

Saints of Ciacco | Chara Murphy

[The following excerpts have been retrieved from the autobiography entitled "Anabel Merrill: All Roads Lead to Rome." Merrill was a renowned lawyer involved in many high-profile medical cases before her sudden retirement and subsequent disappearance from the public eye.]

[From: Chapter 5: "Vincent Levot" (Excerpt 2)]

Early one day, he came to my room. He leaned against the side of my door frame, trapping me inside, and looked at me, patiently, waiting for me to say something. I couldn't think of anything in time.

"So, are you gonna tell me why you need this 'break from school' you keep taking about? How long are you gonna need to figure this out?"

I felt his gaze baring down on me. "I'm going to take as long as I find necessary," I said. "I just have some issues I need to address first."

"Oh, really?" Levot looked at me incredulously. "What kind of 'issues' can you 'address' while you're all cooped up in that room of yours? It's been, what, three weeks since you moved in? And you've almost never got your door open."

I remember feeling that Levot's questions were invasive, but for some reason I always felt compelled to answer. With each of his inquiries, I had to scramble to think of a truth I could use that would not burden him with any unnecessary information.

"I have only been doing research and writing application letters," I said. "I just have no time for anything else." My defensive tone may have betrayed me.

"Application letters? For what?" asked Levot. "I know it's not scholarships. Weren't you going to Harvard? You either have a full ride, or you have rich parents."

It was not the first time he had done this. He had a way of calling out my half-truths and cornering an explanation out of me. It was certainly unbecoming of the law student that I claimed to be.

"Besides," he continued, "Who takes a break in the *middle* of the semester?"

I put my hand to my head, averting my gaze. He was no fool, and I was certain that he had already guessed my predicament long before he had come to interrogate me. With no other option, I uttered my words of resignation.

"I failed out."

A part of me waited in anticipation for some kind of retort; laughter, bewilderment, disappointment, or a combination of the above, but instead, he merely smiled and gave a sympathetic, knowing nod. A tension in my body that I had not been aware of began to fade. I wasn't used to that.

I still vividly remember what Levot's smile looked like. It both captured my focus with its tranquility and somehow seemed to mask his emotions. I would learn that attempting to remain aloof as I had been was a waste of energy; simply being in his presence always compelled me to respond. I was like an open cup of water around Levot.

"Well, if you took this long to tell me, you probably haven't told your family yet, huh?" said Levot. He watched me intently as we spoke.

"What could I even say?" I asked, practically coughing out the words. "They had such high expectations for me, and I—"

I choked the rest of my sentence back, having immediately gotten the sense that I had made some kind of grave mistake. I once again braced myself for what I assumed to be inevitable, but, as always, he just watched and listened, like a wolf.

A very friendly wolf.

"Well, that's no good," he said. "You know that people who make their kids scared of talking to them for *any* reason are bad parents, right?"

He spoke smoothly and confidently as if his words were rehearsed.

Levot put his hand on my shoulder. "I'm here, so you don't have to tell anyone if you don't want to, all right? I'm gonna help you back on the right track."

[From: Chapter 5: "Vincent Levot" (Excerpt 1)]

I connected with Vincent Levot through a platform called "Craigslist." Though I do not remember the details, I believe the website was recommended to me by a fellow resident of my Harvard dormitory who made frequent use of it. I had never heard of the website before, so I knew nothing of its infamy at the time. However, I likely would have chosen to use it regardless of if I had been warned. I had little other choice.

His "seeking roommate" advert on Craigslist was enticing—a small, two-bedroom apartment for a mere \$300 a month. During the initial interview I conducted with him, he also happened to leave an astoundingly positive first impression on me. He was such a clean and kind living companion (compared to the other candidates, at least), that there were times during which I could only see his support as something divine.

[From: Chapter 5: “Vincent Levot” (Excerpt 3)]

Levot fancied himself to be a community leader of sorts. We had only lived together for about a week before he made known an apparent hobby of his—Levot was a leader of a group called the “Saints of Ciacco,” which organized and hosted communal dining events. He called these events “mixers,” which is a descriptor that I could never bring myself to agree with. The purpose of these events was *not* to facilitate connections, and I’m certain he only referred to them as “mixers” to get my attention, but I, of course, did not know that at the time. The prospect of networking with others seemed somewhat of a potential return to normalcy and comfort, so after learning about his “events,” I often caught myself staring at the wall absentmindedly, plagued with visions of the life I was supposed to be living; a life that I thought Levot’s so-called “mixers” might be able to provide.

