worry, I can speak for you. Sidoh's notebook was stolen by another shinigami, Lumen. When a shinigami's notebook is here in the human world against his will, he may come to the human world to get it back. Lumen may have given that notebook to M."

Erin perked up. Somehow she managed to catch a few words darting around in the violent whirlwind of her mind and squeaked, "M? How do you know we're looking for someone named...?"

Umbra crouched on the floor that was so strongly reminiscent of how L used to sit in chairs that Erin couldn't bear it. Two paws on his knees, the other four clutching his long legs to his body. All he was missing was a tea set and a plate of cake. "Someone named M contacted the woman who first owned my notebook. That's why she passed it on to the man you found with it. He was trying to track down and dispatch M, until he died."

"Would you have any idea who killed Teru Mikami or Kiyomi Takada?" asked Halle, tucking a lock of her pale blond hair behind her ear.

"I'm afraid I don't."

If you expect me to have something more to say for myself...I'm afraid I don't.

"And Sidoh knows even less than I. I assure you."

I assure you, that has nothing to do with my decision.

"Well, things have certainly become that much more interesting. The page Wedy has provided indeed has Ms. Blogger's name on it and yet she's still alive. Would you have any explanation for this?"

Erin couldn't help but notice the pause that preceded Umbra's (L's?) response. It was a very short pause, shorter than the animalistic hiss from earlier, and she didn't know how she caught it, but she did. "Perhaps not a satisfying one for your tastes, but yes: she may simply have immunity to the Death Note."

There had to be more to it than this. Umbra (L?) was hiding something, probably something he'd only tell her in private. Or who knew, maybe not even then? Nevertheless, the thought of being alone with him split her mind in all different directions, none of them pleasant.

Before Near, Anthony or Halle could ask any more questions, she felt a warm hand lay on her shoulder. "Erin, are you okay? You look like you're going to be sick."

For a moment, she contemplated reaching over to hold that familiar hand. But a moment was all she got to enjoy Stephen's touch, for the pair were once again interrupted by a certain someone hopping on top of a sofa like an affronted feline. He towered over Stephen and made that terrible
hiss that made everyone—maybe even Sidoh—shiver and duck back.

"Whoa! What's your problem?"

Umbra (L?) couldn't have put it more bluntly or coldly: "I don't like you."

Valiantly trying to stay cool, Stephen said, "Oh yeah? And why, if may I ask, is that?"

"Ms. Blogger, please control your friend here. As amusing as it is to see Gevanni squirm I can't afford to lose any more agents."

Oh God, make this stop!

"You are untrustworthy. A scoundrel."

Of all things to come out of his mouth. The pot calling the kettle black.

"N-now wait just a minute! Stephen's not a bad guy!"

"Yes, he is. Being an agent for the CIA does nothing to change that. Once he made his living making counterfeit documents. You are quite good at it, and when you were caught you still managed to get away with it. The law was lenient on you because your father is a judge of the federal court and you offered your services to your country in exchange for your freedom."

Anger surged through her like electricity, towards whom or what she was unsure, and she sprung up to get between the two. Her arms jutted out at her sides to break them up. "Okay, that's enough! Back into your corners." She turned to Umbra on her right. "Just how the hell could you know something like that?"

Umbra (L?) tilted his head. "Gods of death see everything."

Correction: gods of death, like certain people, saw only what they cared to. Just how long had he been watching her? Did he only spy on Stephen because she had shown interest in him?

Erin then turned to Stephen on her left. "Steve, is it true? All that stuff Umbra just said?"

This had to be the first time in the history of ever when Stephen looked genuinely flustered. This alone confirmed Umbra's outrageous claim, but she would give him a chance to explain himself. A small bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face.

Finally he took a deep breath. "Well, it...it's not something Anthony and Halle, and probably L didn't know already, so...yeah. My dad is a Supreme Court Justice, and I did spend a couple of years dabbling in forgery. But I swear I'm with the good guys now. 100 percent."

"The truth sets you free, doesn't it?" Near remarked, not helping things one bit. Anthony and Halle now looked appropriately uncomfortable, both sensing another confrontation bubbling over and at a loss on how to turn off the heat.

Erin took a moment to let this new information on her friend and possible future boyfriend sink in. She couldn't necessarily begrudge him for withholding that from her with his job and Kira and everything else. "Oh...okay. fine. So you've got a shady past. But who doesn't have skeletons in their closet, huh? Not saying counterfeiting's okay or nothing but it's not like you've killed anyone, right?"

"Never. And I wouldn't if I could help it."
Although being a CIA agent sometimes put him at odds with it, Stephen professed a belief that life in general is sacred, or at least not to be wasted, and he couldn't stand people who think they could do just that. Hardly a revolutionary idea, but it was one of the reasons he insisted on being a vegetarian.

"So what about plants? Aren't they alive?" Erin had asked, partly to tease him.

"You've got me there. Unfortunately, I like a lot of people still need to eat. So unless science can come up with a food source that is not derived from plants or animals, like say, something based on rocks, I always say a prayer before every meal."

When Erin pointed out that she'd eaten with him before and hadn't seen him pray, Stephen had explained that one need not make a big show of prayer for it to be sincere. He prayed in his mind while doing little things like dressing his food.

"Which brings me to you!" She whirled around to face Umbra (L) once more, jabbing a finger at him as all her emotions began leaking out of her seams like cotton from a ripped-up teddy. "Who gave you the authority to judge someone as good or bad? You're a fucking shinigami! You kill people and encourage other people to do it too! You've got some kinda raw nerve calling Stephen a spoiled rich kid when you're one of the most spoiled rich kids I've ever met!"

Christ, the tears were coming back on again. Not totally realizing what she was saying, and forgetting all about their audience, she choked on her next few words: "You know what's funny? Last time I saw you I called you a monster. And some other things. And now—now look at you. You really are a monster! A literal, physical goddamn monster!"

Silence. Utter, cutting silence. She waited for some kind of retaliation for her venom-injected tantrum, and when nothing happened her eyes popped back open to see Umbra curling into himself, as if making himself look small again. It amazed her how rapidly his temperament changed, especially in the short time they'd known each other. One minute quiet and mild-mannered, the next cold and threatening, the next still staring at her almost like a lost puppy. It was like he had a switch that flipped at the most random times.

Or did it?

A single long, spidery finger rested on his rags where his mouth, or mouths, would be. Like L used to do. "I'm a…monster?"

Right then Erin started to regret ever opening her big fat mouth (what else was new?). But she couldn't take it back. It would have been wrong to. The best way to handle Umbra (L) was to be straight with him, even if being straight felt more and more like pulling out your own teeth one at a time with pliers and no anesthetic.

For a moment she truly did forget the others sitting around watching this unfold like a soap opera. Worse, looking into his blank yet intense eyes made her think back to poor Mrs. Mora, sitting alone in the courtyard that she'd probably seen as her house back in her homeland and wondering where her babies went. Completely unaware that both of them were dead. Trapped in the past. And then gradually forgetting even that if Mello hadn't done her the favor of killing her with the few memories she still had.

You don't remember anything, do you? You've got no idea what I'm talking about.

How convenient. This whole mess is literally half your fault and you're lucky enough to forget you caused it in the first place. And if the other guy at fault is anything like you, he's just as lucky.
Lucky sons of bitches.

"Yeah. You are," she whispered.

At first Umbra (L) scooted closer to her, his face swimming up to hers like he was trying to get a closer look at the two or three tears rolling down her cheeks. Like he'd never seen tears before in his…existence.

Then he reached under his chin to pull at the rags hanging off his face. While he didn't pull them all the way off, he tucked a finger under a corner and softly dabbed at her cheek with his knuckle. He probably could have gone for a regular box of tissues but that would've meant breaking away from her, and letting Stephen get close to her. She held her breath as he did this.

"Please don't cry," he murmured into her ear. "I don't like it when you cry."

You're not even gonna acknowledge what I just said? Somehow I'm not surprised.

"Being a monster doesn't mean I have to like Stephen," he added. "He'll hurt you. I'd never ever hurt you."

"A—are you kidding me right now? All you've done since we met is hurt me. You're the one that threw me out all those years ago but for some reason you still won't leave me alone."

Because you lied. You didn't really want me to leave, did you? You just didn't want to face how much you'd fucked up anymore.

The sad innocence underlying his response cut her deep. "What do you mean?"

Taking the most inopportune moment to cut in, Near asked, "Ms. Blogger, do you mean to say that you do in fact know Mr. Umbra from another time? Beyond when he first texted you?"

"No. I mean, ye—kind of but not in the way you guys—ugh, I don't know. It's not like I could prove it…"

"Erin, if you've got something important to say, now would be the time," said Halle, slightly impatiently.

She took her time recomposing herself, again overwhelmed by how fast and how intense things have gone since…well, really since Chapter 5, but especially since they'd brought Umbra (L) and Wedy back to their hotel. She felt Umbra reach over to cup a giant paw over her head, an awkwardly tender gesture of reassurance made even more so when he slowly stroked her hair.

Something L did the last time they'd hugged each other. The last time she'd seen him alive and human. She didn't at all know whether to tell him to back off. It just made her want to cry that much more.

Struggling with the smell of him wafting over her head, she gulped. "You—you guys probably aren't gonna believe this, but…I think Umbra is actually L. The first L. Or, he used to be."

This bombshell was enough to elicit what sounded like a collective gasp from the three agents, enough to force Roger to burst back out of the room, enough to make Umbra stop petting her head, enough to apparently render even Near speechless.

"A-are you being serious right now?" asked Anthony incredulously. "How do you know?"
"Why would I make up something like that? You guys never met him but I spent almost half a year with him, and I can tell you from experience that this big guy right here next to me acts like him, he sounds like him, he's got his sweet tooth...geez, he even kinda looks like him. Except one and a half times taller with extra arms."

This probably didn't help much to paint the image of the first L in the task force's heads...except give them the idea he must have been hideous even before his unholy posthumous transformation. And she supposed in certain people's eyes L would have been considered ugly or at least really strange-looking. Isn't beauty but in the eye of the beholder, as the adage goes?

Umbra became quiet once more. She didn't know whether that was good or bad.

"He...I think it's got something to do with how he took his own life using the Death Note. Light's shinigami once said that people who use it go to nothingness when they die. I—I think this is what he was talking about. Death Note users...turn into shinigami after they die."

She looked to the bemused beast at her side, her voice cracking further under the weight of her emotions. "And they forget everything from when they were human."

"That will be all, Ms. Blogger. The lack of sleep must be interfering with your thought processes. It's best that you go to bed. That goes for the rest of you as well. I believe we can all afford a rest."

She knew it. They didn't believe her, did they? Oh there goes crazy old Erin Blogger mouthing off again.

But then, maybe she did need some space and time to let things sink in? They all did, clearly. Hopefully Mello would be up to no more no-good for tonight.

"Whatever, but you gotta go to sleep too," she grumbled. "That's your problem, I think. You don't sleep enough. You'd be a lot nicer if you did. Here, Watari, lock this book up and throw away the key."

...Sleep didn't come to her. Umbra (L) was mostly to blame for that. He wouldn't stop staring at her from his place at the foot of her bed.

"Don't you guys sleep at all?" she asked him, pulling the pillows out from under her to flip them over to their cool sides.

"Not really. Shinigami don't need sleep like humans do. One could if he wanted, but usually when he's very bored or very lazy."

Holy crap, as if everything else hadn't done enough to convince Erin of his real identity...

"There is very little to do in our world, admittedly," he added with a shrug. "It's not like yours. I guess that's why Lumen was so excited to come here."

He was bored.

Could it be that this "Lumen" character Umbra had mentioned was actually Light? If so, it sounded like that maniac had gotten what he'd wanted after all. To be a god, doing whatever and killing whoever he pleased. What was he like now? How much more unhinged was he without the perfect façade he'd hidden behind in life?
For Christ's sake, "lumen" was basically "light" in Latin, wasn't it? How much more obvious could it get?

Erin didn't suppose Umbra would know where Lumen was. If he did they could find Mello, and Misa. Suppose she gave back his notebook so he could go back to his world and find him through whatever they had for windows over there?

Would he want to do that, though? He could have done just that as soon as Teru and Kiyomi died but he didn't. Because in truth, helping Sidoh was just his own excuse to fool around in the human world. To stuff his face with the desserts he'd unconsciously missed so much. To meet her again. As though he hadn't been tormenting her enough these past few years.

She recalled how L had backed off from his own investigation for two months, leaving the others to pick up his slack when he was supposed to be the one calling the shots. Here was Umbra pulling the same shit. The sonofabitch had changed hardly at all since he'd died. Erin didn't know if she should cry, laugh or yell at him and tell him to get lost.

But she couldn't call him out on anything. What's the point of scolding someone for their misdeeds when they literally can't remember said deeds? Anyway, a part of her didn't really want him to leave, not again.

So much baggage and no clue what to do with it.

Since sleep was nowhere in sight, she sat up on her hands, her blanket falling in a bundle in her lap. "Where's Sidoh right now?"

"In the den. He is uncomfortable with lounging around in a woman's room. He's probably looking for more chocolate. He's taken quite a fancy to it since I introduced it to him."

"Then...would you mind telling me how I really got immunity to the Death Note? There's more to it, isn't there?"

Umbra made a strange noise that made Erin think of a cat's purr, except louder like the motor to a boat. "You truly are clever."

"No I'm not, and I wish you'd stop telling me that. You gonna tell me the truth or what?"

"If you promise not to tell Sidoh." Umbra shuffled around to Erin's side and crouched on the floor. With two of his paws capped around his concealed jaws, he whispered the following to her as though telling a secret to a close friend: "I tricked him into giving you immunity."


She fought to keep from gagging at his smell. She never did like dissection lab.

"Sidoh is a very poor speller. If a Death Note user accidentally misspells a person's name four times, the Death Note will no longer affect that person. It doesn't work if you misspell their name on purpose, though."

"I...is that right? Well."

Holy crap, if Sidoh had gotten my name right I'd be a goner. And none the wiser. What was he thinking?

"Why would you go out of your way to do that?"
Umbra glanced down at her hand. "To protect you."

"Yeah, I figured that much but…why?"

Umbra scratched his wild mane with one paw. "Because I want to."

"Okay, I get that. But why would you want to protect me? I've hardly like, done anything for you."

"I wouldn't say that."

...

...

"Umbra, are you in love with me? Or d'you, y'know, just love me as a friend? Maybe somewhere in between those ballparks?"

A claw from another hand tapped on where his lips would be if he did have lips. "Hmm…that, I don't know."

"Wh-what d'ya mean, you don't know? You either do or you don't. There's no 'I don't know' when it comes to love, man." She was breaking out into bullets of sweat now. She peeled back the blanket, scrambled out of bed and headed for the thermostat just outside her door to turn down the temp. 70 degrees. Surely two, three less degrees wouldn't hurt?

She closed the door behind her, hearing Umbra say, "Well…I say I don't know because I'm not entirely sure what love is. I've heard the word countless times since I've come to this world but I can't discern its meaning. Is it a place you go to? It's probably not something you eat. Perhaps you could explain it to me?"

Gulp. "So you wanna know what love is?"

"Yes, I know you can show me."

"W-we just made a Foreigner™ reference."

"Hm?"

"They're a band. One of my faves. But that's a lesson for another day."

"Ah. I knew that."

"So, love. What's there to say about it? Um…love is…love is when you…"

Gee whiz. How could Erin take something so basic and special for granted she couldn't even explain it to someone when they asked her? In her defense, it hadn't occurred to her that she'd ever encounter someone who wouldn't know what love was. It was like not knowing what fun was, or how to pet a cat or draw a picture or eat. Or how to breathe. It felt like one of those things ingrained in one's DNA.

She could only guess the degree of her success in bringing L back to humanity in the time she'd known him. Whatever it'd been, it looked like Erin would have to teach him how to be human all over again.

Erin clasped her hands, balancing her nose on her pointer fingers. She slid against the door and plopped to the floor. "Right. Okay. Love. What is it? Probably the strongest four-letter word to
have ever been invented. And I know a lot of potent four-letter words."

"Yes. Like cake." It killed her to see him sit in front of her, four arms hugging his legs and two supporting his jaw, staring attentively at her like an inquisitive child.

"There's...love comes in all forms. The love you have for your friends is a little different from what you have for your pets, or your parents, your kids, your siblings, your neighbors...or your boyfriend. Or your girlfriend. Or spouse, or common-law partner. Or partners. We're gonna leave out love for food and hobbies because we're focusing on living people. Yes, that includes pets. But there's a couple of things that make all those loves similar."

She inhaled. I can't believe I'm having this conversation. But we're here now.

"Love is when you want to spend as much time as you can with someone else. When you can practically feel everything they feel and—you'd do anything to make them feel better when they suffer. When you'll give them the shirt off your back wanting nothing in return for it. When you've got their back no matter what happens, but you still know well enough to tell them when they're wrong. 'Cause sometimes they will be wrong and you want them to be safe and the best they can be. It's when you can tell each other anything at all, when you can expect mutual honesty, and you can be silly with each other and drive each other nuts and it's still all good.

"But most of all, love is when the other person's happiness becomes more important than your own."

...

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"I see. Yes. So, based on all you've just told me, I must conclude..."

Erin leaned in, apprehensive. "Yeah?"

"You're right. I believe I do in fact love you."

Oh nuts. She was half-surprised that Umbra would come right out and say this, but half-unsurprised at the same time. Either way, his words and the innocent contentment underlining them, like he'd just solved a big mystery that had been troubling him for the longest time, cut her that much deeper. How could he say that so easily? She never could have expected such honesty from L.

Wait a minute. Suppose L did have the frijoles to tell you how he felt. How would you have taken it?

I don't know. Probably not well. I don't think I would have believed him. I'd have called him a big fat liar. I didn't exactly make it easy, but come on, neither did he.

She swallowed down the lump budding in her throat, a hand cupping over her mouth. "Y-you love me. Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Uh-huh. Everything you've just told me sounds very much like what I think about you. Before I came to the human world, I'd been watching you every single day for the past two years."

That's not creepy at all.
"I first saw you on the roof of your old home in New York. You were burning something, a notebook from the looks of it. And you were crying. I wondered if you were going to jump off the roof. I'm not sure why but all I could think of was how much I didn't want you to, not that I could do anything about it if you did. But you didn't. I know this because I kept watching you into the next day, and the next day, and the next day, and the next.

"I gave you immunity to the Death Note because I want to protect you. I don't like it when you cry or when you're scared. Having watched you for this long I know just about everything about you, including how you are honest, which is why I trust what you say. I am quite content to have gotten the chance to meet you personally. And I hope we still have a long time together left. My feelings match every criterion you've listed. I love you, Erin. Maybe even more than cake and cookies."

Ooh, more than cake and cookies. He had to be serious. Erin didn't know whether to be angry, sorrowful, horrified or touched by Umbra's peaceful confession. Nothing in his voice indicated he was lying to her. Why would he lie? He had nothing to gain by lying, and nothing to lose by telling the truth.

Except his life. Again.

She wanted to scream at him not to love her, was he out of his freaking mind, it was literally bad for his health, he could die, she wasn't worth dying for, please don't do this to her again. But for the umpteenth time, words failed her.

"You love me too, don't you?"

"Wh-what?"

"You look frightened. It's because you don't want me to die...again, if what you've said earlier about me is true. Yes, my feelings for you are problematic in that sense. But I've found ways around it. And if it came down to it, I think I'd give up my life for you again."

But WHY? Why why why why? What the hell do you see in me you find so damn attractive, never mind enough to DIE for? Don't say that! You've lost your mind, you hear me!

"I...yeah. I do care about you, more than I ought to. But you're not even gonna fight me on that? You being another person?"

"Why should I? You are not a liar. Maybe I was someone else in another life? The concept sounds very interesting."

Would you still say that if you learned about your shitty past, whatever that was?

"Did you love me then, too?"

Erin sniffed, wishing she could make like the Wicked Witch of the West™ and melt into a puddle. What a world! "You know? I think I did. I had to work towards that point but I-I did love you a little. I still do. Then and now a-and every moment in between."

And sometimes I really wish I didn't. I wish I'd never ever met you.

"Thank you so much for telling me. I am pleased. Oh, you're crying. Why are you?" Umbra leaned into her again to dab at her cheeks with his dirty face rags.

"I-it's a long story, and I'm super-tired. I'll...we'll talk about it later. Could you do me a little favor?"
"Anything. Just name it."

"I—I want you to hang out a little bit with the kid who's taken over for you. He goes by your title but he also goes by Near, or N. Talk to him and the guy we call Watari, AKA Roger. And then see to it that he goes to bed like the rest of us. Okay?"

"Okay. Would you like me to carry you?"

"No" dangled on her tongue but it never fell. The way he'd asked so sweetly and eagerly (for a shinigami), she couldn't bring herself to say it. "Yeah, sure."

She looped her arms around his thin neck and he swept her off the floor like a bride. Upon tenderly placing her on the mattress, he pulled the blanket up to her chin.

"Good-night, Erin. I love you."

Was he going to keep saying that to her every other sentence from now on? Please stop it, you're breaking my heart all over again without even trying.

"I…I love you too, Eh—Umbra. G'night."

"Sleep well."

Only long after Umbra passed through the wall, and Erin checked to affirm he was gone, did she lie there in silence and let those tears keep squeezing out of her eyes, soaking her pillow one drop at a time.

…

On the way across the empty den Umbra saw Sidoh gobbling down an entire glass bowl of chocolates that he'd swiped from reception downstairs to calm his nerves. On his right sat a young yellowing bunch of bananas.

"I see you enjoy bananas, now?"

Sidoh stopped mid-chew and looked to the fruit Umbra was pointing to. "What, these? D'oh, they're for Madea. I saw these yellow things and thought about her. When we go back I'm gonna give them to her. I think she'll like them, and then maybe she won't beat me up as much."

"Ah. Don't you worry. We'll get your notebook back soon. I can feel it."

"Hey, Umber? Wh-what d'ya think of what that girl said? It sounds freaky." Being Sidoh, he had not remembered that the girl he had supposedly killed all those days ago was the same one they had run into tonight. He did note out loud that her name looked familiar for some reason, only to have his suspicions quelled by Umbra who had explained that he'd killed a different girl with that name.

Being marginally worse with faces than names, Sidoh accepted this as truth.

"I-I'm not sure how to feel about having been a human in a different life. If it's true…what was I like? Was I a tough guy? If I was, I sure wish I could be him again. Then maybe I'd have the guts to stand up to guys like Lumen and Ryuk."

"Mm, there's no reason you can't still be that person."

Umbra was uncertain whether Sidoh was still talking to him or to himself now, but if he had any
objection to his phasing through the door to L's room, he didn't voice it nor did he follow him. As Erin had told him, he saw a short pale boy on the floor working on what appeared to be a set of finger puppets. Near. L.

A bald, thin, bespectacled old man with a large pointed nose watched over him like a guard, naturally assessing him with caution. Roger. Watari.

Near peered up at him, regarding him coolly. So he appeared. "Mr. Umbra."

Umbra marveled at how small he was. So this child had taken his place. "Hi, N. Erin said I should keep you company for a while. If that's all right."

Near averted his eyes from him to his toys. "Did she, now?"

Umbra lumbered over and seated himself behind the boy, one leg on either side of him. Three finger puppets were cupped over the three middle fingers on Near's right hand.

The first on his ring finger resembled Near himself: cotton ball hair, large gray blank eyes, puckered lips and white pajamas.

The second on his middle finger resembled a young criminal: shoulder-length blond hair, narrowed blue eyes, leather vest and gloves, and a wicked smirk.

The third on his pointer finger? A man in a long-sleeved white shirt, thick black hair, puckered lips and large blank black eyes.

As though touching a photo from an old album, he hovered over Near and pointed at the third puppet. "Who is that? Is…that me?"

After two moments of tense silence, Near held up the puppet to the dimmed light. "If we assume that what Ms. Blogger said about you is correct…yes, this is you. Or, this was you." A thin layer of ice laced his words.

Umbra then pointed to the first and then the second puppet. "Is that one you?"

"Who else would it be?"

"And that one?"

Roger looked on helplessly as the boy answered curtly, "Mello."

On the other side of the world Sayu passed through the gate, checking the mailbox before entering the house. "Mom, Dad, I'm home!" she exclaimed, slipping off her shoes and putting on her slippers. "Mail's in! Let's see: bill…bill…junk…junk…ooh!"

Among today's mail was a small creamy red envelope, about the size of one for a greeting card. It was addressed to the entire family.

She found the following address printed on the top left corner:

945 Clydown Ave.
Los Angeles, CA 90103

United States

Above this were the initials L. Y.

Sayu quirked an eyebrow. Who in America would send them a greeting card? Who was L.Y.? She only knew one person who had those initials in English and he was long gone. Carefully she pulled the flap open and found a card depicting an old man in a rocker with frizzled white hair and his tongue sticking out. He looked like Albert Einstein. Beside him was the following in bold Chiller font:

Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

Inside the card was blank. Except for a lone scrap of notebook paper, half the width of the card.

"Huh?"

Sayu pinched the scrap in her fingers and flipped it over. Like the front, the back side was blank. Weird. She slipped both the scrap and the card back in the envelope, which in turn she placed on the counter with the rest of the mail.

That might have been the end of it had the phone not rang five minutes later while she was fixing tea and a snack. With Mom out and Dad taking a nap upstairs (he'd been sleeping quite a lot lately), she hurried over to take the phone off the wall.

The caller ID said, Unknown.

"Hello?"

...

"Hello?"

...

"Uh, hello?"

Sayu prepared to hang up when a harsh, gravelly voice barked, "Is this the Yagami residence?"

She put a hand on her hip, slightly taken aback by the rude tone of the caller's voice. "Yes. This is Sayu Yagami speaking. Can I help you?"

The caller's voice suddenly took on a grating laugh. "Hello, Sayu. It's me, Light."
Erin was well enough known for her compassion if nothing else. It was one of those little things Umbra reckoned he had fallen in love with her for. And she loved him too. She had just told him quite possibly one of the most wonderful things he'd ever heard. One wouldn't have known it to look at him—mainly because everyone else had gone to bed and Sidoh was too preoccupied with his anxiety about seeing Midora again—but her confession, and the preceding diagnosis for his strange feelings had made him happy enough to put a tiny bounce in his step.

Literally. Every step he took launched him off the ground and he would hover in midair like an astronaut on the moon before landing and bounding again. Of course, shinigami were not bound by the same laws humans were, like gravity.

But why had she cried when she'd told him those things? Why had she called him a monster? Had he hurt her in the past? So she had implied, but he didn't recall any such event no matter how intensely he concentrated and she wouldn't elaborate.

"It's a long story. We'll talk about it later."

Whatever had happened, Umbra did not believe he'd meant to hurt her. Why would he? He loved her. She knew he did.

Erin must have sent me to Near and Roger because they knew me from my past life, he surmised. How serendipitous that we should all meet again this way.

Of course "Near" was not the boy's actual name, nor was Roger the old man's complete name. Their real names, their birth names, the ones that would kill them if they were ever written in a Death Note by a stroke of bad luck, floated over both their heads for only a shinigami's eyes to see. Beneath the wispy red letters hovered the numbers that indicated how much longer they each had to live.

Fortunately for both of them, they still had a considerable slot of time left. 20 years for Roger, 65 years for Near.

Apart from this, just who were these two? How had such a young, ill-looking boy taken his place as the world's greatest detective, never mind be destined to live so long? What was he like when he was human? Could he have been the boy's friend? Or his brother, or even his father? His mind buzzed with these questions and so much more in a way it hadn't since the last time he'd spoken to Lumen.

But he was unafraid of getting the answers. The part of him that might have been afraid died a long time ago.

"Who is that? Is…that me?"

"If we assume that what Ms. Blogger said about you is correct…yes, this is you. Or, this was you."

"Is that one you?"

"Who else would it be?"

…
"And that one?"

"Mello."

Umbra observed the puppets on Near's pale hands for a moment more. He was so big compared to him and the arch in his back so pronounced he overshadowed the boy like an unwieldy willow tree, obstructing what little illumination the room held.

"Could you please step out of my light?" Near asked. His voice was small and soft but the cold anger edging it did not escape Umbra's notice. Why was he angry? Was it something he said?

Umbra scooted over some inches to the right. "You seem very good with your hands. Do you like arts and crafts?"

Near didn't answer.

"Where is Mello now?"

"That's what we're working on. Living the short, glamorous life of a gangster, I'm sure. Why you care, I'm not so sure."

"I care. If I didn't I wouldn't have asked."

"Hmph. Because Ms. Blogger wanted you to? Mr. Umbra, at present there's no way to confirm one way or another if you are—were—the first L. Even if you are him, I don't know what good it would do to tell you about your past. You obviously don't remember anything, and you have no way of knowing if we were telling you the truth. The L I knew never blindly trusted a person's word."

He wiggled his thin fingers to fan the paint dry on the puppets. "But who knows? Maybe I was wrong about that, too? It's not as if we were terribly close."

"Erin did ask me to talk to you, yes. But she did not force me. I really did want to meet you. I want to get to know you and Roger, and the person I used to be. Friends of Erin are also friends of mine. Besides I see no reason why you would lie to me."

Against the wall Roger wrung his hands in anxiety, looking like he had something to say but was unsure of the timing.

"I'm afraid there isn't much I could tell you personally. Except that you were my predecessor, at one time the world's greatest detective. Mello and I were your main candidates for succession…but for some reason you never contacted or chose between us, despite the fact you had ample time to before your death."

Umbra scratched his mane, confused by these words and the twinge of sadness they struck in him. "Why?"

"If I knew I'd tell you. And you don't remember so you can't tell me. But if I had to hazard a guess…you were just a chicken. No, not even a chicken. You were less than a maggot. I can't say I wasn't disappointed. As the sole person Mello and I really respected, I considered you better than that. Although compared to Mello, I suppose I took it well enough."

"Compared to Mello?"

"He ran away the day Roger told us you were dead. He's found a Death Note for himself since then
—the one Mr. Lumen gave him, presumably—and has turned his back to you and everything you stood for. Not that you stood for very much in hindsight.

"Don't misunderstand me. I'm not going to say I completely blame you for what he's done. Mello's actions have all been his choice and his only, and he'll have to answer for them when we catch him. But there's no denying your failures urged him to take the direction he has. Then again, if not you it might have been something else. Unlike you, I don't pretend to know all the future holds. I just make do with what I can see in front of me."

The twinge inside Umbra grew and grew in intensity. Now it felt more like a rock that sat in his chest and was slowly sinking lower and lower into depths he hadn't realized he possessed. This poor little boy... suppose he loved him too? Not quite in the way he loved Erin but he couldn't say he felt nothing for him. He had to have once had a connection to him in his past life. Why else would he feel so sad for a boy he was just meeting for the first time he could recall?

He did not try to fight his accusations. In fact, for some reason forgotten to him he found himself agreeing with them.

Umbra tilted his head. "I was a bad man, wasn't I?" he asked pensively.

"Depends on who you ask. But by your own estimations, you were."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Every once in a while you would come to visit. Well, not in person. We'd all sit around in the playroom and you would talk to us through your computer, like how I communicate with my task force. During one of your last visits, Linda asked you about your dedication to justice."

"What did I say?"

