

A Million Dollars

Athena stared out the tinted window, elbow propped on the door, biting her fingernails. She was sitting in the driver's seat of her uncle's shitty, beige hand-me-down Honda Accord. The soft wind in the warm summer night seemed like things would flow smoothly for the long day ahead, but Athena was careful to stay wary. There was too much at stake to be optimistic just yet.

She and her partner Charles were in Bronze Heights. Athena gaped at the clean streets, trash-free with no drugged-out people crashed out, muttering angrily to whatever demons haunted their realities. There was a pickleball court in the middle of a quad surrounded by tall, towering buildings. The court connected to an outdoor seating area with picnic tables and food trucks, from which the dark blue bay met a clear, cloudless night sky peaking through the clutter of modern architecture. It was Athena's first time in this part of the city and she couldn't help but envy the calmness. What worries would one have living here? What heinous thoughts could possibly intrude?

Hidden within a line of parallel parked cars on a street with evenly-distanced plots of geometrically-shaped topiary, they waited across the street from a cylindrical fifty-something floor building adorned by different shades of glass blue. The bow windows, protruding in a new-age-y way, connected diagonally to a neighboring one, winding infinitely into itself from floor to floor, kind of like one of those optical illusion pictures.

Athena tried to follow the pattern of the swirled windows. It was almost mesmerizing trying to find where they started and stopped, each pattern allowing her to indulge in the mindlessness of fantasy as she began to imagine herself working in this kind of building. She probably could have had a chance if she had been born as the daughter of a more

financially-stable family, instead of the firstborn, old-enough-to-be-put-to-work daughter of a struggling single mom working 3 jobs barely making ends meet. What would it have been like to worry about a passive aggressive manager, instead of making sure her two kid siblings had something to eat for the day?

“Do you see her?” Charles asked, eyes darting, thumb fiddling with his gun’s safety. *Click. Click. Click.* Out of the corner of her eye, Athena became anxious by the second that he might fumble and accidentally fire.

“Not yet.” Athena had to pull her eyes away from the swirls to check if their target had emerged.

Athena and Charles were two Jacks, contractually hired by an unidentified organization that took requests from people willing to pay large sums of money to get a certain job done. Athena had only worked with two other Jacks before meeting Charles for this job, but based on what she saw and heard from them, Jacks were typically made of those with criminal experience but no record, who knew how to cut corners of the law and get away with it. Most of them were smooth-talking, and often knew how to use seduction to their advantage. Some of them could pick locks of insanely intricate safes, some of them were incredible shots, and some of them knew how to trail a person without ever getting caught. All of them were young with very little to lose. The jobs were usually harmless enough. There were frequent cases of stealing documents and stalking an ex. Sometimes, there would be kidnappings or intimidation of some sort. Rarely were these jobs of a significantly heartless nature, but Athena thought it must happen. Lurking around somewhere, there were rumored to be at least a few of those depraved customers who requested those kinds of jobs and some desperate, desensitized Jacks willing to do them.

Athena's contract as a Jack began with a sleek black-suited man, who came in a dark luxury limousine. It was past midnight and she was returning home from her late-night shift at the Chicken Crunch. She made practically nothing as a fryer, but she had amassed a clientele at work selling Cannons. It wasn't that hard to Athena to appeal the nitrous-oxide drug to other minimum wage workers dying to numb themselves from the recurring interactions with customers who tried to cut in front of the drive-thru line or who yelled about ranch dips or who kept telling them to re-insert their EBT cards when it had shown a zero balance for the 3rd time. But, when needed, she was great at painting a word picture to the hesitant first-time user of the floating feeling that lifted someone sky-high away from life's unending tribulations, and she knew in those moments that she could get anyone to do anything if she tried hard enough.

When she was approached in the dark alleyway three blocks away from her house, her body tightened but she kept walking. *Don't look suspicious*, Athena repeated to herself as she tried to make her movements flow, conscious of the small clanging noises made by the box of metal cartridges she kept in the backpack hanging from her shoulder. Fearing that it was a competitor who didn't want her selling in the neighborhood, she checked inside her pocket for her pepper spray as she picked up her pace. Perhaps sensing her paranoia, the man opened the door, stepped out onto the sidewalk, and called out "Athena Bronson? Your services are requested. Please take a look at this offer."

He held out a contract on a tablet screen that read at the top 'If the Jack will not accept the agreement, please submit to a Memory Reduction Procedure. If the Jack will accept the agreement, please take one handgun, one phone, and one pack of cigarettes.' Athena hadn't expected to get a job offer that night. How did they know her name? Were they keeping tabs on

her? She reached out her hand, then stopped. Her eyes narrowed as she searched behind the man's dark sunglasses, for any indication of tricks or manipulation.