I eventually gave in.

[From: Chapter 6: “The ‘Mixers’”]

“We’re having a hard time finding people to come to these things,” Levot explained, shutting the door to our shared apartment. “It sucks ‘cause, we put a lot of effort into these events. And money. Turns out it’s *really* expensive to hire your own chefs.”

“I, of course, don’t mind attending your events, but only recruiting guests individually like you have done with me isn’t going to help you in the long run,” I said to Levot, following him as we walked down the hall. “Are you managing your socials

properly? If you're struggling with attendance, it makes me think that you're leaving something to be desired regarding your online presence."

"I think we have, like, a Facebook account? But the last post was in 2010 or something."

"What? Are you even trying?" I said, flabbergasted. "You really need to hire a social media manager. Your attendance rates will skyrocket."

"Hey, we can't all be business-oriented like you!" he said, with that disarming laugh of his. "Hey, you know, you'd probably do great at running our Facebook stuff! How about I introduce you to our money guy later?"

I thought about explaining why that job wasn't in my skill set, but something else seized my train of thought before I could decline. It would not have mattered either way; none of Levot's "propositions" were *offers*.

As we approached a split in the halls of the apartment, an elaborate looking door emerged from behind a corner. This grand, black-painted fixture stood twice my height and was adorned with a golden, ornate design. It struck me as something that belonged on a film set, and I felt my breath hitch while gazing up at the structure. "The mixer is here?" I asked. "In our apartment building?"

"Yeah, they have an event space here. Pretty cool, huh?"

The venue had an aesthetic that well matched its entrance. Dark, Greek-styled stone columns surrounded a wide-open seating area. Dozens of matching table and chair sets which strode a fine line between elegant and gaudy were arranged neatly from wall-to-wall. The chairs clashed with the people they seated, briefly creating within

me a sense of cognitive dissonance; a minor breakdown in what I knew to be real. The opposing wall was built with a noticeable outward curve, seemingly to provide some extra space for its integrated stage, which spanned the size of the room lengthwise. In the center of the wall appeared to be an opening to a hall, though I was unable to tell how much deeper it bore into the building on account of how quickly its contents turned to shadow.

Levot noticed the direction of my gaze. "Hey, please don't go down that hall, by the way," he said. "The kitchen's in there, and the chef really likes being alone. And he gets angry." Levot motioned for me to follow, seemingly having a specific table at which he wished to seat me and looking all too pleased about it.

Everything in the room demanded my attention at once; I was confounded by the other attendees, of whom I recognized not even one. I had certainly been expecting a much different sort of event, and I thought that it made no sense for something of this caliber to be held in such a strange, low-profile venue. The meals at each table were nothing short of extravagant, and I didn't understand how such a skilled chef could be cooking for the same apartment complex that charged a monthly room fee of \$300.

At some point, I became vaguely aware that Levot had stopped walking and was now interacting with one of the attendees at a table. He gestured at me, still looking at the man, and I watched as an unfamiliar hand shortly thereafter pierced through my fog. I reflexively accepted the handshake.

"The name's Ross," said the hand's owner. He spoke with a thick, southern drawl. "Pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise," I said.

Ross gestured at the woman sitting at the table, who was working her way through a decadent-looking bowl of spaghetti Bolognese. “And this is Gabby. Why don’t you introduce yourself?”

Ross was an older fellow; a friendly sort of person who seemed to have a wealth of stories to tell, and all the time in the world to tell them. Gabby seemed the opposite of Ross, in quite literally every conceivable way.

“I’m Gabby,” said the woman, whose name was apparently “Gabby.”

Ross looked back at me with a grin on his face, grasping my hand tighter and still sort of shaking it. “See, she calls herself ‘Gabby,’ but she’s actually not at all!” His laughter quickly evolved into wheezing.

“Wooow, nice one, Ross,” said Gabby while staring at her plate, her demeanor betraying her words completely and utterly.

I began to rattle off the typical introduction that I have used to introduce myself to hundreds of potential business partners, but I found I still hadn’t quite shaken the fugue state I had entered. That haze lasted the entire night, and as a result, I only remember a few events from that day, and I don’t care to further recall those that I do.