Near fixed his narrowed gaze on the L-puppet, staring deep into its intense yet soulless plastic eyes. Not once since they had exchanged greetings had he granted Umbra another ounce of eye contact. "You didn't mince words, I'll give you that. You told us that justice had nothing to do with your work, that it was more a hobby than anything else and you would do anything it took to solve a case. Lie, cheat, steal...and form inappropriate relationships with witnesses, apparently. That's how you first met Ms. Blogger. I've hypothesized that you may have to do with how she became immune to the Death Note, probably by bending a rule attached to the notebook that only you would know."

"Ah... you are not wrong. About Erin, I mean," was all Umbra thought to say on the matter. "You are a smart young one."

"Of course. That's why I was always first, wasn't I? A lot of the residents didn't take what you said well, but I admired you all the more for your forthcoming and daring. Now I know better."

"Well... I'm sure I didn't mean to hurt you or Mello. Maybe I did it to protect you?"

"Perhaps, if you mean protect us from figuring you out. You and Light Yagami were similar in that way. You cared so much about what we thought of you that you'd rather leave us out to dry just to preserve the powerful image we had of you in our minds. Hn. We probably weren't even worth the dirt under your toenails in your eyes. The successor idea was mostly the first Watari's, wasn't it?"

Watari. That name... Umbra couldn't explain how or why but something about it shattered the rock inside him into shards. When Erin was unhappy he felt little aches in odd nooks and crannies. This? It was a whole new kind of pain he had never felt before. He didn't like it. Yet he welcomed
"Watari?" he parroted, the word rolling off his tongue like one of those imaginary shards. Sharp, hot, salty and bitter in taste.

Again, Near declined to answer, preferring instead to play with his curling white-blond hair. His hair looked soft and fuzzy like a small furry animal. A rabbit or a cat. Umbra felt like he wanted to touch it.

"I…don't think you're less than dirt. I don't think I did then, either."

"Didn't you? Hn. You could have fooled me, and I'm not easily fooled. I didn't mind if you were selfish. Selfishness has its purposes. I just can't stand a coward and a hypocrite."

In a way, Umbra could see a piece of himself in the boy. His face and tone gave virtually nothing away, but his choice of words cut to the center. Suddenly Umbra wanted to hold him, tell him everything would be all right.

"Whatever I've done to you and Mello…I'm so sorry. I'm here now, and I want to help any way I can. Maybe we could…start over?"

…

…

"I'm afraid it may be too late for that."

Just how much weight did his apology have when Umbra couldn't remember what he was apologizing for? Well, better to try than not. He just barely brushed a lock of Near's hair on the top if his head with a callused fingertip when Near jerked away suddenly for him.

"Please don't touch me. If you have any more questions, let me direct you to the current Watari. Now leave me alone. I have nothing more to say to you at this time." He seemed to curl into himself like a threatened hedgehog, shutting the shinigami down before he could say any more.

Umbra promptly backed away. What else could he do? He felt no inclination to fight him; he looked quite fragile as it was from where he peered down at him. With an unsatisfied grunt, and making a note to try the boy again later when his mood improved—whenever that may be—he followed the direction Near's finger pointed until he came face to face with a noticeably nervous Roger, who jolted up to his feet as he approached on all eights.

He hoisted himself back onto his legs. Staring down at the old man's shiny balding head, he said, "Hi."

"Erm…hello," Roger gulped. He tried to back away to give himself more space, only for his back to bump against the wall in two steps. "Pleased to—oof!—make your acquaintance."

"Did you know the man who used to be…Watari?" asked Umbra, still accustoming himself to the feel of the word on his lips and tongue.

"Y—yes. He was a dear old friend of mine. He was your…well, you could say your right-hand man. He helped to kick-start your career, and you two were very close."

"Was he my father?"
"No, as far as I know. But he might as well have been, with how much you relied on him."

Umbra looked to the laptop sitting on the table by him. "What did he look like?" he asked softly, like a child asking about someone they'd been too young to remember for themselves.

Roger stroked at his prominent, knobby chin. "I—I suppose I could show you a picture of him. He's no longer with us, so I can't see the harm."

Confirming Roger's words, Umbra could not see the name nor lifespan of the smiling, mustachioed, bespectacled old man standing in the yard of his estate. His name instead appeared to him only in the search engine where Roger had typed it (not without some hesitation).

Quillsh Wammy.

When it came to emotions, shinigami were different compared to humans. Some of them were rather muted, almost entirely numb. They rarely laughed, seldom smiled, had next to no temper to lose or nerves to rattle. A small handful—Sidoh or Midora, for instance—felt too much for their comfort, setting themselves up as the butt of scorn or mockery. One sure thing they all had in common was that they never ever wept.

But the absence of tears doesn't mean the absence of sadness, any more than the absence of laughter means the absence of happiness, or silence means the absence of anger.

On second thought, maybe shinigami weren't that different from humans? After all, weren't they human once?

The sorrow plaguing Umbra drew his chin to the table, one massive paw cushioning it while its opposite shyly reached out to press the palm against the image on the glaring, cool plasma screen. The other four arms bundled his legs close to his body. He made a V-shape with four of his claws so he could see Quillsh's droopy, squinting face cradled in the webbing between his second and third claws. The man's eyes were blue as the spring sky after the rain, warm and glazed with age, mystery and secret sadness of his own.

Umbra wished he could look into this man's eyes when they were still brimming with life. His first time in conscious memory to have seen this face and yet with it accompanied the kind of empty feeling one gets when they miss someone they'd known for the greater part of their existence. He pulled himself up and the computer closer to the edge to brush his forehead against the picture like a cat. How he wished he could touch the real Quillsh's broad, wrinkly forehead.

But Quillsh Wammy was dead, departed to parts unknown even to him. Whatever happened from here, chances were he'd never get to touch or talk to him again.

"Roger?"

"Y-yes?"

"How did this man die?"

Retracting his previous statement on having nothing more to say, Near, who had switched to lying on his side on his mat, provided the bitter answer: "The first Watari died shortly before you. He's buried nearby his estate and your old home. Our old home. You couldn't even bother to come to his funeral after you got him killed. I guess even he wasn't safe from you and the wolves. Whatever it takes to win, right?"

The mat quietly thumped from the impact of Near dropping his head back to the floor. Poor angry
little boy. If only he could take it all away. Had there ever been a point in his life when he was truly happy?

Was Near and Mello's misery truly all his fault?

Umbra—as far as he could remember at least—had never been quick to anger, and this moment was no different. Rather, he felt like those words had pierced something inside him and now he was leaking a fluid—bleeding, that's what they called it—though he had no (longer) flesh to break or blood to shed. He knew not where this pain came from or why, nor did he try that hard to fight it.

Umbra put his chin back on the table. Maybe shinigami weren't so impervious to harm after all?

Uneasy, Roger excused himself to put away Near's toys for the night and replace them with his blanket.

…

"Near?"

…

"Near, I know you're still awake. Will you be all right?" Roger muttered by his ear, his knees popping in protest the longer he stayed knelt next to him.

He had wrapped him up in his old, soft white blanket as he liked: like a burrito, with his feet sticking out. He always, always had to have at least one foot touching the floor. Otherwise he felt unsafe.

Not even he with all his nigh-infinite intelligence could explain why this was. But it had been the main reason he disliked being held as a small child, not so much because he was just a mean snot-nosed brat as most adults had concluded. His mother, having been young herself when she'd had the misfortune of birthing him, had been one of them. It had been the reason she'd dumped him on his ailing granny (besides the complete lack of obligation to anyone besides herself). Not that he missed her at all. He'd been too young to remember so much as her voice when she took off.

As for the adults he could remember, he'd not found it worth trying to change their minds. Some adults like Granny and Roger never minded. These were the ones that mattered.

By this time that annoying shinigami had finished his poking around and left the room—finally—to let Near sleep. Let him bother someone else. But even after his departure he still bothered him. Not just because of the things he'd said but also what he hadn't. Near had no one but himself to blame for the latter.

Why hadn't he taken advantage of Umbra's company to persuade him to tell him more about the Death Note, exactly how he'd given Blogger immunity? It was unlike him.

Something about Umbra especially annoyed him. The way he spoke, the way he moved…his demeanor was somewhat different from that of the man he used to admire and had met but once, and yet so similar. Too similar. How could that possibly be coincidence? If his training had taught him one thing, it was not to take "coincidences" as just that. He'd cut Blogger off to spare her the agony of humiliating herself in front of the others, but that didn't mean he hadn't listened. Even broken clocks are right twice a day.

Suppose that was why he'd lashed out at the creature as he had?
Damn it. I'm just as hypocritical as he was.

"I'll be fine," he answered his confidante flatly.

"It's the shinigami, isn't it? Do you think Ms. Blogger was right about him? I must say...something about him felt familiar to me."

"So you felt it, too. Once again, there's no way to prove or disprove it. If it is him, it's clear he remembers nothing from before. Although he seemed unusually troubled by the things I said about him. Not to mention his strange reaction when you showed him Mr. Wammy's photograph."

So this is what my idol has been reduced to. A shadow of the man he used to be. Or perhaps I'm seeing his true colors? But that's wishful thinking if I've ever encountered it.

Some days, in the farthest corner of his mind where he stored his most intimate secrets (which is to say, most secrets he had in general), Near wished he'd never heard of shinigami and the Death Note. Before that news came out, the principles of science and reason were his anchor, the bricks to the fortress he'd built to guard his heart from the chaotic world outside. It was so much easier to treat everything and everyone with skepticism and scorn. Nothing could hurt him that way. Even if there was a god and they presented their teachings directly to him, he'd decide for himself what was right and wrong.

No. He was being a hypocrite again. He didn't really think for himself all those times. His god—no, he didn't like that word—his guide had been reason, passed down from thousands of generations of philosophers and embodied in his by the person he and Mello were intent on succeeding one day.

But then L died and his teachings failed to explain the existence of gods of death and the dark power their notebooks held over seemingly normal human beings. Since then, what could Near rely on anymore? He never told him so but he envied Mello in that way. Though the latter had been religious at one time (raised Russian Catholic), he could work his way through any problem in a pinch. He didn't waste precious time obsessing over details, asking questions that couldn't or needn't be answered.

Mello acted on faith and intuition. Yes, it did get him in trouble that Near avoided. It had led him astray. But that was when his faith had gone blind. When it could see, it also had won him the upper hand in their battle of wits. Mello should have swallowed his grief and pride and stayed with him. They could've been like L. They could've been better than L.

... Near should have tried to make him stay. It still might not have made a difference but he could have at least said something. It would have been more productive than just letting Mello storm out that door and saying nothing.

But that was Near's problem, not his strength. He liked Mello, he always had. He just didn't know how to show it. Now it was too late.

I can't afford to dwell on the could-haves, would-haves and should-haves. I never thought I'd say this but Blogger has a point. Thinking like L doesn't always work. If she's correct, even he doesn't think like himself anymore.

I need to make a leap of faith, like Blogger. And Mello.

The thought—he'd rather not say "scared" but it did somewhat rattle him in a way he hadn't been in
a very long time.

"Well…whatever his reasons, Umbra appears to be on our side now. It'd be foolish not to keep him around. He could be a great help to us."

"I agree, but let's try talking to him again in the morning."

…

"Roger?" he whispered into the dark.

"Yes?"

Near didn't see the point in asking Roger of all people this, but it was suffocating him. He had to let it go. With some other things.

"What's happened to Mello…is it my fault, too?"

Roger didn't answer at first, probably shocked by his question. Rightly so; it'd been the first time Near had formed those words in that exact order and in that tone. It certainly was a 180 from what he'd said on the matter not long ago. He looked over his ward and as poor as it was his eye managed to catch an even rarer phenomenon.

A lone tear trickling along the curve of Near's cheek. It left a thin silver streak stemming from his right eye and tracing along the side of his otherwise emotionless face. Like water leaking through a crack in eroding limestone.

Roger gingerly reached over to wipe it away with the pad of his rough, gnarly thumb. Only he had the privilege of touching the boy's face and even then only when it was necessary. "No. It's not your fault. It's more mine if anything. Go to sleep now," he murmured, rising up to head for his own bed just two feet away. "You need your rest."

Another little known fact about Near: he also disliked sleeping alone. The knowledge thereof was another small privilege belonging only to Roger.

…

"Look, whoever you are, whatever you're trying to pull, it's not funny, okay? It wasn't funny the first time. Now stop calling or I'll call the police!"

"The police, huh? Well how convenient: our father's still a cop, ain't he? Unless he couldn't take the heat anymore. But yeah, sure! Be a good girl and bring Father Dearest over here."

Sayu practically slammed the receiver back into its cradle on the wall by the time Soichiro had rode the lift downstairs and hobbled into the kitchen. The pink, wide-eyed look of terror and frustration mottling her face jolted what drowsiness had still weighed down his joints. In fact the girl looked this close to tears. "S-Sayu? Is everything okay?"

His daughter jumped a little upon seeing him up. "Uh, it's nothing, Dad. It's just some jerk keeps calling the house. The phone's been ringing off the hook every two minutes."

That did not sound like "nothing" to him. "What did he want?"

"Ugh, who knows? All he'd say was that he wanted to talk to you and he—Dad, he kept claiming to be Light. I kept telling him to go away b-but he won't! How can anyone be so cruel?"
This news froze Soichiro in the doorway. His cane clattered to the floor and his center of balance tilted to the left, his weak side. With a frantic squeal, Sayu lunged forward to hold him up and thrust the cane back into his hand. All he could do in that moment was cling to the threshold on either side before the cane fit back into his hand.

"Ohmygod, Dad! Are you okay?" This moment of weakness was not unlike the one he'd exhibited at L's funeral when he'd first stroked out, and Soichiro hated himself once more for feeding the fear that inflated her eyes.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. How long has he been doing this?"

"S-since I came home and went through the mail. It's all on the counter if you wanna look. The only real interesting thing is this card we got from Los Angeles, b-but the card was blank…"

"Sayu, go sit out in the den and eat. Turn on the television, see what's on. If he calls again, I'll take care of the problem." He lifted his left hand to ruffle her soft, dark brown hair like he used to do when she was little and wore pigtails, and drew her in to kiss her forehead in assurance. She used to giggle at how his mustache tickled her skin, remarking on how it felt like a toothbrush in that endearing lisp she had after losing her two front baby teeth.

She didn't laugh this time. It'd been so very long since any of them had a good laugh. It was unfair to revisit on her life the sins of her brother, sins she and her mother knew nothing of. But so things went. With marked reluctance, she let go of him and left the kitchen. Her departure providing him opportunity, he shuffled over to the counter to find the card in question and was struck by the words printed on the front.

Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

He didn't allow himself time to reflect on the Einstein quote, eerie though it was, and proceeded to pull out a strip of notebook paper from the inside of it. Both it and the card were blank. It looked innocuous enough.

But Soichiro quickly changed his opinion the second his fingers brushed against it. The phone rang while he was still clutching it in his left hand. He refused to give it a second ring when he hurried over to the opposite side of the room by the fridge and fumbled with it with his right.

With the most composure he could work up, he spoke into the receiver: "Hello?"

"Ahhh, there you are, old man! I was worried you'd keeled over on your way down. How are you?"

"Aw come on, don't tell me you've forgotten me already! I sure as hell haven't forgotten you. It's me, Light. Your prodigal son? Ha! My timing couldn't be better."

"Quiet! My son died four years ago. I won't stand for you disrespecting his memory…how did you get this number, and what the hell do you want?"
"Good questions. I found you through M. If you and little Sayu can hear me then you must have both touched the notebook clipping I sent you."

Clipping…the Death Note…those who touch it can interact with a shinigami.

A shinigami? M's shinigami? Why go out of his way to personally harass Soichiro and his family? And why did he keep referring to himself as Light? Had M set him up to do it? But for what purpose?

Unless, the shinigami was acting on its own. Somehow that idea sounded more frightening than the first.

"Who are you?" he snarled. "What do you want with me?"

"Oh, Father. You're as stubborn as you ever were. I'm Light. Or, I used to be. You may have set me back slightly for a while but I'm back and better than ever. Now I'm a god just like I told you I was gonna be! I have mainly you to thank for that. I go by the name Lumen these days."

Soichiro's heart beat closer and closer to the brink of explosion. Maybe "Lumen" was killing him right now as they spoke? "You goddamn liar…you're not my son. You were never my son."

"Aww, still mad at me, Father? Guess it's in the blood. Well guess what else? You're not the only one of us with an axe to grind."

The receiver became slipperier in his palm, the longer he stood there. Could Sayu hear everything? He had to force himself to move more into the corner. "Wh-what do you mean by that? Just what do you want from me?"

"I was just getting to that. I want to meet you, one-on-one. We have a score to settle. Don't you think we ought to work it out once and for all, for Mother's and Sayu's sakes?"

Soichiro's vision blurred, and unless he was hallucinating he thought he could hear the family car pulling up. Oh no, Sachiko was back already? Please, not now. Not when he couldn't hang up. "You leave them out of this! They've got nothing to do with this. Whatever grudge you have is with me. Kill me if you want to but leave them alone."

The voice on the other end broke into a terrible, rusty maniacal laugh strongly reminiscent of how Light laughed when he'd tried to sic Ryuk on him and the task force in a fit of rage and desperation. "Where's the fun in killing a man who wants to die anyway? You've got four days to track me down. Do whatever you have to as long as I get to see you. Hell, bring all your little cop buddies along for all I care, that is if they'll still have you."

"But if I don't see you around my place by midnight on October 1st…I'll kill them both, in the most horrific and violent way you can think of."

The voice took on a sharp harsh growl that curdled Soichiro's blood, like a starving wolf closing in on his prey. "And I'll make you watch every second."

"Soichiro? Darling, what's going on? Who are you talking to?"

A familiar warm and usually comforting voice interrupted the harrowing exchange, its owner totally unaware that a ransom had just been made for her life and her daughter's. Sachiko dropped her purse and grocery bags and hastily snatched the phone from behind him before he could find it in him to resist. With a defensive hand on her hip—like mother, like daughter—she barked into the phone: "Who is this? Hello? Hello?"
"Oh Mother. How nice it is to hear from you again. I have missed you so," purred the ominous thing in a much too sickly-sweet tone for his sentiment to be genuine.

"Helloo?"

"Oops, you can't hear me, can you? So sad. Daddy's keeping you away from me like he did before. Some things never change, do they?"

Click.

"They've hung up. Oooh, that's right! You'd better," huffed Sachiko, doing the same. "Who was that?"

His ears burned. What could he possibly tell her? How much had Sayu told her when she'd come in? That was our son I was just speaking to from beyond the grave. He hates me and he's going to kill you and Sayu to spite me.

Could it be his fears about Light's soul had been realized? It had never gone to rest. How could it? The Death Note's curse had changed him into a supernatural monster to match his hideous personality. After learning about killer notebooks, nothing seemed impossible anymore. All Soichiro knew was this thing calling himself Light was out for blood.

"Uh…no one important. Just a very persistent telemarketer," he answered lamely. If she could smell the lie in his words—God, she better not—she didn't make it apparent.

"Is that all? Ugh, salesmen. Can't stand them one bit. Every one I've met has left a bad taste in my mouth. Sayu dear, I don't see you doing homework. Come help me with the groceries, please."

"Yeah, coming, Mom!"

"A-actually, I'd like to speak to Sayu for a second, if it's all right. I just woke up and she hasn't told me yet about her day."

Sachiko regarded him with concern. The man had been sleeping so much again. Lately that was all he'd done when he was home if he wasn't spending time with her working on her flower garden or going out to meet friends or practice T'ai chi. But for the moment she didn't press the issue and let him take Sayu aside to the foot of the stairs out of her earshot.

Not before, of course, grabbing the card and stashing the notebook clipping in his pocket on the way out. He was not going to let Light torture his own mother again.

"Dad?" Sayu asked, still visibly shaken from the onslaught of creepy calls.

He sighed and pulled her into a hug. "What did you tell your mother?" he whispered to her. It still awed him how much she'd grown, physically and emotionally. Still he wished he could pick her up off the ground again like he did when she was smaller and he was stronger.

"N-not much. I didn't know what to tell her. Who was that? Why'd he keep saying he was Light? He seemed to know a lot about us and he kept asking how I was doing. D'you think we've got a stalker or something?"

"It's all right, sweetheart. You know I've still got friends with the police. I'll take it up with them, and we'll make sure he doesn't bother us or anyone again. In the meantime, don't answer the phone if the caller ID can't tell you who it is. Stay alert of your surroundings and don't go anywhere alone."
"O-okay, Dad."

"And don't tell your mother."

Sayu pulled away, trembling and incredulous. "What? Shouldn't she know too if this guy's a stalker?"

"I'll talk to her about it myself. Leave that to me, Sayu. It'll be all right. Please, just…trust me, and do this for me?"

If Sayu wanted to argue with him any more on the matter, she must have been unable to find the words. She simply nodded and dove back in to embrace him again, which he returned in kind by reflex. He would protect her and Sachiko, chase the monster away as every father is supposed to do. He hadn't been there to help her with the ones from the closet or under the bed because he was fighting the real flesh-and-bone monsters outside. Light had been her protector at home, sharing a bed with her without complaint—even with her bedwetting problems, as he sometimes liked to bring up later when he needed a favor from her and she would be ornery—until she found the courage to sleep alone.

Now her own brother had become the new monster threatening to eat her, and it was all Soichiro's fault. A bitter root aftertaste overtook his mouth and poured down his throat as soon as his words had left it.

It's not over. It was never over, was it?
As much as time stood against him, Soichiro dared not leave the house until after Sayu and Sachiko had gone to bed later that night. He managed to fake an appetite to get through dinner without arousing either's suspicions, but the occasion was tense anyway. He could just tell by the fear shining in Sayu's eyes that she wrestled with the urge to tell her mother what had happened that afternoon.

This was the sort of tension he picked up on those rare nights when he'd gotten home early enough for dinner, when Kira had first appeared. The Yagami family's seating arrangement had always been the same: he and Sachiko on one side by the window, the children on the opposite side by the hallway. The women and men parallel to one another. These quiet family dinners gave Soichiro a window to see how much his children had grown since he'd left the house, and a bittersweet reminder of how much he had missed.

For 18 years he sat opposite of Light, who sat on the left of Sayu, who in turn sat opposite Sachiko, who sat on his left. It was perfect. So he had naively thought.

How could he have looked into that boy's eyes for so long and never once seen the bloodlust flickering in them?

He was a great liar. They usually are. He probably got it from you, a voice in the darkest corner admonished him.

What sort of dark things did Light really think about when he sat there methodically picking away at his meals? Had he ever thought about jabbing those chopsticks into Soichiro's eyes, into Sachiko's hand, or even Sayu's tender throat?

No. Light was a vigilante killer, satiating his desires through targeting those who most said deserved to die. That was how Kira rose in status as a religious figure instead of as the mass murderer he actually was.

But then what had Ukita done to deserve death? Or those FBI agents from America? Did he and his friends deserve it? Sayu and Sachiko were guilty of nothing except their relation to him. Why would Light go after them? And why now?

These were some of the things Soichiro pondered as he stared blankly at the now empty space where Light used to look back at him. So it'd been for the past four god-forsaken years.

He could just feel his hands tightening around his neck as he broke the silence: "Sayu? Sachiko? There's…something I need to tell you both."

The two stopped eating at the mention of their names, and all eyes locked on him. Soichiro thought he saw Sayu freeze in mid-breath. "What is it, dear?" asked Sachiko.

"I…I need you two to be careful for at least the next few days."

"Wh-why? What's going on?"

"It's 'cause of the stalker," Sayu blurted, whereupon she clapped her hands over her mouth. Sachiko, jaw falling, let her chopsticks pitter-patter to the floor.

"Stalker? What stalker? Soichiro?" Sachiko looked first to her daughter and then to her husband,
fear-stricken.

His face burned from the tips of his ears to the base of his neck, more out of the same emotion rather than irritation for Sayu's outburst. Summoning the audacity to lie to his wife once again, he put down his chopsticks and took her hand into his. He lightly stroked the soft border between the heel of her hand and her wrist where he could feel her pulse thumping against the pad of his thumb.

The sensation of her pulse under his thumb almost brought him on the verge of tears when it reminded him of what Lumen (Light, Kira, the monster he may or may not have helped to create) had told him just hours ago.

"I'll kill Mother and Sayu both. And I'll make you watch every second."

As a detective, the threat against his family had never been missed by him. What if his wife or either of his children became another victim in a crime spree? What if someone targeted his family in retaliation when he was absent? What if he died tomorrow and his family couldn't support themselves? What if, what if, what if?

This was the first time someone had threatened his family directly. Never in his wildest dreams would he have seen this bold new enemy turn out to be his own son. Let alone his dead son.

Lips pursed, he inhaled deeply through his nose. Every breath he took felt like pins pricking the inside of his lungs. He glanced briefly at Sayu, who huddled over her plate and picked at her meal, chopsticks in nervous hand. Her own were sealed.

"We're not sure if he's a stalker, but there has been a number of threatening and harassing phone calls made to officers who were involved in the Kira case. Aizawa informed me today."

The disgust frilling the corners of her eyes did not escape his notice. Sachiko refused to say a word about it, didn't think it was her place to, but Soichiro knew she had grown beyond sick of all this Kira nonsense. In no small part because of what he'd done to their family. To their son. Why couldn't that maniac just stay gone? Never mind the rest of the world. Hadn't he hurt her and hers enough?

If the wringer he and Soichiro had put her through hadn't been enough to kill her, knowing Light's (and Soichiro's) deadly secret surely would.

"D-do we need to leave the house?" asked Sachiko.

"No. For the time being, no. Until we—they get to the bottom of this, it's best you two have company when you go out, and don't answer your phones if the caller ID can't tell you who it is."

I could whisk you two to the ends of the earth and it still wouldn't save you.

Soichiro hadn't felt this helpless in years. He was wasting time sitting here, but he couldn't just up and bolt for Aizawa's place. Sachiko would never let him get involved with police work again. Telling her the truth simply wasn't an option. Even if it didn't devastate her, she'd think he'd finally gone insane. She'd force him to seek psychiatric evaluation again and then—

No. He'd have to pace himself. The card Lumen had mailed him could help the task force track down M's location. Hopefully. Lumen didn't tell him where he was. He'd given him a little clue to go by. Shinigami couldn't go too far from the owners of their notebooks, so the greeting card would have had to come from the area where M lived.

Unless he'd given the notebook and ownership to someone else outside his area…
He mustn't delve into what-ifs again. He needed to hold on to what sanity he still had. Lumen
wanted to see him. Why give him four days to find him and then jerk him around by throwing him
off his location?

That wasn't Light's style.

…

Their bedtime routine was quiet and tense. He let her use the bathroom first and she helped him
slip on his nightshirt and poured him a glass of water to take with his medications, but neither said
a word until they got under the covers. She on his right towards the window, he on her left towards
the door, as they'd always slept.

Soichiro didn't know what exactly compelled him to say what he did, except a vague premonition
of this being the last night he'd get to be with her. "Sachiko?"

They were lying on their sides facing each other, their faces washed out from the stresses of the
day and the years laying on them. She peered up at him. "Yes?"

He slipped a hand under his pillow to support his head. "Do you…regret it?"

"Regret what?" she asked, her voice soft, unsure and weary.

"Not divorcing me."

She blinked at him, confused and understandably irritated. "What? You're bringing that up again?
Why do you pull that card up every time something is wrong?"

"I don't do it all the time," he protested.

"It feels like it. The first time you offered I said no, and my mind hasn't changed since then.
Unless…you don't want to be married to me anymore?"

He quickly shook his head. "No, th-that's not it at all! Believe me, Sachiko, you're the best thing
that's ever happened me. You remember how I was way back then."

"Gracious, how could I not?"

The pair had met in university. She was getting her degree in education as Sayu was doing now,
and he had worked as campus security. Soichiro had always had a strong sense of justice. He knew
from a young age he'd wanted to be a detective, despite how at odds it'd put him with his own
father, a burned out curmudgeon of an attorney who wished for something "more secure and
lucrative" for him. "Take it from me, the justice system is a joke. To hell with the rest of 'em," he'd
often say. "Look out for yourself. No one else will."

(Fathers and sons have always disagreed at times. That's just how things are, isn't it? But Soichiro
didn't recall ever hating the man enough to wish him dead, which begged the question of where
Light had gotten it from.)

Soichiro had actually been a lot like Matsuda at his age, a fact he would now freely admit.
Passionate but aggressive and reckless. Starting out he had a number of reprimands and suspensions
under his belt for getting carried away in the heat of righteous anger. If it weren't for Sachiko and
his old friend Takeshi Matsuda, he may have gotten himself killed one day and not cared as long as
it'd meant saving someone and rebelling against his father's cynicism. She had been there to see
him climb his way up into his old position as superintendent of the NPA. And then she'd seen him
fall back down, only able to soften his landing as much as she could at the cost of her happiness.

"You…you gave me a friend who wasn't a cop. You gave me perspective. You gave me an anchor. And then you gave me a home and a reason to come back to it. What I worry about is whether it's been worth it for you."

Sachiko tilted her head and slid a hand over his cheek. He responded in kind by slowly and weakly lacing his fingers between hers. "Being a hero is exhausting no matter who you are. I knew what I was getting into when I married you."

In hindsight, had she really? Then again, neither had he.

She stopped upon seeing the hot tear rolling down his face. Soichiro rarely, rarely cried. It took something truly heartbreaking to squeeze tears out of him and he knew it frightened her when he did. Here he'd been thinking he had no more tears to shed. He was wrong, again. But he was so, so tired. Tired of fighting. "Sometimes I wonder if you'd have been better off with someone else. Someone younger, better-looking…who would be home with you and the kids every night."

"I won't lie to you, Soichiro. There were times when I did resent your work. You being gone all the time and not spending as much time with the children as you should. Me constantly wondering day after day if something terrible would happen to you, and whether I could handle it if it did. But if you think I want to leave you now, there's not a chance. I've invested almost 30 years of my life into you. Someone needs to take care of you."

His voice and his heart dropped to a whisper. "Is that the only reason you've stayed, though?"

She scooted closer to him, a sad smile wrinkling her face. Even at her age, she was still beautiful. "Of course not. I stay with you because I want to. You're my hero, my friend, my husband and the father of my children. I love you. How could you think I didn't?"

"I…I don't know. I just…"

The two lay there in silence once again, their hands still intertwined as Sachiko waited patiently for Soichiro to collect his thoughts.

He drew her hand to his lips to kiss each of her knuckles. "I love you. And I love Sayu, and I loved Light. I really did. And I still do." It surprised him how helpless he sounded, but he was tired of pretending he wasn't.

"I-I know."

"It's my fault he's dead."

"What? No, it's…"

"I shouldn't have let him get involved. I thought he was safe. I should have protected him. He had so much going for him…I've been so wrapped up in protecting the lives of others I've been absent from my own life, and yours, and the kids'. I couldn't even be there for Sayu's birth, or the first day of school for either of them. I've missed out on so much. Some hero I turned out to be. I can't even provide for my own family. If anything, you're the more heroic of us for suffering through everything. And you've done it all with a smile. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

He could keep apologizing until he drew his last breath and nothing would change.

If I could somehow go back in time and stop myself from meeting you, would I? It would spare us
both the heartache and wasted time. I'd have probably gotten shot in the line of duty and the closest you would have gotten to me is a strip on the second page of the paper. Maybe the fifth. You would have gone on with life with far less tragedy than you've suffered in this one.

