







**T**HIS FAIRY TALE begins in 1968 during a garbage strike. In February New York City's sanitation workers refused to pick up trash for eight straight days. One hundred thousand tons of garbage filled the sidewalks, spilled into the streets. Rats ran laps alongside morning joggers. Rubbish fires boiled the air. The five boroughs had been given up for dead. Still, there was some cracked magic in the air because that was when Lillian and Brian met. Each had journeyed from far-flung lands to find one another in Queens. Neither could've guessed the wildness that falling in love would unleash.

Lillian Kagwa emigrated from Uganda while Brian West arrived from the only slightly less foreign territory of Syracuse. This daughter of East Africa and son of upstate New York met at a cut-rate modeling agency on Northern Boulevard. Neither was a client.

The week of the garbage strike Lillian got hired as a secretary at the agency, greeting guests at the front desk. A pleasant sight for folks strolling sidewalks saddled with week-old waste. Brian, a parole officer, had been paying occasional visits to the agency's founder, Pavel Aresenyev, one of his parolees, who'd spent four years in prison for fraud. Brian didn't believe Pavel had gone legit. But that week Brian became focused less on Mr. Aresenyev and more on the new secretary who greeted him when he

arrived. Meeting her felt like finding a rose growing in a landfill. Brian dropped by the modeling agency four times that week.

Despite his immediate attraction, Brian had a habit of mispronouncing Lillian Kagwa's last name, and Lillian kept mistaking Brian for other white men. Hardly kismet. Still Brian West—short, stocky, and persistent—simply wouldn't quit. And on the days when he didn't show up, Lillian, to her own surprise, found she missed him.

Lillian Kagwa had come from Jinja, the second-largest city in Uganda, where she'd lived through the country's emancipation from Britain and its eventual homegrown rule by Milton Obote. Obote used the army and his secret police, the General Service Unit, to rule the land. They spread wickedness wherever they went.

In 1967 Lillian and three cousins were traveling to the capital, Kampala, when they were pulled over by three men claiming to be agents of the GSU. The four cousins sat quietly as the agents inspected their identification, then demanded the only male cousin—Arthur—come out and open the trunk. Arthur didn't want to leave Lillian and his sisters and hesitated. In that moment, one agent leaned in and casually shot Arthur in the stomach.

Lillian and her cousins were temporarily deafened by the sound, blinded by the muzzle flash, but Lillian still sensed the agent who'd fired the gun pawing inside the car to pull out the keys. Lillian, at the wheel, shifted the car into drive and shot off before her senses had returned to her, weaving across the two-lane road like a drunk. The agents fired at the car but couldn't pursue it; their own vehicle had run out of gas. They'd set up the checkpoint to steal a suitable vehicle and would have to wait for another.

Lillian reached Kampala in half an hour, speeding the whole way. Arthur died long before that. An incident like this hardly counted as newsworthy. Uganda, as a whole, was going buckwild, and Lillian Kagwa wanted out. One year later Lillian secured a visa to the United States.

In 1968 Lillian came to New York. She was twenty-five and knew no one, but because of Uganda's British rule, she already spoke the king's English, and this made her transition easier. One of the reasons Mr. Arsenyev hired her at the modeling agency was because her command of

English was so much better than his. She made the business sound serious, legitimate, though Brian West's suspicions were right: the whole thing was a scam. Lillian didn't know this when she accepted the work. All she knew was the job paid twice the state minimum wage, three bucks an hour. Back in Uganda, she hadn't been able to find work of any kind, so she cherished the gig. And what was a garbage strike compared with state-sanctioned murder?

The agency, Glamour Time, was run out of a windowless second-floor office near Queensboro Plaza, remote from any hub of high fashion but centrally located for soaking the aspiring models of working-class Queens. Potential clients could join the agency as long as they had headshots. Luckily, Mr. Aresenyev had a small studio right there at the agency and could snap the shots himself for a fee. For certain young women, he offered to take the shots after hours, just the two of them. The streets of New York were overrun with uncollected garbage, but Glamour Time carried its own stink. The only honest aspect of the business was the East African woman answering phones out front.

