

# **The Masturbating Banker**

P.E. Rowe

About the best thing one could say about Ivy McKinnes was that she was above average. She'd been in the top twenty-percent of her class at every level of her education, and she'd graduated from business school at the precocious age of twenty-six. But in a city of eight million, there were a lot of above average women, and in this massive crowd, Ivy seemed about as nondescript and unimpressive as a thirty-one-year-old New Yorker could have been. She was neither tall nor short, not quite a blonde, and not distinctly a brunette. Her face was pretty enough to be considered not unattractive. She wasn't so particularly witty or funny, but she didn't completely lack a sense of humor. There really wasn't anything about Ivy that would've given an indication she was about to become one of the most talked about people in the city. Ivy never would've considered her fifteen minutes of fame as a likelihood, and certainly not in the form it came.

Perhaps the thing Ivy McKinnes could take most pride in was her success as an administrator for the advertising firm Shuler & Dent, headquartered in Midtown a few blocks from Grand Central. And as Ivy rose through the ranks at work, her salary became considerable enough that she was comfortable. She could afford all the clothes and shoes she wanted to buy. She didn't have to think about the cost of dinner at nice restaurants or tickets to the occasional show or concert. And, in the fall of 2015, when her boss left for a more lucrative position in a larger firm, Ivy's promotion led to a pay raise that allowed her to change the

one element of her New York lifestyle that was still below her above-average standards—her apartment.

Almost every time Ivy climbed a rung on the corporate ladder, she traded up living spaces. She'd moved from a shared three-bedroom in Astoria to a shared two-bedroom walk-up in Hell's Kitchen, and then to a run-down post-war studio on the Upper West Side, and finally to a third-floor Midtown studio within walking distance of the office on summer days. So, when she was promoted this time, Ivy called her broker and asked him to find the next rung.

Many of her friends were moving to Brooklyn, where luxury high-rise living was affordable enough that young professionals were migrating across the river to start having children in a quieter, more comfortable environment. For Ivy, though, Brooklyn seemed a bit too far away from things. Ivy was looking to stay in the middle of the action—near work, near night-life, near shopping and restaurants—somewhere all of her friends and family could come visit and believe that Ivy was making it.

For all these reasons, Ivy was ecstatic when her broker found an available one-bedroom on the thirty-seventh floor of The BorlandEast in Midtown. The Borland was one of the few pre-millennial high-rise residences that had anticipated the 21st century housing market in New York. Ivy found it ideal for its location—a full five blocks closer to Shuler & Dent than her Midtown studio. And the recent competitive uprising of luxury high-rises in Brooklyn and Manhattan had left the prospect of a one-bedroom just below the penthouse level at The Borland financially feasible. This was modern suburbia. The young and wealthy weren't moving farther out anymore, they were

moving higher up, and Ivy was happy to be among the lucky few looking down on the city beneath her.

Perhaps the most salient change in Ivy's new lifestyle was something The BorlandEast was quick to advertise to prospective tenants: "Urban Sanctuary" was what the building's website called it. Modern building materials, near-silent heating and air conditioning systems, and in Ivy's case, the distance from street-level—all these factors helped to create a sense that her residence on the thirty-seventh floor was in a whole different New York than the one she'd grown so accustomed to. The ubiquitous background noise that all New Yorkers tune out by necessity—the honking taxis; the howling sirens of ambulances and fire engines; the barking cops; the hissing pneumatics as the busses lurch to a stop and open their doors; the roaring of the engines as the busses pull away; and the echoing reverberations of all these constant noises—their absence added up to a sound that had become far more noticeable to New Yorkers like Ivy: silence.

Quiet had become so obvious to Ivy that she didn't know what to do with it. Even as she boasted to her friends about the sweet sound of silence on social media, Ivy found it troublesome—haunting almost. On the first night in her new apartment, Ivy resorted to donning socks so that she wouldn't have to hear the sound of her skin snicking off her living room's wooden floor as her feet came unstuck with each footstep. Ivy caught herself talking aloud within hours of moving in. Before long, she'd unpacked her speakers and was playing music non-stop just to fill the void. And through all of this, she believed that in a matter of days, her brain would adjust, as it had adjusted to the

constant noise when she first moved to Manhattan years before. But Ivy was wrong. She became agitated whenever her television was off or her music stopped. When she forced herself to sit for even a few moments without some artificial source of sound, she grew restless, and on several occasions, even caught herself getting up to look out the window when the sound of a strong wind gust had penetrated the thick double-paned glass—as though she might catch a welcome glimpse of that comforting noise’s source.

At night, Ivy would switch the air conditioner to a setting that ensured it would stay on all night to provide some regular sound. Otherwise, she would lie awake for hours without a chance of sleep. But after a few days of shivering, Ivy decided that it was nonsense that needed to stop. Three weeks after moving into the Borland, Ivy shut off her television, her music, her air conditioner, and she began to condition herself to the consequences. She had no idea this decision would alter her life in such a monumental and unpredictable way.

That night, her first adversary became the digital alarm clock she kept on her bedside table. The more she tried to drift off, that reliable relic would remind her of each passing minute, and the more minutes it registered, the more Ivy became aware that she was failing. The silence was getting the better of her. Ivy watched an hour pass on the clock, tossing from side to side beneath her covers. She watched another thirty minutes pass. She couldn’t shut off her brain.

Ivy lay awake for almost two hours before she finally heard the sound that broke the silence. It was faint at first,

perhaps like the sound of a musician softly tapping her bare foot on stage in an empty auditorium. It was slow and quiet and distracted Ivy's mind enough that she forgot about her own personal struggle to fall asleep. The mystery of this foreign sound gave her something new to think about. But as the noise got quicker and louder, it began to trouble her. It seemed to be coming from the bathroom. Suddenly, the worst possible thought registered in her mind in the form of two words: "rat" and "toilet."