[From: Chapter 7: “Initiation” (Excerpt 1)]

At Levot’s insistence, I continued to attend the events held in our apartment ballroom. They were held four days out of the week: Tuesday, Thursday, and both days of the weekend. Additionally, a “Special Event” was always held on the final day of every month, though I gathered it was somewhat of a privilege to be invited.

For several weeks, I attended every event as I, obviously, had no other obligations. I initially attended the events wishing to meet and speak with the other attendees at the party to make connections, however Levot always found an excuse to drag me back to our usual table. "Ross told me he had a story to tell you," he would say, or "Let's see if we can get something funny out of Gabby today!"

I soon learned to stop trying, and I instead simply allowed myself to enjoy the continued company of my new friends. Ross was interesting to talk to, Gabby was fun to be around, and Levot continued to provide me with a sense of comfort. I found that spending time with the three of them helped me to relax and forget my worries. Slowly but surely, my desire to meet new people faded into nothingness. After all, I already had everything I needed. A part of me still misses those days.

I eventually stopped bothering to work on university applications.

[From: Chapter 9: "Saints of Ciacco"]

During one event, Levot brought up the topic of our individual family histories. "I always planned to become either a lawyer or my doctor, like my parents," I explained. "I spent a lot of time shadowing them at their jobs and learning their trade."

Ross shook his head and chimed in.

"Anabel, they're setting you up to be their puppet, you know?" he said. "What are you gonna do when they kick the bucket? What are you gonna do when no one's telling you what to do anymore?"

I shook my head. "It isn't like that. My parents have been my biggest supporters. I always turn to them when I am not sure what to do."

Ross grimaced. "Let's try something else," he said. "What was school like for you? You have a lot of friends?"

"I regularly attended and organized several academic clubs throughout my school years," I said. "I made a lot of connections in those times."

"But did you have friends?"

"I had acquaintances."

Ross and Levot's facial expressions informed me that I had given the incorrect answer. Even Gabby took recess from her usual spaghetti dish to shoot me a sympathetic look.

Levot spoke. "You know, why *did* you flunk out, Ana? I don't think you ever said. Was it too hard? Boring? Did you hate the professors?"

I shook my head again, slower. I didn't want to admit that I knew why.

Ross leaned in and placed his elbows on the table. "When my papa, old money piece of shit that he was, sent me off to MIT to 'study technology,' you wanna know what I did?" He paused to wait for my response, then continued despite not receiving it. "I took that money and lived my *own* life, far away from that hellhole he made. I never heard from the bastard again."

"I don't understand what you mean," I said.

"What I *mean*," said Ross, "Is that you should think more about how your parents treat you, and stop being such a doormat. For *Christ's* sake, you didn't have any friends because of them! They *robbed* you of a childhood!"

I felt like the statue on which Ross chiseled his words into. The idea of seeing my parents in a negative light was a completely foreign one; one impossible for my stone

mind to have previously even conceived of. I felt Ross' chisel as he drove it deep into my skull.

"In fact, I think you already figured it out a little," Ross continued. "You're a smart, capable young woman, but you still failed out of law school. Why?"

Levot nodded contemplatively. "It's what happens when you indulge too much," he said. "It leads to ruin."

It took me a moment to process his words. It must have shown on my face.

"Oh, we have a principal we like to follow," he said. "'Overindulgence leads to ruin; gluttony leads to waste.' Basically, it means that if you indulge in something too much that's bad for you, you'll waste away."

He made perfect sense.

"In your case, you let your parents control you too much. You 'indulged' on their validation too much, and then you paid the price."

I tried to remember an interaction with my parents, desperate for evidence to the contrary, but all I remembered was the pit in the stomach that appeared when they spoke to me about their work. A lawyer. A doctor. No one had ever even once insinuated that I had any other option. The tension from memories suddenly re-manifested itself.

Levot placed his hand on my shoulder. My breath stabilized somewhat.

"It's alright, Ana," he said. "We're here for you. You can stay as long as you need."

A newly formed lump in my throat prevented me from replying. Levot only continued to squeeze my shoulder and looked at me, smiling. He looked at me with that god-damned smile of his. I soon progressed to unrelenting tears.

He pushed my Swedish meatball dish closer to me. "You know, eating's a good way to get all that indulgence out of your system. That's why I always make sure there's always plenty of food at these events."

