

COVER ME

I was gloved and sanitized when my cell buzzed that afternoon so I let it go to voicemail. I was working on Keef Alderson's upper arm but he was showing no pain. Chatty as always, going on about his two nephews and how cool they were now they were old enough to see he was cool. The dude who still rocked out and told war stories about injuries he got jumping into the mosh pits at punk festivals.

The light shifted as the sun worked its way west over the bay. I shifted my overhead lamp so the light on Keef's arm stayed constant. I was inking a black-and-grey Metallica logo there, right above Iron Maiden, Guns N Roses, Megadeth, Slayer and Judas Priest, all of which I'd put there, one at a time whenever Keef had a hundred bucks. His logos barely take an hour so I fit him in at the end of the day when I can. He's a sweet guy in his late thirties who can shred on guitar, but has no sense of melody or spark. He's in a bonehead metal band called Skully that plays on festival underbills and in local bars but mostly drives for FedEx, which is why the tats on his left arm, which he hangs out the window, are starting to fade.

The phone buzzed a second time as I was finishing the shading with a Mag liner, nine intermeshed needles easing grey wash away from the black to make the lettering pop off the skin. I ignored it again.

"Someone wants you," Keef said. "Got another client?" His real name is Keith, but his kid brother went through a toothless phase when it only came out Keef and it's stuck to him ever since.

"Nope. Started early this morning on a full sleeve, which was six straight hours, so you are my last piece of the day."

"Appreciate you fitting me in. Christ!" He flinched as a sharp report sounded right above us. The needle nearly dragged outside the line.

I said, "Try not to do that."

"Sorry. What was that?"

"Acorns. They're dropping all the time now. I was sitting outside with a client last week while she was on smoke break, and she took a direct hit on the wrist. Raised a welt the size of a quarter. Like she hadn't been suffering enough."

Twenty minutes later, I was done and wiping down his arm.

"Ah," he said. "That's the part I like."

"The wiping?"

"The knowing it's over. You doing anything tonight?" he asked. "'Cause I'll be smokin' a few for the pain."

I don't get high anymore and Keef likes to play when he smokes and his repetitive, aimless riffs wear on me after a few. "Another time," I said. "I need to rework the sleeve section I'm doing tomorrow. It's a Japanese koi, and every drawing looks like a dick with fins."

"Then I'm gonna hustle," he said. "I hate going down the bluff in the dark."

"You walked up?"

"Had to. Van's acting up. Blowing big clouds of blue smoke. In fact, I meant to tell you it's kind of in your spot on the access road."

The house I live in is on a high bluff overlooking Georgian Bay. The lawn goes about fifty feet out, then slopes more than seven hundred feet to the water below. It's not sheer but it is steep. A footpath leads down but it's never been cleared properly, just worn down over time. It

switches back and forth half-a-dozen times before it flattens out at an old access road that leads to the beach at Sandy Bay. I have a parking spot cleared down there among the trees but rarely use it.

I watched Keef cross the lawn, shading my eyes against the sun moving past the lighthouse at the southern tip of Christian Island. As he passed under the great oak on the southern fringe of the property, about to be swallowed by the brush, he turned and said, “Better keep Mooch in tonight.” Mooch is a grey tabby who shares my house and my bed. “I saw a fisher in the woods coming up,” he said. “And much as they like porcupine, cats are easier pickings.”

“Thanks, Keef. Watch yourself going down.” Roots snaked everywhere across the footpath, and even though it wasn’t dark yet, some areas were deeply shaded by the forest canopy all day. If you don’t slow down and sit back like a skier where the bluff gets steep, it’s easy to pitch face-first into brambles and trees. Everyone around here knows the name Braden James, a kid who went galloping down the path from his parents’ house on a drunken dare, tripped on a root and fell neck-first onto a broken limb. He bled out long before help could get to the front of the house, let alone the dark tangle of the bluff.

I had just walked back inside the studio to start cleaning up when the phone buzzed a third time. I looked at the number, praying it wasn’t tomorrow’s client cancelling. You never know with sleeves. Everyone thinks they’ll stick it out but seven hours of pain will humble many.

It wasn’t him. The screen showed a private caller. It wasn’t quite five yet, still business hours, so I answered in my shop voice. “Marked Man Ink.”

A man said, “This Matt Penny?”

“That’s me.”

“I’m looking for someone to do a coverup and I hear you’re good.”

I was glad to hear it, if a little surprised. Like every tattoo artist, I do coverups – there are so many mistakes out there to fix – but my real strengths are portraits and photorealism. If you’re going to pay the bills, you have to project confidence in any situation, so I said, “I’m your man. I can fit you in at ten Friday, or Saturday at three, otherwise we’re into next—”

“Now,” he said. “I mean right now.”

“Sorry, dude. I just finished for the day. I’m closing up.”

“I’ll make it worth your while.”

“I haven’t eaten. I need a shower.”

“What do you charge?”

“My rate is one-fifty an hour, two-hour minimum.”

