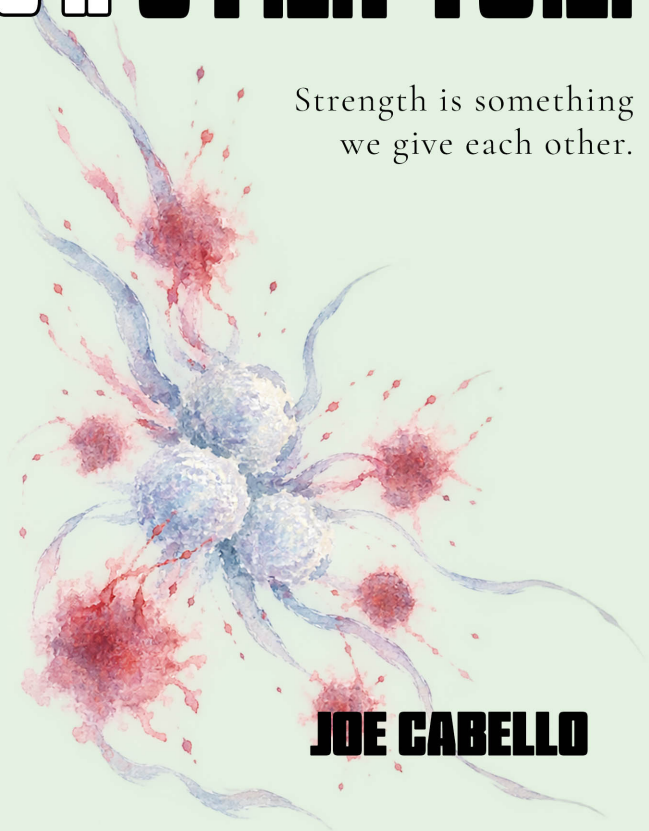


BROTHERHOOD IS A SYMPTOM

Strength is something
we give each other.



JOE CABELLO

PREVIEW

Joe Cabello's

**BROTHERHOOD
IS A SYMPTOM**

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Dedicated to

My mama.

BROTHERHOOD (n)

An association, society, or community of people linked by a common interest.

SYMPTOM (n)

A sign of the existence of something, especially of an undesirable situation

June 1997: The Pauper Virus arrives on United States soil.

July 1997: Cases of the Pauper Virus rise exponentially. The United States government mandates a total and indefinite shutdown of public spaces days ahead of Independence Day.

September 1997: 99,000 US citizens are totaled dead at the hands of the Pauper virus: 0.03 percent of the US population. A news misprint cites the numbers at 3% causing widespread panic.

December 1997: 20% of businesses shudder nationwide. The billion-dollar development of Hopes Crossing is abandoned by investors. Depression and suicide is on the rise.

January 1998: The total deaths due to the Pauper Virus reach 102,872. Everyone has learned to be scared.

February 1998: A local man is shot 11 times and killed by police.

February 1998: Riots break out in metropolitan areas around the country. Police are overwhelmed.

April 1998: An investigation reveals that the victim was a child rapist who opened fire on police to avoid arrest. The papers don't pick up the story. Most never know the truth. Everyone else doesn't care.

May 1998: Speakeasies pop up around Hopes Crossing, most notably, The Open Door. Police and politicians are too busy with the ongoing pandemic and riots to care.

June 1998: The black van appears in Hopes Crossing.

CHAPTER 1:

THE BLACK VAN

Let me tell you about a black van.

A black van that lurched its way into Hopes Crossing just a couple of weeks ago.

Everyone in town should know about this van. But they don't. Not really.

They know the van the way people know the coyotes in the neighboring hills — only by their missing cats and dogs. Their only sign of existence being the absence of something once loved. Even when these beasts *are* seen scampering around in the daylight, people lie to themselves. It can't be monsters they're seeing — they must just be stray dogs — because there's no way monsters would be so brazen. They wouldn't be so close. That'd be impossible.

With its fresh, uneven coat of black spray paint, the van gives off an ugly shimmer. Wet patches catch both the light and the dark. An ugly thing to look at.