For some reason, Gabby caught my eye at that moment, and I watched through teary eyes as she inserted an entire meatball into her mouth. Laughter bubbled up through my tears, and Gabby looked at me as if she had just watched the sun extinguish.

"I wish I could be more like you, Gabby," I said.

"What? Okay," she said, muffled by the exotic mystery meat. "I'm literally just here for the food."

Levot's smile suddenly began to look a little less welcoming. "And I wish you'd donate a little more. Those aren't cheap ingredients, you know."

"Oh, right," said Gabby, mouth still completely full. She removed a \$2 bill from her back pocket and handed it over to Levot. "My subscription fee."

Ross laughed like he had just seen the funniest thing on the planet. "I think we could all stand to be a little more like Gabby! The cooking here's so good that *not* eating it is pretty much a sin!" he said. He turned to me and pointed at my food. "You better start eating that thing like your life depends on it. Otherwise, it might start *growing* on you!"

I didn't get the joke, but I laughed anyway. That night, I took Levot and Ross' advice to heart. I might have even out-eaten Gabby.

[From: Chapter 7: “Initiation” (Excerpt 2)]

There were a couple of matters I noticed that struck me as odd. For example, the complementary food provided was nothing short of exquisite, and I could sense the skill of the chef behind the dishes in their masterful preparation and plating. However, strangely, they all incorporated the same kind of exotic meat that I couldn’t place. It had a distinct flavor that I can only describe as “wild beef.” It was gamey, but I enjoyed it so greatly that I never stopped to consider it further.

Levot also had a penchant to frequently turn the conversation towards his money problems. The “mixers” were apparently funded purely with donations, and Levot was constantly fretting about breaking even. Logistically, I thought that it made zero sense that Levot’s group was simultaneously having funding issues while serving exotic meat for free, but I brushed it off when I learned that several of the regular attendees came from old money. Ross alone apparently donated more than \$30,000 per month.

I am not proud to admit it, but I donated a total of \$3,500 (including rent money). I should not have.

[From: Chapter 12: “Ceremony”]

I stood in front of the event space’s stage, part of a crowd whose every member dressed the same. The sea of tables and chairs had been parted, carefully lined up against the walls to make way for the overwhelming number of black-hooded spectators staring greedily at the stage. Ross stood to my left.

Blocking the view of that forbidden door in the center of the stage was a curtain, black with gold trim. At any moment, those curtains would part, and *something* would

come flooding out and populate the stage. I didn't know what was behind the curtain. I did know, however, that I *needed* to know. This was Levot's "Special Mixer," after all. It was an exclusive event to which I had been graciously invited—an experience which I had been building up in my head for weeks. Of course, the details of the event no longer mattered. Levot's advice had never once failed me; his suggestions had never once led me astray, and in living by the "principals" he had been teaching me, I had found a sense of fulfillment that I had never once even dreamed was possible.

I stared intently at that curtain. Soon, *they* emerged.

Cart after cart appeared from behind the piece of cloth, each carefully piloted by yet another black-cloaked figure. Tray after tray was arranged on each device, each carefully arranged with the most exquisite of dishes. Meat pasta, glazed steak, sausage and vegetables; kebabs, nachos, meatballs, meatloaves. Gargantuan chunks of meat; huge, *hulking, chunks* of meat.

"We followers of our fallen idol,"

A powerful voice from one of them permeated the room. His hood blocked his face, but it wasn't Levot.

"We, the followers of our beloved, fallen mentor have gathered in this sacred spot, to honor His sacrifice, and to mourn His death."

The crowd responded to the prayer in unison.

"And so, we feast on that which He can no longer bear."

"His rage is bottomless; It knows no bounds."

"His rage only grows; It grows as His flesh expands."

The range of meat dishes on display seemed to sparkle in the spotlight, and I was certain I could detect its scent even from several yards away. My mouth at once began to water.

“Ye heroes! Ye heroes, ye Saints of Ciacco! Feast upon His flesh; the flesh of our beloved mentor!”

“We feast for the world which; should we cease, shall spin no more.”

The crowd parted itself in a single smooth motion, eager to give entry to those wheeled devices which bore the Flesh of Ciacco. The sudden movement came as a surprise to me, and my legs, no longer much under my control, made keeping up no easy task.

Ross looked at me. “Don’t worry about getting the prayers and the movements and all that right first try, Anabel,” he said. “The more you do it, the better you get at it.”