“I’ll pay three hundred an hour cash for however long it takes if you do it right now.”

Most days I would have blown the guy off, made him wait until Friday. But getting my own shop off the ground has been draining. I was only able to open it because Granddad Arthur left me this property when he died two years ago. It came mortgage-free but the taxes cut deep now that the value was reassessed, and it’s big enough and old enough to need constant maintenance. I had to buy a sterilizing unit, chairs, new machines and ink sets, pay licencing fees, frame my art and absorb a hundred other expenses to convert his free-standing workshop to a four-season studio. I’m lucky to have it, but it’s not even close to a street, so I don’t get walk-ins. There’s a sign where our concession road meets Cedar Point but few people suddenly pull off the road to get tattooed on impulse. My Instagram following is building and I get lineups at the conventions

I attend. But the market for what I do is small and the population up here pretty thin. The two nearest towns, Midland and Penetanguishene, have three shops between them, and Barrie, less than an hour away, had at least a dozen. Why me for a coverup?

Three hundred an hour for a piece that would run at least four hours if the original tattoo was any size – that would keep a wolf or two from the door. I said, “Alright.”

“Anyone but you going to be there? Apprentices, other clients hanging around a waiting room?”

“No, You are definitely last and I work alone.”

“Good.”

“You need directions?”

“Nope,” he said. “I’m standing outside your door.”

It struck me as odd that he appeared less than a minute after Keef left. And when I opened the door to a man between thirty-five and forty, an inch shorter than me but built more thickly, there was no car in the driveway but my muddy Tucson. My place is a thirty-minute walk from Cedar Point Road. My closest neighbours will occasionally come over to ask favours, discuss snow removal or alert me to upcoming absences. No one ever walks in.

His hair was the colour of wheat, thick and curly on top, buzzed short on the sides and back. His skin tone was fair but not freckled, which meant I could go full colour on a tat if I had to. I held out my hand and said, “I’m Matt.”

He gave his grip the same force I did, no more, no less, and said. “Lyle.”

“Show me what you need covered.”

He was wearing a black cotton shirt with mother-of-pearl snaps down the front and on the pocket flaps. When he opened it, I saw a grim reaper on his right chest, a gnarled hooded figure with a skeletal hand gripping a scythe and weathered tombstones at his feet, nicely lined and shaded. He pulled the shirt all the way open to reveal another image on the left: a black-and-grey gypsy girl cradling a crumbling skull. That’s the one he pointed to. “What can you do and how long will it take?”

I walked up closer and stared at the image, which was about the size of my hand, and wondered why he wanted it covered. It had been done with a single needle – lined and shaded with the same thin point – in the style of traditionalists led by Jack Ruby and current masters like Tommy Montoya. The work was solid top to bottom, but it was the woman herself, her classically beautiful face and the deep ache in her eyes... I stared so long I felt a creep of shame, as if I were spying on a real person.

Most coverups I do are driven by failed relationships: a guy wants his ex’s scripted name buried in a snake; she wants his covered with a Japanese peony. The rest are down to poor quality and judgment. I get clients who were inked by friends, semi-pros, even themselves. Some caved to peer pressure or made poor choices while plastered or went with the latest fad: gnarly tramp stamps, tribal that’s not their tribe, Chinese characters that read backwards because someone used Google Translate.

Quality wasn’t the issue here. Even though gypsy girl tattoos are usually full colour, showing off an intricate head scarf and beadwork, the artist had used multiple shades of grey to give the skull’s eye sockets cavernous depth, and the jaw and teeth looked seriously decayed. Delicate highlights in the black rose tucked in her hair made it look like your fingers could stroke it and

come away dewy. The hair itself was glossy and textured. But it was her three-quarter profile that held me. Gypsy girls are meant to be beautiful but the longer I looked, the more I felt the artist had based her on someone real. A stunning woman of this earth, not his imagination.

“Can I ask why you want that covered?” I said.

“No. Just figure out something it won’t show through.”

“You have any ideas? Anything you’ve always wanted?”

“Nothing specific.”

“It’ll have to be bigger than what you have,” I said. “At least twice the size. I’m guessing six hours minimum, not including sketch time.”

“Whatever.”

“I’ll have to cover some ribs.”

“No problem.”

“That’s what everyone says. Then you hit the ribs and they turn white. I had a pro hockey player puke and pass out on me last month.”

“I can take it.”

“As long as you know. The open parts of her face aren’t a problem but where her hair and scarf are, we’re going to need a lot of black.”

I opened my Instagram account on my iPad and thumbed through images I had inked that fit the criteria.

“The thing about coverups is you’re not trying to cover the old image as much as camouflage it. I’ll need to add elements that draw the eye away from the central part. This panther, for instance. There’s enough black in the chest and shoulders to cover the old part, but I’d draw your eyes up with a big red mouth, yellow eyes, some sharp foliage.”

“I don’t like cats.”

