

THE LETTER H

October 7, 2019

“HENRY! HENRY! HENNN-RYYYY!!!!”

I am screaming at the top of my lungs and can feel my throat tearing, becoming raw. I don’t know how many times I have said his name now, but it is all I know how to do—nothing else is making sense.

I am in a locked room. Flashes of images are going through my head, but there is only one thing, one thought that I can focus on—that is pounding through my brain throughout this confusion and is pouring out of my lungs to the point that my chest feels like it is going to rip.

“HENRY!” I choke on his name and a sob.

He cannot hear me.

He is not coming.

He doesn’t know where I am, and I don’t know where I am, but I know I am not supposed to be here . . .

I have to get out.

I beat at the metal door that barricades me from something unknown and choke on words that begin with H.

“HENRY!” “

“HELP!”

“HENRY!”

“HELP!”

I repeat these words for what feels like a lifetime, until I forget how to speak and my begging turns to carnal screaming—shrieking. With each scream I can feel the sharp stinging of my throat tearing. A metallic taste fills my dry mouth as I suck in desperate breaths of blood, saliva, and air.

No one comes. No one answers. I wait for footsteps, for the sound of the door unlocking, but all I can hear is the sound of my frantic breaths and the echoes of a lamentation that is anything but human.

I look down. My feet are bare against the concrete floor; I cannot feel them. The jean shorts I am wearing show off my slender, scratched legs and remind me that I am small and feeble in this moment.

Yet, in an act of desperation, I put all of my faith in the power of momentum and I run. I fucking run as fast as I can the three paces it takes to get from the wall to the ominous looming, locked door and attack it with my entire being, letting out my most vicious battle cry as I fumble

towards it.

The door wins.

I try again.

And again.

And again.

And again . . .

And again.

I am degraded to a crumbling, bruised ball of flesh.

I can barely speak, my throat reduced to sandpaper.

Everything hurts and I can taste the bitterness of blood in my mouth. I curl into myself like a helpless, dying animal. The floor is like ice against my bare legs.

Through the tears I see the moon shining through a window at the top of the room. It is full and brilliant and illuminates the white of the brick walls that surround me—there is writing on them.

I know that the marks on the wall say or depict something, but as hard as I try, I cannot decipher a single word or image. People have been here before me. People will be here after me.

Why am I here though?

I should not be.

I should be home, where I belong. In bed, with

him. *Safe.*

Terror sweeps through every single one of my nerves.

I whisper in one last futile attempt, “Henry?”

But there is silence. Horrible, deafening, fatal silence.

And it seems to last forever, until I hear it, or think I do: A click, the door unlocking, and the small room is suddenly filled with light. Fluorescence suffocates me as I slam my eyelids shut against the searing pain.

When I dare to open my eyes, they do not find Henry. Instead I find a police officer looking back at me. He wears broad, black framed glasses that are too big for his face. He looks eerily familiar.

A sudden memory of lying in a hospital bed comes to me but does not fully resonate. His face is forlorn and almost disappointed, as if he expected more out of me.

“I thought you were going to hurt yourself,” he tells me then. “Promise you’ll stay calm and you can come out for a bit. We’ve got to get you fingerprinted.”

It’s then that I have the shattering realization that I am drunk and in a holding cell at a police station. The reason why escapes me though, as I try to grab onto flashes of sober memories but drown in my current state-of-mind. My sensation of cold terror has turned to saturated dismay

as I tremble with every step I take through the holding station.

I try to breathe as I remember every single arrest-cliché in the book, and cling to the fact that I am going to get my phone call. They will probably let me go—they have to. If anything, they will make me stay the night at the most.

As an officer holds my wrist and glides my hand down a smooth surface, I see the imprint of my hand taking shape on a screen before I am led to get my mugshot taken. I don't know much right now, but I know I look like absolute shit as I emanate pure hatred in my eyes at the officer taking my picture.

I remember then the silent promise I had once made myself—that the moment I got a DUI that I would put down the bottle for good.

Jail was the worst it could get. My crowning achievement at my last three rehabs was that I had never graced the inside of a jail cell and I never planned to . . .

“Continue down the path you have been,” one of the staff members at my second treatment center had told me after sharing her own story about prison, “and jail is a guarantee.”

And here I am. Her words have come to pass, as

promised.

I am marched back to the small holding cell; I feel more lost than I ever have in my life.

As the officer slams the metal door behind me, I think clearly for the first time that night, about that second treatment center and remember what else the woman told me as we talked over a pack of Marlboro Reds on a warm Orange County night.