"Who do you work for?" She began, voice trembling.

"I am not at liberty to say exactly. They are an organization that has been watching you for some time and they're very impressed with the small business you've created with the Cannons. They recognize your resourcefulness and your well-spokenness and they would love to work with you."

"What does that mean?"

"Please read the contract for more information."

Still shaking and unsure whether she was going to be arrested or assaulted, Athena took the tablet and skimmed through, ensuring that one hand stayed in her pocket, thumb firmly placed on the plastic sliding lock of her pepper spray.

「JACK OF ALL TRADES AGREEMENT.

ATHENA BRONSON, JACK OF ALL TRADES, WILL ACCEPT BURNER PHONE.

OVERSEER WILL CONTACT JACK WITH A JOB THROUGH ACCEPTED PHONE. ALL

DETAILS NECESSARY TO EACH JOB WILL BE SENT TO PHONE. UNDER NO

CIRCUMSTANCE MAY THE JACK REFUSE A JOB, ASK QUESTIONS, OR DISCLOSE

DETAILS OF CONTRACT OR ANY ENSUING JOB TO ANYONE. IF THE JACK

COMPLETES 3 JOBS SUCCESSFULLY, THE ORGANIZATION WILL PAY 1 MILLION

DOLLARS IN CASH WITH OPTION TO RENEW CONTRACT.」

There was more on the contract that Jacks were expected to exhibit, but she stopped reading after this point. A million dollars. A *million* dollars. Athena couldn't even wrap her head around how much money that was. What she could do with that money. This was obviously the

chance of a lifetime. She stood there, feet aching and her clothes smelling like frying oil. She looked at the man in his designer suit, so out of place in front of the near-crumbling buildings with its black mold-stained windows and large wall cracks. He was a beacon of hope, and it made her resolute in her acceptance. She took the pack of cigarettes, lit one, inhaled deeply, feeling the sweet permeation of the torrid smoke into her throat and lungs as she burned the inside of her left thigh with the tip: a promise to endure anything the job required and the mark of a contract signed.

Her first job happened a few weeks after that meeting. It was with a guy named John, who was a little more experienced than her. Her task was to distract a man who John and Athena assumed to be some sort of executive, while John's job was to locate and steal a letter with some sort of incriminating evidence of the client from his office. The man went to a hotel bar on Tuesdays with some fellow businessmen. They were all married, but these Tuesday meetings were a secret from their spouses—a night of bought women and fulfilled fantasies. The bar was a fancy one, with high ceilings studded with ornate, crystal chandeliers. The marble bar was long, and the shelves, almost equivalent in length, were abundant with expensive, rare alcohol.

Overseer had discreetly delivered a burgundy backless cocktail dress with classic black Louboutin heels for the occasion, a package sent to the appointed drop off spot for additional supplies the Jacks may need for a job. There was a velvet black box as well, protecting the elegant radiance of the diamond studded hoop earrings inside. As she put on her dress, her thoughts raced through her mind. The night might end in sex. Those were the lengths that Overseer told her to take if need be, if John's task took longer than expected. She shuddered at the thought of seeing the man in the picture on her phone naked. He was balding, his receding

hairline in the shape of a round M, accentuating his weak chin. He wore rectangular black-rimmed glasses, which didn't do anything to hide the beadiness of his eyes, revealing greed and an empty soul, and his smile was unsettling, the corners of his lips turned upwards, as if he was harboring a morbid secret. She imagined a suffocating stench of whiskey-infused breath and sausage-like, sweaty fingers unzipping her dress and she nearly wretched. Would he be gentle at all or was she prepared to see herself at the end of the night with her mascara smudged below her eyelids in a pitiful way, black and blue smeared across her body?

As Athena spiraled, she caught herself in the mirror, disguised as a young woman who did not want for anything. Her long, dark hair was curled glamorously, framing her still round face, and the glistening earrings peaked through. The deep red of her dress gave her an air of charisma and confidence, and if she just fixed the uncertainty in her eyes, she almost looked like somebody else entirely. In that moment, she realized how desperately she wanted to embody the woman looking back at her. She didn't want to just look like her; she wanted to be her. She would do anything—*anything*—to be her. This woman was a seductress, who did what needed to be done and came home with a large check. This woman rose above the needs of her body—it was only flesh; scars would heal. This woman feared no man—they were mere opportunities for bigger, more worthwhile dreams. The anxiety in her eyes turned to a hardened glint, and Athena wasted no time wondering if it was just fake, a mask that came with the dress. She thought instead of the heater in her apartment that wasn't working and the bone-chilling cold in the middle of January that didn't seem to subside even when wrapped up in the warmest blankets. She thought of the child services agent that began to check up on her siblings every few weeks, judging their small dingy apartment. She remembered that she was never one who cared much about self-dignity or morals anyway.