“Okay. What about this Samurai warrior? I can cover her headscarf with his helmet. Or make him Viking and the skull could be on his shield, like part of a crest. Use his beard to cover her face.”

“Not feeling it.”

I showed him a cosmos I had done with sparkling galaxies and swirling nebulae against the deep black of space.

“That’s kind of girly.”

“What if we keep the skull and add a traditional snake and dagger? The black in the snake scales would take care of the face and scarf.” I pointed to a logo I had designed for Keef’s band Skully: a traditional snake, skull and dagger above Gothic script that read *Nice Skulls Finish Last*. “Without the slogan, of course.”

“A little too old school.”

I hadn’t seen his arms or back yet. “Take off your shirt. Let me see what else you have.”

“None of your business.”

“I just thought if you had a theme going....”

“Don’t think so much. Try imagining.”

His attitude was wearing thin but the pile of bills he had promised loomed thick. “You like zombies? I can hide her face with rot and gore. The skull can be someone she’s eating.”

“Pass.”

As I stared at the girl, the dark hair and lighter areas between her forehead and chin, an image popped into my mind and I thumbed through the gallery to a roaring silverback gorilla I had tattooed on a firefighter last summer. The fur and leathery skin would be ideal for covering the

girl's features and hair. With the mouth fully open in a snarling rage, I could pack in some red. Yellow his teeth and streak blood through his eyes.

"How do you feel about gorillas?" I showed him the silverback.

"That's fucking fierce," he said. "Is he enough or do you need a background?"

"I'd still want something to draw attention from her face." I was going to say jungle foliage when another image came to me fully-formed: King Kong from the chest up, clinging to the spire atop the Empire State Building with one hand, swatting bi-planes with the other, against a backdrop of flames, clouds and streaks of machine-gun fire. "I got this," I said.

"What?"

"It'll be easier to draw than explain." I tapped the camera icon on the iPad and aimed it at his chest. "Hold still a second."

"The hell you doing?" He let go the shirt panels he was holding open and thrust out his right hand to block my view.

"Dude," I said, using my level customer-service tone, "I need a reference to draw from."

"Put that away." He took two steps toward me on the balls of his feet. His hands, while not quite fists, were curled at his sides.

Maybe he expected me to step back but I don't do that anymore. I lowered my head and moved forward just as fast, making him pull up short or get butted. I said, "Don't come up on me."

He stayed nose to nose. "I don't want you taking pictures. That's all."

If you head butt a guy, you do it from your core. I tightened my abs, ready to spring. "That's not all. You came at me like you had something in mind. Do you?"

He waited the customary beat before saying, "No."

"You sure?"

He said nothing.

I said, "You're crowding me. Take a step back."

He didn't move.

"No one invited you here. You showed up at my door, asking me for something."

"Not asking. Offering to pay."

"That only gets you so far. This is my house," I said. "My shop."

When he still didn't move, I said through my teeth softly, "My yard."

He got me then. I could tell by the way he broke eye contact and took two steps back. Held up his hands as if to say no harm done. "I get it," he said. "You're tough."

I said, "You don't like the way I work, the same door you came in will take you out."

"Sorry if I crowded you. Okay? Can we still do this?"

"If you do what I tell you. I always start with a picture of the image I'm covering. Always. Then I draw the new image over it."

"Why not on paper?"

"Paper is fine for original drawings. I sketch all new ideas on the table. For coverups, an iPad's just better. Let's you try different things more quickly. If they don't work, swipe, they're gone. Bottom line is, no picture, no tattoo. If it makes you happy, I'll delete it the minute you approve the stencil. Okay?"

He said nothing.

"And if it's not okay, beat it. I'm too tired for bullshit."

He sighed and shrugged and pulled the shirt away from the gypsy girl so I could shoot it. He said, "Just see that you delete it."

When I had an image that was sharp, I set the iPad down and held out my hand. "Alright. Let's see your cash."

"What for?"

"You said you had cash. Let's see it."

He reached into the front pocket of his pants and pulled out a sheaf of hundreds. He fanned them out so I could see there were at least twenty.

I held out my hand. "I'll take one now."

"Why?"

"Because that's how I work." I kept my hand out until he gave me one bill. "That's for this consult and to draw the image. Non-refundable. If you don't like the sketch, you walk but I keep the hundred. If you approve it and I start inking, you owe the full amount even if you tap out."

"No one's tapping out."

"Alright. I'm gonna need you to sign a consent form." I pulled one out of a tray and handed it to him with a ball point pen.

"You don't think I'm nineteen?"

"I need a signed form saying you consent to the tattoo and aren't under the influence of alcohol or drugs."

"Want to smell my breath?"

"The law says I need it. You going to sign?"

He signed something that started with an L and something else with a J. I looked at the printed name: Lyle Jackson. The address he gave was on a street I never heard of in Barrie, with all those shops I knew of. I had apprenticed at one when I came home from New York and, before opening Marked Man, had worked at two others that did walk-ins and coverups all day.

Yet here he was at the end of a lonely dirt road, pressing me to cover him right now.