Mr. Aresenyev's business might've run just fine for quite a while, soaking hopeful young women for years, except his damn parole officer had made the front office into his second home. How were you going to run a decent fraud when a cop was stopping by every other morning? Brian West was bad for business. And since he was smitten with Lillian that meant Lillian Kagwa was bad for business. So Mr. Aresenyev fired her. Not the smartest plan, but Mr. Aresenyev wasn't bright. Now Brian pursued Pavel relentlessly, an Inspector Javert from Onondaga County. Charging for the headshots wasn't illegal, but running a photo studio without a permit was enough to count as a violation of parole. Pavel Aresenyev went back to jail. Brian West got a commendation. Lillian Kagwa needed a new job.

She worked as an administrative secretary at a law firm in midtown Manhattan. The new job paid less. She moved into a smaller apartment. She cut off all communications with Brian. He'd cost her a good job, and the commute to midtown added a half hour of travel time each way, so no, she did not want to get dinner and a movie with Brian, thank you. Anyway, she was young, and it was New York City, where a lot more fun was to be

had than back in Jinja. They met in 1968 but didn't go on their first real date until eight years later.

Brian West gave Lillian room, backed off by a borough; he rented a place on Staten Island, but he couldn't stop thinking of her. Why? What was it about Lillian? He couldn't quite explain. It was as if she'd cast a spell.

Brian West had been the only child of two wildly unromantic drunks. At twelve Brian had a job selling candy at the Elmwood Theatre. He made the mistake of proudly displaying his earnings to his father, Frank. He expected a pat on the shoulder, words of congratulations; instead the boy endured a strong-arm robbery right in his own living room. His dad bought a case of Genesee beer with the money. Mom and Dad finished it before bedtime. A household like that will either break you or toughen you up. Maybe both. What was waiting on a woman to forgive you compared with having your father beat you up and steal your first paycheck?

Late in 1976 it finally happened. Brian West and Lillian Kagwa went on a date. They'd both been twenty-five when they first met during the week of the garbage strike, but now they were thirty-three. Lillian had met a lot of men during those intervening years, and Brian benefited from the comparison. He worked hard, didn't drink, saved his money, and paid his debts. Funny how much she valued such qualities now. The only hiccup came at dinner, when Brian talked about how much he wanted children, the chance to be a husband and a father. As soon as he'd seen her at Glamour Time he'd sensed she would be a wonderful mother. When he finished talking she reminded him, gently, that this was their first date. Maybe they could wait to make wedding plans until after the movie at least? To Brian's credit, he didn't act wounded or angry—he laughed. He didn't know it, but it was at this moment that Lillian truly fell for him.

He took her to see *Rocky*. It wouldn't have been Lillian's choice, but halfway through the movie, she started to enjoy herself. She even saw herself on the screen. A fierce dreamer. That's what this movie was about. And wasn't that her? She liked to think so. Maybe that was why Brian brought her to see this picture. To show her something about himself that he could never put into words. He'd told her the story of being robbed by

his father, and she'd told him about Arthur getting gutshot in the car, and now here they both were in a darkened Times Square theater. Together. A pair of survivors. It seemed so unlikely—all the life that had led them here—as improbable as myth. In the dark she held his hand. Though they wouldn't have sex for another three hours, it would be accurate to say their first child—their only child—was conceived right then. A thought, an idea, a shared dream; parenthood is a story two people start telling together.

By April 1977 Lillian was showing. Brian found them a two-bedroom apartment in Jackson Heights. Their son came in September. Brian thought it would be weird to name a half-black kid Rocky, so instead they named him Apollo. Brian liked to carry the newborn in the crook of one arm, cooing to him, “You are the god, Apollo. Good night, my little sun.” And they lived happily ever after. At least for a few years.

By Apollo's fourth birthday Brian West was gone.

Brian hadn't run off with another woman or skipped town to move back to Syracuse. The man might as well have been erased from existence. He couldn't be found because he'd left no trail, neither breadcrumbs nor credit card receipts. Gone. Disappeared. Vanished.