She waited at the long bar with a group of other immaculately dressed women, a martini in hand. They could see the entrance to the hotel from the vantage point of the bar stools. The men swaggered into the hotel rowdily, patting each other on the back, congratulating each other on some successful deal with booming voices. Their laughs echoed and their eyes flashed as they scoured which woman would be the reward for their hard work tonight. Like a pack of hyenas, they sauntered toward the bar and the women slapped on their most alluring smiles and approached them, getting into character. Athena saw her target for the night. He noticed her, too. He smirked and ordered a drink. She took a sip of her martini, got up, smoothed her dress, straightened her shoulders, and strutted towards him, leaving herself and her doubts behind entirely.

They went up to a suite. It had a living room area furnished with a wide gray leather couch and a bedroom with a California King and a clean, white bathroom. Ignoring all the logical places, he fucked her in the bathroom. He bent her over the cool granite next to the sink, his pants pooled at his ankles. She wondered if her skull would shatter against the hardness of the counter with the amount of force he was pushing her head into it. He didn't use a condom. She was sixteen years old.

Afterwards, she and John rendezvoused at a designated warehouse several streets away from the hotel. She had gotten there first. Parts of her dress were ripped, but she was too tired, too raw to be ashamed. She plopped down on the cold cement floor and lit a cigarette. The scar branded in her left inner thigh seemed to tingle as she questioned whether she should regret her all too quick acceptance of exploitation. A truck pulled up to the supply drop-off and she heard John jump down and trudge towards her, holding the letter. He saw the state she was in and wordlessly sat down next to her, not knowing what to do or say.

“Overseer texted me to leave the letter in a briefcase on shelf number 23.” Athena said, eyes closed.

“Right.”

A moment of quiet passed between the two before John rose. As he made a step towards the direction of the shelves, Athena stopped him.

“How do you feel?”

“Not as bad as you look, but not great.”

Athena chuckled. “Tell me about it.”

John turned towards her and crouched down to her eye level. “It’ll be worth it. Let’s believe that it will be.”

Athena stared at John, wondering if he meant it when they had crossed a line they could never return from. John took a deep breath.

“I have a son. Had him last year. He’s still a baby. Just starting to walk. He has this smile that breaks my heart because it’s so trusting. He knows nothing, but he knows I’d protect him with everything I have. It’s just me and him and money’s a little tight. I once robbed a grocery store just to make rent. Me and two of my buddies with fake guns and ski masks. I think our voices were shaking but hey, we never got caught and I made it through another month.” He shook his head and looked down at the letter. “I would do the most depraved shit for the organization. I would blacken my entire soul if it means my son gets to be somewhere where he can be a normal kid for as long as he can. I don’t need to think about anything else. Yeah, it sucks and I feel less human now, and you know what, I know this just means we’ll keep enabling the organization to abuse their power with us Jacks and people like us that don’t have the basic means to survive, but I don’t even care about that. I have to do this.”

Something about John's words filled Athena's heart with peace. Yes, the only thing that really mattered was the money and its potential. Bravened by his vulnerability, Athena responded. "I think I know what you mean. I have 2 younger siblings. Emma and Max. They're 6 and 8. I remember when they were both learning to walk, but it's easy to forget that it wasn't too long ago. They're so young but they've already had to grow up so fast. Probably because my mom's a single parent too. She's the most hardworking person I know but she's never around the house and me and my siblings learned quickly that we had to take care of ourselves. When I'm not there, Max knows it's his job to wash himself and his sister up and go to sleep at the end of the night." Athena wryly smiled. "He even cooks a simple meal for them when nothing else is available. Kids like your son and my siblings... They don't really get to be children, even though my mom is doing the best she can trying to give us what we need. I don't think I've ever seen her buy anything for herself. You know, one time, I saw her crying at the dining table holding a bunch of bills when she thought we were all asleep. I can't ever forget about that moment, and since then, I promised myself that I'd get us out of this hell. You're right. We have to do this."