Dented and bruised, with jagged, cheese grater bumpers forged from careless collisions. Windowless, it carries all the implications that come with that. Windows are the canaries of freedom. Can't look out. Can't look in. Both are prisons. One of confinement. One of curiosity.

An onyx bullet in a seemingly constant state of destructive motion, whether it's parked or chugging along potholed roads. Its low-pressure tires sink into the ground like sticky hands molesting the ground as it crawls across the pavement. A predator making its way in a jungle that's welcomed its malevolence by destroying its own ecosystem through greed, hollow ideals, and ignorance. Balance is everything, and balance is as hard to get back as it is easy to lose.

After just a couple short years, nothing's the same. People aren't the same. Maybe that's an inevitability, but entropy usually comes from slow, incremental change, even if it always feels sudden in retrospect. That's not this. That's not what happened with the Pauper Virus.

They say we're supposed to embrace change, but what if that change means we're no longer connected? In the last two years, people have shattered away from each other. Glass shards scattered unevenly. Some have fallen into cracks to be discovered later, or probably never. Some stepped on. Some scooped up. Some discarded. A dropped vase can be repaired. But why would you when it's easier to throw it in the trash?

People aren't outside enough to see the black van. They're too busy holed up in their homes, avoiding the common cold like the plague while inhaling black mold and devouring chemicals to spare themselves the scarlet letter of a disease that'd stopped being a threat long ago. But it was a threat once. Some fears don't shake off easily. Some are simply smokescreens for something

worse. Bad doesn't ever come alone. Sometimes bad is just a symptom.

Those who aren't avoiding the outside are busy throwing bricks through business windows, looting Targets, and marching the streets in the name of a man who became a martyr by dying the wrong way, at the worst time. A time when people needed the permission to go out and cause the kind of trouble their hearts always wanted. Righteous justice aimed at all the wrong people, because the right people never have crosshairs on them.

There's a whole lot of evil in the city. Cowardly. Viral. Systemic.

Then there's something worse.

There's that black van.

Most people don't know about the black van, but a few do, though they only feel it. Like a premonition too embarrassing and uncertain to share with anyone else. Like they can feel something is there, but they don't know what it could be or where *there* even is. They all feel it the same way. A feeling so foreign they can't even be certain if it's good or bad. It calls to them. It itches their throats like a coming cold.

This is their story.

CHAPTER 2:

HOPES CROSSING

Hopes Crossing. A gridded labyrinth of buildings that rose from the ashes of the retired train yard-cum home for druggies and homeless. They're gone now. Went somewhere else. Or died. Everyone wonders without wondering all that hard.

What transformed the rusty train yard into Hopes Crossing were the new high-rises, business centers, and luxury malls promising a bright future built on top of all the darkness that once was. But like building on top of a graveyard, it's bad soil. The virus and a shit economy to begin with made it so no one could afford the promise of Hopes Crossing. The riots made it so the promise all but burned to the ground. Investors pulled out, businesses snaked out of their leases, and it quickly degraded back to its former glory, this time with modern architecture and overpriced art installations. It wasn't long before a new crop of homeless and drug addicts found their way to this graveyard, along with its own rising economy of drug

deals, gun sales, and modern speakeasies created to avoid the lockdown restrictions.

Now it's just a new concrete jungle, smack dab between struggling households and the closest high school. Its centricity was meant to attract business. Now most people avoid it altogether and take the long way around. Those who do venture into its labyrinth are served with a reminder of the failure and entropy of man, and even worse, risk getting caught like flies on fly tape. The perfect place to catch flies.

Only a smattering of legitimate businesses have survived, though they were there long before the gilded attempt at progress, and are determined to survive long after: a mixed martial arts gym and a karate dojo. A reminder that only fighters survive here.

CHAPTER 3: THE CHOSEN ONES

It's 11pm in one of the many alleys of Hopes Crossing. Pitch dark and unsettlingly quiet, like the shadows between the buildings have sucked all the atmosphere out so even the loudest screams can't make their way out past the black.

The only light comes from the moon and the flickering headlights of the black van as its V8 engine bubbles behind a mammoth of a man standing beside it.