“Finish the 90 days,” she had said, “or you will not make it and there will come a day where you will no longer be able to cry out ‘I’m a good person!’ You will lie. You will steal. You will become someone and something else. You will hurt everyone you love. You will lose everything, and just when you think you have lost it all, you will lose something else.”

In this moment of scathing loneliness and terror, it seems the day of reckoning has come. I know not what awaits me or what I have left.

I don’t know what I have done, but I know it is bad and that I will not be going home tonight, as the police officer informs me that I will be going to the county’s main women’s jail in Lynwood.

I ask the officer where that is.

“Near Compton.”

I choke on my own saliva as I contemplate what I am going into, and still: *why, why, why?* What on earth have I done?

The glasses-clad officer gives me a sorry smirk as he asks me to put my hands behind my back and says, “I’m going to have to put these on tight since you slipped out of the ones you were in earlier.”

I can feel my jaw drop then tighten.

This does not sound like me. It couldn’t be me. Then I feel the abrasions on my left wrist and realize he is right.

I meekly put my hands behind my back and allow him to tighten the cuffs, wincing as the cold, harsh metal cuts into my open flesh.

We begin walking.

Passing minutes turn into hours, turn into days; time becomes a figment of the extraordinary as every second manifests as a year.

No one was coming to save me.

My “get out of jail free” card doesn’t exist.

I had made my bed: it was time to lay in it or hang myself with the sheet.

I was about to learn just how thick brick walls could be,

and how I would have to break free of the prison that was me to truly be free.

But I'm getting ahead of myself . . .

Part One:
The
Bloodbath

CADILLAC PROBLEMS

March 7, 2019

I stare at the project I have been avoiding. I'll get to it; I always get to it. Whether it's in an hour or this weekend—it will get done. I am good at my job and I make things happen, but it's Friday and to me that is some sort of finish line.

As I read over the essay-of-an-email from my client about everything she wants included in an upcoming press release, I know I should really get started. Instead, I decide to head to the other side of the office, thinking of some sort of excuse to see him—Henry.

I look good today. As of late, I always make sure I look good when I know he is going to be here. Nonetheless, I look at myself in a small mirror I've situated on my desk. I tidy and straighten myself up and quickly touch up my candy pink lipstick.

In the reflection, I can see my coworker rolling her eyes behind me. She knows where I am going. This little secret may be hidden with words, but the red my cheeks turn when he looks at me doesn't lie. He may be able to act the

calm, cool collected CEO, but I am less experienced in my career and at hiding my affections. Couple that with the few times we had been spotted on the town, and the secret had become more like the elephant in the room during office meetings.

Yet my confidence falters—it's been ongoing for months, this thing between him and I. We work, we rendezvous, and we have our not so little secret that exists beyond the walls of this office. I haven't seen him today, and I need him to see me—to take notice, but I need some ferocity first, so I head to my car.

As I walk down the stairs to the parking lot, I ponder the time—it's almost noon and I hope he doesn't decide now is a good time to take lunch or leave for the day.

I hurry and pull out my keys, deciding to move my car for the second time to pretend I'm actually doing something.

Once in my car, I immediately fumble for the coffee tumbler I have stuck in the driver's door, my nerves calming as I hear the liquid inside sloshing against the metal. I take a quick look to ensure none of my colleagues are watching and down five quick gulps as I clumsily turn on the car and reverse.

My eyes search the lot for another open space and of course there is only one—next to him.

I repark the car and contemplate the shining silver of his Cadillac as I take a few more sips of warm whiskey. It beams in the sunlight: This car represents something to me—it symbolizes the freedom of life I have a few times a week; it represents me getting what I want. It is a flag that I break the rules—and I like it.

I take one more sip, and with it a deep breath, it's showtime. I return to the office with a new sense of confidence.

I feel like the most important person in the room as the bottom of my boots make a pronouncing clack. I glide across the floor and to my computer for a quick glance. When I look at it, I find that in my absence, he's beat me to the punch.

Come in, a message from him reads on my screen. It's always those two words and they always make my heart start beating faster.

In a panic, I pick up anything I can use from my desk as a shield to hide any sense of insecurity he may see. I fill my hands with two notebooks and a pen before I make my way briskly to his office and announce my arrival in his

doorway with a light knock and a shy smile.

I shut the door behind me and situate myself in the leather chair opposite of him, I try to look at ease as he scans me with his eyes.

It's the one thing I've never been able to stop coming undone from—his stare. His soft, but sharp brown eyes speak and see through me.