When Apollo was born, Brian and Lillian thought they'd reached the end of the story, but they'd been wrong. The wildness had only begun.



**R**IGHT AFTER BRIAN went missing, the boy began having a recurring dream. Since he was only four, Lillian couldn't make much sense of the details. Most of it came in the long hurried babble of a scared child in the night, but she pieced it together. There was a man knocking at the front door. When Apollo unlocked it, the man pushed his way in. He knelt down in front of Apollo. He had a face, but he took off that face. The face underneath was the face of his daddy. Brian West opened his mouth, and a cloud spilled from his mouth. Apollo watched the fog roll out from his father's throat and began to cry. The mist filled the apartment until the boy could hardly see. His daddy picked him up. Now the sound of rushing water, loud as a waterfall, filled the apartment. Apollo's father carried him through the fog. His father finally spoke to him. Right about then Apollo would wake up screaming.

This nightmare came to the kid night after night for weeks. Apollo no longer wanted to sleep, and Lillian couldn't shut her eyes because she knew, at some point, her four-year-old boy would be in terror.

*You're coming with me.*

That's what Brian told Apollo in the dream.

While trying to console him, Lillian asked why those words made him wake with such fear. His answer cut her down through flesh and bone. It wasn't fear that made him cry out. It was longing.



“Why didn’t he take me with him?” Apollo said.

Eventually the nightmare passed, or at least, Apollo stopped talking about it. This let life reset to its new normal: Lillian, a single mother who worked full time, taking classes on Saturdays to become a legal secretary, and raising her child alone, a life both grueling and rewarding. Apollo, a bookish child, growing up to be self-contained and watchful.

They stumbled along like this for eight more years. By the time Apollo turned twelve, they never spoke of Brian West and neither expected to make him a topic of conversation for the rest of their days, but then one afternoon Apollo received a message from the man. A gift.



**T**HIS WAS IN the fall of 1989, and Apollo Kagwa was a junior high school student at IS 237 in Flushing. With Brian gone Lillian reverted to her maiden name and she damn sure did the same for her son. He became a Kagwa by legal decree. They erased the West from their lives.

Even a self-contained and watchful kid like Apollo could end up running with a crew. He had two best friends and did well in American history with Mr. Perrault. Lillian had passed her classes to become a legal secretary and found a better job at a law firm in midtown Manhattan. But the work had her keeping even longer hours, not getting home until eight o'clock sometimes. *Latchkey kid* was the term. Adults lamented this new reality on the *Donahue* show. They scolded working mothers who were damaging their poor kids by their need to make a living.

Apollo spent that afternoon as kids do when they don't have to be home right away: dipping into the nearby diner to play a few quarters' worth of Galaga, then off to the bodega for quarter waters and chips, looping around the corner to Colden Street, where a game of running bases had popped off. He played for an hour or three, then headed upstairs. It had been—in all honesty—a day or two since he'd had a shower,

and the game worked up a funk even he couldn't ignore. Apollo turned on the shower and had stripped halfway down when he heard heavy knocking coming from the far end of the apartment. When he ignored it—probably just a neighbor looking for his mom—the pounding only got louder. The hot water in the shower started to form steam. When Apollo walked out of the bathroom, it looked as if he'd stepped out of a cloud.

He'd made it halfway across the apartment before a prickly feeling ran across his neck. The knocking at the door continued, but he looked behind him to find the steam in the bathroom flowing out into the hall, as if it was following him. Apollo felt woozy just then. As if, without knowing it, he'd taken a step into someone's dream. His own dream. He felt jolted by the realization. He'd had this dream, night after night, when he was young. How young? Three or four? There had been knocking at the door, and the sound of running water, the apartment dense with fog and . . .

He ran for the front door. As soon as he got close, the knocking stopped abruptly.

"Wait for me," he whispered. He felt stupid when he said it. Even stupider when he repeated it.

His father was not on the other side of the door. His father was not on the other side of the door. His father was not.