It had been only a few months since that first job but it was surreal to think that she was only one job away from completing her contract. Her life would change soon. Athena glanced down at her burner phone and opened a text from Overseer with a picture of their target, a woman with shoulder-length brown hair and no outstanding physical features that made her particularly ugly or pretty. Overseer had given the Jacks minimal information, as they always did. *Follow the target home. Enter home. Wait for additional instructions.*

"There she is." Charles remarked, abruptly focused, pointing at their target walking down the wide steps of the building towards the sidewalk. Athena shifted the gears of her car and

carefully followed behind her. Her nerves shook as it always did before a job, but she had learned to take it as normal. She kept her mind on the money. First, she would buy a house. A big, modern looking one with wide tall doors, cream-colored walls, and a kitchen island. A house in that one up-and-coming suburban neighborhood in the mountains. Bustling with young wealthy families and luxury cars, yet poised in safety and comfort in every way. Palm Ranch, was it called? She had heard about the celebrities and businessmen and stay-at-home wine moms that kept HOA on their toes. She had heard about the horse trails weaved between the smooth roads and the large mansions that guided riders enjoying the brisk, relaxed air of early Saturday mornings. She would hire a private chef so that Max and Emma always had accessible healthy, hearty meals. She would retire her mom from working ever again and convince her to pick up golfing instead, get a membership at the local 18-hole country club, so she wouldn't be too bored. And Athena might go back to school. Maybe find a boyfriend there. Live a normal life.

The woman had stopped to press in a code at the metal box at the side of an entrance to a tall apartment building next to the bay. Athena had been driving a few paces behind her and Charles quickly tucked his gun at his hip under his belt, got out of the car, ran up to the door. In his sweetest, most proper voice bashfully said, "Sorry, Ma'am. I just moved into the building and I forgot the code. Can you remind me what it was?"

The woman scowled at him, and said "You really shouldn't be forgetting the code. It compromises the security of everyone in this building. Just this once, I'll tell you, but it better not happen again."

Charles put on his puppy-dog eyes and said, "I appreciate it and it won't happen again."

The woman leaned over and whispered in his ear.

Athena waited in the car until Charles texted her. *Unit 904, Entrance Code 0718*

Athena met Charles at the roof of the building. They sat there until exactly 2 AM. They went to the woman's apartment and Charles picked the lock. The two went quietly inside and stood in front of the door. Athena texted Overseer, her phone glaringly bright in the darkness. *We've entered the apartment.* Overseer responded. *Bring the target's daughter to the safe house.* Athena showed Charles the text and they looked at each other. Charles shrugged, but Athena began to have an unsettling feeling in her stomach. A child? What would the organization need with a child? The door had opened up to the living room and connected kitchen. They walked down the short hallway towards the rooms, Athena flashing her phone light at the doors. To the right of the short hallway, she saw a door with a pink cloud, the name SARAH in big letters in it. Athena tapped Charles, pointed to the cloud, and they went in. There was a little girl with blonde hair, holding tightly to a limp gray bunny plushie, laying on the bed in the middle of the room. The window right above the bed wasn't blindfolded or curtained, allowing the moonlight to shine on the peaceful girl, giving her an air of ethereal innocence. She couldn't have been older than Emma's age and Athena blinked back tears. This wasn't right. Why did a child have to get involved? Charles gave her the predetermined signal they came up with beforehand, communicating to her to grab the child while he immobilized her. There was a fire escape right out the kitchen window. They would run down this way to avoid the security guard in the building lobby. Athena nodded, took a deep breath. Palm Ranch, private chef, 18-hole golf course. She took coiled rope out of the small black backpack she had been carrying and handed it to Charles. She was sure he could feel her hands shaking. In one swift move, Athena put one arm around the thin frame of Sarah, pinning her arms to her torso, and lifted her up. As Sarah's eyes shot open in alarm, Athena pushed down on her mouth with her hand. Sarah's scream was

muffled. Charles quickly wrapped her small body in the ropes, paralyzing her arms and legs, and threw her over his shoulder. They ran to the kitchen window, opened it, and jumped onto the fire escape. Athena was about to jump when she looked behind her. There was no one. The blackness of the apartment seemed to conceal nothing in that moment.

They got to the safe house, away from the bay, the pickleball courts, and the large winding corporate building. They were near Athena's house now, in the safety of chaos. It was a small house tucked between a 7 eleven and a two-story apartment building. The safe house was furnished, but barely. It was a studio and the small space was making Athena feel claustrophobic. The melting plastic smell in the air didn't help. There was a thin light brown wooden dining table surrounded by four toy-like chairs. By the long wall, there was a stained brown couch and a small TV in front. The warm-toned yellow lights flickered. Charles had knocked Sarah out while they were running down the fire escape. Her screams, though muffled, were turning on lights in the building here and there. She was still unconscious and Charles took that moment to tie her to one of the dining chairs in the house. He had worried that it was wooden, concerned that she might be able to break through it somehow. Athena told him to shut up. She felt sick to her stomach that she was a part of this. On the side of Sarah's forehead, a purple and green bruise was blooming and Athena could already see the red irritation marks in the same pattern of the rope right under her shoulder caps. Her head was limp, her neck folding at nearly 90 degrees, and Athena flashed back to when her sister was a toddler falling asleep in the car seat, her neck folding the exact same way. She fought back the urge to lift Sarah's head and tuck her sweater under it so that she could breathe better, as she had once done for Emma. The sick feeling in her stomach was materializing into nausea. Turning away, Athena texted Overseer again. *Secured daughter.*

The typing bubbles appeared then disappeared. It was odd. Overseer usually responded immediately with no hesitation on what needed to be done. 3 minutes later, it appeared again.