Ivy sat up in her bed thankful that she'd always been in the habit of shutting the toilet lid—always. Ivy crept toward the bathroom half-curious and half-terrified of what she might do if she did find a creature in her toilet. She'd heard of things like this happening all the time in New York. But as soon as she turned on the light and swung open the bathroom door, she could tell the sound wasn't emanating from the toilet as she'd feared. The sound persisted, though, and was louder in the small, granite-tiled cube. It was also growing faster, so Ivy sat perfectly still on top of her closed toilet bowl, listening. After a few seconds, she identified the source as the ceiling vent, and after listening to the faint repetitive slapping noise, she began to discern what she thought to be the sound of a low male voice making faint but equally repetitive grunting noises. Ivy listened for a few more seconds to confirm her suspicions and decided that her upstairs neighbor was a man, either single or sexually frustrated, or possibly both. She giggled, being sure to not to laugh loud enough to give her presence away, and she returned to her bed thoroughly amused by this accident in voyeurism. She climbed into bed, thinking about some of

the other incidental sounds she'd overheard from neighbors in all her other New York apartments. There was the fighting couple next door in Hell's Kitchen, who'd always made up just as noisily as they'd fought. The yipper dog from her first place in Astoria. And how could she forget her gay downstairs neighbor on the Upper West Side who hooted like an owl when he climaxed. But this was her first confirmed masturbator. None of her friends even had a masturbator story. The closest was Claudette, who had an across-the-street nudist when she was down on the Lower East Side. And as Ivy contemplated all these things and what her friends might think of this funny little story, she drifted off to sleep with a grin on her face and slept better than she could remember having slept in years.

Ivy was correct in assuming some of her friends would find it amusing as well. It was one of those New York stories they could all relate to. At some point, everyone in the city contends with their own hooting downstairs neighbor or yipping dog. Most choose to laugh about it when their time comes, as there's not much else you can do. And Ivy was satisfied at her little story's success with the few she chose to tell about it. But when she lay down again in silence the following night, Ivy wondered if she might not have to hear the next session. It was only a few minutes after she climbed into bed that she got her answer. Once more, the regular, almost mechanical progression of that slapping sound began as an almost subliminal suggestion, which progressed to a noise that was quite audible from her bed, through a door and almost twenty feet from the vent in her bathroom ceiling.

Perhaps it was Ivy's sensitivity to the sudden silence that had enveloped her life, but when she was in her new apartment, she heard everything now—the refrigerator motor, the faint echo of the elevator bell in the hallway, and the welcome rush of the air conditioning switching on. She became attuned to even the quietest sounds in her new environment. But the more she became accustomed to these regular sounds, the more the neighbor's nightly self-gratification began to grate on Ivy's nerves. It seemed to get louder and louder, and the same noise which on that first night had distracted her enough to bring sleep, now kept her awake as she lay in bed.

Each night, Ivy lay there wondering if the man wouldn't ever take a night off. Didn't he get tired enough to fall asleep in front of the television and forget? Not even one night? She wondered who this masturbator might be. Ivy examined every man she rode the elevator with, waiting for the time when one of them would push button 38 and potentially put a face to that nightly noise. It never happened. Ivy covered the crack under the closed bathroom door with a towel hoping to dampen the noise. It didn't work. She resorted to earplugs in her own "Urban Sanctuary," and this too failed, as after thirty seconds or so, Ivy would begin to hear the faint sound of her heart beating, which would grow louder until all she could hear was the mechanical thundering of her own biological motor. Upon throwing the useless earplugs to the floor in frustration, Ivy heard it again—the repetitive slapping noise filtering through her bathroom door. She was disgusted. She'd endured it in silence for weeks and was utterly dispirited. Ivy picked up her phone, and without

thinking, she tweeted a single tweet that evolved into the following thread over the course of the next several weeks:

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | to my upstairs neighbor the chronic masturbator...I can hear you. Every. Single. Time.

Laurie Pyle @PrivateLaurie | What! Are you for real, hon?

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | Unfortunately, yes. The guy's like a spider monkey or something. It's like every night, and so fricken loud I can't sleep

Laurie Pyle @PrivateLaurie | Dam. That sucks. I mean it's kinda funny, but it sucks you cant sleep. Earplugs?

Brodie Merchant @BrodieMerchant | probably warrants a private conversation, Ivy

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | With you Brod?

Brodie Merchant @BrodieMerchant | No. With him. Elevator's what—20 feet from your door?

Laurie Pyle @PrivateLaurie | And say? Dear random mastubator guy. You don't know me but i'm your downstairs neighbor. Mind keeping your sesions under 50 db?



Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | exactly. like go up and knock on his door at 11:30 while he's naked in mid...whatever? Mind, um, not jacking off every. single. night!?!

Laurie Pyle @PrivateLaurie | and when you introduce yrself Ivy don't shake his hand if he offers it!

Priya Ravichandra @PRavicha | LOL, I'd be scared that wouldn't be the thing he offered, Laurie :D

Brodie Merchant @BrodieMerchant | RT @PRavicha: LOL, right, but all I'm saying is if it bothers you enough to tweet about it, you probably shouldn't be tweeting about it. <3 U, Ivy.

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | yeah, i hear you, brod. But i've run out of neighborly courtesy toward masturbating creeps

Kyle Dessange @KyleDess | I heart New York!

Marti Bollinger @MarrtiB | U just moved to Borland right? I'd try the bldg manager, if ur serious and all.

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | RT @MarrtiB: thanks, boss. I might give that a go.

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | You're in my building now, IV? How did I miss that?

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | Seriously Andy? I didn't know you were even in NY! When did you move back?

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | Its just a few weeks now..since I was thrown out of Chicago on account of my incessant vigorous masturbation :-D!!!!That's U down there?

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | FU, Dude! LOL

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | Sorry, Ivy. Couldn't help myself <3! Too funny. Hope you get the situation in hand soon...