And still Apollo snapped the locks open. He felt as if he was shrinking. How had he opened the door in that dream? How had he reached the top lock when he was only a small child? Anything was possible in a dream. How about now then? Maybe he'd fallen asleep in the bathroom, sitting in the tub, and some random firing of electricity in his brain had helped this fantasy resurface. Apollo decided not to care. There was a certain freedom in knowing you were in a dream. If nothing else, he might open the door and see his father and be reminded of the man's features. He couldn't remember them anymore. But when he opened the door, his father wasn't there.

Instead a box sat on the threshold.

Apollo leaned out, as if he'd catch a glimpse of his dream father, maybe

farther down the hall. Nobody there. He looked back down at the box. Heavy cardboard, one word written on the lid in black marker.

*Improbabilia.*

Apollo went down on a knee. He picked up the box—it wasn't heavy—and brought it inside with him. The contents of the box shifted and thumped. He sat on the carpet in the living room. He opened the lid.



“**T**HAT WAS YOUR father’s box,” Lillian said.

Apollo didn’t notice the sun had set, didn’t hear his mother enter the apartment. It was only when she touched the back of his neck that he became aware of anything else at all.

She dropped her purse and crouched beside him. “Where did you find all this?” she asked.

“Someone left it at the door,” he said.

Apollo had spread the contents out on the living room carpet. A pair of movie ticket stubs, the headshot of some young white woman, the rental agreement to an apartment in Jackson Heights, the bill for an overnight stay at a hotel on Ninth Avenue, right near Times Square, a small stack of receipts for takeout food, a marriage certificate for Brian West and Lillian Kagwa, and one children’s book.

“What are you talking about?” Lillian whispered as she scanned the collection. “My God,” she said even more softly.

Apollo turned to look at her, and she reared back, standing straight, trying to recover. “Tell me the truth,” she said. “Was this in my closet? Did you go through my things?”

Apollo pointed to the front door. “There was a lot of knocking. I thought—” He stopped himself. “I didn’t know who it was. I was about to take a shower.”

This was when Apollo registered the running water, still going. He got to his feet and sped to the bathroom. Because of the slow drain in their apartment, the tub had overflowed, and the bathroom floor showed puddles all over.

“Apollo!” Lillian shouted when she found the mess. She pushed past her son and turned off the water. She pulled towels down from the rack and laid them on the floor. “I have to go check with Mrs. Ortiz and make sure we didn’t leak through her ceiling.”

Despite this impossible box in the living room, there were some concerns no parent could ignore; for instance, did her son just cause a major accident for their downstairs neighbor, a kind old woman who used to babysit this thoughtless child? And how much might it cost her to fix Mrs. Ortiz’s ceiling?

Lillian left the bathroom, and Apollo followed her. On her way to the door, she glanced back to the box, the items on the carpet, and quickly returned to them. She leaned over and snatched up one piece of paper, turned, and left the apartment. Apollo returned to living room. Lillian had taken the receipt for the overnight stay near Times Square. She thought she was hiding something, but it didn’t matter. In the time that he’d been sitting there, he’d basically committed all of it to memory and tried to connect the items to the stories he knew about his mother and father. One of the things he hadn’t been sure of was the bit his mother just confirmed.

How could a man who held on to all these things just abandon his wife and child? And how had all this evidence ended up at Apollo’s front door? He looked at the lid of the box again and read the word etched across the top. *Improbabilia*.

His mother would have to explain what most of the items signified, but one seemed easier to grasp. The children’s book, *Outside Over There* by Maurice Sendak. Apollo opened it. He’d been hoping to find a special note, a dedication of some kind, from father to son, even just evidence of his dad’s handwriting. None of that, but the pages were well worn, the upper-right corner of each page faintly smudged, the spine of the book showed cracks. This wasn’t for display; this book had been read many times. Apollo imagined Brian West—maybe sitting on this very couch—

reading the book aloud to his child. Now he read the first page aloud to himself.

“When Papa was away at sea,” he began.