Terminate her. Someone will come collect the body in 30 minutes.

Athena dropped her phone. Her breath began to quicken, becoming more and more shallow. She held her chest, crouching down. She felt her pulse pounding in her temple and the tears streaming down her face. Emma and Max's smiling faces lingered in her head. They loved playing with fake guns. One would shoot and the other would fall back dramatically on their back, tongue hanging out of their mouth, clutching their chest. Would Sarah look like that, just with the blood? What did murder look like on children?

"This is so fucked up. What kind of person would request a child to be killed? They can't ask us to do this. I can't do this anymore, Charles...Charles...Charles?"

She glanced over to her side. Charles was pale, frozen. The phone was in his hand, his mouth was open and his face filled with fear. Was he even breathing? Sarah began to come to. Groaning, her eyes fluttered open, dazed and having trouble finding focus. She saw Athena and Charles but seemed to look through them, her head swinging to and fro. Athena watched her from the corner of the room, a strange calm washing over her. Charles was useless. It was up to her to finish the job.

"Mommy?" She asked.

"Mommy's not here, but she asked us to watch you for a bit. Sorry, we had to tie you up because you were screaming, but you're safe with us. I'm going to let you out now." Athena said. She knew she should have just killed her when she was tied up, but she found herself kneeling at Sarah's feet, untying the ropes behind on the chair, and looking up at her kindly,

trying her best to seem reassuring. Sarah had beautiful hazel eyes and the longest eyelashes Athena had ever seen. She was shy and scared. She didn't answer.

"Do you want to sit down on the couch and watch TV while we wait for her?"

Sarah looked up and nodded. She stood up and rubbed her arms. Athena held her hand and helped her up from the chair. Charles was still in shock but his breath began to tremble. He was still a kid, too. Athena and Sarah walked over to the couch and sat down sitting side by side, almost touching. Athena turned on the TV.

"What's your favorite TV channel?" Athena asked.

"The cartoon channel." Sarah nearly whispered, her hands clasping one another.

"That's a good one." Athena smiled at her. If Sarah had to die, she would die at least under the illusion that she was safe.

Athena pulled out her gun from under her belt and pressed the safety slowly with her thumb, as quietly as possible. She put it to Sarah's head and the next moment, Sarah's body was lifeless over the armrest of the couch, her brains were spilling out onto the floor. Those hazel eyes remained open, devoid of any purity now. Her thin legs were twitching and her sky blue pajamas were spattered with blood. Athena threw up over the floor, sobbing, her vomit joining the shot out remains of Sarah. Children should be able to stay children.

Athena turned the brand-new silver key in the lock and opened the doors to her new house in Palm Ranch. That night, weeks ago now, Charles had awoken from his stupor with the gunshot. They had held each other until a sleek black-suited man of the organization came to collect Sarah. Charles had thrown himself at him in an uncontrollable rage, demanding to know who requested this job. The organization owed them that much. The man's sunglasses had been

knocked off by Charles, revealing a human—revealing weakness—and overcome by guilt and the knowledge that nobody in the room could ever atone for this unfathomable sin, the man had confessed that it had been her mother, the unremarkable lady in the picture that was seen what seems to have been a lifetime ago. Even in the urban serenity of Bronze Heights, motherhood was too much for her.

Sarah was always on Athena's mind now. The nightmare of her coldness when Athena held her hand, repeating "sorry" to someone that would never grow up to know the true meaning of forgiveness. The nightmare of when the black-suited man carried her body out like it weighed nothing. The nightmare of the sickeningly sweet, coppery stench of blood that drowned out all ability to think and function normally, possibly forever. It was on her mind as she watched Emma and Max run into the house, hooting in excitement. Her mother tearfully gave her a big hug. They marveled at the two part garage and the Dolby sound system of the home theater. Emma and Max skipped happily against the mahogany hardwood floors. As she watched her family enter their new life, their worries behind them, Athena realized without hesitation, louder than the memory of Sarah. She would do it all over again.