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | which is obviously prefereable to the situation getting out of hand...

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | in all seriousness, I like your boss's suggestion. The building manager could come in handy...

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | Somebody stop me.

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | if I were in chicago, I'd shoot you.

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | which would require a handgun and...If I'm not mistaken, they're illegal in NY. Wouldn't want you to end up in handcuffs...

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | you are such a dick

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | Oh, that is just too easy haha lol

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | Seriously, though, Ivy, you want to know who he is?

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | Who?

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | Your upstairs neighbor—the spider monkey #spankymcspankington?

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | come on, you know you want to know...

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | How would you know who he is?

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | Um...the internet...it's this new thing all the kids are using to find out who their masturbating upstairs neighbors are

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | and somewhat ironically providing your masturbating neighbor with the endless sea of pornography needed to fuel the whole vicious cycle

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | His name is Dalton Jennings-Milner. Seriously, sounds like a one man law...firm. haha, not again. sorry, too easy

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | you didn't just tweet the guys name did you? For real?

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | Yeha, why?

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | what if he finds out about it?

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | So what if he finds out about it?

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | Wasn't exactly my intention to call him out by name on twitter.

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | You already did, luv. You tweeted it under your name. You're in the phone book, Ivy McKinnes 37C BorlandEast. Dalton Jennings-Milner 38C BorlandEast.

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | Took me literally 50 seconds, plus like another 50 seconds to type it.

Laurie Pyle @PrivateLaurie | OMG! I just googled him. Not the fat bald guy I pictured. Wharton grad. Works for Peterson-Grigg. I-banking.

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | haha too easy! #wankbank

Laurie Pyle @PrivateLaurie | Damn. Dude can wear a suit. They should seriously consider him for the next Bond when @DanielCraig\_007 retires. [QcX391JU0DaZSPG.jpg](#)

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | if he's not too busy jacking off to like, fly a plane or jump motorcycles or shoot rocket launchers or bed european underwear models

Priya Ravichandra @PRavicha | already does. Really. That guy's your masturbator? He's seriously dating a CK model. Look: [XcQ480JU0AaMXIR.jpg](#)

Priya Ravichandra @PRavicha | @PetraMizencka even her name's hot

Laurie Pyle @PrivateLaurie | No way! That chick's on a billboard on 5th right like one block from my office GTFO!

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | Jesus. I was joking about the underwear model thing. SMH

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | that's his gf?!!

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | What is this guy masturbating for? His gf could literally heat ur entire building with her sheer natural hotness IV

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | I've seen that girl in the elevator. Thought she lived downstairs and wuz going to roofdeck. She's like breathtakingly beautiful in person.

Laurie Pyle @PrivateLaurie | for real

Ivy McKinnes @IvyMcKK | for real. if her photog put her into one of those victorias secret angel bra things she would spontaneously float off to underwear heaven

Laurie Pyle @PrivateLaurie | ...where people like her belong... sigh...hate her. lol

Priya Ravichandra @PRavicha | maybe she's into the whole chronic masturbation thing ;-)

Laurie Pyle @PrivateLaurie | he is a fine looking man with banking money. I'd probably put up with it. haha

Awsumb Andy @AwsumbAndy | Me too :-)) and he has soft hands as well, one would assume...

The thread went on much like this for weeks in the vastness of the internet, where it was hidden only by the overwhelming volume of information far more worthy of attention. And Ivy—who never did consult the building manager for fear of having to confront Dalton about the issue—she finally admitted her own weakness and purchased a small air purifier that filled her bedroom with a rather pleasant humming noise to mask the sound that provoked the twitter thread, which lay dormant for several months without a single post or view. Ivy had almost forgotten it entirely. It wasn't until Petra was cast for a lead role in an upcoming movie that a curious, or perhaps overzealous, fan stumbled across the thread, read it in its entirety, and forwarded the link to the tipline of several New York gossip concerns. One published less than a hundred words about the incident on a blog post that included equally inane bits of information about some far more notable New Yorkers and celebrities.

For several more weeks, this too went largely unnoticed, submerged in the gigantic sea of people that is New York. At best, Petra was a B-list celebrity, and Dalton Jennings-Milner was only one name in a crowded field of New York's wealthy and powerful young bankers. They were small fish, and remained safely in obscurity until a gossip blogger at TMZ was tipped off to Dalton's multiple family connections to the British Monarchy, which began with his grandmother Tilly Blum's supposedly deep friendship with Wallis, Duchess of Windsor, during her diplomat husband's time in Paris in the 1950's. Apparently, there were also cousins with lineage descending from varying

titles, and Dalton had a very loose connection to Prince William himself by virtue of his year abroad at the University of St. Andrews during one of the years the Prince was attending. These tangential connections to the monarchy were apparently all the extra shine the story needed for it to reach critical mass.

Dalton found out about the situation from an email sent by a colleague who copied the link the TMZ story, which led him down the digital rabbit hole to several more gossip columns with even more cringe-worthy headlines, not least of which read: THE MASTURBATING BANKER, ROYAL WANKER? Dalton had no expertise in handling such a public crisis of reputation, especially one that already had its legs underneath it by virtue of Dalton's months of ignorance on the matter.