His mother wasn't a reader. For all her good qualities, this just wasn't one of them. Lillian worked like a beast, and at night she had the energy to sit with him and watch television, that's all. Many nights she fell asleep right there. Apollo didn't mind. But once she'd knocked out, he'd take off her shoes, slip off her wig, turn off the television, and go into his room to read. He'd been like this ever since he could sound out words. The book in his hand allowed him to imagine there was a time when he wasn't the only reader in the home. He liked to believe he'd inherited a taste for texts. Maybe this book had been only the first of many his father planned to share. Apollo's appetite for reading only grew after he found the box.

Apollo read in bed and while using the bathroom. He took books to the park. He read paperbacks while he played right field. He lost books, spilled soda on them, and splotches of melted chocolate fingerprints appeared inside. Even the kindest librarians had to start charging replacement fees. So Lillian began a practice of bringing books and magazines home from her law office. *Reader's Digest* and *People*, *Consumer Reports* and *Bon Appétit*. He went through all of them and still wanted more. She befriended secretaries on other floors of the building and even convinced a few to start subscribing to magazines that differed from the ones at her firm. A dentist's office across the street kept mass-market paperbacks for its clients, and she convinced the woman at the front desk to give the old copies to her rather than throw them away. These were romances and thrillers, mostly; true crime thrived. Lillian Kagwa didn't vet the volumes, just plopped them into a plastic bag and took them home on the 7 train. So Apollo read Ann Rule's *The Stranger Beside Me*, *The Wayward Heiress* by Blanche Chenier, and *Dragon* by Clive Cussler when he was way too young to understand them. Nevertheless, he finished each one. Unsupervised reading is a blessing for a certain kind of child.

Lillian didn't fully grasp the kind of child her son was until a Saturday in early October when their neighbor, Mrs. Ortiz from downstairs, came to the apartment. Mrs. Ortiz was there to see not Lillian but her son. Lil-

lian's immediate guess was that Apollo had done something wrong, but Mrs. Ortiz only waved a dollar bill in the air saying Apollo had promised her the issue of *People* magazine with that sweet Julia Roberts girl on the cover, but he hadn't come by with it yet. After a few minutes Lillian sorted through her confusion, and consternation, to understand that her son had been selling off the books and magazines she'd been bringing home. She felt so aggravated that she went into Apollo's room, found the issue amid one of the stacks on the floor, and gave it to Mrs. Ortiz for free. She tried to throw in a more recent issue with Barbara Bush on the cover, but Mrs. Ortiz didn't know who that was.

Apollo returned home right around sundown. New York had been going through a warm spell so the day had been only in the mid-seventies. He and his friends had been at Flushing Meadows Park playing two-hand touch until the temperature finally cooled. He showed up grimy but glowing. Lillian let him find her in the kitchen. She'd spent the late afternoon putting all the magazines and mass-market paperbacks into garbage bags. Those bags were on the small kitchen table instead of dinner. Before Apollo could ask why, Lillian told him about the visit from Mrs. Ortiz.

"I went through the trouble of getting those things for you because I thought you were going to read them," Lillian said. Now she lifted one bag, grunting with the weight. "But if not, we can just drop all these down to the incinerator."

Apollo untied one of the bags and peeked inside. "I do read them," he said. "All of them. But after I'm done, what should I do?"

"Throw them away, Apollo. What else?" She tied the bag closed again.

"But Mrs. Ortiz likes reading *People*, so . . ."

"So why not charge an old woman?"

"She pays me a quarter. Cover price is \$1.95. That's a great deal for her, and she doesn't care if it's a few weeks old. What's wrong with that?"

Lillian opened her mouth to answer him but found she didn't have a ready reply. She scanned the bags. "You sell all of it?"

"The stuff I can't sell, I throw away, but I do pretty good around the neighborhood."

"You're twelve," Lillian said, sitting down with a plop. "Where did you learn to do this?"



Apollo remained silent a moment, then smiled widely. “You, Mom. I learned it by watching you.”

“What does that mean?”

“You work so hard. I see that. And I’m your son. It’s in my blood.”

Lillian pointed to the chair beside her, and Apollo sat there. She watched him for a long count.