At 6'7", he towers over the van, but his size spans beyond just his height. His shoulders are as broad as a sedan. His hands look like mallets of meat. Inhuman and unnatural. On sight alone, you may assume they belong to a hairless mythical beast, or that they were some perverse machinations of a special effects expert. The skin is as strong as ox leather. It has to be or else the seams of his bulbous fingers and palms would burst from the musculature inside that begs to be unleashed. The tendons alone are so abnormally strong that it takes more muscular force for him to close his hand into a fist than it

would take for the average man to bend steel. Simply looking at him raises something instinctual in you. Everything about him makes you feel like a victim. Except for his big, friendly smile. He could be anyone's friend with a smile like that. It can make you feel like the most important person in the world.

His name is Epustein.

He raises a glass of champagne that resembles a golf tee in his engorged fist as he holds court to a group in front of him. His voice booms out to them in an entrancing tenor, "You know what I see when I look at you? The elite of the elite. The best of the best on this big blue rock! You are the special ones! The cream of the crop! Yes, sir. You know it. You don't need me to tell ya, but here I am tellin' ya anyway. That's why you're here, after all. You deserve it. All the fine things the world has to offer you. All the fine things *I* have to offer you. With me on your side, nothing's off limits. That's what I do for my friends. That's my promise to you." His voice booms over the chugging van behind him. Its rumbling hum has a dizzying effect, like going up an elevator too fast.

He stands before a dozen teens. Mostly girls. Some boys. Huddled around each other. Nervous. Unwell. Tired. Clearly street kids cleaned up just enough to look presentable in the dark of night. It takes more than soap and water to wash off abandonment and loss of hope, but shadows cover it up just as well. They gaze at Epustein with a nervous excitement, the man offering the first promise of opportunity in their tragic lives.

Epustein smiles out at his captive audience of teens with a campaign smile, "so, without further ado, let's get this party started... take your pick."

He turns his head to his actual audience: three men bathed in the backlight of the van's headlights, looking like black specters to the teens. The men are plenty

nervous themselves, but eagerness overtakes their nerves. It helps that they are the kind of men who scoff at consequences, if they even know what consequences are.

Mayor Degarzo. Former sumo wrestler turned politician. His early political career struggled due to his insecure way of speaking. Despite his domineering body, the quavering tenor of his voice oozes weakness. Despite this, he won by a landslide thanks to a tip that would change his career: refusing to speak publicly. In a live televised debate ahead of the election, he refused to utter even a single word.

The headlights cast a shimmer on a young redhead's crimson locks. "What a fine selection," he thinks to himself in a voice that sounds nothing like his own.

Beside him stands the chief of police, Dick Edwards. Heavy set and with the face of a man who can't make good conversation. He's a former judo champion known for breaking not one but two opponent's backs during competition. His glory days far behind him, he clutches on to them by making judo lessons a requirement for the entire department, even the janitorial staff. Taught by himself, of course. No longer the physical specimen he once was due to the hundreds of pounds he's added post-competition, his weight is exacerbated by the adult diapers he purposefully fails at hiding, secretly desiring for someone to notice. The diapers aren't necessary due to any kind of incontinence condition. They're simply part of a bizarre kink. One he's excited to force upon one or two in the crowd that quakes before him.

And the last of the trio is the gaunt Judge Troman. A decorated marathon runner and judicial hammer for Degarzo and Edwards. His long, sinewy body doesn't weigh more than 100 pounds at 5 foot ten inches, but he doesn't carry it feebly. He's created the perfect machine

for long distance running. Sexually impotent, he plans on satisfying his urges in more violent ways.

These are the men who dictate what is right and what is wrong. What is punished and what is forgiven.

On the other side of the van, Epustein's gang snickers. Five of them. All nightmares. Together they form a group of the very same name spray painted in white across the side of the van:

THE LOLITA EXPRESS.

Degarzo, Edwards, and Troman leave the light of the headlights to descend on the teens.

Teens we'll never hear from again and no one will come asking about.