“How's it going?” he asks in a casual tone.

“Good, almost done with the press release,” I lie.

“That's great,” he says with his notorious smirk. “Send it to me when you're done.”

I nod, barely understanding the request. Instead, I'm focused on the conversation our eyes are having. We will be seeing each other tonight, no question of that. And I get lost in the thought of what that might mean, as this man never fails to surprise or satisfy me.

“Here's your check,” he says and slaps it on the table—I'm stung back into reality.

It's payday, and the same man who pays me is the same one I will be spending the night with—and I don't feel bad about it. Not at all.

I smile and thank him, shooting him one last sly smile as I leave, and return to my desk to wait.

I wait and wait and wait until the clock nears 4 p.m., the time he leaves. I've busied the time with menial tasks, mindless banter with coworkers, and a trip to the liquor store. My pressing project is still not complete, let alone started, but like I said, it will get done.

Has he left? I wonder, looking at the clock and thinking of an excuse to go by his office again without making it look obvious, but then my phone buzzes.

I want to go to Vegas, the text says.

Lol, I reply. *We should sometime! We hanging out tonight?*

I'm going, if you want to come, I'm leaving in 45.

I don't even think. I shut my computer off and begin to pack my things. I'm supposed to be here for another two hours, but I don't care, and I don't explain myself to anyone.

This is not me. I am a planner—I like to know what is happening, when, why, and how, far before it does, but Henry brings something out in me I have never known before. Something that says “no” to all of my normal instincts and makes me just want to be alive. He makes me abandon thoughts and reservations . . .

So, I go.

Before I even clock out, I am on the phone with him: “Yeah, I will go,” I say casually. “But I need to get my things together.”

“Well you better be ready in 45 minutes, because that’s when I am going.”

“I need time to pack,” I protest.

“You can get stuff there.”

Henry doesn’t take excuses; if I want to go, I’ll be ready when he says—and I am going.

“Okay,” I say. “See you then.”

Then begins a frantic rush as I contemplate all I will need to do in less than an hour—get back to my house, pack, and, most importantly, go to the liquor store, again—because it’s a long drive to Vegas.

I call my mother and inform her of my plans, feigning that the trip is work-related. I think I even try to convince myself of this as I try to arrange for her to keep Hayden, my five-year-old son, longer so I can make this happen. By her tone, it’s clear she doesn’t believe me, but it doesn’t matter.

I mute the phone as I purchase two small bottles of whiskey, and by the time I am home I have downed a quarter of one.

I pack the essentials first—the two bottles I just bought and my pills. I then hurriedly create a pile of dresses, undergarments, shoes, and other items I think will be appropriate for the trip, but I have resigned myself to the idea of “I’ll just get what I need there.”

Before I know it, my knight in his shining Cadillac has arrived and I realize that I am not prepared whatsoever. Yet as I shuffle with my bags to the car and he steps out and looks at me, any misgivings and tension disappears.

He’s here, I’m here, and we’re going—to hell with the rest of them.

We drive away from it all and music washes over my ears. I am entranced with him and this moment and then it all becomes dark—I sleep.

When I awake, it is to the glimmering of bright lights and a valet.

“Come on, Hannah,” Henry says, irritation seething in his tone.

We’re here? I wonder. How could I have possibly slept through the entire ride? But the pounding in my head gives me the answer I need.

Disoriented, I try to collect myself as quick as possible, but I practically fall out of the car as I try to figure out what

hotel we are at. By some miracle, he is completely distracted talking to the valet and doesn't see the calamity that is me.

I begin to multitask—unloading my bags from the car and slipping one of the whiskey bottles into my purse.

The next several minutes feel like a disaster and I am met with his singular impatience and infuriation—the feeling of dread and panic it instills in me is almost as powerful as the ecstasy he can evoke from me. Yet like it always does, in a moment it is washed away.

We are suddenly walking through the lobby, the tautness between us relinquishing by the second, and we are heading exactly where I need to go—the bar.

He lights both of us a cigarette as I impatiently wait for our drinks; when they come I exchange him his drink for a smoke and we clink our plastic cups to absolutely nothing at all, other than the fact that we together, here, free from it all—at least for now.

I inhale cigarette smoke between sips of bourbon and feel everything melt away as I look at him with complete reverence and he looks back at me with his signature smile—there is nothing perfect or normal about this, but it is mine, and for this time, he is mine and I feel like the most

important person in the room.

“Ready?” Henry asks.

And I nod, I am ready for absolutely anything.

Tiger Stripes