Light would have never been born, but neither would Sayu.

Her voice broke then, tears shining in her own warm brown eyes. "You're right. You shouldn't have let him in on the case. But you didn't kill him. Kira did. I wish Kira would just go away and stay away so we can move on with our lives. Light wouldn't want us to keep mourning him forever. At least…at least he died doing what he loved…"

"I forgive you, Soichiro. It's taken me a long time to be able to say that and mean it, but I do. Whatever crimes you think you've committed against us, I think you've more than paid for them in full. That part of our lives is over now. Of course I'll always miss Light. How could I not? He was my only son. But I don't want to keep grieving over lost time. I can't. Divorcing you wouldn't change a thing. It's not going to bring him back. Instead, I want us to enjoy the time we still have left, together. It's what he would have wanted. It's what I want. And I hope…I hope it's what you want, too."

What had he ever done to deserve her? Every day with Sachiko was a miracle. 25 years together. Two and a half decades of distance, sickness, debts, arguments, crises of faith and the shadow of their oldest child's untimely death hanging over them to this day and somehow their union had yet to run out of love, even after it'd lost its physical passion long ago.

He sniffed. I forgive you. Those three words made his heart swell and ache. I forgive you. He swore he loved this woman so much he would explode if feelings had that effect on one's body. I forgive you. It was the closure he needed. As much as he could get, anyway. Now he could go on and do what he had to.

"Thank you, Sachiko."

Time and words seemed to fall away then. They closed the gap between them to embrace each other as tightly as they were able to make sure the other was still here, sharing that same warm, deep and assuring kiss that had sealed their marriage on their wedding day. They tasted the salt of each other's tears dotting the corners of their lips. That's how they stayed, just holding and comforting each other and crying into each other's shoulders until they fell asleep.

Well, until Sachiko fell asleep.

With great reluctance—and one last kiss planted in her fine hair—Soichiro carefully untangled himself from her arms and slipped back out of bed, wiping his eyes dry on the sleeves of his nightshirt. He changed into his battle clothes in the darkness and grabbed Light's old backpack which he had packed while Sachiko and Sayu had been downstairs watching their favorite TV dramas. The one with the giant Gundam™ on it.

(In hindsight, he wondered if Light ever really cared for such childish things or if he merely pretended to because it was expected of boys his age then.)

He passed Sayu's room on the way out and noticed with trepidation that her door was cracked open and the light on. To his relief, however, he peeked inside to find her at her desk asleep on top of one of her textbooks, clutching it like a pillow.

You're going to do many wonderful things. Dad won't let anything happen to you. Even if it means he won't get to see you do them. I'm sorry, Sayu.
Like her mother, Sayu could sleep through most noises. Life hadn’t quite traumatized her yet to the point where the drop of a pin could wake her in a panic. Praying it never would, he slipped a blanket over her and gently maneuvered the book out from under her head to replace it with one of her numerous pillows. A little thing he should have done when Light was growing up.

He brushed her lovely long hair back and bade her farewell with a delicate kiss on her temple, watching her smile slightly in her sleep at the touch. He had to leave now, before he lost his nerve.

With one last look over his shoulder at his home for almost half his life, Soichiro rode the lift down the stairs, crept out the door and locked it and the gate behind him. Cane in one hand and backpack and evidence gripped in the other, he headed up the street and into the quiet balmy night, going over in his head the route to take to Aizawa’s all the while.

This time, he would never come back again.

…

Erin had another dream about L (or should she call him Umbra, now?). She saw him this time lying on his side, his black eyes wider than she’d ever seen them and his chest heaving as he gasped for nonexistent air. She never saw him look in so much as a fraction of this anguish.

Is this how he’d gone out the day he died? A crumpled pathetic heap on the floor writhing in agony and begging for his life to the pitiless silence? Like Light? How the mighty had fallen.

She ran to him, struggling to keep him in her arms as she beseeched him to tell her what was wrong. He choked out the last two words she ever thought she’d hear from him, the last two words she wanted to hear from anyone.

"Kill me."

"What?"

"Kill me. Please. Kill me."

"But—but you did that already, to yourself."

"I killed my old body. I thought that was the end. I know the truth now. And so do you. I'm still here. I can't take it anymore. I have nothing left to live for."

"Don't talk like that! That's not the L I know!"

"Did you ever know me at all? This isn't living. It's merely...existing."

He hacked so hard into her chest she saw splatters of hot dark blood dotting her body. "Please. Help me…Erin. Kill me. You're all I have left. End my suffering. End all our suffering."

His head rolled backwards and he went momentarily limp. What light had been visible in his eyes went out in a flash, and the flesh started liquefying and melting off him. Sohelp her God, it rotted off him like a corpse on a nature show in time lapse. His pallid skin, his scant muscle, his gnarly nerves, all the way down to the sinew and fracturing bone. But he kept seizing and moaning and then screaming into her ear to help him. All she did was sit there and let his fluids seep into her clothes and skin.

He smelled of dissection lab cadavers and molding books. He smelled like Umbra.
Likely because Umbra was curled up snugly behind her when she woke with a start. He had her wrapped up in four of his arms, pressed to his chest. The first real things she saw were his spidery legs jutting out over the corner of the bed below her and his other two arms hanging above her head.

"Ah, you're awake. Good-morning, Erin," he greeted with serenity. A gross contrast to the wails and cries of despair she'd heard from him in her dream but seconds ago. "I missed you." She felt one of his paws move over her chest, which she quickly swatted away. Turning into a shinigami must have stripped him of what mite of shame he had carried in life.

"H-hey! Don't do that," she sputtered. "Don't ever touch people's boobs unless they say you can."

"I'm sorry. It's just, your heart is beating very fast. Are you all right?"

She scratched the back of her head. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. I just, uh, had a bad dream, is all."

Umbra scooted away to perch precariously on the edge of the bed as Erin pushed herself up and stretched the sleep from her limbs. "You have a lot of bad dreams, don't you?"

"I…guess."

"What was this one about?"

She blew a lock of hair out of her vision. "I don't think you wanna know."

"Yes, I do. I want to help you. That's what you do for someone you love, right?"

Erin glanced away at his use of the L-word, wiping the crust and tears caking her eyelids. She could hear a little crack popping in her chest every time he said it. Gathering her legs to her, she noticed something pinched in one of his paws. Between his thumb and pointer finger, like how he used to hold things as a human.

She needed only to see the corner of it to recognize it as the picture Near had showed her of Mello the night they had first met. She was surprised Near would let Umbra walk around with it. Although, it wasn't like he could blurt out his real name if he wanted to.

She gulped, pulling down the collar of her shirt to get air underneath it. "Umbra…do you like being a shinigami?"

"Hm? Do I like being a shinigami? Well…I can't say I particularly enjoy it. It has its perks, but not many to justify its drawbacks. Our world is very boring, as I've told you before. And when you can live forever it rather takes the meaning out of living after you've seen and done everything you wanted. And eaten all the sweets you can. Yes, more and more I've come to find it overrated."

"Umbra? You're not, um…you're not suicidal, are you?"

He scratched the side of his face with a single claw, his head lolling lazily to the side. "I don't think so. I'm not actively looking for a way to die, if that's what you mean. But I meant what I said last night. I'd gladly die for you if I had to."

She shivered. Oh no, not that again. Misa used to throw around statements like that about Light like she did her business cards. Even before Erin found out Misa was the Second Kira she found such morbid devotion to a single person a smidge disturbing. It didn't help that Light didn't try that hard to make her stop. Not that Misa was his responsibility but he could have at least said something. Any decent person would.
Really, it should have been her first clue something was off about them.

Hindsight's always 20/20.

Now here was someone echoing those exact sentiments not just to her, but about her. Someone who'd already died for her before and whose response upon being told of such could be reasonably summed up as, "Aw hell yeah, I'd so do it again!"

She held the power to kill a shinigami. All it took was putting herself in harm's way to trigger his instincts. She didn't want that much power over someone else. Never. Maybe that turned on certain other people but not her.

But in her dream…

"Do…you have any friends, where you're from?"

"Friends? Hmm…I suppose there's Lumen. We talk now and then. He's very smart, and very restless. But it's tiresome having only one person for company, particularly one who happens to act and think like you. You may as well be speaking to your own reflection. I wonder if we were friends in our past life?"

Erin combed her fingers through her slightly greasy hair. She reeked. She could use a shower but today she couldn't seem to find the energy to take one. "Fraid I can't say. You said Light was your friend and stuff…but you guys didn't really act like it. That's just me, though. I'm old-fashioned when it comes to these things. I'm not torturing my friends or constantly plotting to murder them."

…

"You believe that was Lumen's name in his past life, Light?"

"I—it's a shot in the dark, but yeah. His name was once Light Yagami. AKA, Kira. He was a—a serial killer. Had a bit of a God complex. And you were L, the Great Detective determined to catch him. You guys were like, uh, Batman™ and the Joker™."

"Oh."

One of the most important details in his life, and "Oh" was all he had to say on it.

…

"Erin?"

By now she had gotten up to continue her stretches. "Yeah?"

"What was my name?"

She froze with her arms stretched awkwardly over her head, making her shirt ride up her stomach. "Your name? Near and Roger didn't tell you?"

"Near told me he didn't know it. And Roger was too busy getting him ready for bed. I was going to ask him today. Unless you know?" Oh God. Why must he do this to her this early in the morning? What was it, 5 am? 5:30?

"A—actually, I do. In fact I named my cat after you. Before I learned about Near and Mello. I'm sure you've seen him."
"Yes."

The constant patter of rain against the windows stole her attention in her moment of silence. Perfect weather to match her mood. Dark, gloomy, not unlike how the weather had been the morning of L and Light's epic final climax (which, if what she believed was true, had turned out to be not so final after all).

She swallowed again, inhaling as though she were about to plunge under water as she turned back to face him, the childlike curiosity dilating his eyes killing her. "I know it 'cause you showed everyone it after you wrote it in the Death Note. You went by a lotta names. I could count the number of aliases I just heard you use on both my hands. But your real name...was L Lawliet. I kid you not, that was your first name. L the letter."

Umbra repeated the name for himself, testing the sound and feel of it. "L...Low-light. L Lawliet. I like it. I like how it sounds when you say it." He hopped off the bed and slunk towards her.

"Please, say it again. Say it with honesty and tenderness, like you treasure it in your heart."

Oh man, you've got no idea. And I don't know how to tell you.

Erin couldn't deny being floored at the odd sentimental request. Her voice had never been what one would call kind, gentle or tender. Some days she kind of loathed the stark, booming and nasally sound of it—not enough to keep her yap buttoned, though. To hear Umbra (L) of all people say it made his name sound nice...there were no words.

Except dying must have made him go tone-deaf.

Biting back the urge to cry again, she obliged him: "L Lawliet."

Satisfied, Umbra hovered over her and rubbed his rough, cold forehead against hers like Lawliet would do when he got hungry for attention. She briefly shut her eyes, still not quite used to the feel of him or ready to look at the intricate details of his new face. Hell, she still hadn't gotten accustomed to his new lovey-dovey disposition (L, lovey-dovey? Get outta here!). She thought of telling him to back off but it was so damn early in the morning why was her brain not working?

As it did all things in due time, death had destroyed the great L's mind.

"Thank you, Erin," he murmured.

"So, uh, you want me to call you that from now on?"

"Umbra, L...call me whatever you wish. As long as I get to call you my friend. Please open your eyes. I want to look into them."

Her eyes, slowly and almost painfully, pried themselves back open after she got the courage to brush some of his black straw for hair out of the way. Oh sweet Jesus, he was even scarier—and smellier—up close. Erin trembled for reasons too numerous to count.

"My—my dream was about you."

"Me?"

"Yeah. I saw you as a human again. But...you were in pain. You asked me to...to..."

"To do what?"
"You begged me to kill you again," she whispered. "You kept saying how much you couldn't take it anymore. And I was your last hope. S-something like that. Umbra, I—I wanna help you but...I don't wanna kill anyone. Human or shinigami. It ain't my place to decide who lives or dies. That was Light's whole problem."

"Oh Erin. I know you are not a killer by nature. But I would think no less of you if you found yourself in a situation where you had to do it. Not even if it was me."

"Phht. Easy for you to say as a shinigami. I'm not using the notebook, I hope you know that."

"I didn't think you would. Don't worry. We'll figure something out."

We'll figure something out. Exactly what he'd said when she'd come crying to him about Light and Misa's improprieties. After which he'd proceeded to fuck her over.

God dammit, those tears were coming back. Moments like these made her wish she could just carve her tear ducts, hell, her entire eyes out. "I won't lie. I've got problems trusting you when you say things like that. Last time I decided to trust you—back when you were L—it didn't turn out so great."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. You lied about what you were doing and got the idea to do yourself in with the notebook before Light could. Then you baited him and Misa into basically spelling out how they were Kira to all and everyone. To this day I'm still not entirely sure why you picked that way out. You had real problems; you just didn't talk about them. I dunno, what do they say? Die a hero or live to see yourself become a villain?"

But seeing what you turned into anyway, that's a moot point, huh?

"Misa? Your friend?"

"Uh-huh. She used to be the Second Kira, Light's right-hand girl. You destroyed her notebook and made her forget everything. I thought maybe then she could, y'know, turn over a new leaf. But I was wrong. People like her don't change with or without stupid killer notebooks. She's shackled up with Mello. Don't ask me how that happened. I couldn't tell you."

Umbra hummed again to himself, then slowly pulled her into a hug with four of his arms. The whole time he never let go of Mello's photograph. "So you tried putting trust back in Misa, and she failed you again. Is that why you can't trust me again?"

Being bundled up against him made Erin feel so small, like the rabbit next to the wolf in that one song. She rested her hands on his chest, appalled and sorrowful when she turned to press her temple against him only to feel no heartbeat or breath underneath. "I—I guess. I wasn't expecting you coming back from the dead to see me, either. I thought you and I were done."

"I wouldn't betray you. I love you. Please give me another chance. The past is dead. I promise there will be no more lies between us from this point on." The eager melancholy breaking the monotony of his tone made another crack pop in her chest.

Really? It didn't stop you before. Then again, you never acted or talked like this when you were L. Maybe you are telling me the truth this time?

Your mind's been shot to all hell. That's gotta be the saddest thing about all this.
A sudden commotion outside the door interrupted the pair. Umbra reluctantly let her go and slipped the picture into his belt, following her out into the den. Everyone else would be up by now. Except Wedy, who liked to catch up on her beauty sleep when she was off work.

Stephen wouldn't come out of his room.

"What do you mean, you've got nothing to wear? Didn't you pick up dry-cleaning two days ago?"

"I'm serious, Halle, all my clothes are gone! All I've got is my one pair of underwear."

It took longer than usual to process what she'd just heard, namely due to the image of Stephen in nothing but a pair of boxer-briefs overwhelming her imagination. When she came to, Erin noticed something fluttering outside a window on her left in the cold pouring gray.

She hurried over and pushed the curtain aside, squinting. "Oh my God. Umbra!"

He bounded up to her from behind, perching on top of the sofa. "Yes?"

Erin jabbed a finger at the flag pole outside. "Did you do that?"

Anthony, Halle and Sidoh gathered around to behold the absurd sight beyond the window: Steven's suits, shirts, ties, socks and underwear scattered all over the yard. Stephen's suits had been bound to the rope and hoisted up the pole like flags by his neckties. The rest had been discarded haphazardly over shrubs, the tops of trees, in the pool and in growing muddy puddles on the ground. All of it dirty and drenched and only getting more so.

"Yes." She heard not a trace of remorse in his monosyllabic answer. At least he was staying true to his word about not lying.

"Why?"

"I don't like him."

"Oh for fu—what's Steve done to you that was so damn offensive you felt it necessary to throw out his whole wardrobe? And don't say 'He used to be a criminal' 'cause I know for a fact you don't really care about that."

Umbra sniffed and scratched his head, his demeanor like a cat's after stating his territory by pissing all over someone's clothes. "He exists. That offends me."

A safe distance away Erin saw Stephen poke his head out of the door to his room. Prudent as always he refused to respond to Umbra's insults but the peeved look on his face said, "Wow, okay. Screw you, too."

Erin stamped her foot. "Listen, Umbra. I can't make you like Stephen but the least you can do is be civil with him. He's my friend."

"A fine friend. I know how men like him tick. He just wants to take off your pants."

Oh no. He did not just go there. She'd put up with enough of that from Near. Blood boiling with fury raced up to her head and cooked her brain like overdone chicken meat. The only worse thing he could have said was he didn't like him for being Jewish. But to be frank, what else is one supposed to make of a comment like "His existence offends me"?

She stamped both feet. "Our relationship isn't like that and even if it was, what the hell difference
does it make to you? I put up with a lot of your PS in the past and I ain't gonna do it anymore! If you really care for me like you say, treat my friends right!"

Wow. That one line had to be one of the shittiest most manipulative things she'd ever said. Or was it? Erin couldn't tell anymore. From her experience it was generally true: one ought to accept the company a loved one keeps regardless of their personal feelings toward them, with special exceptions.

It's not my fault you missed your chance with me. If that's what you wanted, that is.

Her body burned with fever and her ears rang after her outburst. She shouldn't have said that in front of everyone. Catching her breath, she pointed out the window again. "Now go get his clothes back inside," was all she came up with as a follow-up. "You're lucky nobody's out today. You owe him an apology."

She'd have also put the dry cleaning bill on him had it not been for the fact that Umbra was a penniless shinigami, thereby rendering this part of the punishment unfeasible. She'd have to do it herself.

To everyone's surprise, Umbra put up no resistance to her demand. If anything he gave her that mild lost-puppy look again. "Okay."

He jumped over their heads, phasing through the wall and glass on his way out.

"What better way to wake up than to the new episode of my favorite soap?" remarked Near.

"Shut up," she grumbled. "Stephen, I'm so sorry."

Stephen shyly retreated back into his room. "No, it's okay, don't sweat it. It's not your fault he's… for the sake of propriety I'd rather not say it."

"I don't know why he did this, I swear he won't do it again."

"Well, I've got one theory," he muttered.

"Stephen, no…"

"Ms. Blogger?"

She threw her hands up in exasperation, scrambling back over to the coffee table where Near's computer sat. In the meantime Umbra climbed up the wall to the window. With a frown, Anthony opened it to let Umbra dump the muddy, sopping wet pile of expensive clothes on the floor.

He sighed. "I can lend you some of my clothes if you want, Stephen."

"Thanks Tony, but I don't know if your clothes'll fit me. You're a big guy, no offense."

"Hmph. None taken. But you need to wear something until we can get these clean."

"Gee, I hope they're salvageable. Those suits were 400 dollars each."

Umbra, phasing through the rain to keep dry, climbed in through the window and snorted in Stephen's direction. "How exorbitant, and fitting. Why don't you ask your father for another favor? Or perhaps forge a few hundred-dollar bills and buy new suits? You're good at both things."

Erin snapped her fingers. "What did I just say? What's up?"
"Mr. Umbra and I spoke to one another last night."

H'oh boy. "Y-yeah? You guys hit it off?"

"That depends on how you define 'hitting it off.' But enough on that. I'd like to make a proposal."

"Sorry but I ain't interested. Plus it'd probably be illegal in most states."

"No more than would be a prospective relationship between you and Umbra. I was actually referring to an idea on how to locate Mello."

Erin plopped down into the sofa. Just woke up and still she was exhausted. Something sounded different about the young detective compared to yesterday—she couldn't say what, though. "'Kay. Lay it on me."

"Retrieve Mr. Umbra and Mr. Sidoh. It involves them."

With a groan under her breath, Erin beckoned Umbra over. If he was upset with her for yelling at him (he better not be), he did not make it apparent. "Yes, L?"

"How do shinigami…see the human world? Do you have special portals?"

"Why yes. There are portals scattered around the entirety of our world. We can choose what, or who we see through them. It's through these portals also a shinigami may drop his notebook into the human world."

"Interesting. I take it you've thoroughly studied that photograph I loaned you?" Huh? Now what was he up to?

"I have. You want Sidoh or myself to briefly return to our world to find M's location through one of the portals."

"That's correct. Are you able?"

Umbra scooted closer to Erin. Dude, not helping. Near was a smart cookie. He could also be manipulative when he wanted to. He'd have picked up by now how Umbra felt about her, especially after that outburst. She'd be damned if she let him use that against Umbra to kill him.

On the other hand, why would he want Umbra dead? He'd been fairly cooperative with them so far. Jeez, what had they talked about last night?

"Wait, hold on. Are you all right, L? I didn't take you as the type to resort to doing…this. I thought you'd wanna get like, forensics or something."

"I am not above cheating to get answers, Ms. Blogger. Considering the supernatural methods our opponent has employed so far, I think it's justified to use what resources Mr. Umbra and Mr. Sidoh can provide. Besides, I feel time is against us. Don't you?"

"Uh…I guess—"

"If I were to leave even temporarily, Erin would have to give ownership of my notebook back to me," Umbra explained, not sounding too thrilled about the prospect of leaving her side even for a few minutes. "On the other hand…Sidoh is not currently bound to a notebook. If you will allow, I can tell him who to look for, and he can come right back here." He turned to his right to the end of the couch. "What say you, Sidoh?"
"I know you are scared. But, I hope you don't mind me saying so, it is your notebook we're searching for. You needn't approach M or Lumen yourself. Just locate them through one of the portals, then come back here."

"Ah yes, Midora. It's anyone's guess how her mood is right now. However, with how vast our home is it is unlikely she will spot you. Anyway, it's a good a time as any to leave her that bunch of bananas you got her before they bruise. They should temper her anger for a while. You calmed down almost immediately when I gave you chocolate the first time."

Midora? Who was that, another shinigami?

"I'll give you my half of chocolate when you return."

"You've made the right choice. I believe in you."

"It's no trouble at all. L, do you mind if I give Sidoh the picture of M so he can look for him? He promises not to approach or kill him. He has neither the means nor the will to do so. And like me, he can't reveal M's real name to anyone."

A shinigami that could not kill. That was sure a first.

After a thoughtful pause, Near answered, "Very well. Mr. Sidoh, please study the photo carefully. I'd rather keep it within the confines of this suite."

With everyone gathered around, Umbra held up the photo to the wall pinched in two fingers. "Concentrate as hard as you can. Use a mnemonic."

"It's a rhyme or phrase that helps one to remember something. Like this one: 'My High Will Kill.' And if you still end up forgetting his name and face, you can also use the portal to find Lumen. He'll never suspect a thing."

"Good luck. We'll be right here when you come back."

Umbra steadily lifted his head towards the ceiling as though watching something, or someone take flight. In the meantime, Erin jolted when she heard the tune of "Somebody to Love" tinkling in her room. She hopped over the back of the couch and stormed over to answer it before it went to
voicemail.

The caller ID said "Kimiko."

Surprised and for reason acquiring a sick feeling in her stomach, Erin pressed the button, tossing her head as she held the phone to her face. "H-hello?"

The older Amane sister's weeping greeted her on the other end. "Erin? Erin, I-I need you to come over! Please, come quickly!"

Erin clutched her chest, her stomach tossing and turning as she would on a bad night—which is to say, most every night these past few weeks. "Where, back at your place? Kim, wh-what's going on, are you okay?"

"No, I'm at the pet—the pet emer-emergency clinic, I'm at the clinic on Overland Avenue! It—Erin, it's Lawliet, it's your cat. I killed him! I killed him! He's dead he's dead, oh Erin I'm sorry I'm so sorry!"

...

Sometimes in times of crisis, one is prone to feel so many things at once that they end up feeling nothing at all. Numbness. It may be a defensive mechanism to protect one from a deadly meltdown. A shock absorber. Or perhaps the feelings all cancel each other out.

Whatever the reason, numbness was all Erin felt on the ride over to Sinai Animal Hospital™. Feeling nothing used to frighten her more than pain did, but now she couldn't find the energy to even feel fear. From the hotel to the hospital she said nothing to anyone. Not Halle, not Umbra, not even Stephen (not that he could have gone with her with his lack of clothes). She just sat up in the back seat, rigid as a corpse, staring at an imaginary point beyond the horizon.

Lawliet's dead. I killed him. I killed him. He's dead.

Erin had never heard Kimiko so hysterical before. It could have very well been an accident. The woman had issues but she wasn't mean or spiteful by nature. So Erin kept trying to remind her the closer they got to their destination.

The staff was reluctant to let Erin hold the body of her small quirky companion of four years, just because of how mangled and bloody and contorted it was. He had been struck in the Amanes' driveway, already dead for several hours when Kimiko had discovered him this morning.

She hadn't even gotten to say goodbye to him.

"Erin, I—I'm sorry. I swear I didn't mean to. I didn't see him. I-I don't even know how he got out of the house," Kimiko blubbered across from her.

Too fucking hot in here. Someone turn down the thermostat.

The first sentence Erin spoke since the call was a question: "What were you doing driving Misa's car? I thought you were blind." If she could find the energy, she'd be much more shocked at how cold and robotic her voice sounded. Erin was many things. "Cold" and "robotic" were not among them. It was as if someone had injected her with a tranquilizer and hypnotized her.

Kimiko seemed to be sucking on the tips of her fingers with how much she'd kept her hands close to her mouth. She looked horrid: eyes bloodshot, voice croaking, clothes rumpled and all in disarray and hair scratching at all directions on her head and over her face. It wasn't like her not to
care for her appearance. "I'm not totally blind. I—I just needed to get some things from the store."

"Why didn't you call me? I could have gotten them for you. I didn't give you my number for no reason."

"I think I did, you just didn't answer—"

You flatten my cat, now you wanna insult me by lying to my face? You and Misa are sisters, all right. "No, you didn't. My history would have told me if I missed a call from you. What were you out getting?"

Her silence spoke volumes.

"Open your mouth."

"Wh-what?"

"I said open your mouth. I wanna see something."

Kimiko shrank into her seat at the demand. The two stared at one another for what felt like forever, before she gradually dropped her guard, meek and defeated. Erin lunged over before she could change her mind and took a whiff of her breath.

Just what she'd suspected. The mere smell of it was almost enough to make her throw up herself. There are few sensations worse than the need to throw up when there was nothing inside to throw up.

"You threw up a while ago, huh?" The numbness was quickly fading away. As though her feelings had just been bundled up as dynamite with the rancid sourness on Kimiko's breath lighting the fuse.

"I—I did wake up sick, yes. That's around the time I found Lawliet, outside—"

Erin always hated it when people beat around the bush. Time was precious as it was. "You got plastered last night, didn't you?"

"What? N-n-no, I—"

"That's why you didn't call me. You were getting booze. I wonder how many cats you ran over last night. Hit a couple dogs, maybe some little kids too on the way?"

Halle, who stood in the corner to distance herself from the drama, perked up in alert at the string of uncharacteristically hateful words spewing from her charge's mouth.

"Erin, please! Yes, okay, fine, I admit it. I got a little bit tipsy last night but I didn't mean to—"

Lawliet had suffered for who knows how long under her car in the dead of night while she'd stumbled in the house and passed out in a no-doubt blissful heap on the floor, all in the pursuit of a single night of relief from her problems. If only Erin could afford such a luxury for herself.

"Tipsy, my foot! How could you do this to yourself? To Lawliet? Why?"

Kimiko lurched into herself like she'd just been punched in the gut. "I don't know, okay? I don't know! I just wanted to forget—"

"Forget what, Misa?"
"Erin, it's been weeks since she went missing and nothing's happened! Weeks, weeks, weeks! She's not coming back, I can feel it. My life has no meaning anymore. I'll be lucky if I get to see her in a body bag—"

"So you take out your frustrations by running over my cat in a hammered rage."

Tears poured down Kimiko's sunken cheeks. Christ, she hadn't been eating much, had she? "No! It wasn't like that! Erin please, I'm sorry, this is hard enough as it is—"

By now both Halle and the receptionist looked on, one wondering if they should intervene before the confrontation escalated into violence and the other preparing to. The baby blue walls closed them in like a boxing ring lined with portraits of cute fluffy cats and dogs, one of them a black kitten that made Erin think of poor Lawliet as a baby worthy of an Internet viral video.

"I can't believe what a selfish bitch you are. I'm out busting my ass trying to help you and the cops—I gave up my job, Kim! I don't have a place to live anymore. And what're you doin'? Spending money that ain't even yours to get drunk off your ass and fucking me up and down the street. No wonder your folks threw you out and Misa stopped talking to you. When the going gets tough, you're completely useless! Forget falling off the wagon, you practically jumped!"

For the shortest of moments, Erin forgot which Amane she was speaking to: Kimiko, or Misa. Unlike Misa who could work up quite a mouth during an argument, however, her sister's gaze turned blank with shock and a touch of despair. Her jaw fell, leaving her staring at Erin defenselessly like a fish in mid-gulp.

But history repeating itself, Erin was too wrapped up in her rage to realize the harm she'd just inflicted with her careless words. "You wanna prove to me you're sorry? Use your money for something useful this time. Get into rehab. Pronto. If you don't, I'm pressing charges."

"Y—you can't do tha—"

"Animal cruelty, drunk driving... just you watch me, Kimiko. I'm sick of being fucked over by everyone! It's a goddamn wonder I can even walk with how much people have fucked me! I don't need it from you too. We're done here. Don't speak to me again until you're committed."

What happened next was somewhat a blur: Kimiko hung almost completely over convulsing with ugly sobs like a bullied child, Halle heading over to do damage control, and Erin, the adrenaline flushing out of her system, racing for nowhere else but the bathroom. Only after seeing Kimiko break down again did her anger start draining out of her like blood from a fresh deep wound.

Holding on to the edge of the sink for dear life, she filled the sink with ice cold water and proceeded to splash her sweaty, damp, engorged face.

I can't believe I just blackmailed someone, she recalled with horror. I stand corrected. THAT has to be the most manipulative thing I've ever said. How could she say those things? What was happening to her? She didn't feel empowered. She felt like scum, the kind lining an old toilet pot. She should have seen this coming, Kimiko falling apart like this. The latter couldn't live without her little sister. Why hadn't she been there to stop her?

Oh yeah, because of Misa.

But killing Lawliet? Who knew how many more drinks she'd had since Misa disappeared? The Amane women ticked like bombs. They blew up when you least expected.

Umbra had been with her the whole time as a silent spectator and supporter. Always helpful, he
held back her hair as she washed her face and neck. "I'm sorry you had to see all that. I reckon you hate me now too, don't you?"

"Never. That woman killed your cat, and my namesake. How inconsiderate of her. She knows you've been under so much stress." The casual delivery of his next few words chilled her: "I'll kill her for you if you'd like."

**Sweet Lord on a motorcycle on fire jumping sharks how could L ever—**

"NO! No, no…don't. Please," she panted. "She doesn't deserve that. It was an accident. It's not gonna bring Lawliet back. I told you, I'm not having anyone die, 'specially not for my sake. She just needs some…tough love. If she checks in to rehab, she'll be taken care of for a while. I hope. Oh God…I don't know how she's gonna take it when we find Misa. If we do. I'm so dizzy…"

"No doubt, after all the shouting you've just done. My poor Erin. Come here."

Erin didn't know whether to find it worrisome that she could seem to do no wrong in Umbra's eyes. Even when she did. Perhaps because she was too tired to consider it that deeply.