It wasn't until a week after the initial TMZ story that I became aware of the matter when the name "BorlandEast" caught my attention in a headline on the *New York Post's* digital edition. Of course, as I got caught up on the story through various other sources, I could already guess the probable outcome for Dalton and Ivy. One of the reasons I'd gotten involved with Media Law and Ethics so soon after law school was the fascination I'd always had with our public personas, and even as I was mired in the everyday monotony of whether things were or weren't printable, I had this overarching curiosity about the almost naturalistic life-cycle of celebrity, fame, and how that life-cycle played out in public. As if it wasn't taboo enough to be one of the few women working in the crucible of the world's most prestigious newspaper in the eighties, I was also the lawyer who told them what they couldn't run, and



then I'd talk in circles about the philosophy of Media Law to frantic reporters with deadlines who couldn't have cared less about Ethics. In the years between the *Times* and my recent consulting work, I got to explore this idea while I was teaching at Columbia, and still, almost ten years later, I was wrestling with feedback from colleagues in the Social Sciences and Philosophy departments—seven drafts of book proposals worth of wrestling to be precise. And all of those years of contemplating this issue told me this: celebrity has a life-cycle proportional to the merits of its earning. That is, with a well-established monarch, for example, whose family fought for generations to build and maintain a hegemony over its subject territories, any child born into such fought-after celebrity would be likely to maintain some form of that celebrity for the entirety of her existence, probably passing it on to her sons and daughters as well. Whereas with celebrity that is accidental or attained with little effort, such as a lottery winner or a mildly-talented actor or pop singer, the life-cycle of celebrity is short. And the life-cycle, short or long, is always this: one attains celebrity; then one is consumed by it, and either it completely destroys the recipient or alters them such that they are an almost entirely different species of human being when it's finished with them.

What I knew about Dalton Jennings-Milner from the little I'd read was that he had no business with celebrity at all. Wall Street was littered with the suited shells of men like him, who came from powerful places with ancient friends, who had Ivy-League educations and gorgeous wives and girlfriends. Ivy McKinnes had done even less to deserve her fifteen minutes of celebrity. She was

responsible for only a few mildly-humorous quips on the internet about her masturbating neighbor, most of which were actually made by her entirely obscure friends. This pair had the celebrity equivalent of the fruit fly's natural life-cycle. They were utterly undeserving of anyone's attention. Ordinarily, I'd have read the headline and perhaps a few sentences of the article, harrumphed and maybe muttered something curmudgeonly about the classlessness of this internet age, finished my tea, tucked my tablet back into my purse, left the cafe, walked home, and forgotten both their names by the time I'd gotten to the elevator in my apartment building. And I would have, mind you, if I hadn't walked home to the very same elevator in the lobby of The BorlandEast every night for the past seven years and ridden up to an elevation less than ten floors beneath the both of them. That the whole thing had happened in my building was as improbable as they were both ridiculous, or at least this was what I thought as I ate my dinner, looking Uptown toward the great green patch of garden sanctuary that lived in the window above my piano, which stood snugly between two walls of books and behind a kitchen just large enough for a full-size refrigerator and a dishwasher—my own little piece of urban sanctuary.

I followed the story with curiosity over the course of the next several days, watching the inevitable run its course. As in most relationships, there is a honeymoon period. For Ivy, I figured this would last for several days while the story was novel. The angle in New York was predictable. Everyone, male or female, could relate to the nuisance of having overheard unwanted sounds from the most private

elements of our neighbors' lives. Then, there would be empathy for the perception of helplessness, and of course, the curious process of perspective-taking that we humans do, when everyone would place themselves in poor Ivy's shoes and wonder how we'd have behaved in her position. And, of course pundits would discuss the ethics and power of social media.

For Dalton, I knew there would be no honeymoon to this. The accusation was all that mattered. I didn't know whether he was being clever or he just didn't know how to deal with the situation and therefore avoided it, but he issued no statements, gave no interviews, disappeared from social media, and wasn't spotted in public, neither with Petra nor anyone else. But I knew it couldn't have been easy for him. Peterson-Grigg also couldn't have been happy for this type of publicity—one of their top young executives becoming infamous city-wide as *The Masturbating Banker*? It wasn't a good look. And surely, the management company running BorlandEast wasn't happy about something like this becoming so public.

Once it reached the tipping point, I knew it would have some life, but I was surprised by the scale to which it ballooned once it went viral. To my mind, at best it was a funny little story, but this little story didn't stay little. And the jokes on the late night New York comedy shows were so obvious and so easy that the story didn't disappear nearly as fast as I'd suspected. A week or so after I became aware of the story, Peterson-Grigg put out a press release that Dalton Jennings-Milner was stepping away from the firm for "personal reasons," and that he would no longer be associated with Peterson-Grigg. Frankly, I was

surprised that it took a full week of “spankbank” and “spermbank” hashtags and comedy monologues before they severed ties. This told me that Dalton had to have been a serious player there. Shortly after that news, one of the gossip blogs that “broke” this story announced The BorlandEast had reached a mutual arrangement releasing Dalton from his rental agreement.

As a media lawyer, of course I was curious where the story was heading. I’d actually figured on some sort of legal action far before it ever reached this stage. But it wasn’t until a gossip blog report about Petra dumping Dalton and a press release from Kenneth Feirman about a libel lawsuit that I knew Ivy McKinnes’s honeymoon period was over. Ken was a pit bull of an attorney. It didn’t surprise me that a man like Dalton would go to Ken, but I also knew that Ken wouldn’t have taken him on as a client unless he had a sense that some sort of injustice had been done. Dalton surely had some money, but Ivy McKinnes didn’t have much. It couldn’t have been about the money for Ken, and suddenly, Ivy’s funny little neighbor story was looking a lot less amusing.

It was shortly after dinner, and I was at the piano working on one of Satie’s Gnossiennes when I heard a knock on my front door, which was rare and unexpected at that hour. When I got to the door, I didn’t recognize the woman in the eyehole, some nondescript female figure. I didn’t think in a million years that when I opened the door it would be her. I kept the door latched and cracked it, saying, “May I help you?”

“I’m looking for Myra Husch. This is the right apartment?”

"It is," I said, quite surprised to see her there in the flesh. She looked far plainer than the headshots I'd seen attached to the few blogs where Ivy had been pictured. Most had pictured Dalton or Petra and left Ivy faceless. But this face was ordinary and, I could see, quite vulnerable. Her eyes were troubled and her posture closed in on itself. I got the sense that if I opened the door and poked Ivy in the shoulder she might shatter into a thousand pieces and dissolve into a puddle on the floor.