CHAPTER 4:

MAMA

The sweet music of a telephone ringing sings through the tiny apartment. A corded phone to be exact. An incoming call feels different coming from a corded phone, not that Mama has any comparison. Her real name is Tiffany, but ever since she gave birth to Halle, it's been Mama.

She already knows who's conjuring the sharp tone. Well, not exactly who, but generally who, and she especially knows who the call is for. It's for Halle. It usually is, not due to any shortage of calls meant for Mama, but more so for the obscene amount for her daughter. Especially during peak hours before and after practice. Mama remembers when she had friends who were so desperate to talk to her, even minutes before they were going to see each other. Like needing an umbilical cord connected to each other at all times. A form of nourishment. Not carbs. Not vitamins. But love. The love of young friendship. Pure, distilled, and as rare as it is abundant. The young find it so easily, yet as we grow older it only crawls around us out of sight, like the

earthworms that seemed so plentiful to our youthful eyes then seem to disappear one day. Mama's happy her daughter has it in abundance.

Mama doesn't have any of those friendships and doesn't need them anyway. Her heart is more full than it has room to carry. After Halle's father left, she never took another partner. Never went out for drinks. Never joined a book club. Her focus was keeping that girl good and healthy, and God damn if she didn't do a good job. She knows it. Not in the superficial way many parents know it. "He's a good kid," the parents would say about their date rapist son. How could they know? They'd never had a conversation with him that lasted more than a minute or two. They know nothing about the darkness in his heart that's so brimming full you'd have to be blind to ignore it. That's the story of many parents who think providing food and a bed are enough.

That's not Mama. She knows the good and bad about her daughter. Even the bad that her daughter thinks she doesn't know. Not that it's anything to worry about. All kids get into a little bit of mischief. It's just the way. A little bit of mischief is how Halle came into her life, after all.

Mama peels a label from a roll with incredible speed and precision. She's done it so many times that it's in her muscle memory. The label reads "WHITE TEARS." She slaps it onto a jar filled with saline solution, though once it's adorned with that label, it's White Tears and it sells by the dozens. The strange and morbid social chaos of the times has made it a hot ticket item at protests, mom & pop gift shops, and eBay.

All the while, that phone keeps ringing.

Halle glides in with a soft, runner's step, outfitted in her track uniform. You'd be hard pressed to find her in anything else. She picks up the phone and speaks as if her

conversation was somehow continuing from the preceding silence. “Did you hear what Ally did? Shut up. I’ll tell you at track.” She hangs up and rolls her eyes once she sees what her mom’s doing, “Oh, my god. You are so annoying.”

“Oh, shush,” Mama sticks another label on.

Halle plops on the couch, peeling a sock onto her foot. “You don’t have to work so hard. I’m gonna get a loan.”

Mama smirks, “You think that’s why I do this? I’m not even letting you go to college. You’re staying here with me so we can grow old and die together.”

“It’s scary that I actually believe you. Can you at least Martha Stewart something other than white tears?” she says with a stretch.

Mama continues packaging effortlessly, “like what?”

“I dunno. Normal mom side hustles. Like selling candles. Or polaroids of your feet. There’s plenty of dudes into old lady feet.”

That stops Mama’s flow. “Old lady feet? Girl, I will...”

A small wave of embarrassment sweeps over Halle but dissipates in the atmosphere of Mama’s good nature. “I’m just saying. Don’t you think this country is divided enough?”

Mama scoffs, “hell, it’s all white people buying them. They love this shit. They’re buying white tears from a black, female independent business owner. I’m making them feel like superheroes.”

Despite not having time for it, Halle finds herself falling into the argument’s gravitational pull, “What if someone sold something called black tears?”

Mama goes back to work. “Don’t start with me on that,” but she pauses. “Wait, White people would

probably buy that too. That's a damn good idea. Cover both markets."

Halle falls back on the couch laughing, knowing her mom's probably right. For better or for worse.

Mama slaps a label on a jar, "if you don't have plans after practice, come home and help me paint the nails on these old lady feet."

Hopefully she'll get a nap in before Halle returns. Mama hasn't been sleeping well. She's felt an inexplicable tightness in her chest for the past couple of weeks, like something bad has happened before it happens. She chalks it up to the parental nerves of gearing up for her daughter leaving the nest.