She collapsed into his arms, supporting herself with her arms wrapped around his neck. Unable to hold in the next wave of tears, she wept into her shoulder while he stroked and patted her back.

Erin might as well. She would get no more time to grieve for Lawliet for some time after today.

"I'm…sorry about Lawliet. You loved him very much, didn't you?"

"Y-yeah. He was my best friend in a really low part of my life."

"Well…you still have me, at least." Not a very helpful response, but the intention was well. More or less. Erin could expect no else from a shinigami who even as a man had been emotionally stunted.

To her surprise, his smell was starting to become more tolerable, the longer she stayed around him. Not more pleasant. Just tolerable.

... The last time I told you I loved you, I shouted it for everyone to hear. For the whole world and Heaven and Hell to hear. If I died right then and there with those last words on my lips, I'd have been happy.

"Ah…hah…Mello…oh, right there. Right ther—ah!"

Except you didn't hear, did you? You don't remember either, do you? I do. I don't remember much else from that terrible day but I remember that, clear as lead glass.

As much as she missed seeing Mello's face and body, somehow the blindfold made their trysts that much more pleasurable. Maybe because when one sense was deprived, the rest of her body hyper-compensated for it. Since putting on the blindfold, the creaks of their bed and his grunts turned louder, the room warmer, their kisses wetter and saltier, the intrusion between her legs more welcomed. Misa thought she might suffocate from the sheer smell of sweat, sex and sin permeating the air.

The rush provided by the cocaine was icing on the filthy cake.
I wouldn't have cared if you'd told me you hated me. I wouldn't have blamed you for it then. I swore to be there for you even if it meant dying and I failed you. You're gone. I'm still here. At least you'd have felt something for me. I am a work of art. Your work of art. Or I was.

Misa's hands had moved on from Mello to the headboard to support herself as she bounced on top of him. He had one hand gripping her hip to the point of bruising (how she hoped his fingers would reinforce their print on her), the other both holding the condom in place and stimulating her manually, roughly, as she liked it. How he could be so skillful was a marvel to her.

As with most things, she'd learned not to waste time questioning things and just—Ah!—enjoy them.

But nothing? You couldn't find it in you to at least acknowledge my love?

To acknowledge me?

Had Misa always been a masochist, or had she picked that up from her tribulations with Light and Mello? She had been slightly frightened of this at first but quickly embraced it like everything else about her nature.

You'd never admit it—and neither would I—but you really were no better than me, and I was no worse than you. But that would have been all right. We could have had it all, all the same. It's not hard for people like us to get what we want.

"Mello, ah! Go! Go faster! H-harder! I need you, I need you to—ooooh, fuck me harder!"

I guess it's just part of my punishment. There's no one left who cares about me and you and there's no Heaven or Hell, at least for us.

"H-hit me! Please hit me! Hit me real hard!"

This had been far from the first time Misa had requested Mello to hit her during sex. There was just something so satisfying about suffering for a loved one (or someone close to it). Mello didn't always do it the first time she asked, to tease her, to spite her. This time was no different.

"No way! Hit yourself."

I can't see you. I've been lost and alone in the dark street searching for your hand since you left me. Yesterday I found it again, and it was cold and rotten. You jerked away like I was a stranger. A lowly urchin.

Her thighs ached from how far she spread them to accommodate him. But it wasn't enough. She needed one more hit.

What Misa wanted, Misa got.

"F-FINE! Then choke me!"

She heard him ask breathlessly, "What?"

"Are you deaf? I said choke me! Ch-choke me 'til I black out! Choke me with your rosary!"

Bingo.

How dare you? What kind of god deserts his followers in their need?
Wherever you are, wherever you go, I can't follow you.

I don't want to anymore.

The air cracked around her head and she gasped in both sharp white blistering agony and ecstasy coursing through her onward from her cheek where he had slapped her with his open palm.

"AHHHH, MELLO!"

Here, you bastard. See me defiling myself with the enemy like the shallow two-faced slut you always knew I was? Hear me singing my praises to someone who's not you?

"Rotten little bitch, I'll show you—"

In the darkness, Misa's eyes squeezed shut and braced herself. Like many times over she capsized and found herself sandwiched between the mattress and Mello's weight. Her legs protruding ungainly from either side of Mello's lithe waist, he licked and sucked voraciously at her neck and collar, pounding pounding pounding into her in a merciless frenzy. More bruises would turn up there later, more markers of his property.

You're not my god anymore. You had power only because I gave it to you. You should have never denied me.

Misa writhed under him and cheered him on, raking a hand over the hot soft skin and fine toned muscles of his back, the other tugging at his hair by the roots. The delicious pain and the obscene sound of their succulent flesh slapping together thrusted her over the edge of oblivion she wished one day to cross and never come back.

Fuck you, Light.

Fuck you Light fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you oh God fuck God oh Light FUCK YOU—

Misa rewarded her lover's brutish performance with one final scream of his name into the void, her insides exploding with that familiar electricity and fire and poison from her throbbing pelvis upward. She felt Mello squeeze her, trapping her to him as he finished up inside her. Slowly, carefully (agonizingly so), he slid out of her. She lay there spread-eagle gasping for air, her mind numb and her bones fluid, her ears pounding so hard with her thundering pulse that she almost didn't hear him discard the condom and wipe himself clean.

They let the sheets and their mutual passion cool before saying another word to each other. Misa wiggled a bit, basking in the warmth of his angry affections and the oh-so-short rush of endorphins. The afterglow that made her think every time that maybe just maybe she had fallen in love with the man next to her.

Or something approximate to love.

As it had done in the past, her mouth betrayed her. "Mmmm—I love you, Mello," she slurred into the dark.

She felt him tense up on her right. "No you don't."

"I do."

"Those are the hormones talking. You could care less about me."
"I do."

"Is that all you can say? Did I fuck you that well?" he asked, a smirk in his voice.

Misa giggled, curling her toes. "I do...think you're the best." He was her first. Even Light hadn't gotten that privilege. She would have loved Light to have her first but he missed his chance.

She scooted closer to him, only for him to pull away. "Could you not? It's hot. Gimme some air first, why don't you? Why do you always do this?"

Misa, gleeful, kicked her legs up, knocking the sheets into the air. "Because I love you."

Mello groaned. "If you loved me, you wouldn't have done that."

"Do what?"

"You asked me to choke you with my rosary."

"Oh. That. I didn't mean it. I just wanted to make you hit me so I could get off. I mean what else would you need that thing for? You've fallen from grace, just like me."

"I rest my case. My rosary is not a kinky sex toy. You wouldn't say something hurtful like that if you really loved me."

"But I didn't mean it!"

"It doesn't matter. Just stop telling me you love me when you don't, okay? This thing we have had nothing to do with love from the start so let's keep it that way. And before you ask, no, I don't love you, either."

...

...

Misa reached over to blindly grope at her side. When she found his mussed moist hair again, she brushed it with her fingertips. The direction was irrelevant. "Yeah, you're right. I'm just sleeping with you to get back at Light, and you're doing it to get back at L. Kira's number one follower and L's number one successor! Too bad they're not here. It'd be so much fun to see the looks on their faces if they caught us like this. All smelly and dirty and naked and happy in each other's company...and not theirs..."

Mello snorted, a grim humor shading it. "Yeah."

"Don't worry, Mello-yellow. I'm not that stupid. I know we have no future. I never cared for the future. Not really. Misa-Misa's all about the here and now. But you know...even if I don't love you, I do like you. Like, a lot. And you must like me too, at least a teeny bit."

"Well...I don't hate you. Sometimes I feel I should since you helped to bring on the end of L. But I can't. It'd be hypocritical of me to. After hearing what he did to you, I don't think I even feel that sad he's dead anymore."

"We're two of a kind. Thank you, Mello, for helping me find myself again. For letting me spend what's left of my time on you. It's been a pleasure doing business with you."

"Hn. And it's been a business doing pleasure with you."
"You can…come closer now, if you still want to."

Content for now, Misa nestled into his side, savoring the natural scent of his body wafting around her. He slid a bare arm around her, his hand resting over her breast. She took said hand into hers and pressed it closer to her, relishing its warmth against one of her more tender places.

"I'm sorry for saying that one thing earlier."

"Heh. No you're not. But thanks anyway."

Some minutes after Misa drifted off to sleep, Mello stirred to nervous raps along his doorway. He draped his share of the sheets over Misa's petite, exposed body and sat up. "Who's there?"

"It's Matt."

"Well, what is it?"

"Well?"

"They—we got 'em, Mello. We rounded up all the kids from Wammy's. Get dressed, the boys are bringing 'em in now."
"Look, over there. Another cat. It's not black like Lawliet was but you like calico color, don't you?"

Before Erin could respond either way, Umbra made a single mighty bound across the street to scoop up a plump, short-haired and indeed very cute and colorful cat lounging on someone's stoop. Clutching the animal underneath her front legs, he hopped from the roof of one moving car to another to present her. How no one noticed a cat floating over traffic went down in the books as another one of life's endless little mysteries. It could have had to do with the darkened skies and light drizzle, granted.

The cat didn't appear in distress but she did have a blank look on her white furry face. She "mrowed" at Erin and kicked her hind legs a bit, her long skinny tail wiggling behind her like an animated question mark.

Once she got her bearings back, Erin looked at Umbra from under her umbrella, unsure whether to find this next misguided gesture adorable or heartbreaking. She saw the cat's silver nametag swinging by the turquoise collar around her neck.

"Put her back, Umbra."

"Oh? You don't like calico color?"

"No, that's not it. All cats are beautiful. But Patches here already has a home, and someone who loves her."

"Oh dear. Why yes, she does."

L would have never missed little details like collars on pets. As much as she'd often thought he could stand to be nicer when he was alive—some small shred of good will did exist in him like it did in everyone, or so she'd always thought—this felt all wrong. Seeing him lick the toes of her shoes every chance he could with his mind popped like an overcooked bag of microwaved corn kernals.

Death was one thing. Losing one's identity and faculties before then? A whole new level of torture. (Or was it mercy? Erin wasn't yet smart enough to tell the difference, and maybe she never would be.)

"Don't worry. I'll find a cat who doesn't have an owner. There are plenty of stray cats about this city if I look hard enough, of all shapes and colors. A candy store of cats."

"N-no, c'mon, Umbra, it's too soon…"

"I may just be able to recover a black cat the same size as him—"

"Umbra!"

"Yes?"

"Forget it. I don't want another cat. Not now. Just…go put Patches back where you found her before her friend notices she's gone. See? She doesn't like being out here while it's wet."

Umbra stared at her wordless, but soon grunted, "Okay," and turned back to do as she'd asked.
Erin sighed, turning away herself to head back to the pavilion. They'd stopped at the closest rehab after claiming Lawliet, after which they'd gone back to the Amanes' house to let Kimiko pack her bags. Halle was inside with Kimiko, helping her check in. Just as she'd promised, Erin hadn't spoken a word to her since their big fight at the pet hospital. Regret continued to suck on her like a leech to her stomach but anger still rattled and rubbed her brain raw within her skull. Every time she tried to come up with an apology in her head, it just sounded mean and bitter. Not at all sincere or forgiving.

She'd just have to let herself be pissed off. At least if she kept quiet, stewed in silence under a lid, she couldn't do any more damage.

Except silence can be just as hurtful as words. In this case, it was. She could just feel the pain radiating off of Kimiko even without so much as looking into her tattered sponge of a face. She could hear it in the ragged rhythm of her breaths as she tried to recover from crying so much. It hurt like nails repeatedly jabbed into her ears.

She couldn't win.

Umbra bounded back to her. Like her shadow, always with her. Hell, he basically was her shadow now, wasn't he? "Are you sure you don't want a cat?"

"I haven't even gotten around to burying my first cat. Why would I want another one this soon?" she asked him wearily.

For some reason he hung upside-down from the support beam facing her like a bat. "I just don't like seeing you sad," he said. "I want to see you happy again."

Erin scanned her surroundings for passersby. Though she saw no one, she lowered her voice. "I get what you're trying to do, buddy, and I appreciate it. But...sometimes you just gotta let people be sad." She saw him curl into himself a little at the word "buddy," like how many small furry animals did if you tickled their belly.

"You said people who love each other make each other feel better. I don't want you sad, so I can't let you."

Oh great. Now he was throwing her own words back at her. How L of him. Chances were, L hadn't known how to grieve even then. He either couldn't or wouldn't let himself, and he hadn't had much time between Watari's death and his own to start learning. It wasn't his style. L had wanted to die as he lived: cracking cases like Brazil nuts. He knew practically nothing else.

Looks like it's time for another lesson on being human.

She clasped her hands together. "People aren't like cell phones or cars or clothes or credit cards. When you lose them, they can't be replaced. When they die they're gone, forever. End of story. Like, you see them practically every day and then suddenly...for no good reason at all...you don't anymore. That's tough. Then you'd be sad 'cause you miss them and you don't know what to do without them. It's called grieving. Sure, I could get another cat tomorrow. I could even get one right this minute. But he wouldn't be Lawliet. Our relationship wouldn't be the same as the one I had with him.

"Kind of like you and me, actually."

"Hmm?"

Erin wondered if she should have said that. But it was too late to take it back. She had his
undivided attention. He wouldn't leave her alone until she talked, and still wouldn't afterwards. Pressing her umbrella down on her thighs with her forearms, she caught someone staring at her on their way up to the entrance.

Beyond embarrassment at this point, she sniped, "What're you looking at? Huh, never seen someone talk to themselves before?"

The woman passed her by, saying not a word but her heels clacking louder on the sidewalk as she slightly picked up her pace.

"Where was I? Oh yeah. I hope you don't mind me saying, but when you were L there were some things about you I didn't like. Some things I honestly downright hated. But…there were things about you that I liked, too. Like how you were clever…and daring…and determined. When you wanted to be, anyway. I guess it helped you were kind of sad and pathetic too, not that you didn't try to play it off." She shrugged. "I'm a sucker for sad sacks. Can't tell you why, 'specially after all the trouble it's gotten me in."

... "I've really missed you since you died. I still regret never telling you these things when I had the chance. Although it has crossed my mind whether you knew already by the time I left. Just about nothing got past you. Not that that makes it better."

"But…I'm right here. You told me just today and last night that I am L."

She nodded. Normally she would get testy with how long it was taking for Kimiko to get her affairs in order but this was one of those few times when she felt thankful for having to wait. "That's right. You were L. That's the problem. You may have been L long ago, but you aren't anymore. You act a lot like him but otherwise you're someone else now. You've got different memories, different moods, different morals…kind of…even things between us aren't the same as before. Not really. For one thing, we used to bicker and fight."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Like, a lot. At least three times a day. And that was on our peaceful days. I don't miss the fighting, mind you. But I—I do kinda miss the arguments and bickering. A lotta 'em we never really resolved but they were…interesting. You were interesting," she confessed with a mild blush heating her cheeks. "Pretty much the main thing that ain't changed is that even after everything I still love you."

...

"So…even though we've found each other again, you're still sad because you miss who I used to be. And because they wouldn't be like Lawliet, you'd still be sad even if I gave you a new cat."

She flashed a smile not without mourning. "You're catching on quick. That's another thing I liked about you—still do. What I'm trying to say ultimately is that…um…people can't move on if you don't let them grieve first. You can't be happy without first being sad."

Umbra tapped a claw against his rags. If he wanted to reply, however, he was deferred by Halle exiting the building. Though she had an excellent poker face, the rare glaze in her eyes did more than enough to convey how tired she was of all this drama. Nevertheless, Halle's patience and quiet mediation was without value or compare.

It came naturally to her as a daughter of bitterly divorced parents, neither of whom had been above
forcing her into the middle of their squabbles, each trying to use her to hurt the other.

"Kimiko's all settled in," she announced. "Did you want to say goodbye to her?"

Erin, against her heart's wishes, shook her head. "I've got nothing else to say to her right now. I'll call her later."

"That's fine. She didn't feel much like talking to you either."

As the three loaded up into the car, Erin glanced into the rearview mirror to meet Halle's gaze. "I'm…sorry you got dragged into the middle."

"Forget it. It's not like anything new has happened since we brought back Takada's notebook. I can't say I've got no bad feelings about it…"

They were in the eye of the hurricane right now. Any moment they'd all be plunged back into chaos in their corner of the world.

"What are you planning to do with your cat? He can't stay in the car. Are you going to bury him?"

Erin's heart constricted inside her throat. "I…I don't know. Neither of us have lived in LA for that long, so there's no place I can think of that's special enough."

And I get a feeling I won't be staying here for long either. I didn't know Rem hardly at all when we buried her. The best place we could come up with for her was Aokigahara, that creepy forest outside the city. At least she had that. There's no place here for Lawliet.

"I'm still trying to remind myself he's dead. I-I can't just leave him, not again."

Halle folded her arms. "Then get an urn and cremate him. You can keep him around that way. If we hurry we can still get an appointment. I can pitch in for the cost if I have to."

The thought of cooking her cat in an oven made Erin violently ill. It sounded so barbaric, especially after what he'd been through. But what else was she to do? Halle was right. She envied the woman's clear head in trying times.

If the interest existed, Stephen would be better off with someone like Halle, not a weepy nervous wreck like herself.

"Alternatively, you could take him to a taxidermist and have him stuffed and mounted."

"No-no-no-no-no," sputtered Erin, recalling her lifelong wariness of taxidermy animals and the reason she'd actively avoid the nature exhibits at the American Museum of Natural History. Maybe other pet lovers wanted to honor their late animal friends that way, but not her. It felt undignified and just plain wrong. She wanted to remember Lawliet as a warm, squirmly and weird cat with bright, roving eyes. Not a piece of furniture stuffed with sawdust where his heart used to be, with soulless plastic eyes and no other purpose than to remind her of her loss.

Besides if she was going to travel more often, she'd have to pack light.

Again, she couldn't win.

"I'm just pitching suggestions."

"I know. I—I'll have him cremated. Sounds like the best thing to do."
"All right. Let's go and get it over with."

"Yeah, before I lose my nerve."

In the back seat, Umbra took Erin's hand into one of his. His paw eclipsed her hand in size and his skin no less rough or cold than from all the other times they'd touched, but still she found herself squeezing his thumb. She leaned into him, and he slipped his other two arms on his side behind her to do the same.

They'd held hands a few times before, back when Umbra was L. Every time it'd felt awkward, even a bit surreal. Yet kind of enthralling in a screwy way she couldn't explain. Was it the touch of his skin? The feeling of their fingers lacing together? Once they'd made contact, for some reason she would get reluctant to let go again.

Sometimes after the fact she wondered if he ever felt the same way about it, and if he did how many times.

This time it felt more awkward than nice, considering L was now a giant killer ghost who'd likely ruined all of Stephen's clothes just to spend more time with her one on one. (He always was too childish for his own good, and everyone else's.) Either way, he didn't let go until they got to the pet crematorium.

Once again, Erin stayed outside after handing over Lawliet's body. She just couldn't stand to be in there while they literally burned him to ashes. Not a minute went by when she wasn't wiping her eyes dry on her wrists.

Until she remembered she might knock out her contact lenses. Why did she even bother putting those on? Maybe she was better off blind?

Umbra only left her side to come back not even a minute later with a stack of paper towels, whereupon yet another crack popped in her chest. "Thanks, man," she sniffed, balling up a sheet to blow her nose.

"Anything for you," he said, reaching over to lightly rub circles on the mole on the top of her head like it was lucky. Erin, who had taken off her hat out of respect for Lawliet, stopped.

"Uh…Umbra?"

"I love every part of you, you know. Even the parts you prefer to hide. Your mole is why you like to wear your hat. Your hat gives you security."

Erin didn't answer him. She couldn't figure what to say to that. He wasn't wrong. When she was growing up Farley and others sometimes used to call her a rhino for that damn mole that defiantly poked out of her hair no matter what she did to hide it.

Her fedora was a security blanket she could wear on her head, for more reasons than one. But over time, it became one of those things she got too tired to care about anymore. People eventually get more important things to worry about than inconveniently placed moles.

"Sometimes I like to imagine lines connecting the moles on your body to make pictures."

"Whoa-whoa-whoa, too much information!" she blurted.

"I'm being honest. For instance, if you connect the moles dotting your lower back, they would resemble an ice cream cone with two scoops." Having never had the opportunity to see this for
herself (it is difficult for one to see their backside even with a mirror unless they can turn their head far enough), she had no choice but to take his word for it.

Never mind that. He'd just admitted to watching her rather extensively in the buff with not a single second's provocation or warning. How much more mortifying could he make this?

"Y-yeah but—there-there is a limit. You can be too honest."

"Oh? When can one be too honest?"

She struggled to come up with a good answer as the fever surged throughout her face and into her ears. "W-well, here's a rule of thumb: if it's not something you think I absolutely need to hear, then you probably should keep it to yourself."

Umbra scratched his head. "That's...not very helpful. I can think of nothing I would rather not share with you, especially if it's about you." Erin balked upon hearing this, a complete 180 from the secretive and deceptive attitude he'd had as a human.

L had been, and was still, a man of extremes. He'd simply traded some of those extremes for others since his reincarnation.

"Love is beginning to sound more nuanced than you let on last night."

"I-I prefaced it with a disclaimer, didn't I? I said love's a little different on a case-by-case basis. I was just talking about what made all love the same so you know what to call it when you see it. Come on, I'd have thought you of all people would be all over the shades of gray in between. But, maybe that's changed too...besides, I'm only 23. S'not like I-I'm a guru or nothing."

"Shades of gray," he echoed pensively. And for a few moments more he said nothing else. What was he thinking about now? What part of his decrepit soul would he lay bare this time?

"There's something else I want to share."

She got her answer before she got the mind to ask for details.

"I can't say my life has been miserable per se—the one I can remember, at least—but it hasn't been happy either. I would call it...gray. Cold. Empty. Bland. A perpetual rainy day. Like today, actually. I've had Lumen for company but there have been times when I suspected that even he doesn't like me. Not really. I think he chose me as a friend for the same reason he chose Mello to possess: because I had something to offer him. What would you call it...vanity? Yes, that's it. Otherwise, I don't think Lumen truly likes anyone except himself.

"Still I stayed with him, because I do like him and besides I had no one else. It's a shame how we've ended up on opposing sides. Then, and apparently even now."

I can see how you two would be attracted to each other. Birds of a feather...doesn't quite work when you're both egotistical two-timing freaks.

"Then I saw you and everything changed, like how sunlight splits the clouds. Slowly, surely the rain stopped. My world became warm and fresh and new for the first time. Better still, I followed you and found a rainbow. Look, just like that."

Son of a gun. Sure enough, Erin shielded her face and looked upward to see a ray of sunshine breaking through the dark dissipating clouds. The drizzle had dialed down to the occasional drop on her arms or her forehead. As the sky began to brighten, she could make out a ghost of a rainbow
far away on the horizon, arching high above the skyscrapers and highways. A longtime sign of hope and recovery. They all sure could use such a sign right now.

"You are my ray of sunshine, Erin. Metaphorically speaking. Without you, I don't believe I would have found Near and Roger. Or I might have found them another way, but then I wouldn't have seen you again. I hesitate to call it fate—it could have very well just been chance—but I'm glad it happened all the same."

Such poetry. Although on second thought, it wasn't completely out of character for L. In the most inopportune moments he would spin a line or two that could qualify as poetry or riddles. His ramblings about "the bell" in the rain came first to mind. Still, she was unused to hearing him speak so sentimentally about anything, let alone anyone, let alone mean it.

Was this how Rem had felt about Misa, or how Misa had felt about Light? Was this how L had felt about her, telling her so only now when he had nothing left to lose? Poor bastard. Poor proud, stubborn, constipated old bastard.

He brushed his cheekbone against her hair. "I suppose that's why I can't stand seeing you sad. Because it makes me sad. Like the sun's gone away and it's raining again."

"Well, uh…I'm flattered to know that's what you think of me. I really am. Except, you can't expect me to be a ball of sunshine all the time. No one can. Though believe me, I'd love to be. Sometimes I-I wish I could put my arms around the triple-W and heal it. But my arms aren't long enough and my heart's not big enough. I-is that stupid?"

"Never. Sentimental, perhaps, but what's wrong with sentimental?" Should Erin have asked him that? He was biased. Not something she would've once expected L to say, either. Maybe.

"It's uncool, or so they say. My point is, I can't be sunny all the time even when I want to. Sometimes I'll be…"

A raging storm.

"…a plain ol' jackass. As, uh, you already saw. You can't get a rainbow without rain, you know."

If Umbra did consider her a jackass (of which chances were nil), he did not show it. He pulled her closer instead, situating her between his giant legs on the bench so he could admire her from directly below him like a penguin with his pebble.

"Come to think of it, I've been unable to ignore how unhappy you've seemed since we united. Or re-united, as it were. Is it…because of me?"

"No" crossed Erin's fragmenting mind but she pushed it aside. No more lies, they'd vowed. "Y… yeah, kind of. You've been a total unprovoked jerk to Stephen, for one thing. But it's not all you. It's everything that's been going on since you died the first time. Light may be gone but Kira isn't. I don't know if he'll ever be."

Kira was a massive period stain on the underwear of humanity. No matter how many times one ran him through the wash, he wouldn't come out. Or if he did he'd show up again later, bigger and bloodier. In a way, Kira may have existed long before Light was even a twinkle in his parents' eyes. He simply went by a different name per era, per dynasty, per empire, per regime. A god of death who happened to live in and on human hearts.

"Don't forget, I'm not the only one you've made unhappy."
Yes. I spoke to Near last night as you asked. He's very sad, and very angry. I imagine Mello is, too. Suppose there's still a chance to reconnect with him when we find him?

Suppose he still had that chance with Near. Maybe.

But Mello? The forecast looked bad. Even after all the horrible things he'd done, L still cared for him. (Boy, L sure was a hypocrite. At least that hadn't changed. Then again, it wasn't so different from her case with Misa, really.)

Had Near and Mello and all the other kids at Wammy's been on L's mind too when he'd made the choice to kill himself?

Why he couldn't have showed the kids this when he was still alive was beyond anyone now. She just had to do what she could to help rebuild the bridge.

Halle came outside with her cell phone up to her ear. "Erin, now would be a good time to come inside. Pick out the urn you want. Yeah. Okay, Gevanni. We'll be back as soon as we can."

Something else had happened, hadn't it? Erin could see it from the taut look on Halle's voice, hear it in the mild frustrated tone of her voice. Someone cut them a break!

"What's wrong now?"

"I'll tell you when we're done here. Now come in; we haven't got too much time."

…

"What d'ya mean Wammy's House got burned down?"

"Ms. Blogger, there is no need to shout."

"No need to shout? 'No need to shout,' he says! You tell us someone up and blew up Wammy's House and then you say there's no need to shout," she roared, her voice breaking into several coughs with the sudden lack of air in the room. That could have been just her, though. Everyone else seemed to breathe normally enough.

"I understand this is a natural response to such news—and if anything, Watari and I have more of a right to be distressed than you since this affects us more directly—but hysteric is least helpful to the problem at hand."

Erin glanced helplessly around the room, the center of which everyone had gathered around Near's computer. When she could find no answers in the drained, tense faces of her comrades, she dropped her head into her hands. She could no longer bear to look at the picture of the smoky skeleton that used to be the illustrious academy and children's home.

It had taken almost six years to build it and just under six minutes to reduce it to a smoldering pile of bricks and glass. And with the property so far out in the countryside, no one might have noticed anything were it not for the billows of smoke licking at the gloomy grey autumn skies above, after the fact.

Quite sobering when Erin thought about it long enough, despairing if for too long.

And perhaps that was what Mello had aimed for?

Oh no. The kids! What had happened to them? Please God don't let those kids be—
"L! What about the kids? The teachers? Anyone? Are they okay? How many…"

She couldn't say it. She dared not say it, for fear it would make it come true.

Whatever distress Near wrestled with on the matter, he hid well. "No. They're all still alive."

Erin released a sigh of incredulous relief.

Relief that turned out ephemeral as Near ruined it with the following news: "They've been abducted instead. The students, the staff, even the caretaker filling in for Roger."

"Kidnapped? By the Winchester social services?" asked Anthony in disbelief. This had to be the first time Erin had seen him even a little rattled. The man was a commander, too, so you knew when something was a true blue clusterfuck to see him this way. And well he should be rattled. Governments weren't supposed to turn on their people like this.

Except they knew better.

No. Rather, they knew worse.

"M. He used the Death Note to evacuate the school through five social service agents who had come to investigate the allegations against it. They had planted homemade bombs in each room and ignited them after the fact. The local government must be drowning in scandal, as we speak."

"BOMBS? Jesus Christ, the balls on this kid!" snapped Erin, her fingers digging into her scalp. "Does he want to plunge the whole world into chaos?"

Wedy uncrossed her legs only to recross them the opposite way, her arms folded under her bust. She didn't like to admit it, but perhaps she was starting to get old for this shit? "Who knows? But even if that's not what he's actively going for, it's pretty clear he at least doesn't care about collateral damage. Jeez L, what'd you do to piss him off this much?"

"That question would be directed more towards my predecessor rather than myself. You will find him situated on your left playing with Ms. Blogger's hair."

Indeed, Umbra had been passing the time waiting for Sidoh to return by delicately combing and twirling locks of Erin's hair around his claws from behind her. It took her back to the time when their band had gone out to see a movie, when L had spooked her—to put it mildly—by picking at her hair in the darkness. The incident had gotten them all kicked out of the theater.

In hindsight, L did show some mild (and unusual) interest in that particular part of her. This time he was granted access to it as she had neglected to tie it up. He had abruptly stopped his motions upon hearing the news of the Wammy children's abduction, allowing Erin to tear away from him.

Wedy lowered her shades to look over the remnants of her old boss and grimaced. "Oh, right. Uh… never mind. On second thought, it's not that important. What does matter is how we stop him. What does M want with the kids?"

"What else? He's holding them for ransom. In fact, M just contacted us early this morning to discuss his conditions. Watari, please download the file so everyone may take a listen."

Sure enough, L's insignia vanished from the screen. In its place a window popped open bearing the letter M in a corrupted version of the Old English font (not unlike the font Misa had used for the tapes she'd made for Sakura TV, Erin noticed with nausea wringing her guts).
"Hello, L. Bet you didn't expect to hear from me again. I paid a visit to our old home the other day. It's too bad that I missed you, not that I was surprised at all to not find you around. Sorry for the mess I made of the house—and any of your old toys I might have broke—but don't worry. Only the guys I had handle the bombs are dead. Everyone of interest to you is fine. For now."

Listening to Mello's voice for the first time turned Erin's blood to slush and put a cramp in her chest. Even the voice scrambler he'd used to deepen his voice couldn't mask the bitterness and malicious satisfaction lacing his words. The kind of satisfaction one enjoyed when they got one taste of sweet revenge and licked their lips for more. It was really of little wonder why Misa fell into his posse. She'd found someone just like her.

"Since I've got your attention, here are my demands. It's nothing much: just the notebook you took from Takada and Mikami…and a list of all of your contacts. Yours and Watari's. Pictures only."

Pictures only?

Oh shit. Mello had the Eyes now, didn't he?

No. Not him.

Misa.

If Mello was anything like Light, he wouldn't make such a horrible trade when he had someone so unhappy with life and love she would more than gladly do it in his stead.