I barely registered what he said to me. I was not interested in merely learning the chants; merely going through the motions. It was the least of my concerns, and I didn’t care to bother with even a bit of it. I wanted to go straight to the source. I wanted *true* meaning.

“What’s... What’s behind that curtain?”

Ross laughed heartily. “That’s where the source of the meat is,” he said. “It’s real dangerous. If us Saints weren’t here to keep it in check, it’d keep growing until it swallowed up the whole earth. That’s why we’ve got guys like Vincent—to chop off its flesh before it gets too big.”

At once, his usual, jovial demeanor vanished from his face, and he looked me dead in the eye.

“And there’s only one way to stop it from growing again.”

I looked at the curtain, drawn back and inviting. Beckoning. This place, with Levot and the others, was where I had learned to *belong*. More so than ever before, through the guidance of the people who took me in, I understood myself. They had shown me who I was; shown me how wrong I had lived my life thus far. Far too long I had indulged in that forbidden fruit—had I *survived* on it.

I understood the error of my ways.

She’ll be just like us, honey!

You have a bright future ahead of you, Anabel.

Your mom and I are so proud of you, kiddo.

Gluttony. Sin. Ruin. Waste.

I stared down that forbidden hallway, burdened with that new knowledge of its prisoner. I heard the laughter of my compatriots as they dined on its flesh. The reason for our gathering; the reason why we were *united*. *The direct cause of my salvation.*

Nobody was watching me. The opening on the stage began to grow. My heart swelled, and my still-weak legs carried me closer. Closer to purpose. Closer to *meaning*. The thing that compelled me to move was the only force keeping me from collapsing to my knees. Larger still. The other Saints faced their various directions, away from me. No one watched as the curtains engulfed me.

The kitchen was a spacious facility. It was well-maintained and current to the specifications of any commercial cookery, and it had a scent about it that was delectable yet familiar, not unlike that of a high-end steakhouse. The night’s dinner service had left

the room reminiscent of a battlefield, as one might expect. Nothing about it was remarkable, and there were no other rooms to investigate aside from the freezer. My stomach dropped, looking at that kitchen, and the room began to feel warm. It is logical, I thought, trying to reassure myself, that perishables are stored in the freezer. It then follows, I reasoned, that this Ciacco must be hidden inside. It was a flawed reasoning, of course, as I had wholly neglected to consider an incredibly basic truth.

In that freezer, in that dark, cold box, there was nothing. There was no god, no "Ciacco," no ever-growing amalgam of flesh. Instead, I found dozens of wire shelves lined up in perfect rows, like church pews, each stocked with its own incredible supply of packaged meat. The police later confirmed with me—imported kangaroo meat.

"Gluttony invites waste; Overindulgence invites ruin."

The voices of the cult members still permeated through the walls. They now seemed somehow different, and my heart seemed to beat along with the irregular verses of the chant. I was certain that the room was getting smaller, as the cold air seemed to slowly fade, leaving me gasping in a vacuum. The image my eyes provided me with was engulfed in a certain disreality, as all my other senses were suddenly uninterested in providing the usual information that proved my sight's accuracy. I couldn't tell if those shelves were real.

I knew better, of course. Ever since I left my hometown for Harvard, my body had been occasionally playing this trick on me. It was a nasty trick, one that I had fallen for far more times than I care to admit. How could I attend my classes if I couldn't be sure of their existence? How could *all* my assignments *truly* be overdue? How could I have been *certain* that I correctly read the letter grades on that final transcript?

How could I possibly see the truth with nobody at my side; nobody to show me reality from delusion?

"He provides us with the solution to our desire;

"Our urge fulfilled will curb the wrath of our supplier."

"Supplier of lies," I muttered. "Lies. It's all lies. What do I do? What do I do?"

All of my previously given guidance had failed me, yet I found I could not act against it, even now. My thought processes were conflicted. I tried to develop my own course of action or at least think of a way to escape the situation, but, as if I was trying to push a heavy boulder up a steep hill, my brain simply refused to move.

I quickly tired of pushing, of course, and my mind began to roll back down that hill, back into familiar territory—Territory I had passed through time and time again.

"*Their support was real,*" I said. "They only wanted what was best."

Hands shaking, I pulled out my phone and I fumbled with the screen lock. I found the entry for one Edna Merrill in my contacts list. "She never lied to me."

"Though that impulse to others will undo, our exception rings true;

To refuse is a sin, to diet a defect;

A failure to serve those whom we live to attend to.