"Ms. Husch, My name is Ivy McKinnes. I live a few floors up, and um —"

"I know who you are, Ms. McKinnes."

"So you know what's going on then?"

"I'm aware, and I imagine you'd be looking for some legal advice?"

"I'd be really grateful. I'm freaking out."

"One moment," I said, closing the door and opening the latch before swinging the door open again. "I don't wish to be rude, but it is almost seven o'clock, and, I do have an office."

"I know. I know," Ivy said, her head hanging. "I just don't know what to do."

"I imagine you've just heard from Mr. Feirman's office?"

She nodded, and as if an afterthought, then said, "I didn't think to bring the papers down. I could go up and get them if you want."

"That's quite unnecessary, Ms. McKinnes. I have a fair idea of what they say. I'm just wondering what you think I might be able to do for you at this hour."

"Well, I'm just. I don't know. How does this work?"

"Mostly, I'm a legal media consultant. I'm not usually the kind of attorney people would call when they're sued."

"But you know about this kind of law? This is your field, right?"

"Yes, this is exactly my field, although, I have to say, I almost don't recognize it anymore with all the new technology. I used to get phone calls at this hour from editors, but I could rely on knowing them personally and having an established relationship. This is a little odd."

"Could I come inside?" Ivy asked.

Ordinarily, I'd have felt a bit rude for not inviting her in, but I wasn't exactly sure what was going on — whether she simply wanted some neighborly advice or whether she wanted to hire me.

"I don't really feel comfortable talking about this in the hallway," she said.

"Very well," I said, and I invited her in, closing the door behind her and escorting her through the living room past the piano to the table adjacent the kitchen. I offered her tea, which she declined. Ivy sat with her arms crossed on the table in front of her.

"Is this—I mean, is it like everything I say is confidential?"

I sat across from her. She didn't make eye contact, just kept her eyes fixed on her hands.

"That depends. Do you mean confidential in the sense that you're confiding in me as a neighbor, or privileged? If it's the latter you're looking for, then we'd have to have an agreement that I am your lawyer and you are my client, which I would advise you against. I think what you're

looking for is a civil litigant with trial experience. And that is not me."

"What would I have to do in order to hire you? I mean as a consultant. That would be confidential, right?"

"You could hire me, and, yes, that would entitle us to confidentiality. You'd simply have to agree to pay my hourly rate. But again, I think you should look elsewhere for a litigator. If you'd like help in that process, we could start there."

"What if I hired you until it came time to go to court."

"If it comes to that. Often, my job entails finding constructive ways around litigation."

"That's what I want," she said. "I'll pay whatever. I just need help right now."

"Ms. McKinnes, I know it's unsettling getting sued, but if I may be frank, it seems to me as though you're acting as if you're in the wrong. Did you make this story up?"

"No," she said, looking me in the eyes now. "I mean. I thought...I heard what I thought I heard."

"But you're doubtful?"

"He emailed me."

"Mr. Feirman?"

"No, my neighbor."

"Jennings-Milner? He emailed you?"

"About a week ago."

"And what did he say?"

"It was something about a week in December when supposedly he was in Israel with his girlfriend, and several dates when he said he could prove he stayed at her place."

"I presume these are some of the dates you tweeted about—the activities?"

"Supposedly."

"Did you email him back?"

She shook her head no. "I mean, what do you say to the guy? Of course he's going to come up with something."

"Unless he was in Israel, in which case, *we* may need to come up with something. That's something he could easily establish if it's true."

"I just didn't consider. I heard what I heard. I thought I heard."

"You need to tell me why you're so nervous, Ms. McKinnes. I can't help you if you're not honest with me."

She sighed, shook her head, and looked down at the table in front of her before saying, "I heard the noises last night and the night before and the night before that. And I'm not sure if you're aware, but apparently, they kicked him out of the building on Monday."

"So those noises couldn't have been what you said they were, at least not for the past three days."

"And that makes me think it was never him all along. I think maybe something's broken in the ventilation system. Something mechanical. I don't know."

"That very well may be the case, then, Ms. McKinnes."

"I feel so stupid," Ivy said, and she sat there shaking her head for a few seconds. "I thought."

She looked up at me for a moment and I couldn't begin to wonder what she saw when her eyes met mine, but a sudden feeling came over me that I'd never once had for another human being, much less a client. It was this strange mixture of disgust and contempt. I couldn't help but wonder about this woman, this smart, educated woman living a successful life in one of the most challenging places



on Earth to do it, and here she was at my table sounding for all the world like she hadn't matured beyond grammar school. I was floored that she couldn't even have been bothered to take a few seconds beforehand to consider the consequences her actions might've had on the other human being in the equation.

"I'm terrified of this lawsuit," she said. "And I don't know what to do."

"Well, Ms. McKinnes, despite the things you've written seeming to be both inaccurate and demonstrably harmful to Mr. Jennings-Milner's reputation, libel involves deliberate malice and proof thereof, which it seems, in this case, are both lacking. It's a very high bar. I suppose the largest variable in the case will be how far he's willing to take it. For right now, though, there's very little we can do."

"What should I do, though?"

"You mean right now?"

"Yes. I mean, people were telling me to delete my twitter account and all that. I want to talk to him. I have this really strong desire to have a conversation with the man."

"No. Don't do that. I'd do nothing for now. Don't do anything or talk to anyone else about this unless I tell you to, and certainly don't contact him."

"But I just can't stop thinking about it. I'm all alone up there, and I can't get it out of my head."

"Do you like to read, Ms. McKinnes?"

"Sometimes."

"I suggest you go back upstairs, pick up a favorite book of yours, and try to put this out of your head. I'll contact Mr. Feirman in the morning and that will give me a better idea of how we'll proceed. In the meantime, stay off the

internet, don't read about the case, certainly don't tweet anything –"

"I'm never tweeting again. I want to delete my account."