And so history repeats itself.

Erin might have started up crying again were it not for two of Umbra's paws resting on each of her shoulders. Another first: she swore she could feel him shiver. She didn't think shinigami could shiver. But she did know it wasn't from cold.

Was Umbra worried about the kids, too? Or was it…?

Regardless, she reached over to lay her hand over his paw on her right, cold and rough and gnarly as it was. As soon as they made contact, his shivering subsided and his grip on her relaxed. Even shinigami needed comfort sometimes.

"I understand you're a busy man, but keep in mind so are we. I won't beat around the bush with you: if I don't see you by midnight on October 1st…I'll kill them. Either one by one, or hell, maybe all of them at once? I haven't yet decided. I must confess I'd love to see how you try to cover that up, but we both know dead hostages are useless.

"Oh, and by the way, L…I want you to deliver the goods personally. I know what you look like so I'll know if you try to send a proxy in your place. Do that and I'll start killing the kids. You won't be hiding behind Watari or the police this time. Oh yes, I'll be needing his photo, too. Don't bother trying to alter his appearance, either; I'll know if you do. Again, I'll kill them if you try.

"You've got four days to get things together. As for the issue of where we are, I'll leave it to you to figure out. You're smart. But I will give you a hint to start: we're not far from you. A hop, skip and jump away, actually.

"Well that's about it for the time being. I look forward to seeing you one last time. Don't be late."

Just like that, the harrowing message ended. Erin had to stumble through her fog of confusion and terror, remind herself she wasn't just watching a thriller movie approaching its climax, before she
could find the capacity to speak again. Four days. Four days to give him everything he needed to end L once and for all, or Mello would kill all his old housemates. He sure didn't mess around.

"He...he's not really gonna kill all those kids, is he? H-he coulda done that when he blew up the House but he didn't—"

Halle looked at her with dwindling patience, her tone grave and blunt. "No. The Death Note doesn't work if you try to use it to kill more than one person at a time, and besides he needs leverage against L. Personally, he lost my sympathy after he killed our partners."

"Yeah, hon. There's no point trying to find a single shred of good will left in him," remarked Wedy. "Surely you've learned that lesson by now?"

Erin hung her head, her face burning with shame and a growing sense of hopelessness towards the bleakness of...well, everything. They were right. She was grabbing at straws at this point, wasn't she?

From behind her, she heard Umbra growl. "Don't listen to them," he whispered into her ear. "Your compassion towards others is a power all of its own."

Oh, Umbra. Not that she didn't believe him (at least she wanted to believe her "power" wasn't just another fatal weakness), but could he get any cheesier?

"Hmmm...b-but wait! He doesn't know who the rest of your pack are, does he? Can't we just give him some—some Photoshopped versions of their pictures or something?"

"It wouldn't be worth the effort. M knows Watari's face as well as he knows mine. Once he gets his name with the Shinigami Eyes, he can use the Death Note to control him to eliminate everyone else in our association. As he is bound to do when he gets my name the same way..."

"We...we can't just let him kill all those kids and teachers," said Stephen softly. "They're innocent in all this."

"L?"

No, no, no. This was all wrong. L didn't give up no matter how dire the situation looked...well, okay, that wasn't 100 percent right. But she didn't think Near would just give up like that. Not that stubborn little bastard, no way no how.

Was he giving up? It could have been Erin imagining it in her panic but it sure sounded like it. Her heart pounded against her skull and then her ribs and then back against her skull.

She would not let him.

Not again.

"We can put a stop to this," said Umbra, the volume of his voice making it ambiguous as to whether he was addressing her or everyone in the room. "Give me the Death Note. I know M's name now. I can write down his name and end this once and for all—"

"NO, YOU CAN'T!"

Before she realized it, Erin had launched off the sofa and was on her feet, her head light from the speed at which she had gotten up before her blood could evenly distribute through it. But that did nothing to damper the emotion coursing through her.
"No-no-no-no! I thought we had this conversation this morning? God, is your memory that bad? I ain't using the Death Note for any reason! And before you say anything," she barked at the computer with a defiant finger jabbed at the tiny camera on top of the monitor, "there's 'cheating' and then there's stooping to the other guy's level for no good reason. We are not, nor will we ever, use that goddamned notebook."

She panted, lowering her voice when she quickly lost the air necessary to maintain this volume. Her knees wobbled underneath her, but somehow she continued to stand her ground. "S-seriously, I've seen what it does to people. Come on, look at Umbra. He just used it on himself and this is what happened to him. It's just plain not worth the trouble."

Umbra said nothing. Near, on the other hand spoke up: "You do have a point. Killing M alone won't solve anything. There's still the matter of rescuing the entire student body and staff from the mob itself. If I do call in reinforcements, they might slaughter them all anyway in retaliation. Whatever we decide to do, I'd like to keep the number of casualties to a bare minimum.

"Having said that, have you any better ideas, Ms. Blogger? I'm open to suggestions."

Erin would look back on this later on and think of this as the moment where Near decided to muster up the bravery to truly deviate from L. L was more or less deaf to offers to help, and the unnatural shape he had taken on was the price he'd paid for it.

Near? Near would be a different story, with a much different ending.

What would make this moment sweeter was that for once, Erin did have an answer to this question. No one knew this for the time being, though. For now, she let a tired and nervous smile stretch her mouth. "Actually…I think I do. Here's the short version: we call up my buddies from the NPA and get Umbra and Sidoh to go in and clean house before we do. M would never see it coming."

"And I'll go with you myself."

Everyone grunted, all eyes upon her with question. It felt as if the whole wide world was asking her, "Girl, have you gone insane?"

Yes. Maybe so. But if that were the case, Erin reckoned she'd gone nuts a while ago.

She tugged at the collar of her shirt. "D'oh, that came out wrong. Guess I'd better go with the long version instead—"

Before she could elaborate, she thought she saw a massive shadow drop down the wall in the darkest corner of the room. When she turned her head, so did everyone else.

A table toppled noisily to the floor, assuring them all of the watchman's return.

"Ah, Sidoh. Welcome back," greeted Umbra. "How did it go?"

…

Why did he come down here? He had no business being here. There were plenty of guys here who could take on the duty of feeding the hostages. Why take it upon himself? He hated working. He shouldn't be here. They'd recognize him. They'd lash out at him.

Or worse, God forbid, they'd look to him for salvation. He'd tried being someone's savior before. It didn't work out. Had it, none of them would be here now.
Still, none of the above could stop Matt's trek down the stairs with plastic bags—one full of
sandwiches, one with water—clutched in his sweaty hands. How they twitched for cigarettes. How
his chapped lips ached to wrap around the one thing that could pacify him these days besides his
games.

Each metal step clanged beneath his feet like the rattles of a chain gang as Zakk and Glen led the
way, mumbling between them how above this menial labor shit they were.

At least Mello had been kind enough to leave them here in this cellar with the bare necessities: a
toilet over here, a shower adjacent to it, a pile of blankets and pillows lining the far wall which
were rather clean given the grim setting. But with pipes bending and twisting along every wall and
not a window in sight, two widely spaced rows of lights swinging from the support beams
overhead cast the makeshift dungeon and everyone in it in a hazy halo of grubby gold that marked
them for damnation whether they made it out of here alive or not.

Matt tried in vain to block out from his hearing the muffled sobs of the younger children as they
clung to older ones or to teachers and caretakers and begged to go back home, to blur their haggard
tear-stained faces from his vision through the orangish tinge of his goggles. I don't know these
people, he repeated to himself, which wasn't a total lie. The House had gotten some new additions
since his and Mello's departure. As he should have expected. Life hadn't stopped just because
they'd decided to drop out, as much as many would prefer to believe.

What happened next when the door's hinges groaned was a fiery haze, playing out like a fever
dream he'd had once when he was sick, or a hallucination he'd had from the time he'd sniffed glue.
He saw a howling little boy darting towards him, probably finding an escape without the
wherewithal to know better, only for Glen to obstruct his path and pick up his tiny squealing body
by one of his suspenders, shouting inappropriate things at him.

(Not that Matt would know better.)

A young woman in a ponytail and paint-stained smock charged up then, angrily demanding Glen to
leave Olly alone, pick on someone his own size. That voice…it sounded like Linda. So she was an
art teacher now, huh?

Matt's body seemed to act against his will. He saw his hands drop the bags and latch around the
crook of Glen's tan beefy arm, the one gripping Linda's hair in a fist, but was powerless to whatever
had possessed him that second.

A voice that sounded like his yelled, "Hey fuck off, Glen! Leave 'em alone!"

If Zakk had pulled his thumb out of his ass at any time to break up the ensuing scuffle, Matt didn't
notice. Mainly because a loud crack surrounded him and he found himself kissing the floor, a hot
dark fluid leaking out of his nose and trickling down his scratched chin.

But even that couldn't compare to the two thunderous BANGs that split the air above him. He did
recognize those shots. Every gun had a distinct voice. He groped for the rusty railing, hearing Glen
howling and screaming obscenities behind him. Something about his foot and Mello what the fuck
did you do that for?

A pair of leather boots banged down the steps, accompanied by a matching pair of tight-fitting
trousers that came to a stop next to his cheek. Despite the water in his eyes, he knew those legs. He
could see them through the one lens that hadn't cracked from the impact of Glen's fist in his sorry
face.
"Next time it'll be your cocks. Get out," was all Mello said, low and menacing. It was all he had to say.

"Yeeeeaaaah, go Mello! Show them who's boss," cheered Misa from presumably the top of the steps, an unmistakable thrill underlining her voice at this violent display of manhood. One of several voices he never wanted to hear again.

Only when Linda called out to him did Matt regain full consciousness once more:

"Matt? Is that you?"

She saw him. Shit.

The mere shock and betrayal in those four words injected his body with enough speed to carry him up the stairs before he fumbled again, cursing himself all the way for his boundless jackassery. Forget the fire and brimstone and torture devices. This was the real picture of Hell.

His ears rang so loud he barely heard Zakk kicking the bags into the room only to slam the door on their prisoners again.
Insist

The shocked expressions on Aizawa and company to see breathless Soichiro on his doorstep in the middle of the night was sorely discouraging though unsurprising. It only worsened as he shoved the greeting card into Aizawa's bewildered hands and tried to explain himself.

"Please Aizawa, you have to let me go with you!" He was shaking so violently Matsuda stepped up to offer him a seat lest he fall over and break something else. The last thing he needed right now. "H-he said he'd kill Sachiko and Sayu if I don't come."

Aizawa, feeling rather light in the head himself, sat down parallel to his senior and former boss. "M's shinigami sent you this? That doesn't make any sense. Why would it give you M's location? Moreover, why you? What would it want with you specifically?"

Soichiro's next few words tore out of him like shards of glass slicing up his throat. "Because Lumen—that's what he called himself—he's my son. He's Light."

Once upon a time none of them would so much as entertain the notion of people coming back from the dead, never mind as monsters. Those things only happened in myth and the movies. So they'd all thought before discovering the Death Note.

"He…he called me Father and everything."

"N-n-no way! You're telling me that was Light calling you?" sputtered Matsuda, the first to respond to this bombshell. "Th-th-th-that can't be! Light's dead, and even if he wasn't he would never do that! Never ever! M must have put his shinigami up to it, he must have!"

"If that's the case, I'd like to know what he did that for," muttered Ide. "L's the one with the notebook now, not us. Why would he single out Yagami? He's not with the police anymore, he's got nothing to do with this. No offense, Yagami. Besides, it's not like M to give away his location just like that. I think it's more likely the shinigami did it on his own free will…"

Matsuda fell speechless again. Whatever faith in his fallen friend he'd still desperately clung to in the sea of grief for these past four years was rapidly slipping away from him like debris from under a shipwrecked man. Soichiro could see it in the shine in his eyes and his own broken heart reached out to catch him in its place.

None of them ever knew Light at all, had they? The young man they'd known, worked with, respected, loved? A trick of the light. After all, no one would think much of the moon were it not for its beauty, and even that wasn't truly its own.

Of course that hadn't been on his or Sachiko's mind when they'd named him. But that was when they were young and naïve and bursting with hope.

Aizawa quickly cut through the sentiment. "I—I don't know what game this thing is trying to play with you…"

He's not a thing. He's my son.

"…but I don't like the sound of this one bit. It sounds like a trap. You can't come with us. You're in no shape—"

"Aizawa! You can't seriously expect me to just ignore him! He's going to kill my wife and
"daughter!" he roared, lunging at him and only catching himself in the nick of time before he could topple onto his face. Or Aizawa's lap. "His own mother and sister... all because he wants to get back at me."

"He... could be bluffing," said Mogi, a bead of sweat condensing on his face. "What if he just said that to get you to meet him?"

"I can't take any chances! He knows Sachiko and Sayu's names and faces. What do you want me to do, get on my knees and beg?"

"Yagami, stop it! Get a hold of yourself. You don't have to do anything." Seeing Soichiro fall apart almost frightened Aizawa, though he'd never dare say so. This man used to be the strongest of their group. "We... we won't let anything happen to Sachiko or Sayu. I promise."

"You can make me that promise a thousand times and it still wouldn't matter. He wants me," Soichiro snarled. "Don't make me ask you again. Because I'm not asking for permission anymore. I'm stating."

He did have a point, madcap as it was. Even if they did leave him here, he'd catch the next flight to Los Angeles, someway, somehow. Neither man nor nature could stop Soichiro Yagami when a problem triggered his boundless determination. Once he'd driven a police bus through Sakura TV to retrieve the Second Kira's tapes from the studio. Mind as well, this had been merely days after landing himself in the hospital for his first heart attack.

Aizawa should have known from the start that even he, with all his recalcitrance, couldn't stop him for long. For this reason, the Chief of the NPA hung his head and sighed, fighting back the tears welling up in his own eyes.

What would become of him? Of any of them? Of himself? He'd have thought he'd gone numb by now to the lethal uncertainty inherent to wearing a badge, but no. Never. Eriko certainly hadn't. That's why she'd left him. She couldn't take it anymore.

With a clenching hand on either of the other man's shoulders, he asked one more question in a last feeble effort to delay him (though he knew the answer before Soichiro could say it aloud):

"Have you got all your affairs in order?"

..."Oh Umbra, I almost died going back up there," Sidoh whined, trembling in apprehension like the last leaf on a tree seconds before its descent. "I went and peeked through the portal like you asked and Midora spotted me from literally a mile away! She's still really ticked off. I don't know how but I just barely managed to jump back down to the human world before she could grab me. I sure hope those bananas stall her like you said. Y-y-you owe me lots of chocolate!"

"Well, even if they don't stave off her tantrum, which I doubt they will not, she can't get at you now," Umbra calmly reminded him. "And worry not, you'll get your reward soon enough. Did you at least get to see where M and Lumen are?"

Sidoh lurched over as if to catch his breath, if shinigami had breath, that is. "I... I think I did. I saw them, Umbra. I saw them just like you said."

Umbra nodded. "Very good. Where were they?"

"They're... they're in Los Angeles."
"Oh. How convenient. That's exactly where we are."

Every human in the room gasped in surprise. How could M have been under their noses this whole time? In the name of fairness, however, one usually considers their enemy to be hiding far out of reach when searching for them. Besides, Mello had done well to keep them distracted for as long as he had, and when it wasn't him it was Kiyomi and Teru whether they'd meant to help him or not.

"Did you see the street?"

Sidoh racked his brain for the answer. "Uh-huh. I-I think it was Clayborne…no, Cleveland? D'oh, I remembered it just a second ago…quick! Someone gimme some chocolate!"

Umbra turned to the task force to hastily order a chocolate bar, a call which always-dependable Stephen promptly answered. "Here, give him this," he offered, fishing out a Hershey's™ chocolate bar from his bathrobe pocket. "I knew it was a good idea to pick this up. I hope he likes Special Dark™."

Without thanking him—or so much as looking him in the eye, as Erin noticed to her chagrin—Umbra snatched the candy from out of Stephen's hand, carefully tore off the gold foil from the top end, and handed it over to Sidoh. The beleaguered shinigami wasted no time noisily chomping the dark chocolate down to a nub and a pile of wrapping foil on the floor like a starving man who'd just been rescued from a desert island.

When he finished, Sidoh sighed with uncharacteristic relief. "It's not as sweet as that other chocolate you gave me, but it'll do. Much better, thank you. Okay, I think I remember it now."

Umbra leaned into him. "Yes?"

"Ah! It's Cl-Clydown. Clydown Avenue. There's this giant warehouse out on the city limits, n-next to a junkyard. I saw Lumen on the roof. H'oh, I hope he didn't see me too; he's still really scary…"

"Good work, Sidoh. I knew you could do it." Umbra turned once more to relay Sidoh's information: "He says they're in a warehouse at the end of Clydown Avenue."

Everyone grunted in understanding, still surprised at how easy it'd been to pinpoint M's location all along. "Well, now that we've got that settled, what's your plan again, Erin?" asked Stephen.

"Huh? Oh yeah! Right, uh, the plan!" Jeez, what a terrible introduction. No wonder she'd been hard-pressed to land jobs in the past. No matter what happened from here, she'd always be a rookie at heart. But now wasn't the time to dwell on it, nor was there time to waste realizing how handsome Stephen looked in a fluffy white bathrobe and the lack of hair on his legs which gave them a silky-smooth appearance. "Tell you what: for the sake of clarity, why don't I draw a picture?"

"An excellent idea, Erin," said Umbra. "Tell me what you have in mind and I shall transcribe it onto this wall here. L, have you a set of markers I may use?"

"Hey, wait a minute! Y-you can't do that. It's not our wall to write on. That would be vandalism. You can get busted and fined. Also, it's just plain disrespectful."

"No, let him go, Ms. Blogger. If you're going to use a diagram to illustrate your plan, everyone needs to be able to see it, myself included. We—namely Watari—will take care of whatever fees are acquired in damages. Mr. Umbra, I do in fact have colored markers you may borrow. Watari, give him my markers and please adjust the camera on your way out."
Erin cringed. Did the boy not have a whiteboard they could use instead? When none was offered, she conceded. "Uhhh... o-okay, I guess. But I mean it, you better not pin it on me. I've got enough debt as it is."

Roger, considerably pale in the face, wouldn't look at anyone as he shuffled out of Near's room to set down the box of markers and move the laptop to the floor behind the couch. He pushed the screen back far enough for the camera on top of it to see the wall parallel to it.

With Erin on the left and Umbra on the right, the former steepled her fingers. "Okay, L— I mean, Umbra. Um, draw a square. A big ol' square. That'll be M's hideout. Use whatever color you want. Just make sure everyone's a different color so we can tell who's who."

A marker poised and ready in each of his arms, Umbra doodled a giant black crooked shape that looked more like a diamond lying on one side than a square, but it had four sides and four angles and the warehouse in question probably wasn't that pretty either.

"So, Phase One: Umbra and Sidoh sneak into the place and, uh, incapacitate the bad guys. Umbra can't be seen or heard as long as they don't touch the notebook, and Sidoh can't be seen, period. Like, you two tie 'em up, do that pinching-the-back-of-the-neck trick you pulled on me once. Stuff like that. The name of the game here is search, stop 'n' rescue, not search 'n' destroy, catch my drift?"

Umbra scrawled the number 1 inside a circle next to two smaller shapes: a brown oval for Sidoh, a dark blue diamond for Umbra (which looked more like a square standing on one angle). Between the shapes, the black marker squeaked softly against the wall as he dragged it down to the square to make an arrow.

To emphasize the point, he then proceeded to fill the "hideout" with fat black X's with a little more fervor than Erin was used to seeing from him.

When this was all long over, Erin would also look back at this and wonder if those X's were another omen. But she thought little of it at the time, her mind racing with dozens of ideas at a pace it hadn't in a very long time, if ever.

"Ph-Phase Two: once Umbra and Sidoh secure the joint, one of them will fly up top to give a signal. That's when you guys come in with your SWAT suits and masks and..."

She gulped down the lump budding in her throat. "...guns, and stuff. Let's see, counting you all plus my friends from the NPA, there's..."

Pausing to count everyone off on her fingers, she balked upon thinking of Light's father, Mr. Yagami. No, he couldn't go. He was in no shape, physically or emotionally, to go on such a mission. Besides he wasn't with the police anymore, and Aizawa wouldn't let him get involved no matter how much he'd beg or protest. She'd have to count him out.

Then again, a reproachful voice asked her, are you?

"Eight of you. S-so, we can split up into two groups. One gets the kids out, and the other cuffs our baddies."

Roger raised a hand. "Er, excuse me, Ms. Blogger. Does that number include me by chance?"

Erin twiddled her fingers. She wasn't too cut out to be a leader, not like her mom or L or the President. Most anyone, really. "Well, I... no. I was kinda sorta hoping you'd stay here. Where it's safe."
Roger furrowed his bushy eyebrows, a frown elongating his face. "I beg your pardon? I can't just sit here while the rest of you do all the dangerous work. Those children are my responsibility too, and especially with L being forced to show his face—"

"M clearly stipulated he doesn't wish to see you with me, Watari," Near cut in. "He's playing a game with me. He's challenging me to face him head-on without your protection, as I've relied on in the past, or else he'll kill all the students anyway. That said, you can accompany the task force in retrieving the hostages once the shinigami neutralize M's underlings. We need all the help we can get. M said no police but nine people hardly sound like adequate reinforcement for a problem of this scale, especially if he isn't expecting them."

Erin blinked, staring at this skinny old man barely an inch taller than her. She couldn't imagine him in a heavy bulletproof suit carrying a gun. But then, she'd never seen the first Watari that way either. Roger must have seen the doubt clouding her eyes as he squared his shoulders.

"Qu—the first Watari taught me a thing or two about self-defense. It's a necessity for the sort of occupation we have," he assured her.

As they conversed, Umbra took the liberty to draw the number 2 inside a bubble under the "hideout" and nine cones surrounding it, each drawn with a unique color (sans brown and dark blue). He connected the circle of cones to the target with another crooked black arrow. Next to the X-filled box he drew a smaller box filled with pink and light blue circles. Erin had never seen anyone, human child or shinigami, look more concentrated on their desecration of a wall than Umbra right then.

Yet another wave of love and sadness swelled through her despite everything as she watched him from the periphery of her vision.

Until she caught him sneaking an St into one of the cones. The purple one. "Hey, what's the 'St' mean?"

Once again, Umbra made no attempt to hide his petulant contempt for the man whose name started with those letters. "This is Stephen. The 'St' also, what a coincidence, stands for Stupid."

Erin just about chomped down on her cheek in her anger. "Really? You wanna pull that shit again now? Come on, buddy, focus!"

Umbra turned up his nonexistent nose. How he could smell anything in spite of this was chalked up as another one of life and death's great mysteries. "I could say the same about you," he said quietly.

Aw nuts. Had he been watching her watching the way Stephen's cleavage played peek-a-boo in his robe? She couldn't say a peep in response, lest the situation get even more embarrassing than it was already. She made the mistake of locking eyes with Stephen, who from the look of his own face had picked up just what Umbra was talking about. He pulled his robe more fully over himself to hide the offending cleavage from sight.

If anyone else noticed this, they were wise enough to leave it alone, letting Erin continue discussing her (probably, probably not) harebrained scheme. "O—okay, Watari, if you think you can handle it. L's got a point. The more, the merrier. I...guess. Which brings me to Phase Three: L goes up to Mello with Umbra's notebook...or at least what he thinks is the notebook. Stephen, you're good at making counterfeits, right? How long would it take you to make a fake notebook that looks like the real one?"

Stephen perked up. "Well, if I really worked at it, I could get one done in a single night. Erin, do
you mind if I—"

Erin lifted a finger to silence him. "Hold that thought, Steve. I'm gonna lose my train of thought if I stop in the middle of this. Please save any questions you guys may have 'til after the presentation. Huh, where was I?"

"L would present Mello a fake notebook," Umbra reminded, regarding her as fondly as the shinigami can be apparent.

"Thanks. So L gives Mello the fake notebook…or no. Mello wouldn't do it himself. He'd have someone else pick it up instead, wouldn't he? One of his cronies. Maybe…"

She sighed, a pang of sadness piercing her heart. "Misa. I know she's got the Shinigami Eyes. Musta kissed up to Mello enough to get him to let her do it. She's crazy enough to make the trade for them. She's done it twice in the past, and that's just as far as I know. Knowing her, she'll want to be up front in the action.

"Which is why…I'll go with L myself."

Anthony was first to speak up about this. "Are you sure? Do you have training for these situations that we weren't made aware of until now? Why you?"

Erin took another breath before answering: "You all heard Umbra the other night. I'm immune to the Death Note now. They can't do nothing to me. And that's just it: I ain't a cop. I'm nobody. They won't see me as a threat. Not enough to justify killing the kids over it. Besides, Misa's still my friend. A pretty lousy friend to understate it, but there's still my friend buried in her somewhere. Even if I can't talk her out of what she's doing, I can at least distract her to buy you time if you need it."

"And I shall do the same with Lumen, if need be," Umbra chimed in. "Although it's doubtful he is that loyal to Mello in the first place. Lumen only sees him as a toy to amuse himself with. That's how he sees all humans. If we can take away the Death Note from Mello whilst avoiding vice versa, his power over you all is gone." With that, he drew a red flame shape next to the blue diamond and a black arrow between them that pointed both ways. He also scribbled the number 3 inside its own bubble and two triangles to the left bottom corner of the box—one large, green and upside-down; the other smaller, lime-green and right-side-up.

Erin didn't need to think too hard to figure out which triangle represented who. Not that she knew Light that well ultimately, but from the sound of it he hadn't changed much between his last incarnation and his current one. Not in any positive way, at least.

And at this rate, it wouldn't be long until Misa met the same fate.

Did she know yet? If she did know, did she care? Misa did once say the best way to go out is to die young and pretty…

Should Erin tell her? It'd be the decent thing to do as her friend, even if nothing could be done about it. Or would it just push Misa that much further over the edge, if indeed that was possible?

"O-oh yeah. That, too. So, uh, that's about it. Any questions, concerns, suggestions? The floor is open," she concluded, forcing a smile that hurt more than a smile ought to.

Even a fake one.

…
"Hey. You wanted to see me for something?"

"Yes. Have a seat, Ms. Blogger."

Seeing how Near was on the floor, Erin sat here. Near's back was to her, hunched over with something in his hands. He was making something. A mask, from the looks of it. But out of respect of personal space, Erin refrained from looking over the young man's shoulder to see what kind.

"Uh, what's up?" she asked to break the awkward and tense silence. She felt Roger's eyes on her back as he stood diligently by the door. Had something else happened? But if something had, why call her out by herself (barring Umbra's presence in the other corner opposite Roger)?

What had she done this time?

"Y'know, it's okay to call me Erin. Ms. Blogger sounds too formal," she remarked. "Specially at this point."

Unless that was the point. Formality maintained distance.

Without seemingly hearing her last comment, Near reported, "I've contacted Chief Aizawa and his colleagues. They will be here in Los Angeles tomorrow. The sooner we confront M, the better. That brings me to you."

"I-is this about me insulting Roger? If it is, I'm super-super sorry," she said, turning to acknowledge the old man behind her. "I didn't mean to imply you couldn't do anything just 'cause you're, um…I'm not an ageist!"

"I know you meant no ill will," said Roger. "Though I must say, you have a dreadful habit of inserting your foot into your mouth when you speak."

"Actually, that's not why I called you in here, although we appreciate your apology. We want to make sure you know what you're getting into, and whether you'd wish to back out."

Erin shook her head. "N-no way! I've just had a bite to eat and my blood sugar's up now but my mind hasn't changed. I figured since I'll be staying close to you for a while I'd better start earning my keep."

"You shouldn't do it only because you feel obligated. In fact, I'm questioning if it would be wise to allow your involvement, considering how you are the least experienced of all of us in hostage situations."

"Of course, there's also the possibility that I was right about that death wish of yours…"

Crap, he's bringing that up again?

"N-no, that's not it. Like hell, it is. I wanna help outta the goodness of my heart, too. Besides, how am I s'posed to have experience if I can't get it?" This was a question she and many others had often asked themselves when applying for jobs that turned them down later citing that very problem. "And another thing: what part of 'I'm immune to the notebook' are you not getting? Even without that, Misa wants me alive. She won't let Mello lay a finger on me. I'm practically perfect for going with you."

Throughout this dialogue, Near never turned to look at her, preferring to focus on constructing his mask as he spoke to her. "Mm-hm. And I trust Mr. Umbra has confided in you where exactly your immunity came from?"
Erin froze. Umbra didn't seem okay with her telling Near his secret. Such was the downside of being loyal to two entities with conflicting interests. "Uh…well, uh…y-yeah. He did talk a little bit about it. But he asked me not to disclose the details 'cause it wouldn't work anymore if you knew. I'm sorry…"

"Should I assume this is because it involves the other shinigami among us, Mr. Sidoh? Tell me, Mr. Umbra, is he here at this moment?"

"No, L. Sidoh is not in this room. But otherwise you would be correct."

"Very well. We'll touch on the subject later, when Mr. Sidoh leaves to return to wherever you both came from."

"Ooh! That's another thing," Erin blurted, finding another reason for coming along. "Umbra trusts me the most out of anyone here. He…doesn't like being away from me. Please don't hold that against him…"

"If you think I would exploit the shinigami's feelings for you to get rid of him, don't. I understand where you get your concerns, but if you would stop to reconsider, I have no reason to do such a thing. We may have our issues but I don't dislike either of you that much. Also, if for whatever far-fetched reason I got the inclination, killing Umbra would entail putting your life in danger. Something I would rather not do."

"That's comforting," said Umbra blandly.

Erin scratched at the nape of her neck, uncomfortable. "Why, because Umbra might figure you had to do with it and kill you too before he went out?"

"Yes. That, and I do rather…"

Erin waited with bated breath for Near to finish his sentence. He grunted. The completion of his statement was slow and far more carefully measured than most things he'd said in the past.

"…care…for you."

This would be the second time he'd admit up front to caring for her, and yet this confession was somehow as incredible as the first. Maybe because this time he'd said that in front of more than just Roger.

"Are you truly that surprised, Ms. Blogger? I'm disappointed in your lack of faith in me," he went on, playing it all cool and condescending. Not unlike how L would do in an intimate moment. "Yes. More and more, I find myself likening you to a little sister of sorts. Perhaps a little cousin."

"A little sister? 'Little sister,' he says," huffed Erin, jabbing a thumb at him and shooting a look at both Roger and Umbra, half in jest and half in slightly offended disbelief. "Dude, I'm six years older than you."

"That may be. If we were to go strictly by chronology, and of course we actually shared parental DNA, you would be the older sibling. But intellectually and emotionally, I would say you were the younger of us."

"Ha! Whatever, man. You're my brother from another mother," she tittered, somehow finding it too funny to stay that mad about being compared to a younger relative. She shouldn't have been so
surprised. It sounded like Near to downplay her, and this (whatever "this" was), the way he had. "I can live with that."

"Which brings us back to the original point," said Near like that part of their exchange had never happened. He wasn't quite ready yet to start holding hands with her while singing "Kumbaya" around a bonfire. He'd made his atheism clear, for one thing.

Hey, neither was she.

"It goes without saying it will be dangerous. Are you sure you want to accompany me even so?"