Our servitude is correct."

I unblocked that phone number and placed a call.

"And so we consume."

"Hello? Mom?"

"Ana! Sweetie! Is everything all right!? Why haven't you been answering our calls?"

"I don't, I don't know. I think I'm in a cult, or something. I, I don't know what to do."

"Okay, sweetie, calm down. What's happening? Are you on campus?"

"No, I, I, failed out last semester. I'm not—"

"What?! Why? But you're so intelligent! Did you talk to—"

I removed the phone from my ear. My mother's words at once became inaudible. I turned my phone off after a moment.

Though I was certainly fully capable of standing, it suddenly didn't seem much worth the effort. I barely noticed as my body crashed into the cold, concrete floor. It mattered not, for my body felt as if it might soon collapse under its own pressure, though despite its best efforts, it never managed to. My face wrung my eyes dry of tears, a purposive action compulsorily driven by some latent force in my mind. There was simply no other course of action available.

"You know, I really hoped I wouldn't find you in here, Ana."

I was somehow able to regain control from my fugue state for long enough to look back towards the freezer entrance. There, a black robed figure stood, surrounded with fog created by the freezing air, cast in silhouette from the bright light of the kitchen from where it had come. It spoke with Levot's voice. He chuckled with that laugh—with that god-damned laugh.

"I had a great time hanging out with you. And honestly, I'd consider you one of my closest friends."

Levot started to walk towards me. I felt a familiar urge to keep quiet.

"But... Well, you know, I told you about going in the kitchen," he said. "And now... I can't really let you leave. I guess I should have warned you about this before."

As his figure came into closer view, I noticed something. He was holding some item behind his back. Blood suddenly rushed into my skull, and I felt a pounding in my ears. Before I knew it, I was lifting myself with the support of a nearby shelf. I felt it shift and tilt as I held on to it.

"No, no, it's okay. Don't stand up," said Levot, his free arm reaching towards me. "Don't stand up." He started walking faster. As I inevitably shifted more and more of my body weight onto the shelf, I realized that it was standing freely, unbolted to the ground. Levot wasn't much more than a yard away now. Clenching the wireframe, I threw my weight back, and the shelf came with me, toppling over, and hitting something *very hard*.

One of the shelf's metal racks made contact with Levot's skull, causing him to let out a grunt that shook me to my very core. A dark stain began to spread on the hood of his cloak. I watched as he writhed and squirmed under the weight of the pile of shelf and fallen meat, reduced to the unwitting captive of a frozen kangaroo steak mound.

I stared at the pile. My life had once again come crashing down before my very eyes. With nothing left, I ran.

[From: Chapter 2: “Vince and Edna Merrill”]

I poked my head through the doorway. Our home office was on the smaller side, but there was still enough space for Mom and Dad's desks to be arranged next to each other. The room felt lived in; well-used. Mom's desk was covered in academic journals and patient records, and Dad's in forms and legal documents. If one of my parents was home, I could typically find him or her sitting in this room. On rare occasions, both of them could be found here. They considered those few moments of working together “important bonding time.”

As I entered the office, I noticed I happened to arrive during one of those moments. Mom and Dad cheerfully greeted me as I entered, but despite my attempts to keep a neutral demeanor, they quickly noticed that something was amiss. I hated the way it felt when they looked at me like that, so I asked about their work. Both of their faces lit up as they began to search through their various desk items to show me. Suddenly, all was right again.

“Mommy’s doing some research on Mr. Miller’s cancer variant,” said my mother, holding up a journal issue. “I may be able to use what we learned from him to help people with his disease in the future.”

I liked Mr. Miller. His wife had come and given us homemade gingerbread cookies.

“Is he going to be okay?”

Mom stood up from her desk. “This is just what happens in the medical field, sweetie.” She crouched in front of me and put her hands on my shoulders. “You get used to it eventually.”

Dad had, meanwhile, used the time to put together a makeshift briefing on the case he was working on.

“Anabel, this is my working argument for *[redacted case name]*. The client alleges medical malpractice, and although his evidence did not originally appear to be compelling, I have made some recent breakthroughs regarding a few clauses that I believe the defense has overlooked.”

I nodded blankly. “Okay,” I said.

He flipped to a new page, somehow having taken my response as a sign to continue. “This new argument has seen increased success among the mock trials we have been performing. I have told you about mock trials, correct?”