“If you’re going to run a business, you should have business cards,” she said. “Your name should be on them, and a phone number. I guess we could put the home phone there. I’ll get them made for you. I can get them for free through my office.”

Lillian rose from her chair and returned a moment later with a sheet of typing paper and a pen. She drew a large rectangle and scribbled in a few lines:

*Apollo Kagwa*  
*Used Books & Magazines*

She crossed out that second line and wrote in another.

*Affordable Books & Magazines.*

Under that she wrote their phone number.

Then she set the tip of her pen at the top of the rectangle, right above Apollo’s name. “You’ll need a name for the business.” She waited on him, pen poised.

He slipped the pen from her hand and wrote it in himself.

*Improbabilia.*



**A** POLLO KAGWA MIGHT'VE gone to college if it wasn't for a man named Carlton Lake. Apollo was a senior at John Bowne High School, and based on his grades, he qualified as absolutely average. Bs and Cs straight down the report card. It had been that way since ninth grade. A surprise to some of his teachers since the kid could be counted on for brains and even study, but school wasn't his true enthusiasm. All Apollo Kagwa cared about was his business.

By the age of seventeen, he'd turned Improbabilia into a thriving concern. The kid was known in Queens, Manhattan, and the Bronx. Rare and used book dealers learned of him because he would call a shop cold and ask if he could stop by, a fellow dealer who happened to be near and wanted to make a courtesy visit. Sure, they'd say, baffled by the decorum. These guys weren't generally known for their Emily Post. And soon enough some fifteen-year-old black kid clomps in, he's got a pack on his back that would make a mule buckle, and he introduces himself as Apollo. The kid's glasses are so large, they should have windshield wipers.

He enters their stores and tries selling off weathered issues of magazines like *The Connoisseur* and *Highlights*. The combination of entrepreneurial spirit and absolute naïveté was enough to make some of those old booksellers fall hard for that fifteen-year-old. Through them he got the

education he craved. They taught him how to value a book, how to navigate estate sales, and the best spots to set up a table at antique shows.

Other booksellers were far less welcoming. When he shared his stock, trying to sell, they accused him of having stolen the merchandise. Maybe he'd broken into a storefront and looted whatever he could. A few stores—the higher-end spots in Manhattan—had buzzer entry at the doors. This was the era of Bernhard Goetz shooting black boys on the subway and many white folks in the city cheering him on. Every kid with excess melanin became a superpredator, even a black boy with glasses and a backpack full of books. He might be standing at the entrance for fifteen minutes while the clerks pretended not to notice him.

To make things worse, Apollo would find himself wondering if he actually was frightening, a monster, the kind that would drive his own father away. That conviction flared brightest at moments like this, when the world seemed to corroborate his monstrousness. If he wasn't careful, he'd be consumed. To endure these humiliations, these supernovas of self-loathing, Apollo dreamed up a mantra—or maybe the words came to him from some old memory—one he'd repeat to himself while he stood there being judged. *I am the god, Apollo. I am the god, Apollo. I am the god, Apollo.* He'd chant it enough that he soon felt downright divine. But that didn't mean those store owners let him in.

In 1995, senior year of high school, he got accepted to Queens College, but the summer before school started, one of the dealers who mentored Apollo gave him his graduation gift, *Confessions of a Literary Archaeologist* by a man named Carlton Lake.

Lake gives a history of his life as a collector of rare and valuable books, manuscripts, music scores, and even letters from the era of Napoleon. While the collector, and his collection, apparently became quite famous, the early part of the book details how he came to love these materials. He'd been a big reader and browser of secondhand bookstores. When it came time to start truly collecting books, the kind that cost more than a couple of quarters, Lake mentions he was “abetted by an indulgent grandmother.” In other words, Grandma bankrolled him. And quickly enough Carlton Lake was collecting the great nineteenth-century French poets:

Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé. Soon he had his moment of revelation, “illumination” he calls it, when he made his first great purchase at an auction in New York. He bought a copy of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal—Flowers of Evil*—and inside found corrections written in the margins by Baudelaire himself. With this find, he became a literary archaeologist. For Lake this was the start of his true calling. He had become a book man.