This time no hesitation weighed down her response. "I'm sure. Someone's gotta help you walk."

Near held up a hand as if to gesture to the back. "Then allow me to direct you to Roger. He will give you a basic rundown on how to handle a gun."

Gun?

"Hey-whoa-whoa-hey! Did you just say 'gun?' You wanna give me a gun? I-I-I think I need a license to carry one of those…"

"It's not illegal if you don't get caught. And I hardly think that's the greatest of our concerns at the moment. Don't you? Your immunity to the Death Note doesn't make you invulnerable to death itself. Regardless of your stance on killing, I cannot allow you to go with me without a means to defend yourself. Unless of course this changes your mind…"

Oh God. Oh God oh God oh God. Guns. What few encounters she'd had with the sort up to here had been unpleasant to say the least—she had to clutch her upper arm as she recalled then how much it'd hurt to get clipped by a bullet. Even now with but a tiny easily concealable scar to show for the incident, it smarted.

Pain is funny. We go deaf to sounds, we go numb to heat, we even grow bored with the sights. One eventually tires of pleasure. But they never accustom to pain.

But even before then she'd turned away at the idea of using one of those horrible things. It was the one thing she and Aiber could agree on. Once on an off-day (damned if she could remember what he'd done to rile her up, not like it took any effort), she'd asked him if he had any standards whatsoever as a con artist, only to be caught off-guard by his unusually sober answer:

"Ah…there's guns. Can't stand them a bit. When you think about it, a gun has one use and one only. To kill. Doesn't matter what you picked it up for. Chances are you're gonna kill someone with that thing. And it's unkind to folks that don't respect its power. They don't fit in with my style. Sure, I love conning rich people out of their money and whatnot. No, I feel no shame saying that out loud and don't bother trying to make me. But money can always be replaced. Life can't be."

He's finished his speech with a satisfied sip of white wine and a smartass's smirk unbecoming of his previous words but suited for his next ones. "Outside of that, nope. No standards to speak of here."

Smug, roguish old bastard. Whatever he was up to now, Erin hoped he was doing all right. Surely whatever he'd cleaned out from Yotsuba's bank account had been enough to make him retire from his dirty deals?

But this conversation wasn't about him. This was about being handed a deadly weapon. One as bad as the Death Note.
No.

Worse than the Death Note. Not in intent but in mechanics. Even the Death Note had limits.

You didn't need a name and face for a gun. You didn't need to waste time finding a pen and then having to wait 40 seconds for the guy to drop dead. All it took was a second—if that—of pulling back a piece of metal like a latch to the gates of Death itself.

How could she say no?

I just have to hope and pray things won't get so bad I end up having to use it. I don't know if I've got the guts.

Umbra looked at her, mutely encouraging her to make the right choice. Whatever that was. Why did it feel like she was signing her soul away?

Take it or leave it.

She swallowed down the urge to throw up, however mild it was this time. "Fine. Awright. I'll take it. Where do we start?"

…

"You took a pounding down there, didn'cha?" cackled Lumen, pointing at Matt's swollen lips still stained bright red with blood. "Bwahahaha! Look at you, look at that face! A one-punch man: one punch and you're KO'd!"

"Shut the fuck up, Lumen!" barked Mello, his locks tossing around the frame of his face. "Don't you have some chips to stuff your face with? Go bother someone else."

Lumen's grating cackling calmed down to snickering. "Boy, am I glad I'm a god of death. Otherwise I'd probably have a massive hole in my foot like Glen right about now," he proclaimed in a mock-cowardly voice. "But don't worry. Like you, I'm in a good mood today. So like Glen, consider yourselves spared."

With that, he took his leave to satiate his hankering for his favorite snack. He never stopped that hair-ripping snickering as he phased through the dusty wall. Matt could still hear him long after he'd vanished from sight.

"Pheriouphly?" he mumbled.

"Sssh. Don't speak. Put this on your face; it'll help the swelling go down," said Mello, handing him a bag of frozen Brussel sprouts wrapped in a washcloth. The one thing Brussel sprouts were actually good for, as far as both were concerned.

"Mello, didn' you hear 'im juph now?"

"That's just Lumen being Lumen. He might talk big but he's just another dumbass shinigami. He's got no reason to kill either of us. Open your eyes wide again. I need to look into them."

Matt couldn't recall being pampered by Mello; it'd usually been the other way around. He hadn't heard his friend speak so softly to him in oh so long. But as much as he missed this, he had to get this crushing thing off his chest. His heart swelling at this gentleness did nothing to help it.

"Like the kidph? You pheriouph about killin' 'em?"
Mello had reached over to brush some of Matt's bangs out of the way when he stopped. Too bad he had his gloves on. Matt deeply missed the warmth and feel of his bare hands.

Though he'd chop off his own balls and then his thumbs before admitting it. Not out of shame for loving a man—yes, love, that was the name for it, he'd decided. He'd made peace with that long ago. Honestly, he couldn't remember when being gay was ever a personal issue to him in the first place. It was more out of avoiding the trouble it'd get them both into than anything else. Being comfortable with yourself doesn't mean everyone else will magically become comfortable with you in turn, contrary to what Mr. Rogers™ and everyone says about "being true to yourself."

Yeah, tell that to Ross and the others.

"Or you juph playin' too?"

"What? This again? What's your problem, all of a sudden?"

…

"Matt!"

"You phaid don' talk."

"Asshole. I'd clunk you on the head if you didn't do that already. Come on, tell me what's the matter."

"When you tol' Near you were gonna kill the kidph…didja mean it?"

"I'm twisting his arm. It's the best way to get him to give us what we want. Part of me wonders if he'll abandon them to save his own ass. I had no problems ditching us. But he won't. His task force won't let him. What's left of them, anyway," he explained with a smirk. "There's kids involved."

Noting the troubled look on Matt's face (bloody nose and lip aside), Mello cocked his head, his increasing annoyance evident in the icy gleam of his eyes. "What of it?"

Matt dabbed the frozen vegetables on his face, collecting his thoughts. "'Unno. You di' juph blow up Wammy'ph Hough. You didn't tell me you were gonna do that."

Mello scoffed. "I didn't realize I was supposed to ask you permission. It was the most effective way to catch his attention. Blowing up the only home he's ever known."

His vision was still blurry. Suppose this was a concussion? He slightly hoped so. The less conscious, the better off you were. "Wha'bout uph? It waph our home too."

"It stopped being our home years ago. Now it's no one's home anymore. I gotta say, I'm surprised how much you care right now. I never took you as the type."

"I—it'ph not a big deal. Ph'not like we can take it back," said Matt, his bitterness with all of this bullshit asserting itself more and more to the forefront. Or that could just be a headache coming on. "It'ph juph…if you're not gonna kill 'em, an' we can't phend 'em back…"

What will we do with them? Leave them here to rot in a strange country? We can't just keep them here indefinitely…the heat's gonna come down on us eventually, even if you do kill Near and the rest of his posse…what will we do then? What about Ross? He's an idiot but even he knows when to cut losses.
You didn't think this all the way through. Did you, Mello? No, of course you didn't. Because you care more about revenge than you do anything else. Even those little kids downstairs. Even our old classmates. Even us.

Even me.

You really are an asshole. Heh. So am I.

Linda's horrified call of his name reverberated in his skull like a lost person's scream echoing through a canyon.

"Shit. Matt, can you hear me? How many fingers am I holding up? Matt? Matt!" He barely felt Mello's leather fingertips against his cheek as he lightly tapped on him. "Matt, come on, stay with me, okay? Don't fall asleep on me yet. Matt, I swear to—"

Shutting his eyes, Matt watched green and purple blotches float in the dark and a quiet, hoarse laugh began chugging out of his dry itching throat. What was he laughing about? Fucked if he knew.

"M-Matt? What—what the hell's so funny? Cut it out!" Cradling his face in his hands, his taps ramped up in intensity to slaps. Even if he couldn't feel his actual skin under this leather, this felt good enough to keep him awake.

"M-Matt? What—what the hell's so funny? Cut it out!" Cradling his face in his hands, his taps ramped up in intensity to slaps. Even if he couldn't feel his actual skin under this leather, this felt good enough to keep him awake.

Somewhere in the darkness, he heard an all too familiar voice chirp, "Hey, is he okay? C'mon, Mello-yellow, let's go back to what we were doing—"

"Not now, Misa! Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Not exactly. I'm blind, remember?"

"But not deaf! I think Matt's concussing." Was she walking around with that blindfold on? Oh well, it wouldn't be the strangest thing she'd ever done. Far from it.

"I-I'm sure he's fine. His head's a coconut. What else can you expect from a guy who smokes and plays games all day?"

"Jesus Christ, I know you don't but can you at least pretend to care for me? Or go away if you're not gonna help. Ed, help Misa back to her room."

"Waaah! You can be sooo mean, sometimes! You're sexy when you're mean…"
"Acceptance is the key to be,
To be truly free…
Will you do the same for me?"

- Katy Perry, "Unconditionally" (2013)

…

"No, no, you need to hold it like this, with both hands."

"What?"

Keeping a tight grip on his vexation with her, he gestured to the earmuffs on his head. Erin pulled her left muff aside to hear him better.

"I said you need to hold it with both hands to steady it. You have your dominant hand, your right, gripping the handle…your other hand firmly and squarely cupping your trigger-hand at the bottom. Your thumb should be on top of these fingers…rest your index finger along the barrel…and these fingers rest on the back of your hand…"

The old man carefully molded her hands from behind her to the correct position, giving her a moment when he let go to let it soak in through her eyes and sink into her brain. The practice weapon of choice was a semi-automatic pistol, scarcely bigger than either of her hands (it wouldn't be a handgun otherwise). Yet somehow it felt like the coldest and heaviest thing she'd ever carried in her life. The sheer weight of it, real or imagined, had almost turned her hands completely limp the first time she'd held it.

It may not have been the notebook, but…

She faced the target some dozen feet in front of her, the gray brick walls on all sides closing in on her. Why'd they have to make their targets shaped like people? What was wrong with regular targets with the circles inside each other? The pistol rattled in her clamming palms.

"A gun has one use and one only."

"It's not my place to decide who lives or dies. That was Light's whole problem."

For a moment she thought she saw someone standing there as the target. Either Misa or Mello, she couldn't tell. Whoever it was, they were small and blond and frail and dressed in black like they were already on their way to their own funeral.

And, oh God help her, smiling at her.

Shooting a little kid. Jesus Christ.

Tears singed the lining of her eyelids. This lousy hunk of steel housed a godly…or ungodly power of its own (ironically enough, considering its more mundane origins compared to the Death Note). She brushed the corner of her eye against her shoulder, squeezing them both shut to cut herself away from their accusing imaginary gaze.
Her finger, frozen against the sleek black metal by spasm after spasm, barely inched downward towards the trigger when Roger stopped her. "No, no, no! You mustn't shut your eyes, Ms. Blogger! You need to be able to see your target."

That's the point. How can I look into anyone's eye when I'm about to take their life? How do other people do it? Can you learn to harden your heart that much, until it's just a cruddy shedding of callused flesh sitting in your chest? Or do you have to be born that way?

Jeez, no wonder Light managed to kill so many people. He didn't look. Thanks to the notebook, he didn't have to. Fucking prick was a murderer and a coward.

"Stop, stop-stop-stop-stop-stop." Standing behind her, Roger took her hands into his and lowered the gun down towards the floor. He kept one hand over her trigger-hand as he pushed the muff back so she could hear him again. "Ms. Blogger—"

"Erin. Please, call me Erin," she insisted.

"Erin. With all due respect, I am already beginning to doubt this is a wise decision. You clearly aren't ready to so much as aim a gun—"

"No! I gotta do this. I promised. I-I'm sorry. I dunno what's wrong with me. I—I keep seeing Misa standing out there. Looking at me. Smiling at me. She always had the prettiest smiles. I have to protect L. I got to. But I…"

"I know. You don't want to kill anyone. I too hope for the best. This is one of my former wards we're dealing with, after all. But for these situations one must expect the worst, as well. And to respond accordingly. Don't…don't look at the target as your friend. Don't look at it as anyone. See it for what it is."

"Whaddya mean, just see it as a target? When we go over there, I'm not gonna be shooting at stinkin' paper targets," she snapped. "I'll be shooting at people. Real live flesh 'n' blood feeling people."

"You think I'm unaware of that?" retorted Roger. "You seem to be forgetting that these 'real live feeling people' are ruthless mobsters who've stooped to bombing an orphanage and kidnapping children."

"I know, I know," she conceded with a shiver out of terror, anger and cold. Lately almost every room she'd stepped into would be either too hot or too cold. No in-between. "They're bastards, there's no getting around that. And so was Light, and the whole Yotsuba Group was a circle-jerk of bastards. But even bastards are human beings. Most, shit, most all the problems we've got in the world right now—like Kira—are 'cause we've stopped seeing each other as fellow humans. A-as equals, who deserve just as much dignity and respect as the rest of us."

"Well, forgive me if I sound cynical, Ms. Bl—Erin, but it's been my experience and that of my dearly departed friend that some individuals—not many, but some—are human only in the academic sense of the term. They do not believe in basic decency, never mind compassion, nor do they respond to diplomacy or friendship. Their language is more…barbaric."

"So does that make it right to treat 'em like garbage?" she whispered, thinking back to Miguel Mora who likely had only tried to rob her because he was forced to, only to wind up dead anyway.

Thinking back to Misa who had spent nearly two months cut off from the outside world just because L wanted to scare a confession out of her.
Thinking back to Teru Mikami, a man who'd made a direct attempt on her life out of disdain for her defense of a school accused of child abuse.

Thinking back on L himself, whom she'd somehow found it in her to love in spite of his many frankly unheroic acts.

And really, how was she that much better? She could be self-absorbed, too. She had her pig-headed temper. She had cut people down with her words in the heat of passion. She'd thrown her hands—and Louie—around to hurt, didn't matter what for. Half a day had passed since Kimiko had checked into rehab and she still hadn't contacted her. Nor had she contacted Kimiko; she couldn't tell anymore if the reason for this was anger or shame. What authority did she have to talk about compassion or forgiveness when she herself couldn't practice what she preached?

Were humans naturally sick, selfish, short-sighted brutes like Light and Hobbes and Machiavelli and Rand and all those other yahoos had said since civilization began? Did they truly understand fear and violence better than they could ever, love and mercy?

Erin loathed to think so. She simply couldn't bring herself to believe that, not then and even after everything not now. She'd only read about all those guys because she'd had to for school and tossed them back in the return bin as soon as the bell rang. They pissed her off too much to take any more of her time.

Because who else but these "selfish brutes" came up with love and mercy in the first place?

Umbra, who had been hiding in the ceiling watching this initiation, poked his head out from the vent, staring at Erin upside-down. "Go on, dear," he said, quite gently for him. "It's all right."

Dear? That was new. Normally the least offensive term of endearment one can think of, but the fact that he had never called people by any pet names as L (at least within her earshot) threw her off that much more.

For someone who had treated Misa's cutesy antics with indifferent curiosity at best and passive-aggressive derision at worst, he was starting to act more and more like her since he'd died at a rate she, needless to say, hadn't anticipated. Well, not quite like her—he had yet to start wearing black lacy things, not that there's anything wrong with dressing however one pleases in itself and the Gothic Lolita style was a neat take on fashion—but this was no good. She would need to talk to him about this later.

But for now, she twisted her neck to crack the stiffness out of it, planted her feet as far apart as her shoulders, stretched her arms as far out as she could, and raised the gun back up to point the barrel at the chest of the target.

Come on, Erin! It's now or never. You've got to hold your own. If you can just do this one thing, no one will have to worry about you. Especially not Umbra.

Everyone's counting on you not to crack.

Don't think of Misa. Don't think of Mello. Don't think of nobody.

See it for what it is.

See it for what it is.

She slowed her breath—or rather, held it—as her numbing finger wrapped around the trigger.
See it for what it is.

She squeezed.

Even with the muffs over her ears, the resulting blast split the air like the most thunderous POP she recalled hearing in her whole life. Not that she would know for sure but she imagined a hot-air balloon to sound something like this when burst from high up in the sky.

Otherwise her first shot turned out to be, to the surprise of no one, far from graceful. With her heart slamming against her chest, the kick that rattled up through her arms knocked her off-balance (no one had bothered to tell her about that part, or perhaps she hadn't caught it with all her navel-contemplating), sending her backwards into Roger. Luckily he had the sense to catch her before she could crack her head on the floor (or crack the floor with her head, depending on who you asked).

"H-h-h-holy shit," she gasped, all she could think to say for the moment. How did Matsuda get so good at this? She'd have to ask him for pointers, next time she saw him. Maybe hit up Halle and Anthony and Stephen for extra tips?

Was it normal to smell something burning after a shot? The scent scorched her nostrils and throat, acidic and faintly metallic like how the city would smell after one very spectacular Fourth of July fireworks show. Except worse somehow. Oh, much worse. But otherwise she could think of no other way to describe it. What do they put in guns, sulfur?

One thing for certain: she wouldn't forget that awful smell any time soon. Too bad, too. She used to love fireworks.

"Good shot," exclaimed Umbra, this time materializing directly overhead. "You got the stomach."

The stomach? Oh jeez. She sure had her work cut out for her.

But at least she'd done it. She'd gotten her first shot over with. It could only get easier from here.

Right?

"That may be but you mustn't lose your balance like that," grumbled Roger, pushing her back onto her feet like one puts a dolly back upright. "You could lose your weapon and give your target an opening for attack."

He took a moment to regain his own footing and clear his throat. "Let's try again. Use what's left of your ammunition so you may get used to firing it, and then I will demonstrate how to reload your pistol. Here, it helps to put your non-dominant foot in front of you, like so…in your case, your left foot."

Erin's ears were still humming on the ride back hours later, their tune either one of relief for the end of her first round of practice, or a warning of what would come next. No matter how many times she washed her hands red and raw under the boiling hot water in the bathroom sink, her fingers reeked faintly of lead. Was all this also normal? She was too scared to ask. What if the task force took her concerns for weakness? As in, too weak to go with them?

She tried to take her mind off this by buying dinner for Stephen. Not well-versed in the Jewish vegetarian way (it wasn't like they'd ever had time to talk in depth about it), she settled on the least offensive things she could find: a Caesar salad with a single packet of ranch dressing, a large bottle
of mineral water with his favorite flavoring drops (tangerine), and a bag of fruit and nut trail mix. Hopefully that would be enough. Hopefully.

For Umbra and Sidoh, she grabbed two bags of chocolate drops. Then grabbed two more for good measure. Might as well; they were on sale.

For herself, she got a strawberry-banana smoothie. It was all she had the stomach for.

Back at the hotel, her knocks on the door were softer than was normal for her. Her mother never turned down an opportunity to remind her she was not hammering a nail and she was not going to pay for any holes she punched in someone’s house.

When all you've got is a hammer…when all you are is a hammer...

Erin had to stop thinking about Mom, or anything related to her family, lest Stephen catch her tearing up upon answering. "Oh hey! What's up, Erin?"

No words could express her gratitude for his patience with her—yes, she was probably beating a dead horse at this point but considering Umbra's relentless assholery towards him for the past two days it was a wonder he still found it in him to keep talking to her.

"Uh, hi. I, um, I brought you some munchies. Carbs, proteins, essential…fatty…acids…you're…your clothes aren't back from the dry-cleaning, yet?"

"Huh? Oh, oh yeah, I've got clothes to wear again, thanks. And thanks for the food! You shouldn't have; I could always get room service."

"Then why are you still in that robe?" Umbra asked, his tone clipped and quiet.

"Because I like to be comfortable while I work. And you can't get much better than microfiber in that department. Is that a crime?" Stephen shot back, before diverting his attention to Erin. "Care to come in?"

"Y-you sure? I thought you were super-busy—"

"Normally I would be. But for you, I've got time to chat. I mean, if you want to. I want to know how practice went."

Erin cracked a smile to answer his and, though unsure of what to say about her day, accepted his invitation. Umbra, suspicious of Stephen's intentions, followed them into the room. Locking the door would have meant nothing to him, anyway.

"Holy shit! The bogus notebook's looking great so far!" Erin exclaimed, admiring Stephen's magnum opus in progress on the desk, basking under the magnificent white light of a single fluorescent bulb from a reading lamp.

The artist in question cleared his throat in humility that was only partly feigned. "I'd prefer to call it a replica, or reproduction. But that's just me. Once again, thank you." Taking her offerings from her sweaty hands, he pulled out an extra desktop panel on the far left, sat down and began to dress his salad.

"Seriously, Steve! How'd you get so good at this?" Without thinking of it, she plopped down on the edge of the neatly made bed. Either Stephen liked to make his own bed or he hadn't slept at all. If the latter were the case, however, he concealed his tiredness masterfully.
"Many years of practice," he said warmly. "I started out small like most of the greats: copying my parents' signatures on permission slips and report cards...then fake IDs for my friends so we could get into all the clubs and be cool. A boy is capable of most anything when he's desperate enough to get what he wants without getting in trouble."

Neither saw Umbra fold two of his arms, support two more of them on his narrow hips, and press the thumb on his fifth paw to his rags. He only managed to steal back some of Erin's attention by covering the hand supporting her from behind with his sixth paw. His blank piercing eyes never left Stephen's chest, which resumed sneaking back and forth teasingly behind the robe as it had yesterday.

Erin could avert her gaze, albeit barely and for different reasons.

"So when d'ya think you'll be done with it?"

"At the rate I'm going, tomorrow morning." He stabbed his salad with the plastic fork Erin had courteously provided. "How did it go at the shooting range?"

Erin glanced down at her sock-feet, massaging the back of her neck. "Uhm...it was okay, I guess. Not as bad as I thought it would be. I managed to avoid blowing anyone's foot off—"

If she had anything more to say, she forgot it upon seeing Stephen make a face seconds after chewing his first forkful, pure disgust contorting his features like he'd just eaten a used bandage.

Oh no! Did Stephen not like Caesar? Was it rotten? It'd looked fresh when she'd picked it up. She shot back up onto her feet, pulling away from Umbra. "Stephen! You okay?"

He spat the offending morsel back into the plastic bowl, quite undignified for him. Erin peered over his shoulder to check it out, and when she saw the familiar fleshy pink aberration her eyes grew to about the same size as his.

"I—is that meat? St-St-Stephen, I swear I thought I got a plain Caesar salad!"

The rags over his face hid the twin smirks creeping through Umbra's frozen lips, unable to resist gloating over this clever little sleight of hand. Now who was the cool one? "Ha. You just ate ham," he deadpanned. "So much for your keen eye."

Erin had never before seen Stephen look as sickened as he did then when he staggered back out of his seat. "Excuse me. I...I need to use the bathroom."

To wash out your mouth, thought Erin as she watched him disappear, beaten with dismay. Why wouldn't he, when he'd just violated his most precious principles against his will? She slapped a palm over her face like she was swatting an imaginary mosquito buzzing with schadenfreude about her head.

Then again, was said mosquito that imaginary after all? No. And unlike his past incarnation, he didn't bother hiding it. "If you asked me, he tries much too hard to seem impressive. It only hurts him in the end."

Whap!

Something in his words snipped the last thread inside Erin's brain that had stilled her hand, and before either realized it her right hand had fallen numb and limp on her arm while Umbra cupped a puzzled paw over his left cheek. He must have been caught off-guard by her assault or else her hand would have phased through him.
"You! Me! My room! Now!"

Did it hurt a shinigami when you slapped them? Or was it more the shock of having her lash out at him in itself? It was a small fortune they weren't in a cartoon, lest Erin burn holes on the floor under her charging feet.

Sidoh, always terrified of displays of anger regardless of whether the aggressor could see him, yelped and ducked under the coffee table, spilling Anthony's third coffee pot on the floor. "Aw, fuck me," he grumbled, forgetting his social graces and reverting to his military tongue as some often did under duress.

Once in her room, Erin struggled not to slam the door but depending on who you'd ask failed. "What the fuck is your problem?" she roared. She'd warned him.

When Umbra didn't answer right away, she continued to rip into him: "Ham, Umbra? REALLY? Stephen freaks out over this shit! How would you like it if I—I put spinach in your cheesecake or something?"

"I could have done worse. I could have snuck bacon, instead. Then he'd have clogged arteries, too."

"Coulda done wor—wh-what'd you have to go and make me look like an asshole for? This has gotta be the dirtiest thing you've done yet, or a'least it's way up there on the list. God, I never took you as the type to hate Jewish people that much."

"I don't hate all Jewish humans. It's mere coincidence that I hate a man who happens to be Jewish. And I didn't do it to make you look bad," he muttered. "If I wanted to make you look bad, I would have done it and not said a word."

Hoo boy. No more "I don't like him." The shinigami man had officially upgraded to "I hate him."

"Why do you hate him?" she asked, breathlessly this time. One knows how out of shape they are when just standing around being angry makes them have to stop to catch their breath. "Please, answer that for me."

Umbra peeked down at his massive feet. The thick sharp toes on his left foot scratched lazily along the top of his right foot. "Because I love you."

Erin sat down in her chair, raking her fingers through her unkempt hair. "It's hard enough to love or hate by themselves. Doing both at the same time? No matter you're messed up. And so am I."

"Apart from that, I'm starting to find it hard to believe you love me that much when you—you disrespect me every chance you can. You can't love someone without respecting them."

"I do respect you. I just don't respect Stephen. He's a pathetic little man masquerading as a hot-shot who'd be in prison for forgery without his family's money and influence." Should she take that as another anti-Semitic remark? Her brain rattled with frustration as it is. It baffled her how such biting words could carry on an otherwise bland tone. For now, she'd just have to take it as an anti-Stephen remark.

"And you're not?" she blurted, only to stop upon remembering who she was speaking to. Umbra didn't recall his old life as L, and all the similar absurd privileges he had enjoyed himself. Insults don't work so well when your opponent loses the self-awareness necessary to know what you're talking about.

"I-I mean, back then you weren't that much better." Not like you're any better now from then,
either. "And that's the problem. When you dis my friends, you dis me too. Wh-why should you loving me mean you have to hate on Stephen? We cannot be having this drama when we're supposed to rescue the kids tomorrow night, Umbra. We need to all be working together.

"Are you...are you jealous of him?"

...  
...  
...  

"Of course not. I just wish he'd stop trying to steal you from me."

Bam.

"What? Steal me? Stealing is when you take something—as in an object—from someone who owns it without their permission. You can't own a person—w-well, technically you can in certain circles but that's slavery and slavery is bad. I'm not an object you can own, any more than you are to me. So by that definition, no one can steal me. Didn't we talk about this the other day? People are not things, so you can't treat them like things in any aspect. I'll hang out with whoever I want, and by all means I'd encourage you to do the same."

She didn't anticipate his soft response: "Ah. That's...what I'm afraid of."

She'd never heard him use the word "afraid" before, not in relation to himself. Then or now. She lowered her voice in kind. "Wh-what d'ya mean?"

His movements and voice remained idle and calm but on the tongue of anyone more expressive, his words would have been anything but. "You love Stephen. I may still be learning about how feelings work, but I can feel how much happier you are with him than you are with me. I fear one day you'll only want to be with Stephen. You won't love me anymore. And then I'll be all alone again."

The crack in her chest snapped her heart in two, and both halves sank to her feet like rocks to the bottom of a murky lake.

"Oh."

Oh my God.

Who hurt you? Who fucked you up to the point where you think I'd totally dump you for someone else, in every sense of the word? Was it Light? Your parents? Watari? Oh God forbid, Watari.

Was it me?

But she didn't ask out loud. She couldn't. He'd have had no answer for that, not anymore.

Is this how Misa felt about Light? She told him she loved him no matter what, and he didn't answer her. I wonder if she remembers that much?

Wonder if that has to do with why she ran off with Mello? And why Mello took her on?

What about Light himself? Did he ever feel a mite of conflict of being Kira? What kind of odds must that have put him with his dad?
Is that why he wanted to kill all of us? Because we were all calling him…evil…?

Huh. The more I learn about people, the more we all start to sound the same.

She felt her body relax, her fury tempered by sympathy in notches. "Hey. Hey. C'mere."

Umbra perked up at the command and bounded over to her without hesitation or protest. She feared for a moment that Umbra might try to jump into her lap, but instead he came to a stop in front of her and took her hand when she offered it. She let him press her palm against his cheek. Apparently the slap hadn't made him averse to having her hand against him. If anything it seemed to make it all the more appealing.

So then what had been the point of doing it?

Did the poor fella just crave her touch that much?

Come to think of it, Umbra had very few opportunities to make friends compared to most folks, herself included. He could only interact with humans who touched his notebook, and honestly how many people would want to go bowling or out to a murder mystery theater dinner with a creature like him? He'd had only one friend among his own kind and even that guy wasn't working out, to the detriment of everyone.

Boy, did she feel like a jerk again.

Erin excavated her mind for the right words to explain this without digging herself into another hole. "I—I'm sorry I slapped you. I try and I try but I ain't exactly the most patient person in the world. But you gotta understand something. Y-yyeah, I do love Stephen, as a friend. And, uh…we do have an attraction to each other. I think. We've acknowledged it, at least."

This was not a normal conversation two adults (well, relatively speaking) ought to have. This was the sort of talk a mother would have with her insecure four-year-old son to assure him that she and Dad were not going to put him up for adoption just because they now had a new baby bogarting all their time. (Yes, this actually happened between Mom and Farley, back when Erin had just popped out fresh from the oven. Actually, maybe being the little sister wasn't so bad after all? She had plenty of experience for such a role.)

But nothing about these two was normal to begin with, was it? Whatever they'd had back when he was L bore no semblance to normal either.

"B-but, i-it's kinda soon to say that I, uh, love-love him. That's number one. Number two, whatever happens between me and Steve has no bearing on how I feel about you. That's not how love works. Do you not like me having other friends besides you? Matsuda, Halle, Wedy, L, Watari? What about my family?"

"No. Everyone else is fine. It's only Stephen I have a problem with."

... Aw nuts. She was hoping she wouldn't have to say it aloud but it seemed like the only way to clear the air. "Umbra, when you say you love me…in what sense do you mean? 'Cause you know there's like, four main kinds when it comes to people. Family, friendly, spiritual…romantic…"

Umbra scratched his chin. "Hmm…I don't know. Do you mean romantic like Kiyomi and Teru? They went on lunch dates practically every day. I think I'd like to go on dates with you, too. That would be nice."
Erin blushed. "Well, uh, yeah, that's part of romantic love. But friends go out and do stuff together, too. I guess the big thing separating friendship from romance is the, uhm—"

She drew a blank.

Damn it! How can I not know the difference between the two? I know there is one! How do I explain it? Me and Matsuda are just friends, that's a fact. We've never been physically attracted to each other—hey, yeah! That's it! That's the difference! The level of physical intimacy—

Wait.

Even that's not entirely true, is it? Friends can also live together and hold hands and cuddle…and even kiss…you can even find a soulmate in your best friend…

Then on the flip side there's the whole "friends with benefits" thing…

Gah! This is no good. All I'm doing is confusing him, and myself. At the very least I can assume he doesn't want to sleep with me. Ugh…

She had to close out that boxcar in her train of thought lest she make herself ill. Thankfully, what Umbra lacked in tactfulness, he more than made up for with patience.