"Don't bother. All of your posts will still be there whether you delete them or not. Leave everything as is until I say otherwise."

"I feel like the loneliest person in the world," she said.

"You're not," I tried to assure her. "Just try to be patient over the next few days and I'll see if we can't sort this out in the smoothest way possible."

Ivy thanked me and told me she was going to go back upstairs to binge-watch a new television series her friends were talking about. And she agreed to wait until I called her the following day before doing anything related to her case. I sent an email to Ken Feirman to let him know that the girl had retained me as her lawyer and that I wanted to speak with him at his earliest convenience.

The following morning, I worked from home, as I often did when I was dealing with out-of-state clients. I checked my email as I was waiting for my lunch to arrive. I was somewhat surprised that I hadn't heard back from Ken Feirman yet, especially as the longer the current situation dragged out, the more potentially damaging it could become to his client's reputation. I was contemplating a phone call to Ken when I got a knock at the door. Presuming the knock to be the delivery man with the broccoli chicken I'd ordered, I opened the door. And it was him. I stepped back out of shock.

"I don't usually get that sort of reaction, Ms. Husch," Dalton said. "Do I look so terrible?"

I paused to regard him, and really my reaction was just the surprise more than anything, but it was highly irregular, him showing up like that. I did look at him, though, and quite unlike Ivy McKinnes, Dalton had the look of an extraordinary man. He was taller than I'd imagined, and he looked like he'd just stepped out of a Brooks Brothers catalogue—and, having finished the photo shoot for the day, he'd tousled his hair, thrown off his tie, untucked his shirt, and gone off for a good night out. And he may well have done that. He had a half-empty bottle of scotch in his left hand and an empty glass in his right, and his eyes told me where the missing scotch had gone. Even so, there was no malice in his eyes. There was a quiet sense of defeat and sadness in his countenance, but even as he swayed ever so slightly while standing there, his posture was erect—even noticeably commanding. There was a strange clash unfolding in his bearing, as though his mind were somewhat sad and defeated, while such a prospect was so utterly foreign to him that his body didn't even know how to express it. He swayed foot to foot for those few seconds, not like a drunkard, but as a medalist on a podium, and not for a moment did the sly smile leave his lips as he awaited my response, which didn't come.

"I trust you know who I am, Ms. Husch?"

"I do indeed. You simply startled me, Mr. Jennings-Milner. I was expecting some delivery, you know, it is lunchtime."

"Please, call me Dalton."

I didn't quite know what to say to him. I was flustered by his surprise appearance, and I remember uttering a few ums and ahs while contemplating whether I might have an

untidy situation on my hands, before finally I said, "What can I do for you exactly?"

"I understand my downstairs neighbor hired you to be her attorney."

"Yes, she did."

He nodded. "My attorney, Ken Feirman just made me aware."

"Does Mr. Feirman know you're here?"

"I'm sure he doesn't," Dalton said, still smiling. "Nor would he be happy about it, I'll bet. But I've always had a fundamental distrust of lawyers."

"I see," I said.

"Ironically, though, I've always trusted my neighbors, which...obviously a mistake." He tipped the bottle of scotch comically and smiled again before looking at me seriously and saying, "I figure you're both a lawyer and a neighbor, so I thought I might drop by and have a word—see where you stood."

"Well, I would say, given the circumstances, Mr. Jennings-Milner, that would be inappropriate—as both a lawyer and a former neighbor."

"Please, Ms. Husch. Dalton."

"Yes, very well, but as I said."

"I'm sorry," he said nodding. "I just I hoped I could set the record straight—as a neighbor, of course. I didn't intend to discuss anything inappropriate."

He stood there for a moment waiting for an opening. As he looked into my eyes, my head grew quite warm. My heart began to beat faster, and I couldn't understand why, but I had the strong urge to hear Dalton out.

"Again," I said. "I don't think—"

And at that moment, the delivery man stepped around the corner from the elevator, and seeing the open door without any visible number, he said quite generally to the both of us, “32E? Hirsch.”

“Yes, here,” I said, fumbling through my pockets for the tip money I’d left on the kitchen counter.

As the deliveryman thrust the bag into my hands, Dalton tucked the bottle of scotch under his arm, and almost as though it were a reflex, he took thirty dollars from his pants pocket and handed it to the fellow, who took it, even as I said, “That’s quite unnecessary.” But before I could rectify the situation, the man had already disappeared again—around the corner to the elevator and gone.

“I already paid by card,” I said.

“His lucky day,” Dalton said.

Perhaps it was the sight of him there, sad and drunk—or perhaps it was the contempt I held for that girl, turning this man’s entire world on end with her utter carelessness for the dignity of other people—perhaps it was both those things that made it difficult to turn him away. I felt a nervous tension in my chest with each passing second, and as I stood there, trying to think of the gentlest possible way of getting Dalton to leave, he suddenly looked over my shoulder and said, “Is that a grand piano in your living room? In Manhattan?”

I must have turned around out of reflex, because I certainly knew the answer without having to turn around to look.

“You must play then?” he said. “Let me guess...Bach and...Vivaldi?”

"What about them?" I asked, turning back to face him.

"Your two favorite composers."

"Well, I can't say I don't have love for both of them, but if I had to pick just two, for the piano mind you, I would have to say Debussy and Chopin."

"I should start playing again," Dalton said, nodding. "I gave it up in college, and what a mistake. I was never that good, but, well, I do miss playing. Do you mind?" he gestured toward the piano with the bottle.

"Mind what exactly?" I said.

"May I have a quick look at it?"

I hesitated for a moment. "At the piano?"

"Yes," he said. "I can't believe you've got a piano up here."

I looked over his shoulders into the hallway and realized that the longer he stood there, the more likely it was that we'd be seen by someone other than the delivery man—someone who knew me and would likely recognize Dalton as well.