By the time Apollo Kagwa finished reading that anecdote, he knew he wouldn’t be attending Queens College in the fall. Though he didn’t have a grandmother bankrolling his purchases, and despite the reality that he didn’t yet know the difference between Baudelaire and Beatrix Potter, he still felt sure he was also a book man. If Carlton Lake could do this shit why couldn’t he? The son of two fierce dreamers had become one, too.



“ESTATE SALE” SOUNDS posh, but for Apollo it might mean traveling all the way to New Rochelle to inspect one garbage bag full of water-damaged books in the basement of some Victorian Colonial. Then again he might find four bookshelves of perfectly preserved first editions at a townhouse in Sugar Hill. The suspense, the surprise, mattered nearly as much as the profit.

Apollo had found his calling early, but his first great find in the field—his Baudelaire moment—didn’t happen till he was thirty-four. He’d moved out of Lillian’s apartment at nineteen and found a studio in Jackson Heights, the place so crammed with books he hardly had room for a twin bed. He crossed the country on his book hunts. Occasionally he looked up from the frontispieces and margins to take in the sights, date a woman, but after a few good moments he always got back to work.

The big day, though, was at an estate sale in the basement of a Bronx apartment building, forty-two containers of books—from sneaker boxes to an old orange milk crate scavenged from a supermarket. In them were some of the rarest books on magic and the occult that Apollo had ever seen. A loving couple, Mr. and Mrs. D’Agostino, died within months of each other and left behind a collection that crept out their four children and eleven grandchildren. He found a snapshot of the old duo tucked in the pages of a grimoire. They looked like the old man and wife from

that movie *Up*, but this version of Carl and Ellie Fredrickson had been stockpiling volumes of sorcery. The homely photo and the otherworldly collection were so incongruous, Apollo had to fight hard not to laugh in front of the family.

He made a lowball offer right there, and because he'd been the first dealer willing to come out to the South Bronx, he got the sale. He rented a van that afternoon and took the stuff home. It took a week to catalog everything and upload the relevant info for the books. As he leafed through them, he found scribbled notes here and there in the margins, in two different kinds of handwriting.

As he examined a third edition folio of a lighthearted little book called *Witch Hunter Manual of the Blood Council*, out slipped a postcard addressed to the D'Agostinos. The plain postcard hadn't yellowed as much as he would've expected since the date stamped on it read 1945. The addresser's name, his signature absolutely clear, was Aleister Crowley. A quick check online verified Crowley had been a famed occultist in the early 1900s, called "the wickedest man in history." Accused of Satanism. A recreational drug user and sexual adventurer back when such a thing was scandalous rather than just a part of one's online dating profile. Ozzy Osbourne wrote a song about the guy in 1981. And apparently Domenico and Eliana D'Agostino had received a postcard from him. Apollo read Aleister Crowley's note to the couple.

*Some men are born sodomites, some achieve sodomy, and some have sodomy thrust upon them.*

*Thinking of you both.*

Well, how did you like that? The D'Agostinos had been certified freaks!

Even before the postcard this haul had been Apollo's best. Now, if he could authenticate the card, this find could become legendary. Carlton Lake got Baudelaire's corrected texts; Apollo Kagwa got a horny postcard from Aleister Crowley. He read the card again and laughed. He held it up to share the joke with someone else—but he sat alone in the living room. The find of his life, and no one there to share the news. Now he felt surprised, overcome, with a different emotion.

Apollo Kagwa felt fucking lonely.

He looked again at the books he'd bought from the family; he scanned

the postcard. Mr. and Mrs. D'Agostino had been up to some wild stuff, it seemed, but the two of them had been on their occult adventure together. The handwriting in the margins, two different styles, suggested husband and wife both spent time studying these tomes, exchanging marginalia, an ongoing conversation that spanned decades. Apollo suddenly understood all these books as more than just an excellent payday. They were the evidence of two lives intertwined.

At three in the morning, in his one-bedroom apartment, surrounded by a small library of occult texts, Apollo Kagwa, thirty-four years old, realized his biological clock had gone off.