But I can't flat out tell him whatever he feels for me otherwise is invalid. Even if it is, I doubt he could change his mind. He's dead. I can still change, but he's stuck like this.

…

…

Oh fuck.

So that's it then, huh?

She waved her free hand in the air. "Wait-wait-wait-wait-wait. Forget it. I'm going about this the wrong way. Haha, I told you I wasn't a guru. I'm still figuring this crap out for myself. Thanks for nothing, C. S. Lewis," she huffed to the ceiling above them. "The problem here, from what I'm getting, is you're compelled to be an asshole to Stephen because you feel threatened by my relationship with him. Am I wrong? 'Cause you know I've been wrong before."

Umbra stepped closer, rubbing his cheek against her palm. "I can think of no argument to refute you."

"Then I'll just get straight to the point: I'd never stop loving you. Regardless of what kind you feel, love is…it's the toothpaste you squeeze from out of the infinite tube that is the human heart. You can't put it back, and there's plenty to share with everyone. And if I gotta tell you so a thousand times over until you believe me, I guess I will.

"Now, having said that…what you did to him was cruel, and I can't just let you off with another warning. It's like baseball, my friend: three strikes, you're out. No chocolate drops for the next 24 hours. There're 65 drops in each bag I bought, which makes…uh…65 times four…"

"260," said Umbra, hoping this bit of help would soften whatever punishment she was brewing. Erin never could do math well in her head. Mental math required more concentration than she could muster most days.
"Yeah, that's right, thanks. If you wanna prove to me you respect me, stay out of the candy 'til tomorrow night. If I see any of 'em opened, I'll know it was you. And I… I won't get you any more junk food for a week."

Nausea permeated her gut at the thought of depriving Umbra of food. She had to remind herself that shinigami technically didn't need food and therefore couldn't starve. Food to them was like cigarettes or alcohol to people: they took it because it felt good.

Besides, it wasn't like she was forbidding all the other food groups. She just couldn't let him think he was above consequences.

"And don't go getting anyone to sneak you any sugar on the side," she added, trying to sound firm. "I mean it."

Umbra considered asking about Sidoh but decided against it. Erin would probably think he was searching for a loophole in his punishment. What was it she'd said? Love is when you care enough about someone to tell them when they're wrong.

Instead, he tilted his head and asked something he'd been toying with on occasion since seeing Erin again: "If I kissed you, would it change your mind?"

"Wh-what? N-no! No, it wouldn't! What makes you think it would? A-am I just rambling into one invisible ear and out the other with you?"

She should have known. Umbra had a long way to go.

"Oh…no, you are not. Okay. I accept your conditions. Still, can I please kiss you, anyway?"

Was it just her or did her heart miss a beat there? Well, that one came out of nowhere. "Wh… why?"

Umbra shrugged. "It's something I've been meaning to try for some time. I've seen many humans kiss each other from my world and I wish to know what it's like. Also, I hope it will show you that I'm… sorry. Besides abstaining from the chocolate drops. But if you're too angry with me and don't want me to, I will not."

Actually, should she be that surprised? L did have quite an oral fixation in life and clearly it'd passed on to his new identity, who continued to stare into her eyes with resolute longing. Or his stunted version of it. Equally clearly, he'd lost what inhibition he still had as L in the transition.

She scratched the base of her burning neck. If she said no, would he take it as the rejection he feared?

If she said yes, would it get him off Stephen's back?

…

"Wh-where would you wanna kiss me?"

"Your face. I rather enjoy your face. It's my favorite part of you."

"Um, thank you. Same here. But I mean, what part of my face?"

"Your lips. Or your cheek, or your forehead, or your chin, or your nose or eyelids or ears or hair. To tell you the truth, I may want to kiss every part of your face at least once at some point. But for this
one, I think I would most prefer your lips."

... "Er... sure. I—I guess one wouldn't hurt. The...the lips, it is. But I mean it, man. This ain't getting you off the hook. Afterwards I want you to go apologize to Stephen for being a prick to him. And say it like you mean it."

"Don't worry. I know. I will."

Umbra clutched her right hand that much tighter to his face, while another paw slowly took her left hand to press it on the right side of his face. A third paw slid up to the rags obscuring his face, a finger hooking into the top to pull them down to his large unnaturally pointed chin.

"From what I've observed, a proper kiss requires each partner's lips be exposed to one another."

Whoa. Every day she got a little more used to his looks, but the sight she beheld was expected and yet unexpected: not one, but a pair of broad mouths, one on top of the other, with a triangular hole divided in the center by a single spine where his nose would have been. His bottom mouth stretched up to his hairline on either side of his skeletal head, while his top mouth stretched up to his prominent cheekbones.

Was he imitating a scene he'd watched on TV or real life? Who knew? For reasons dubious to her, her hands began to shake again to the rhythm of her quickening pulse.

Oh shit, those teeth. Those long, jagged, yellow, rotten-looking teeth. He could rip her jaw clean off with those things. But Umbra must have caught her staring at his dentition because he then pursed his gray, cracked lips to hide it.

"Please, don't be afraid. I would never hurt you."

Not on purpose, at least.

His face swam up to hers (or was hers swimming up to his?), and with eyes locked and her breath hitched in her throat, he brushed the lips of his bottom mouth on her top lip before moving down to lightly knead her bottom lip between them.

His top mouth caressed the tip of her nose.

Objectively, the gesture was long, graceless and a bit gross. His lips were chilly as glass and coarse as sand, and though he had no breath the scent of his skin had never been more pungent: dirt, rust, mold and formaldehyde. At one point Erin's nose might have poked tentatively into his nose-hole when he tilted his head to test a new angle.

But to Erin the whole moment was a haze. Did she kiss back? She didn't know. Something about the shy, surreal, simple and yet profound intimacy of the act pulled out all the words from her throat, breathing into her in their place a warm, sickly-sweet perfume that froze her brain and stopped her heart.

Could she expect any less from sharing a kiss with Death himself?

But this wasn't just Death. He was Umbra. He was L. He was her weird friend and part-time frenemy. A man who could be your worst enemy and your best ally, sometimes at the same time. (Then again, comparing their relationship to his with Light, they could have had it far, far worse. At least they'd never hated each other enough to want the other dead.)
He was...someone important to her. Someone who from a rational perspective should not be but was all the same, because love more often than not spat in the face of reason and commonsense. Misa was a living testament of that.

He had come to mean so much to her, she wondered how it hadn't killed her yet. Or perhaps like him with the Death Note, it was merely killing her slowly?

Umbra finally pulled away with a tiny smack to rub his forehead against hers, obscuring her vision with his wild itchy mane. "Hmmm...thank you, Erin. That was nice. We should kiss more often." He slowly let go of her hands, letting them hang limp at her sides. Good thing he hadn't torn off her lips.

She blinked a time or two. The first word she could think to say once that noxious scent dissipated was, "And?"

"Ah. I'm sorry I upset you. I will apologize to Stephen right away. And...I will make an effort to be more civil to him. I promise not to sneak pork products into his salads ever again."

"Good. You better. I—I love you, Umbra. I still love you."

She could see all four corners of his giant mouths curl upward slightly. His version of a smile. "I love you too, dear."

"Dear?"

"Yes. Because you are dear to me. Do you not like it when I call you dear? I'll stop if you don't."

"No, no, it's not that, it's just—whatever, it's fine. 'Dear' is okay." There were many worse pet names he could go with, all of which she refrained from reciting so as not to encourage him. Let him find those on his own. He always did like the thrill of the hunt.

Only after Umbra turned and bounded through the wall did Erin slump over, one hand over her forehead and the other touching her dry, irritated lips.

Maybe she shouldn't have said yes to the kiss?

She stumbled up on her feet to put that smoothie in the fridge for later. She could give it to Stephen later as a peace offering. Suddenly she'd lost her appetite again.

She felt disgusting.

...

Umbra had just pulled his mask back over his jaw when Sidoh pulled himself out from the coffee table by his spindly claws. His massive size lifting it off the ground, it clattered back to the floor behind him. "Holy cow, Umbra. What's wrong with that human? Sh-she's scary...humans are scary when they get mad."

He scanned the room to regard Anthony on his left and Halle on his right, both of them regarding him with a conspicuous degree of distrust. "Yes, she does have a bit of a temper. But it was not unjustified. I did something bad to Stephen."

Naturally this shot both agents out of their seats. "Something bad? What's that mean?" said Anthony.
"What did you do to Stephen?" demanded Halle.

Without a drop of shame, Umbra pressed his thumb to his bottom mouth. "I mixed ham into his salad." Yes, truth be told, he mainly regretted his action because Erin hadn't liked it.

Anthony placed a hand over his broad chest and huffed in relief. "Oh. Is that all? I thought you meant you'd killed him…"

Halle on the other hand narrowed her eyes at him. "What would you do that for? He's never done a thing to you that I could see."

"My motives are of no consequence now. I'm going to apologize to him."

"H-hey, so, did you bring back any chocolate while you were out?" asked Sidoh.

"Why yes, we did. But we can't have any until tomorrow night."

Sidoh shot up like he'd just been electrocuted, even though technically electricity couldn't harm shinigami either. "WHAT? Why?"

Not that anyone could see it but Umbra's bottom lip on his bottom mouth poked out in a restrained pout. "Erin's punishing me for antagonizing Stephen. And since I can't have any chocolate, you can't, either."

"Are you being serious? H'ooohhhh, it's not fair!" Sidoh commenced to spinning in place like a top. "Why do I gotta always be punished for something someone else did? First Ryuk, then Lumen, and now you too? Didn't you tell that human I need chocolate? It's the only thing keeping me sane these days!"

Umbra shrugged to his accomplice. "I'm not supposed to open the bags or ask for sugary snacks, but she never said you couldn't seek them out." He passed him by to phase into Stephen's room.

To his slight surprise, Stephen was nowhere to be found. However, Umbra spent little time pondering his disappearance, for he quickly picked up on the hiss of rushing water. So he was still in the bathroom.

That sounds like quite a bit of water for hand-washing. He must be taking a shower.

Musterung all the decorum in him, he phased through the dampening bathroom door to find the shower curtains pulled over the tub and the man's illegally attractive silhouette swaying behind it, appearing to be scrubbing his skin with what smelled like...some "manly" brand of soap. Old Spice™? Axe™? It mattered not. Shinigami had no need for bathing and anyway Umbra liked "lady" soap scents better. They were generally more soothing and reminded him of fruit and sweets.

Umbra rolled his eyes. Eager to get this over with, he approached the tub and pulled back the curtain. "Hello, Stephen."

A bewildered flurry of suds and water ensued that dampened the floor and nearby toilet.

"HAH! U-Umbra! What the hell are you doing this time?" His smooth, toned legs twisted around each other. His loofah dropped to the floor of the tub, rolling over the top of his foot.

"Erin wanted me to come back to apologize. I'm sorry for the salad."
"You couldn't wait until I got out of the shower first?" Stephen, his skin shining with water and soap, made a frantic grab for the curtain with one hand. The other cupped the spot between his legs to hide it.

But it was too late. Umbra had seen everything in that last second when he'd had his guard down. Personally, he never understood why humans put so much regard into the dimensions of that particular appendage of the body. The act it was specialized for—besides elimination—looked grotesque and uncomfortable to him.

Presumably it felt good to humans and was their primary means for continuing their species. In the latter aspect, he supposed shinigami benefited from it as well.

Still, he'd watched humans for long enough to know how much value males invested in their physical masculinity. Zerоing in on yet another opportunity for attack, he tilted his head and deadpanned, "Ah, so that's what you're compensating for. That tiny mutilated thing."

His rival's face bled red with rare but spectacular anger as he ripped the curtain out of Umbra's grasp, glaring at him all the while. "Wh-what? Hey, fuck you! At least I've actually got one!"

This was true. Shinigami lacked certain anatomical parts that humans possessed, no matter what their gender. But this did nothing to faze him. For one thing, Erin never expressed much interest in the activity herself, often becoming flustered and evasive when the topic snuck itself into a conversation. Stephen was no threat in this arena.

Instead, he acquired a pinch of satisfaction at his success for piercing his armor. What would Erin think to hear Stephen curse? Then again, if he or Stephen told her about this, she wouldn't give him any candy or pastries for a week. He doubted Stephen would say anything.

Should he tell him about their kiss?

No. Let that stay between them. Their first kiss was too special to disclose to outsiders and besides, one must not give their opponent an opening to strike back.

"Ah-ah-ah, Stephen. That sounds vaguely sexist of you. And transphobic. Erin would be displeased to know that's how you think."

"Oh, I don't have time to play games with you. Now get out of here! And don't bother me again! You're making me waste water." He yanked the curtain back over, returning him to obscurity.

"Very well. I've said what I had to."

On the way out of the steaming room, Umbra accidentally-on-purposely grabbed the lever and flushed the toilet.

"GAAAH! Damn it, Umbra!"

He pulled back the curtain far enough to toss his sopping loofah at him. A valiant but vain effort, as it passed through Umbra to smack the wall in front of him.

…

Nnnnnn…Nnnnnn…Nnnnnn…

"Amane Kimiko here! I'm so sorry if I missed you. Please leave a message and I'll call you back the earliest I can. Thank you!"
Damn it. The third time Erin had called her that night, both her cell and her room number, and she still wasn't picking up. Was Kimiko still mad at her for those things she'd said at the pet hospital? Was she too scared and ashamed to talk to her after what she'd done to Lawliet? Was she praying for Misa?

Was it all three?

Whatever she was up to, it'd better not be anything stupid.

"Uh, yeah, hey Kimiko. It's me, Erin. I—I'm just checking in to see how you're doing. A-again. I guess it's late and you're probably in bed or something but…well, I've sent you two messages and a text already and I haven't heard back on any of them. Please Kim, I need to know you're okay. Call me. That's not a suggestion. Good-night."

Click.

Pitching her phone into the open drawer of the nightstand, Erin lay on her back staring up at the peach-cream ceiling. Her arms hung limp over either side of the mattress, her legs too heavy to so much as kick them.

With shit set to go down tomorrow, she ought to sleep. But like Kimiko, sleep refused to answer her calls. Or perhaps she couldn't hear it over the maddening buzz of the rest of her thoughts.

Am I really ready for this?

What if I screw up?

What if Mello goes and kills all those kids after all? And all of us?

Will I get to see Misa? Will she listen to me if I talk to her?

...

...

...

How long have I been in love with him? When did that happen? And why?

Had she caught these feelings during all those double-dates? Which one? Which argument had set the spark?

Or did it happen after he'd died, after he'd given up his life to save the task force? To save her?

She gulped. What was worse: that A) she had sucked face with a literal monster, B) she had done it with a dead man, or C) she had done it with a supernatural undead being who used to be L?

No matter what the answer, she was a sicko. Her skin writhed with this sentiment in waves of goosebumps, as if it wanted to jump off her body, fly out the window and never come back. How stupid could she be to not even know the difference between really close friendship and—

She couldn't tell anyone about what had transpired between her and Umbra. Especially not Near, or Stephen. The former would never let her live it down, and the latter…as cool and understanding as he was, even he had limits. After all, this same shinigami had tricked him into eating ham just to
what, "put him in his place?" Whatever that meant.

Erin was Stephen's friend. Friends have each other's backs.

She'd betrayed him. Erin would have never considered herself a traitor before. Then again, she hadn't realized she could love-love L after all until now, either.

Or maybe she'd just been denying it all this time to preserve what sanity she still had? She grabbed a pillow from behind her to shield her face from the world. He'd see her as the revolting freak she was and never talk to her again.

Maybe it was just as well—

Okay, stop! Get a grip. You're not a traitor. Traitors are assholes who play with everyone's trust in the name of their own selfish interests. That's not you. That's never been you. You're an asshole but not that kind.

You know what your real problem is? You wanna make everyone happy. Your heart is an open house with no doors or gates. You let everyone into it and let them take whatever they want.

And then you wonder why you're going crazy. One of these days you may find you've got nothing left to give. Is that what you want?

Except, that's not what she'd told Umbra hours ago. She'd given him the corny bottomless toothpaste tube analogy. Which was the truth? Did the tube have a bottom or not? The fabric over her eyes began to moisten and burn.

What should I do now? You heard Umbra. I'm all he has now. And even then, for how long? Every day he can literally see how much more time I've got. I could die tomorrow, or maybe I'll die ten years down the road? I'll go out in thirty, if I'm lucky.

One day his sacrifice will turn out to be for nothing.

For a second it yet again surprised her how little these thoughts on her own mortality registered to her. Years ago she was fucking terrified of dying just like everyone else. Now that fear had been numbed to passing disappointment. The kind you might feel to see it pouring rain on a day when you wanted to go to the beach, or when you don't have the money to buy a ticket to that one concert everyone's going to. Or when you're bowling and your ball falls into the gutter without laying down a single pin.

The kind that made you go, "Aw, that sucks. Oh well."

What happened?

No wonder he's nuts. He's even nuttier than he was as L. Or was I just looking at the top of the house the first time and now I'm seeing the basement? There's a reason people keep what junk they can't fit in the attic down in the basement. And it's usually the only thing left after a twister.

What am I supposed to do, turn around and tell him I don't love him anymore and fuck off? First of all, that's not true—sohelpmesomeone, it's not true—and second, like that would help. What would that do to him? Would he snap? Would he kill Stephen?

Or kill me? He said he'd never hurt me but…

Erin tore the pillow off her face and, clutching it to her chest, mustered all her strength to shift her
weight and turn onto her side to face the window. The city lights flickered beyond the translucent curtains like stars captured by a telescope. Somehow the incoming storm clouds made their orange and white contrast against the darkness that much sharper.

Like stars, one day these lights would all go out forever.

What was the point of saving the world when it would end someday anyway? Either by the sun blowing up or a meteor crashing into it or some other random thing…

I thought I got over all this.

Or is it that I just stopped thinking about it when I didn't have to? And now I have to, so now I'm fuc—

"Erin?"

She jolted at the sound of her name, more so because of the voice saying it. Now what did he want?

"Umbra? What's up?" she croaked, hiding her eyes in her forearm. She'd rather not let him see her cry. She always hated crying in front of anyone.

Not that it stopped her from doing it. Often.

"You haven't eaten. Are you not hungry?"

"If this is a ploy to get me to open the chocolate drops, forget it. I ain't falling for it. Plus, I'm not in the mood for chocolate."

"Again, clever girl," he said in that fond tone that made her recall that enigmatic double-smile from earlier. "But no, that's not why I asked. Your brain needs sugar to function. As does the rest of the human body but particularly the brain. Would you like me to fetch you something?"

"No…no, thanks." She couldn't find the energy to look back at him.

For someone with such enormous feet and claws, it astounded her how quiet his footsteps were. They pitter-pattered slowly across the floor like how Lawliet's paws did as he approached her. Nothing about shinigami made sense.

Well, almost nothing.

Oh God. Don't think about Lawliet, not now.

Her fingers clenched the pillow under her head tighter.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Now g—"

Erin stopped herself before she could utter "go away" or "get outta here." She couldn't say it like that. She couldn't afford to make him her enemy. Not again.

"Pardon?"

"Uh…nothing. It's fine. I'm not hungry. I just wanna sleep. Got a big day tomorrow."
She felt the mattress collapse slightly behind her, and in a single blink she found Umbra staring at her from upside-down. His rags were back over his face.

"Are you all right?"

She considered saying yes, only to remember their promise not to lie to each other. She sighed. "Actually, since you're here…can I ask you something?"

"Anything. What is it?" He leaned in closer, two arms shooting down to the edge of the mattress in front of her.

I don't want to think he's manipulating me. He was so upfront about it I find it hard to believe that. Upfront wasn't exactly L's style. Maybe he just has no sense of time and place…not like I helped that at all, though.

But there's only one way to know for sure. I don't see why he'd lie about this one. His filter is gone. So, here goes…

"H-how come you really wanted to kiss me, earlier?"

"Ah. It's as I said. I've always wanted to know what kissing is like, and I can think of no better person to try it with than you. No ulterior motives beyond that. Why? Did you not like it? Did I do it wrong?"

"Did I do it wrong." he says. Oh man, you're killing me here. Yeah, you kinda did. But not in the way you might think.

"I was just—well, considering what you said before that about why you don't like Stephen, were you—are you trying to drive us apart?"

…

…

Should she worry that he took more time to answer this question than the last one?

Her heart sank another inch for every second of his silence. "Please, don't lie to me. This relationship ain't gonna work if you start lying again."

"Well…I can't say I wasn't hoping it would confirm the strength of our love compared to his. But, I mainly did want to kiss you for its own merit."

Erin's eyes almost popped out of her sockets. She'd forgotten to tell Umbra to keep this between just her and him. "Oh my God. Y-you didn't tell him, did you? That we kissed and all?"

"No. The temptation did cross my mind but ultimately I decided he needn't know. Some victories are best kept secret."

What the—did he just say—

"Victory? What, is this a game to you? A-am I just a trophy?"

On one hand, she shouldn't have been that surprised. The guy did have a mean competitive streak in his past life. Most people did when they sought to compensate for something. On the other…

Her fists now clenched so tightly she could feel the circulation cutting off in them. She stuffed the
knuckles on her left hand into her mouth.

Umbra seemed to wilt like a decomposing sunflower above her. "Oh. You're angry with me again, aren't you? You're eating your own fist."

All right, stay calm. Getting riled up again won't solve anything. Of course it'd take more than a couple days for him to learn better, and for right now it looks like I'm the only one who's got the will to set him straight. And the only one he actually trusts and listens to. Of course.

Be kind to him. Kind, but firm.

She made a raspberry through taking a breath with her knuckles still in her mouth before getting the sense to remove them. An undignified but simple and effective way to relax the atmosphere, plus she found something soothing in the way her lips vibrated as she made the sound. Say, she ought to do this more often. Better than flying off the handle all the time.

"Well, I can't say I appreciate being compared to a trophy. Once again, people are not things. 'Specially not things to compete over."

Umbra shook his head. "Oh no. I didn't mean to imply that's all you are to me. You are worth more. So much more." Another paw slid over her head to stroke her hair. His paws could crush her head like a grapefruit and yet so far he'd only raised them to hold and caress.

She briefly shut her eyes. "Maybe you didn't. But that's how it sounded in my ears. You gotta watch what words you use to describe things. I-I can kinda understand why you're inclined to think the way you do—"

Or so I think, I could always be wrong but it's not like he could tell me either way…

"—but love isn't a contest. I-it shouldn't be, anyway."

Umbra stopped in mid-brush. "Erin? Have you and Stephen kissed before?"

What? Man, that's none of your damn business! But, again, I can't lie…d'oh, what'd he have to go and ask me that for?

Wait. Maybe I can turn this around?

Her entire face burned. "Y—yeah. I kissed him, not long ago, actually. Before you and me started talking. But that wasn't his fault! It was all me! I came at him first. Mello had just whacked basically everyone on the task force except the seven of us and I was scared and sad and glad to see him still alive—"

Erin paused to recollect her thoughts, and to check Umbra's reaction. When he gave none—was that a good or bad thing?—she inhaled once more.

"Now before you say anything, kisses are nice. And they're better with people you like and care about. But they—people do it for a lotta reasons. Greetings, good luck, comfort, gratitude, and of course affection. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, and a kiss is…well, just that. It doesn't mean I love one of you more than the other, or that I'm gonna magically stop loving either of you. You are both important to me. That's why I kissed you both. And that's why you can't look at this as a contest. That's how relationships go sour. And when they go sour, boy, do they sour…"

…
"But...just the other day, you said you missed how much we bickered and argued."

Crap.

"W-well, yeah, I did. But that was more like, uh, friendly contesting." More or less. "Like, 'Which one of us can eat the most oysters without puking?' or 'Which of us's got the best moves on Dance-Dance Revolution™?' Or 'Is a panda white with black spots, or black with white spots?' Those kind of contests and debates are fun, even if no one wins in the end. They bring people together.

"The kind I'm talking about here isn't fun. This is 'Which one of us does Erin love more?' No one wins in that one, and it...it just drives us all apart. Know what I'm saying?"

Goddamn it, must she start crying again? Erin rubbed the corner of her eye with the heel of her hand. Thinking about the good times always killed her. Considering who her friends turned out to be, sometimes she had to ask herself whether her adventure in Japan—and now this—was all just a bizarre dream. Or a nightmare. If this was in fact a dream, her mind couldn't seem to make itself up on which to go with.

But as much as Erin would rather not look at them that way, her tears did have one small, limited use.

Umbra wove his fingers into her hair, and once more she found herself overpowered by his smell (to think at one time this scent of mold was one of fresh cotton) as he scooped her into his other arms and gently maneuvered her onto her back, like she was porcelain and one false move could shatter her to pieces.

Unsure whether to be enchanted or wary by his beyond awkward tenderness like last time, she allowed it, only cutting the silence to blurt, "Whoa, watch it, don't poke a hole in my stomach," when he climbed up on the bed and perched over her eagle-like, a giant foot and two paws on either side of her. How they managed to fit on the same mattress flew over her head like most things.

He leaned down to an unnatural angle, lifting her head upward at the same time so they could touch foreheads. He seemed to like that, as though he hoped to absorb her thoughts through the thin skin of their brows and share his thoughts in return. Erin found herself reaching up to loop an arm around his neck.

Heh. Hey, this is kinda romantic. And weird. Mostly weird, but still.

Just goes to show what a weirdo I am, she thought, that shame creeping back up her spine. And here I was thinking all this time L was the bigger weirdo.

"I hadn't thought of it that way," he said at last, an inflection to it that sounded like regret in Erin's ears. As regretful as he could sound, at least. Yet somehow his default monotone made even small emotional changes in his voice—which, granted, they mostly were—that much more amplified.

Indeed, one had to listen to his voice to gauge his mood rather than look into his face. What part of it that was exposed. His eyes, deep and hollow, yielded nothing.

Outside, rain started to patter against the windowpane.

"I'm...sorry for making you feel like a trophy. I assure you again, you're not."

Although he didn't pull off his rags this time, she felt one pair of lips press against her hairline through the cloth. Despite his temperature, this gesture sent a jolt of warmth through her head and
into her heart. "You are an absolute treasure," he murmured. "Now I wonder if I'm even worthy of your love in the first place."

"H-hey, don't start thinking like that," she stammered. "Everyone deserves to be loved." She pulled him to her in a hug, now with her other arm on his smooth armor-like back. Not unlike how she'd touched him the last time she'd seen him alive. She trembled with nostalgia and a sorrow she barely kept at bay.

Had no one ever told him that?

She grunted as she held on to him, "You know what the problem might be? You don't know Stephen that well. You haven't given him a chance. I mean, now's obviously not the best time what with him needing to finish the replica—"

"I prefer to call it 'fake notebook.'"

Erin narrowed her eyes. "There's my point, right there. As I was saying, when this is all over, and we've caught Mello and rescued the kids, you and him should go out and get a drink, maybe work on a ship-in-a-bottle together. You know, get to know each other. Then maybe you'll start to get along and you won't feel so threatened by him? Hell, maybe you guys can end up friends?"

There was that pause again.

"A-at least think about it. Stephen's cool. He doesn't hold grudges, as long as you really make an effort."

"Very well. I will consider it."

"Good. Thanks, Umbra." She yawned, her grip on him loosening. He caught her and placed her flat on the mattress. "I gotta sleep, now. Gonna wake up early in the morning to go with Halle back to the shooting range. Or Wedy. Whoever's up when I am. Chances are it's gonna be Halle."

"Are you sure you aren't hungry?"

"Yeah. I'll just eat a big breakfast tomorrow."

Umbra rose up and fluttered off the bed to pull the blankets over her, up to her chin. "Would you like me to hold you?" he asked, clicking the lamp off.

"Uh…actually, I'd like to be alone for a bit. At least until I fall asleep. B-but you can come back afterwards."

"Okay. Good-night, dear Erin. I love you."

Unable to recall grappling with as much sentiment as his words had triggered in her all of a sudden, she smacked her lips against her palm and tossed her kiss to him. "Same here."

Umbra lifted a paw to catch it like one would catch a firefly, clutching it to his chest as he saw himself out.

Now alone in the dark, she listened to the beat of the rain, erratic as that of her own heart, and tried to distract herself by watching the shadows lounge about the walls and ceiling. If she let her mind wonder too far, the shadows would take on faces. The ones haunting her from the past, and the ones stalking her from the future.
Perhaps she could keep practicing this way? Erin made a gun with her right hand and aimed her pointer finger at the rippling shadow overhead that looked like Misa.

See it for what it is.

See it for what it is.

See it for what it is.

Tears resumed their place on the border of her eyelids, one leaking out every time they forced her to blink.

"Bang."

Though imaginary, the kick made her hand twitch hard enough to knock it back on top of her forehead.
For the first time in years, Mello wouldn't leave Matt's side for the rest of the night, and the one after, and the one after that still. He had to confess, despite the fucked-up circumstances of it all, a tiny sickly part of him felt pleased to be the one showering in attention for a change. Not so much because of the attention itself—if that were ever the case, he might have tried harder to climb up the roster at Wammy's House—but because of who was giving it to him.

Or maybe, with his brain swelling inside his skull like a water balloon and his lip throbbing like the nastiest cold sore in history, he just wasn't thinking straight? Hopefully this would clear up soon, before Misa got mad enough at him to kill him for cock-blocking her. She'd killed for pettier reasons.

But once the haze of dopamine and oxytocin and endorphins and whatever cleared, Matt woke up again to reality. Something felt different in the air today, thick and scorching like heat and smoke. Not from too many cigarettes, but from a complete oncoming fire.

Who had poured the gasoline, and who had struck the matches? Did it even matter now?

Something would go down soon. An ending. To what, or who, Matt didn't know. It could be the end of the world for everyone, for all he cared.

Whatever it was, Mello may have felt it too on some level. After crouching in the corner for who counted the hours, Matt looked up from his game to catch him staring at the chocolate bar in his fist. He hadn't taken a single bite of it despite tearing off the top half of the wrapper like always.

Imagine his shock to see his friend ultimately place the bar on the footstool in front of him. Like a drunk deciding from out of the blue, with no coaxing, scolding or screaming from anyone, that he'd had enough.

Matt wondered for a second if his old man had had a similar epiphany on the night he'd drowned. And, if he had, whether that had drove him over the wall rather than a passing vehicle.

Had he crossed his mind at all when he'd tumbled off the bridge?

Matt half-hoped so, and then he half-hoped not. No matter how or why he'd died, he'd always hoped the old man didn't suffer too much or too long. He hoped he hadn't felt a thing, that he'd at least broken his flabby neck on the riverbed first before he could feel the shit and grime and muddy water saturating his lungs. There's only so much your six-year-old runt can do to save you.

But Matt wasn't six anymore. He hadn't been six for a while. Not physically, at least.

"Matt?"

Realizing he'd just lost his last life on the game—today was just not his day—Matt turned off the handheld device and put it beside his pack of cigarettes. "Yeah?"

"How are you feeling? Does your head still hurt?"

"No."

"Can…do you think you can walk?"
"Yeah. My leg ain' brok'n. Juph my faph." And everything else.

…

"If you really had to…do you think you could drive?"

…

"Uh, yeah. I gueph. Why? Tired of playin' nurphmaid awready?"

"Ha. You're welcome, you bastard," sniped Mello. Some best friends called each other "buddy."
Others went by nicknames or code words. For Matt and Mello, it was "asshole," "bastard,"
"shithead," "cocksucker" and so on. They saved the crasser names for more affectionate moments.
This was the way it'd always been.