"I certainly didn't carry the piano up the stairs, if that's what you mean," I said, and quite reluctantly, I turned and stepped inside.

"How did they even fit it in the freight elevator?" he said, following me. "And around the corners?"

"It's only a baby grand, and they took off the legs. The movers were actually quite clever."

"They'd have to be," he said, looking on the instrument with admiration.

I suddenly realized that my feeling of apprehension had mostly dissipated now that the door was shut behind us and there was no longer the possibility of a neighbor

happening upon us conversing in the hallway. Dalton, meanwhile, circled the piano, observing it from several different angles. I watched as he approached the keyboard, still with the glass in one hand, and the bottle in the other.

"If you have any designs of setting that bottle down on my Steinway, Mr. J—"

He laughed. "Please, Ms. Husch. Call me Dalton. And, I'm just wondering if you think me such a philistine as to set a glass on this work of art you've obviously taken great care to bring into your home." He set the bottle down on the wooden floor beside the ventilation unit and the scotch glass on the table behind us.

"I'm sorry. It's just that I'm a bit protective of it."

"I can see why," he said. "It's beautiful. Must have cost a fortune."

"No, actually, it was free."

"You're joking."

"No. I mean, the movers weren't cheap, but the piano itself was free."

"Who gives away a Steinway?"

"Well, the previous owner was a piano teacher, and her children didn't know what to do with it when she passed, and the truth is that it's just an old form of entertainment nobody wants anymore. People all have televisions and computers to keep them occupied, and a piano takes up far too much space for the city. The only thing I had to give for that piano was my word that I would play it and take care of it as their mother had stipulated when they arranged her estate."

He looked at me and smiled, and then he gestured. "Might I hear it?"

"I'm not sure that would be appropriate given the circumstances."

"I'd play something," he said, gesturing toward the keyboard again, "but I've forgotten mostly everything – and, well, I'm not in the best state. I wouldn't want to –"

"No, I understand," I said, happy that he was still sober enough to refrain from touching the keys.

"I could really use some music in my life right now, Myra, and I can tell you're passionate about music," he said, gesturing to the piano again. "Please. I love Debussy as well."

I hesitated for a moment before finally giving in. "Very well," I said, nodding as I sat.

He picked up the bottle again, sat down at the kitchen table, poured a little scotch, and corked the bottle. I turned to address the piano, and after a deep breath, I began to play. With Dalton seated behind me like that, I had no idea what he was thinking as he listened. As I played, though, I became aware of just how long it had been since I'd played for even an audience of one. I was nervous, and not only because I was playing for someone. It began to dawn on me that it was by far the least professional thing I had ever done in my thirty-four-year legal career, and he'd charmed me into it in less than five minutes. As I continued playing, I debated whether it had been conscious on his part or whether he was just unconsciously that manipulative. And then I forgot about Dalton altogether. I got lost in the music, and I felt an entirely different energy pulsing through me than when I played for myself, an almost indescribable warmth in my chest. I felt truly alive in a way I hadn't in years, and it stayed with me from that



moment—minutes—all the way through to the final note, and I paused when I finished and took a deep breath.

“Wonderful,” Dalton said. “You play beautifully, Myra. If I could play like that, I actually would carry the piano up the stairs.”

I turned around, remaining seated on the piano bench across from him, “You’re too kind, Dalton.”

“It’s true.”

“So,” I said.

He smiled again.

“You came to talk with me about something, Dalton. Not pianos and not Debussy.” I said. “Yet somehow you haven’t said a word about it.”

“You’re not a litigator,” he said, as though it weren’t a question. “Are you, Myra?”

“Why do suppose I’m not?”

“You know what I am, right?” he said.

“You’re an investment banker, and a very talented one from what I understand.”

“I’m a shark,” he said, and the smile disappeared. “In every aspect of the word. I am a cold, all-consuming capitalist predator. That’s my job. That’s what I do. I sense weakness and opportunity and I gorge on it. I can see you’re not of that world, like Ken Feirman is.”

He poured another shot of scotch.

“I actually already asked you every question I needed to ask, and you answered when you allowed me in your apartment, which you wouldn’t have done if you’d had an ounce of suspicion that Ivy McKinnis was telling the truth. I wanted to know what you knew, Myra, and now I do. So, this is the world I live in, and I’m sorry to do that to you,

because I genuinely respect you, and I think you're a fine human being with a sharp, sharp mind. I mean, who the hell reads Schopenhauer?"

He gestured to the bookcase behind me.

"I do," I said, and I suppose I should have been angry, either at myself for allowing him to manipulate me so easily or at him for being so cunning. I suppose I must have hung my head a little.

"Don't do that, Myra," he said. "No. No. No. You have a bright mind and a good heart. You've got no reason to be upset."

I was about to tell him that he knew nothing about me, but then I realized that was a lie.

"Why do you do it then, Dalton? If that's your talent, couldn't you use it in a better way than being a predator?"

"I do it for the money. If it makes you feel any better, I don't eat the little fishes, just the littler sharks. I plan on retiring in ten years and doing a lot of good for this world."

He paused for a moment mid-thought.

"This fucking world."

He put his glass down on the table and turned his head to gaze out over the city.

"You know, Myra, when I was in college and I first started taking business courses, one of the first things we read about was the great market crash in '29, and the thing that always puzzled me about that whole thing wasn't that no one saw it coming or that no safeguards were in place or anything like that. I was just baffled by the sheer number of men who pitched themselves out windows. These were men like me, who worked with money every day. I literally have colleagues who talk about losing a million dollars as

casually as if it were a pair of reading glasses. Money is nothing to them. We all know. It comes and it goes, and the only thing that can possibly stop that process for people like us is if we do go over to the window and pitch ourselves out. So why the hell would so many men who knew this still jump out? I didn't understand the answer to that question until last week."

Dalton looked over at me again.