She knows nothing of the black van.

CHAPTER 5:

ACE

We find ourselves in a fatherless garage: one lacking the years of clutter and grime that come with projects, mistakes and learning. There's no array of tools or spare parts packing every corner, ranging from wires to planks of wood. No posters on the wall from magazines — creased images of women in Budweiser bikinis.

This garage isn't completely empty though. And it does hold tools. The truest of tools. The ones meant to build the human body. A punching bag. Free weights. A pull up bar. A bench press. All hard, rusted metal. A gym cobbled together from sourced equipment — garage sales, curbs, and dumps. The harsher the better. Absent of any technological advancements. Metal on metal. Not safe for humans. Made at a time where the point wasn't to be comfortable, it was to harden.

A rhythmic yet discordant beat clangs as the bench press bar moves steadily up and down while the loose weights clack together without regard for timing. The boy who lays arch-backed on the bench is 17 years of age. His

mind thinks of nothing other than the weight going up and down, until up and down feel no different from each other. He wears nothing but red gym shorts that stink like hell. He doesn't care. There's no reason to. The only thing to care about is that weight moving up and down. 405 pounds, up as smoothly as it goes down, kissing his chest before rising up again.

He clicks the bar back on the rack and sits up. Alone. He sighs a heavy sigh. Is he winded or does his heavy breath come from a sense of unfulfillment? We're not sure. He's felt unsettled for the past couple weeks, though he's been unable to put a name to the feeling, like being scared of an empty room. All he knows is something's been bothering him, but regardless of what it is, his only solution is to push more weight, so that's what he continues to do.

He rises from the bench revealing his 5'8" stature. His musculature could cut glass, but even still, pushing 405 pounds at 5'8" causes an unseen and unknown rift in the world. The bounds of nature being broken in a garage somewhere where no one can bear witness to it. Nonetheless, his only thoughts are of his unfulfillment. He wanted the weight to destroy him, yet it didn't, and he doesn't know who to blame so he blames himself.

His bare feet slap towards a bucket of jagged, porous rocks. The kind you might find in a grassless landscaped yard. He grabs a handful then grips his rock-coated palm around a 100lb rusted dumbbell before curling it steadily. If there's effort, it's unseen.

His name is Ace, and he knows nothing of the black van.

CHAPTER 6:

COACH JOHN

5am. The sky bruises dark purple as the sun's light mixes into the night air. Coach John wakes up a minute before his alarm. He reaches for it and flicks it off, half-imagining it's a bomb about to go off. Can he employ the measured quickness it takes to diffuse it before it explodes and ends him? He's adopted many games like this to settle his uneasy heart. With the alarm safely off, he feels a sense of pride that's quickly washed away by the questions of why his mind needs such games.

Getting up has been easy. It's been falling asleep that's been hard. Something's been nagging at him for weeks. He thinks he knows what it is — yearning for the bottle — but he's wrong, at least this time.

His feet slap against the hard wood, pulling his thick calves with them. They look like banyan tree trunks. Muscles layered on top of muscles. Dense fibers twisting around each other in search of space to grow. He's both surprised and thankful how good he feels this morning. The surprise hasn't worn off after a lifetime feeling the

opposite. A lifetime of waking up with a swollen brain, stale muscles, and parched mouth.

His apartment appears as if he just moved in and hasn't even bothered to bring in the moving boxes yet. A bed and some clothes. All fitness wear hung neatly in the closet. The living room is nearly as bare, save for the stretching mats on the floor, the pull up bar in the doorway, and a television set up to play a single sports channel. An old buddy of his set it up for him, and if it ever got messed up, he wouldn't know how to fix it. He uses it to study technique. There are only a few things he allows to fill the space of his mind. Athletics and the youth. If he left even an ounce unfilled, he knows that whiskey would fill it until it demanded more space.

He heads to the kitchen to cut fruit. The kids only ever eat the fruit if it's already cut. He's happy to do it. He wishes someone would have done it for him when he was young. It's good to give more than you've ever received. The world needs more good guys.