“Dad, do you like your job?”

He stared at me with a look I had never seen him wear before. “I find it fulfilling,” he said finally.

“How do you know if it’s fulfilling?”

Mom and Dad looked at each other. For some reason, I started to become restless. I thought about running, but I was trapped—both by their bodies and the growing sense that I couldn’t dodge responsibility for what I had said.

“Ana, sweetie, you have to try a lot of things to find out what ‘fulfillment’ means to you,” said Mom. She spoke as if I had just announced an intention to commit suicide.

That doesn’t make sense, I thought. I’m only happy when Mom and Dad smile, and that only happens when they talk about work.

“Why don’t you start shadowing me at my workplace instead of your father’s? You might like it more!”

My father rolled his eyes a little, but Mom was clearly pleased by her idea. Watching the sight, I felt the tension in my body loosen. I thought about what it might be like to shadow Mom at her job. I imagined Mom excitedly telling Mrs. Miller about her research in the same manner which she spoke about it to me. I imagined Mrs. Miller with the same expression she had when she asked Mom, *“Is my darling going to be okay?”* I imagined myself in Mom’s position.

“What if I *don’t* like it?”

Incorrect response. I felt my parents’ gazes weigh on me, and that pit in my stomach instantly returned. I recall briefly wondering if this was how a criminal feels at his trial.

“Fulfillment comes from practice, Anabel,” said Dad. “Though you may at first despise your work, you will eventually come to appreciate your contributions to society.”

He made perfect sense.

“You’re strong and intelligent, sweetie. I know there’s nothing you can’t handle.” Mom leaned in closer for an almost-hug.

“Your mother and I will always be here to keep you on the right track, Anabel.” Dad approached to join the pile. “There is nothing that you must concern yourself with. Understood?”

I felt that my question had not been fully answered, but as I looked up at their warm smiles, I thought that it didn’t matter. Their smiling faces were the only source of fulfillment I needed.

“You have a bright future ahead of you, Anabel.”

[From: Chapter 13: “Gabriella Connolly”]

I sat in the passenger seat of Gabby’s sedan, which was now comfortably en route to the nearest police station. The vehicle which had been following us was no longer in sight, largely in part because of Gabriella’s “sick moves.” However, all the excitement had the unfortunate side effect of exacerbating my adrenaline-induced fatigue.

“You wouldn’t believe how often people run out of that place, screaming,” said Gabby. Apparently, she made a habit of waiting outside the building with a car during the monthly ceremonies. I didn’t fully understand how she managed, but I found it particularly admirable. I stared at her as she spoke, wishing that I had what whatever it was that she did.

“No one’s ever *chased* me before, though. The hell you do in there, girl?”

I shuddered. “I think it would be best if I don’t force myself to recall.”

I looked out at the nighttime cityscape. Somehow, it was still bustling with activity. I watched as the various city light sources flew by, and I strangely started to recall the many quiet late-night drives home from the hospital with Mom.

“Listen, far as I’m concerned, whatever you did wasn’t enough. My little sister got involved with those rat motherfuckers. Went ‘missing.’” Gabby removed both her hands from the steering wheel to do air quotes. “Yeah. ‘Missing.’ It’s a real *mystery*.”

“Is that why you attempted to eat them out of house and home?”

“They only blew like a few hundred on me, but it’s like, the principal, or whatever.”

She procured an electronic cigarette from somewhere, and the cabin was shortly thereafter filled with an overpowering, sharp scent that was completely indeterminable to me.

"Hey, you think you can get the cops to actually do something this time, Miss Law Student?"

"I don't think I was ever qualified to practice law," I said. "Though, I believe I may be connected with the local police commissioner. I may be able to convince him."

"Oh, damn, I didn't know you were a fed. Oink, oink, am I right?"

I laughed politely, failing to come up with any further response.

I found myself once again staring blankly out of the front of the window. The scent which permeated the vehicle had begun to feel oddly comforting after a few moments.

"So what now?"

"What?"

"Well, you don't wanna do the law stuff, right. What are you gonna do instead?"

It was a question that I had never once before been asked, so I logically should not have had an answer prepared, yet to my surprise, my response fell from my mouth like it was the most natural thing to do. It was a pipe dream—a fantasy—but in that moment, for the first time in my life, I *allowed* myself to dream.

"I think I would like to attend culinary school."