"It wasn't the money. It wasn't that they'd gone broke and lost their jobs. It was the shame of it. It was the fact that they'd have to go home that night to their wives and tell them, 'I have failed at the one thing that is most important for me to do.' And a lot of them couldn't live with that shame, because they'd never failed like that before, and that—that I can understand now. I learned what that felt like this past week when my mother called me and asked me whether all those things in the tabloids were true. My grandmother read it in the *Post*!"

Dalton shook his head. "This fucking world we live in."

I wanted to say something to him, but I simply didn't know what I could say.

"Do you know my resume is a work of art, Myra?"

"I imagine it is."

"Jesus, I mean. I have busted my ass my entire life to get where I am. I had a 3.8 at Andover and a 4.0 at Brown. I was a multimillionaire at twenty-nine. And even when this thing gets straightened out, I will forever be the masturbating banker. That's my mark on this world. The masturbating banker. What a fucking joke.

"Maybe in the next life, eh?" Dalton said.

He paused again and poured more scotch, but he didn't lift the glass.

"But, I can't say it's a total loss, Myra, because—you cannot know your melting-point until you're thrust into the crucible. And I can tell you, having lived there this week, that I know things about myself I did not know two weeks ago."

The best I could offer him was a look of commiseration.

"But anyway, Myra, I've taken up too much of your time, and your lunch is getting cold."

"I have a microwave, Dalton."

"You're too kind, really. I'm so sorry we had to meet this way."

He stood, and he took one awkward step as he rose. I leaned toward him, but he caught himself on the table.

"I'm fine," he said, holding up his other hand.

I stood, so I could see him out, and as I walked beside him toward the door, he had a look on his face as though he were puzzling over something—something that was escaping him. He reeked of whisky. When I opened the door, he stepped into the hallway and turned toward me before he left.

"Myra Husch, you are a wonderful human being," he said.

"Thank you, Dalton," I said. "You're going to be all right, aren't you? You're not going to do anything drastic?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I'll be fine."

"Can I call you a taxi?"

He reached into his pocket and lifted up his phone with a smile. "Ah!" he said. "It's on here. One second. His name was escaping me."

Dalton scrolled for a moment.

"Whose name?"

"Got it," he said. "Samson Francois. Have you heard of him?"

"No, I don't know the name. Is he a composer?"

"A French pianist. This is my gift to you—for being so kind to me today, Myra. The Passepied. I'm going to get into that elevator in a minute, and when I do, pull up the Samson Francois version of the Passepied on YouTube. You know the piece?"

"Oh, I'd need to get the sheet music. I only know the Clair de Lune."

"No, I don't mean can you play it. I mean, you know it, right?"

"I do. I like the Passepied well enough, but I've always found it a little clunky, if I'm honest."

"Listen to Samson Francois play it, Myra, please. Do that for me today. I swear it will change your entire perspective on this world."

"I will, Dalton. As soon as you step into the elevator."

"Promise me you'll listen to it."

"I promise."

"Okay, Myra. Okay. And I give you my word, no one will ever know of this conversation. I promise you that."

I nodded and he stepped away.

I waited at the door until I heard the elevator open and then close again. Then I shut my door and latched it, and I stood there for a moment. I couldn't help thinking that Dalton's unexpected visit had been the single most confounding experience of my life. I knew from the moment I set eyes on him that I shouldn't have spoken to

him except to say that I would talk to Kenneth Feirman and we should resolve things that way. I felt guilty and sad and violated and sorry for Dalton all at the same time. And I couldn't fathom what it had been about him in those few minutes that had convinced me to abandon all good sense. And the Passepiéd? I loved Debussy, but I must have heard a hundred different versions of that piece and had never heard anything extraordinary in any of them. I took a deep breath and retreated to my bedroom, and reluctantly typed: Passepiéd Samson Francois.

A video popped up with a static picture of Francois's face as he stared to one side of the photographer. He looked maybe ten years older than Dalton, and he had a mustache that made him look a bit more like a philosopher than a musician, but his face reminded me of Dalton — serious and beautiful and devilish and somehow still innocent, and I stared at that face, and the music began.

I knew all the notes as Francois played them. I had heard them all before, played in the exact same order maybe a hundred times, maybe a thousand, and it occurred to me as I listened that I had never heard that piece before. It sucked the wind out of my lungs. I found myself shaking my head at this beautiful dead Frenchman and aching in my heart and confounded by the magnificently beautiful thing he was able to conjure from the identical pieces I'd identified as mediocre and unworthy of my attention, and I cursed Dalton Jennings-Milner for knowing this — for knowing and for showing me. And I wept at the thought that I could have sat for an eternity at my beloved Steinway and still never understood the one thing I loved more than anything else in this world the way that Samson Francois

had. I felt futility and I cried, and when the video ended, I hit repeat. And I felt futility again, and I cried again, and it was the most beautiful thing in the world to feel so insignificant and so infinitesimally small next to the beauty of those sounds, and that man.

I couldn't work for the rest of the afternoon. I couldn't think about anything with any focus. I found myself staring out the window as Dalton had, thinking about this world and all the ridiculous things we think are important and the marks we make for all our struggles. I'd lived in this world for over sixty-two years before I knew the name Samson Francois, and I needed Dalton Jennings-Milner to teach it to me. I couldn't begin to process that. I couldn't fit that into my silly little conceptions about fame or celebrity when I had something so immortally beautiful staring at me from the depths of the already-forgotten. How foolish I had been to think I could write the book on that. It was all too much to bear.

I don't know how long I stood there in silence, staring out my window at the distant green of Central Park and the gray city flowing around it, but when I finally came back to reality, I thought that the only appropriate thing for me to do was to call my friend Ira King and tell him that I would be sending a new client his way, and that he should be prepared, because Ivy McKinnes—the woman, the case—neither one of them would ever be worthy of such a decent man's valuable time.