Matt couldn't think of a good comeback. That thing in the air become more stifling by the minute.
Instead, he watched Mello get up from his bean-bag chair.

"I…need to get something, real quick. Don't be dead when I come back."

"No guaranteeph."

Normally Mello would scoff or snicker at such a reply. But this time he froze in the doorway, his
fist clenching along the brickwork. Before Matt got the sense to ask him about his new
malfuction, he slipped away around the corner. He would get the answer in due time, regardless.

For the next two, three, five minutes, Matt entertained himself with a cigarette, listening to the
leaky crack in the ceiling drip rain water into the recently emptied pail in a half-time rhythm.
Ironic, how they could have more money than God yet settle on squatting in shitholes like this
place. Not that Matt minded at all. These surroundings felt more like home to him than any posh
penthouse ever would.

Besides, when Matt really thought about it, most everyone on Earth had more money than God.
Even his old man. Why else would all the churches insist on asking their followers for donations?

If he was conscious enough to have a smoke, surely he would be okay after all?

Matt was in the middle of crushing the stub into the brimming ashtray when Mello returned, with
the notebook in his hand. He blinked a few times in surprise upon seeing it.

Well, fuck me. Who's he looking to waste, this time?

Mello zipped straight to Matt's side, taking a seat on the edge of the mattress and thrusting the
book out to him. "Here."

Matt didn't take it. He never wanted that thing within 100 meters of his space again. "What'm I
ph'pophed t'do w' thiph?"

"Keep your pants on, I'll tell you. You're gonna take the notebook and drive out to Glendale. I've
reserved a room at Days Inn™ in the area, 450 Pioneer Drive."

Matt blinked at him, the words meaninglessly bouncing off his brain. "What?"

Mello glared at him. "Did I stutter? Then again, you did get popped in the head, so I'll forgive you
this time." Mello never would have tolerated such hesitation from anyone else. Matt was privileged
in that way. Not that he felt like it.
"Fine, let me use fewer words to illustrate my point. You," he spat, jabbing a finger into his chest before turning it to the book. "Take notebook. Go to Glendale. Days Inn™. 450 Pioneer Drive."

"Awright, awright, I heard ya. It's juph…we're leavin'? Like, righ'now?"

"Not we. You. And not right now, but definitely first thing in the morning. I'll have someone pack your stuff. Got the Pontiac™ gassed up and everything."

Matt's gut sucked itself into a puckering hole. It was happening again. Mello was driving him away, just like he had four years ago. Had he stayed with him the first time, would any of this have happened in the first place? Would all those people still be alive? Would there still be a Wammy's House? Would Mello still be the same blustery kid he had grown up with who still had some tangible capacity for good underneath his spines, instead of this vendetta-obsessed stranger wearing that kid's face like a hollow mask?

"I…I don' undaphan…"

"What's there not to understand?" snapped Mello.

"Oh, I dunno. Normal people don' juph aph their friendph t' juph drop ever'thing an' phkip town without a reaph'n ferrit."

Mello tilted his head and sneered at him. Since when had either of them, or the thing they shared, ever been "normal?" Nevertheless, Matt put up his hands to reign the former in. "'Ey, c'mon. I don' think it'ph tha' unreaphonable t' a'least know what'ph goin' on."

"Hm. Glen must've taken more out of you than I thought. He'll pay for that." Yes. Shooting the bastard in the foot had been a slap on the wrist in Mello's book.

"But to answer your question, Near's coming over tomorrow night to get the kids back from us. Tomorrow night, it'll be all over. For him."

"Then why're ya phedin' me away w' the notebook before then? Wha'bout you?"

He didn't ask about Misa or Lumen or Ross or anyone else. The rest of them could go to Hell, assuming there was one or they weren't all in it already.

Mello sniffed at the dread weighing in his voice. "I'll be fine. But we both know Near is a cheating little bastard. He's going to want to take the notebook as much as we want the notebook he has. I won't give him the chance. When it's all over, I'll catch up with you. I'll meet up with you at the motel."

"Oh."

…

…

Even if Matt did care enough to ask about where that left the rest of their gang, he couldn't. What if one of them heard them? The last thing he needed now was to have them turn on Mello, if they weren't already thinking of it behind closed doors.

Mello wouldn't be so stupid as to force Ross's gang to all stick around to possibly get killed. Just the least important members of the pack. The expendables. The fuck-ups.
But the kids…the teachers…Linda…

"An' th' kidph?"

"What about 'em?" The chill in Mello's curt tone was enough to send a chill down Matt's own crooked spine. It made his voice too quiet. It sounded…artificial. Forced rather than forceful.

His breath became shorter and more painful than the last, like his throat and airway were being pierced by hundreds of invisible needles. "They're all gonna die, aren' they?"

Mello didn't answer. Some kind of emotion flickered across his fair face but he turned away to glance at the wall before Matt could get a better look at it or name it. Not that he really had to. The mere act of diverting his gaze gave him all the confirmation he needed.

"You're gonna kill 'em, aren' you? After you get Near and Roger—"

"What the fuck else would I do with them? Besides, I'm doing them a favor!" he blurted, whirling back around to aim blazing blue bullets at him. Not that Matt wasn't slightly cowed by that vicious look in his eye but rather than back down, he felt another fit of laughter coming on. Or perhaps he'd begun to laugh because he was cowed? Cowed, and other things.

"A favor? Bullshit. Pho that'ph the new ephcuph you'ph commup with? That'ph pho…lame."

Mello never stooped to lame excuses to explain the things he did in the time they'd known each other. Maybe they didn't make sense to anyone else, but Mello had never given a shit about what anyone else thought. Or so he'd always acted.

Mello's hands fell in front of him and clenched on top of the mattress. "I would be doing them a favor! What future do they have as the next generation of soulless L-clones? As Near-clones? If I spare them, they've got nothing to look forward to except to be used and then thrown away like trash by some self-important dirtbag who couldn't give one shit about any of them! Just like you and me! We're trash! And it's all their fault."

Just as Matt had suspected, that disingenuous chill had broken out into a feverish rant, the sincerity of which he could not determine. He scooted away towards the opposite edge of the bed. "You really believe that? Or iph tha' phomethin' you'ph parted tellin' yerphelf 'cuph you juph realiphed how much you'ph fuck'd up thiph time?"

"I didn't fuck up! L did!" Mello's wide eyes seemed to take on a reddish tint under the dim lighting, as if the vessels inside them were exploding under the heat of his fury as they argued.

"Yeah, he did. I'm not gonna phay he didn'. He'ph alpho dead. He an' Wammy've been dead for four yearph. But I gueph phomeone'ph phill gotta pay ferrit, huh?" His lips and tongue throbbed in protest, urging him to shut up, but he ignored them. He could not shut up this time. Though that could be because he hadn't slept in days. Mello hadn't let him, even if it'd been out of fear of never seeing him awake again.

"Of courph the neph' beph' thing would be our old claphmates, and the new oneph we've never even met. They don' even know why they're 'ere."

Mello sprang up on his feet then, this time his face an illegible scrawl of shock, rage and perhaps a twinge of sadness or betrayal. "What the hell are you—where is this coming from? You've never said these things before. I never pegged you as the kind who cared one way or another…"

Whereas some people in this position might have begun breaking down in tears, Matt resumed his
hollow, bitter laughter. "Well, yer not wrong. If you want'd t' put me in an alignm'nt, I'd prob'ly be True Neutral. Can' be bother'd to care about good or evil, law or chaoph. No' really, no' for their own phakeph. It'ph not worth worrying 'bout a world that'll never be any leph of a crap-phack no matter wha' I do."

"And yet, for reapophonph unknown even t' me, I've phtill founnit in me t' care abou' two thingph in the whole time I've been alive: my ol' man, and...you."

Mello froze. Matt, meanwhile, paused to wonder what more to say, if it was smart or necessary to say anything else at all. Something about the way the other's warm blond hair glowed and swayed, despite (or because of) his wild expression, had him sliding back across the mattress towards him. He never could stay away. What had possessed him to think he could break away from him now?

"Ever'thing I've done, an' haven' done...it'ph been all for you. You're fuckin' pheffish, Mello, but let'ph fap it, pho'm I. Maybe that'ph why I never tried t' phtop you when I should've. You're the cloheph't I can get t' feelin' alive, t' feelin' awake...exptept I've foun' tha' bein' awake phuckph as much as bein' aphleep. I can' win.

"I—I never though' it'd get thiph bad. Killin' thoph copph waph one thing, but thiph..."

Maybe I just didn't want to believe it? Because that would mean acknowledging you were becoming a monster and I was letting you go even when I was there beside you. I really am no better than Misa.

In spite of his sleepy chuckling, Matt's heart sank inch by inch when he saw Mello start to take his turn backing away. In the meantime, the notebook lay patiently at the foot of the bed. (Matt never thought he would ever consider a lousy notebook its own entity, but after witnessing only a glimpse of its capabilities, would it really be so far-fetched if it also had a mind of its own?) "Are you going anywhere with this? Or is it your concussion talking?"

"I'm fine, Mello. Thiph iph prob'ly the cleareph't I've ever thought. Mello, you know thoph kidph don' depherve wha'ever you're plannin'. Deep down you mupht know that. Why would you go outta your way t' shoot Glen if you didn'?"

Before Mello could get too far out of his reach, Matt lunged forward to wrap his pale freckled fingers limply around his forearms, just below the bend of his elbows. "We can pull the plug on thiph shit. Let'ph all phkip town juph like you want! Let Near find the kidph here alone. They'll diphtract him, and we can fuck off to the border or phom'thin'. Canada, Mephico, Cuba, anywhere you want!"

Mello's lips protruded as his mouth formed the shape of a small lemon. He always loved how his lips curled, regardless of the mood accompanying it. Mello could look downright kissable without meaning to, not that Matt had ever mustered the courage to touch them with his own. There'd never been a right time.

But what was "right," anyway? Just went to show how sick Matt was, a fact he'd made peace with some time ago. No, that wasn't quite right. He'd merely stopped caring about it, just as Misa had stopped caring about hiding her violent psychopathy.

"C'mon, Mello, leggo o' your contempt for life aph we know it while it phtill countph! You've done enough damage juph by blowin' up Wammy'ph Houph! In more wayph than one. There'ph no way they're gonna recover from—"

By now Matt had ceased his laughter, and in its place rose the most visceral sense of dread he
could recall ever experiencing. The kind that split his lip open all over again and from there tore him open down the middle to spill all his organs out onto the floor at Mello's shuffling feet, with his still beating heart landing on top of the pile for him to see.

Said feet wouldn't stay on the floor for long, however.

"Get off!"

Thwack!

Before Matt knew what had happened, he was lying back on the bed on his back with his arms splayed at his sides, dull but hot pain radiating up from his groin before Mello had removed his foot. His head lolling over the edge towards the floor, he spared himself from looking into Mello's no doubt ferocious face.

"You think I can just back out now, after coming this far? Fuck you! I thought you were my friend!" he snarled outside his sight.

Matt grabbed his aching groin, shielding it from another possible assault. "I am, aphhole. That'ph why I'm tryin' t' talk phenph into you…ferrall th' good it'ph doin' me."

"Well, forget it! You know I never did anything halfway. I'm not about to start now. I don't care what it takes; I'll beat L—Near—by any means necessary. If you don't like that, you can just fuck off right now and never come back! I can make it just fine without you. I've done it before. So there's the door."

The growl in his voice gave Matt pause. It was a very rare sort of growl you'd expect to hear from Mello, sharp and quivering.

The kind one took on as they tried to fight back away from the verge of angry tears.

Was Mello going to cry? If Matt got back up right now, would he see tears rolling down his cheeks?

No. Crying was weakness. Just like walking away from total victory at the last minute out of a silly sense of morality.

Matt grinned up towards the ceiling, his last bit of venom squeezing out of his teeth before he could find the mind to stop himself.

"Congratph, Mello. You've finally dunnit."

"D-done what?"

"You alwayph want'd to be the nepht L, right? To phurpaph him. Well now you got it. You're aph bad as L. Worph than' im, even. That should make you happy, now."

Matt expected Mello to pounce on the bed and straddle him as he hammered his fist into his jaw over and over again. He squeezed his eyes shut and braced himself for another onslaught of blows that never came. Instead, he heard his feet hurry away, growing fainter and fainter until he no longer heard them. Perhaps because the idea had crossed Mello's mind, too. As had the knowledge that Matt wouldn't have fought back at all if he acted on the urge.

Oh. He decides to walk away this time. Dumbfuck.
His tongue reflexively brushed across the wound on his lip, granting him the warm metallic taste of his own blood and broken flesh. He twisted the kinks out of his neck and pushed himself back up. In his haste, Mello had left the notebook on the edge of the bed. Or maybe not? After all, Matt had always come through for him in the end. The fact that this was his first—and only—earnest attempt at protest meant nothing.

Whatever Mello's reasoning for leaving it, Matt plucked it up by the corner and clamored over to the nightstand to pull out his half-empty lighter. He was just about to flick it on, as he should have done a long time ago, when a smug, gravelly voice cut in:

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you."

Fuck me, not you again.

Sure enough, Matt reluctantly glanced over to see Lumen standing by the door, his back against the wall and his arms folded over his withered chest. "You really wanna piss off Mello some more? After seeing him shoot a guy in the foot? I thought you were smarter than that," he taunted.

"He wouldn' hur' me."

"If kicking you in the crotch doesn't constitute as 'hurting' you, I gotta wonder what does. Then again, I did always peg you as a masochist. You must be to have stuck around for this long. But don't get the wrong idea. I'm not pointing that out 'cause I care about you."

"Trupht me, tha' didn' croph my mind at all."

Lumen clapped a bony hand over his gaping mouth and cackled. "You should listen to yourself. You sound so stupid, like an old man with all his teeth gone. Although at the rate you go through those cigarettes, that may become a reality sooner than we think. I guess I should give you kudos for trying to show a spine, but Mello wouldn't be Mello if he listened to you. He'd make a fine shinigami…not as great as me, of course, but close enough."

Matt's hands began to tremble with the ice flowing through his veins. "Wha'the hell doph that mean?"

"Oh. Nothing that concerns you. I mean it, though: don't try to stop us, now. You'll regret it."

"Why? What're gonna do, kill me? I can' feel regret if I'm dead."

Lumen shook his head with a knowing and cruel snicker. "Nah, not you. Where's the fun in killing someone who doesn't care for his own life? You said so yourself: there's only one thing in this world you actually give a damn about."

The notebook fell out of his right hand back onto the mattress, while the lighter on his left clattered to the floor.

"You wouldn'. I though' you liked Mello?"

Lumen crossed his long legs, the toe of his right boot rapping against the floor like he were crushing imaginary ants under it. "Sure, I do. But you know he's gonna die eventually no matter what you do, and I'll be the one to take his life when the time comes. Such is the contract he made with me when we met. It's merely a matter of how much of the time he still has that we'll let him enjoy."

We?
Matt reached up to clutch his pounding left temple. He would have grabbed his right if he weren't using his other hand to push himself back up on his feet, where he teetered back and forth like a bobble toy. "Why're you doin' thiph? You've got nothin' to gain fr'm any o' thiph shit…"

The air cracked with the raspy, high-pitched sound of Lumen's wicked laughter. "Don't I? Ah, never mind. I'm doing it because I can. See, I'm a god. I can do whatever I want. This world and the next one are my playground. Besides, maybe I have some scores of my own that I'd like to settle? I happen to have a special appointment tomorrow night that I fully intend to keep, whether you like it or not.

"No matter my motives, who's going to stop me? You, a lowly human? As if. The King? I don't think so. That old fart is as impotent as he is apathetic, not unlike the self-appointed rulers of your world."

"Bu' if I burn the notebook, you can' kill anyone—"

"Eeer! Wrong again. You didn't think I'd come to your world without a spare, didja?"

Lumen reached into his jacket and, to Matt's ineffable breath-taking horror, pulled out a second black notebook that looked just like the first.

"It's true that if you burned that notebook, I'd have to go back to my world. But I can still kill any and all of you anywhere and anytime I please. Face it, Matt: you're trapped. Tomorrow night, someone will die—maybe more, if things really go well. The only choice I'd say you have is who is most worth sacrificing for Mello's life and happiness."

The shinigami's speech lost some of its perverted levity for a moment to take on a quieter and more openly sinister inflection. "So don't you get in the way, or try to rat me out. It'll do you anything but good. In case Matt still had a sliver of doubt about the sincerity of his threat, he drew a sharp, skeletal finger across his nonexistent throat. His other paw reached back to firmly grasp the handle of his ax like the executioner he fancied himself to be.

"Ha. Now that we've cleared the air a bit, you'd best get some sleep. Tomorrow's a big day. It's been three days now and you're not dead yet, so it's probably safe. I don't think Mello's gonna come back and bug you."

He turned his back to Matt, who had lost the strength to stay up on his feet and dropped on his knees to the floor. "You sure got under his skin with that last jab. Heh, didn't think you had it in you."

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"Hey, Mello-yellow! Glad I caught you!" Missing the anger simmering in his eyes, Misa jumped in front of him to show him two dresses she held up in either hand by the hooks of hangers. "Tell me, which one looks best on me?"

He stormed past her without sparing her or her clothes a single look. "Go away."

"Awww, c'mon, Mello, this is super-important!" she whined, trailing behind him. "I want to look my best for tomorrow! Now which dress looks best: the red one, or the black one?"

"I don't care. They're not my clothes. Wear what you want." He flopped down in his seat, propping his jaw on his right fist as he slouched into the chair and glowered at the stained wall before him.

"But Mello-oooooo, I'm blind! I need you to be my eyes."
"Then go back to your room so you can see for yourself."

Misa, no longer able to ignore his curtness, laid the dresses haphazardly over the bean bag where Matt used to sit to free her hands. Now what was the matter? He hadn't left Matt's side since the commotion down in the basement, to her chagrin. What had changed?

Whatever it was, she reckoned it was nothing her magic fingers and lips couldn't (temporarily) fix. She unfastened the top button to her top, put a little extra sway in her hips, and sauntered up behind him, using her feet, hands and ears to guide her.

She wrapped her bare, soft arms around his neck and nested her chin into his shoulder. "What's the matter, Mello?" she hummed into his ear.

He didn't try too hard to throw her off—except for a shrug—but he didn't respond to her touch like he was supposed to, either. He tensed up. "What part of 'go away' don't you understand?"

"As sexy as you are when you're mad, you're not the right kind of mad right now."

"Oh? I didn't realize there were 'right' and 'wrong' kinds of anger."

Misa giggled. "Sure, there are! The way you got when you caught Glen beating up Matt…that was awesome. But this isn't. Now tell Misa-Misa what's wrong. She can't fix it if you don't tell her."

Mello shrugged again. "What d'you care? Even if you did, it's not your problem." He tried to peel her off him, only to have her lock her hands together over his chest.

"Oh Mello, you haven't left Matt's side for days. And now suddenly you have. What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it. Now get off me."

"No." She yanked his hand out from under his chin and forced it open so she could press it against her cheek.

"Don't make me hit you!"

"Mm-hmm. What'cha think I'm trying to do? Go ahead, don't hold back," she whispered, cajoling him by pressing his fingers into the nape of her neck and planting kisses along his leather-scented wrist, one or two with them with tongue.

Even with his gloves on, she could faintly feel his nails dig into her skin, and she waited for his full reaction with bated breath. Would he go for it?

She heard him sigh and go lax on her. "Let go of my hand, Misa. I don't want to hit you."

She frowned. Did her ears deceive her or did Mello sound…defeated? "Why not? I deserve it, don't I?"

"It's not a question of whether you deserve it! I just don't feel like hitting you, okay? Now cut it out!" He summoned the strength to rip his hand out of her grip, but otherwise she stayed on top of him, her hand now resting on top of his head to draw it to hers while the other stuck to his chest.

"But you'll feel better."

Mello sniffed. "Yeah, like you care how I feel. You're doing this for yourself."

"What if I am? Does it matter? I can tell from your voice how much you want to hit something.
And I want to be hit. Everyone wins. So what's the problem? It's not like you to hold back. You're like a typhoon, loud and spontaneous and ripping up everything in your path just because you can. That's one of the things I like about you."

Light, on the other hand, had been more like an earthquake. Rare, deliberate, active only when the earth shifted in just the right way, but just as devastating in his own right. The world could still feel the aftershocks of his wrath after all this time, and who knew how much longer it would still.

But even earthquakes and typhoons ceased eventually.

Mello rested his arms on top of his supple legs. "Tch. You wouldn't understand. You'll say just about anything to get into my pants."

"Aw, it's not like sex is on my mind 24/7. I do take out two hours to think about other things. I really don't like you like this. Why don't you try me?"

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"You…spent a lot of time with L directly." He refrained from commenting how fucked up he found it in hindsight that L would rather spend more time bonding face to face with his suspects than his own students. By now that went without saying and was beside the point.

"Yes. Unfortunately."

"Would you say I was worse than L?"

Misa blinked behind her blindfold. Now where did that come from?

Matt. He must have finally cracked and blurted something in the heat of passion and delirium. Why else would Mello suddenly separate himself from him? She had heard them arguing just a while ago but hadn't stuck around to hear all the dirty details. Not that she didn't like a little gossip, but choosing her final outfit had higher priority at the time.

"Oh, Mello. You're on a level that L couldn't hope to achieve. I think that's why he always ignored you: because he was jealous and scared you were gonna turn out better than him. Look at how much you've accomplished and compare that to what he's done. It took him a whole year to catch Light red-handed and he didn't even technically do that on his own. In just two months, you've singlehandedly all but totally trashed his legacy."

(Never mind that Mello hadn't been alone, either.)

"Thanks, but that's not what I mean. I'm talking about being worse than L as a…"

He grunted, like it both pained him to say the words and surprised him that he would ever feel the need to say them in the first place. "…as a person."

"Oh. Um…why does that matter? You never cared about that before."

She felt Mello bristle in front of her. "Just answer the question, Misa. Chances are, I won't like what you have to say, but we're deep in it now. So tell me."

"Hm. Fine. L was a bastard through and through. And so are you. But I wouldn't worry about it. We're all terrible people here. Trying to sort out who's the worst of us would be splitting hairs. And
no one likes split hairs. They're unattractive." She stuck out her tongue in disdain.

Mello fell silent for what seemed too long for him. Either Misa's arms were getting weak or he was beginning to shake under them.

She called out softly: "Mello?"

"Goddamn it. He's right…this was a mistake…but I…I can't…"

"Who was right? Right about what?"

Again, he didn't answer her. Not that he ultimately had to, for understanding made Misa jerk in place.

Oh, right. Those kids and teachers downstairs. What else could it be? Nothing else he had done before had made him recoil this way in the whole time she'd known him. Was he having second thoughts about this whole thing?

"You can't do what? Take it back?"

Even if he was, what good would it do him or her or any of them to dwell on it? He couldn't take it back. Or maybe he could? His pride and need for revenge just wouldn't let him, just as pride and anger had compelled Light to turn on his father and friends, and on her. Besides, showing mercy was no guarantee that Near would return the favor, if he was anything like the "big-headed twit" Mello had painted in her head.

Then again, she could be biased all around, given her own grudge against L.

"Ohhh, Mello." She hugged him to her, planting several kisses around the top and back of his head. "It'll be all right. You've come this far. Just follow your heart. It may be black and withered like mine, but it's the only one you have. And if it's telling you to…put those kids to sleep, so be it. Personally, I think you'd be doing them a favor. The world is a rotten place, after all. With or without L. Let them die while they're still young and cute and innocent—"

"Shut up, Misa!"

Thump!

To her not-so-secret disappointment, he still didn't hit her. Rather, he'd merely grabbed her by the arms and tossed her backwards. His strength and her shock had landed her on the cold floor. Though she could not see him, she could feel the fire in his no doubt hateful gaze raining down on her as hot as the pain that shot up from her thighs and buttocks.

His breath grew harsh and ragged, as it often did when he'd reached a boiling point. "For once in your life, why don't you shut the fuck up!"

Hoping to still get at least one blow, Misa shrugged. "Excuse you. You said to tell you what I think no matter how much you wouldn't like it. Well, that's what I think. Make up your mind, won't you? It's not like I'm saying anything you didn't already know. Forget Matt. He's just one stupid opinion. Yours is the only one that matters in the end. Even he knows that."

There. She'd insulted Matt. That should do it.

Mello responded to her goading by hoisting her up from under her arms and herding her out of the room as one would throw out a dog as punishment for piddling on one's best shoes.
Slam!

Fumbling about in the corridor as she groped for the wall. "A-hem! Mello, I left my dresses in your room. By the way, you never answered my question about which one I should wear tomorrow."

She finally got her answer on the matter when she heard him tear the door back open to throw said dresses outside.

Slam!

Alone again, she took the liberty to lift up the blindfold by the right corner to check which dress had fluttered over her foot first.

The black one, then. She was leaning towards that one, anyway.

As Lumen had predicted, they didn't speak to each other for the rest of the night. Matt did consider apologizing for what he'd said, only to remember all the times he'd apologized before and how little of a difference any of them had made. Apologies are like checks: not worth the toilet paper you wipe yourself with without an endorsement.

The only way he could well and truly make up with Mello was to do as he'd asked, no matter how much he wouldn't like it. Besides, they weren't expecting Near to show up until around midnight. He could use the time and distance away from everyone to think of what to do next. If there was anything he could do. Glendale wasn't terribly far from Los Angeles, only 16 kilometers. On a good day with an open road and no cops, he could burn through that in 10 minutes, give or take.

Lumen took it upon himself to rouse him at 4:00 in the most obnoxious way he could think of: by rapidly pounding on the ceiling with his weapon like he was hammering a nail into a sign sealing the latter's fate. "Abandon hope all ye to enter here, or whatever."

He didn't even try to bite back his howls of laughter as he hung upside-down and watched Matt roll out of bed cursing and convulsing in terror. "Get up, lazy-bones! It's time to go!"

The first thing Matt did as soon as he regained full consciousness was flip the shinigami the bird, which did nothing but elicit more cackling on the latter's part. As futile of a gesture as there ever was, Lumen found his sorry attempt at defiance oh so amusing.

Except for slipping on his beige vest with the fake fur trimming, he didn't bother to change out of his clothes—his favorite striped shirt and jeans—or clean himself up. He just wasn't the sort who worried about a trivial matter as personal hygiene, even without all this tension in the place that pushed him outside (as much as he hated that place, too. At least it was still dark out).

He plugged his fingers into his ears and began humming "The Ball of Kerrymuir" to deafen himself to the helpless cries emanating from dozens of meters under his feet, real or imagined.

Mello must have cooled down at least somewhat overnight, because he found it in him to walk with him out to the car. But ice had crawled over his eyes in place of fire and his demeanor had turned cold and dour to match. Maybe Matt shouldn't have expected him to completely forgive him? What he'd said had cut pretty deep.

Misa, to his relief, had not come out to say good-bye. Lumen hung out on the roof overlooking the urban wasteland surrounding them like an emperor overlooking his empire, chuckling to himself all the while. What the hell had gotten into him today? His mood was too gleeful, even for him.
It must have been the idea of all the carnage bound to happen within the next 24 hours that continued to tickle him. Or was there something more? What was it he'd said last night, about having a "special appointment" to keep?

Matt slammed the trunk shut after tossing his duffel bag inside. Apart from Lumen, the pair were alone, in more ways than one. "450 Pioneer Drive."

"Yeah."

"I'll wai'up for you there."

"Yeah."

"Ya know when I can ephpect you?"

"I'll call you when it's all over. Don't let anything happen to that notebook."

"Yeah."

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Still, even if it wouldn't change anything, he ought to say it anyway. That feeling from last night was creeping back over him. That thing that warned him with every passing painful heartbeat that this would be the last time he'd ever see Mello again. Mello was the only living person he could be bothered to care about not seeing again.

"Mello. I'm...I'm sorry. Wha' I phaid lapht nigh'. It waph—"

"Forget it," Mello cut in, brusque as ever. He kept his arms folded over his chest the whole time they spoke. "It doesn't matter anymore. How's your head?"

"Fine. I'm awake, alert an' fully aware of my phurrroundings. Phadly. Wan'me to prove it?"

"Make it quick."

"Today's Phemptember 30th. The time iph 4:11, way too fuckin' early in th' morning. I'm goin' t' Day'ph Inn™ in Glendale with th' notebook, at 450 Pioneer Drive. I should prob'ly thank you for pickin' a phpot cloph by. I don' think my lazy aph could handle drivin' farther away."

God, he could sure use a cigarette right about now. He'd indulge himself once he got into the car. For now, he placated the twitch in his fingers by placing them over the top of Mello's head, to the surprise of both. He pressed his palm on his warm, soft forehead.

The ice in Mello's eyes stayed in place but he did see it crack in the center.

Finding no need to lower his voice, Matt closed his statement with the following: "My name iph Mail Jeevaph. And no matter what happenph t'nigh', I love you, Mello. Later, motherfucker. No homo."

He used the heel of his hand to lightly push him back, and then being the coward he was, he turned on his heels and dashed around for the driver's seat before he could see or hear Mello's reaction. If he had any at all.

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The cool morning breeze venting through the open windows combined with the lack of traffic yet
and the warm, sweet aroma of tobacco smoke drifting down his airway led Matt to an epiphany he might not have made had he stayed back with the others. Lumen's mood had just been too cheerful even for him to easily ignore. What could he have meant by that "special appointment?"

Near? Why would he care about Near?

For that matter, what "scores" could he possibly have to settle as a shinigami? What had Near ever done to him personally?

Unless it wasn't Near.

Come to think of it, why had Misa kissed Lumen that one time? It was no secret that Misa was mad, but that mad? Then again, she had somehow charmed a shinigami well enough to compel it to kill, and die, for her. Since that incident, Matt hadn't seen her speak to him or look his way. A development with which Lumen had seemed quite satisfied.

From this rose the question: why would Misa want to try to make Lumen fall in love with her?

Did she know something about him that they didn't?

That bitch. What was she doing? He knew they couldn't trust her, or him. Why wouldn't Mello listen to him?

Never mind. That didn't matter anymore. Even if he couldn't do anything about Misa now, thinking about Lumen did give him a terrible idea. One of the few ideas, and the worst idea, he'd ever come up with by himself.

Only after he'd pulled into the parking lot for the motel did he pull out his phone. He lit his second cigarette to steel his nerves.

I can't believe I'm doing this. But what other choice do I have? It's the only way to check to see if I'm right.

Mello…I'm sorry. I swear, this is for you more than anyone else.

But at least I made it to the inn like you asked.

I don't know the numbers for anyone else, so I guess I'll use this one.

The line rang like a heart monitor for a coma patient getting off life support, moments before flat-lining. After five beeps, a nasally and understandably groggy voice rewarded his patience, answering with a snort:

"H-hello?"

He lurched forward, his left hand hanging out of the window to flick off the ashes. "Thiph iph Erin Blogger I'm talkin' to, righ'?"

"Y…yeah. It is. Who wants to know?"

"Thiph iph Matt. Where're you guyph 'tayin' at?"

"E-excuse me?"

"Don' hang up. I wanna make a deal wi' you, an' Near. I'm comin' alone."
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