He'll be meeting his kids on the track at 6am. He's still surprised they ever show up, even after all these months. They need something. Something to keep them feeling hopeful. To keep them healthy.

He's out the door by 5:30. It's a 10-mile run to the track. He'll be there with time to stretch. Today he needs to teach Halle how to get off the line strong. The kid has something. It's up to him to water saplings so they may become strong trees.

Coach John kneels shoulder to shoulder next to Halle in a crouch start. One foot in front of the other, legs coiled like springs. Ready to launch.

“You’re a sprinter. You’re only in it for the short run,” he says without looking at her. It forces her to keep her eyes forward even though she desperately wants to look over at him to avoid the discomfort of staring out into the horizon.

“That means you only have a small window of time to prove who you are. You gotta learn how to put everything into it.”

She nods, not even sure if he sees the tiny movement, but before her chin even rises back up, a gust slaps the side of her face. In a blink, Coach John is 40 feet out, slowing from a sprint to a jog. She looks to where he once stood and for a second, she swears she can still see him crouched there, like a smokey mist, but it’s gone so quickly she doesn’t know if it was real. All she knows for certain is the grass where his feet once stood is left impacted and discolored.

She bursts into a smile that nearly turns to tears from the feeling of sheer awe. He jogs back to her and drops back down into position next to her. “Now you try.”

With the weight of pressure on her, her body doesn’t feel like her own anymore. Like she’s learning to move it for the first time. She has to will each individual muscle strand to get anything to work. Her head is too in it. Coach John knows this, but he doesn’t say anything. He knows it’s part of the process. We have to be clumsy to be great. One day she’ll get so good she’ll stop thinking about every strand of muscle in her body. Then one day she’ll get so great that she will again, and she will conduct each strand like an orchestra.

She launches off the line and runs a couple paces before slowing to a stop. Coach touches the ground where she once crouched. “You got more than that in you.” She knows it before he even says it.

She comes back and repositions herself, shaking her head, unsure of the problem. "Is it my feet?"

"It's not your body. Your body knows what to do. It's your heart. You've gotta leave it all out there. So much that if someone came back to this very spot, they'd feel you here."

She breaks her forward stare to look at him, "like a ghost?"

He nods forward, directing her focus back ahead. "Like a memory."

She turns her gaze forward and keeps it there. "What's the difference?"

"A ghost haunts. It takes from you. A memory visits. It gives back something you lost."

Halle takes a deep breath, then explodes off the line and sprints as fast and as far as she can without stopping. Coach John smiles. *Not there yet, but she will be.*

Benny, a skinny teen boy with a wind-scowled haircut jogs up to Coach John. "There aren't enough of us for dodgeball."

Coach John has noticed the wilting number of kids but doesn't ask. There's no need to stress Benny with questions. He wipes away his concern with a smile.

"No problem! Let's all try to beat our mile times instead!" Half the kids groan while the others cheer in a mix of mock as well as genuine enthusiasm. He waves the seven teens over to the track. "Let's go, everyone!"

He leads the pack so he can hide the concern on his face.

CHAPTER 7:

ROGAN

The karate dojo stinks of mildew forged from the sweat of men who have long since passed. The mats are yellowed. The walls are covered in canvas dappled grey from being punched, kicked, and sweated on. It's old in all the best and worst ways. Simply known as Karate Dojo, that's all the business has ever been listed under. No gimmicks. Just Kyokushin style karate. Despite its lack of modern amenities, like air conditioning and cleanliness, the class is mostly full. Authenticity still means enough to keep it afloat in a world that seems to be leaving karate behind a little more every day.

Rogan towers in front of the students. He's the master of the dojo and sole teacher. The width of his body is extreme. Shoulder to shoulder he's as wide as a pallet. Not an ounce of his mass is fat. A He-Man action figure come to life. His wrists are as thick as an average man's legs and he's completely hairless from head to toe, as if he's expelled the hair out of his body for being too weak.

His students sit on their legs, backs straight at attention. Many of them are past the point of discomfort, but they won't dare move an inch. All the students who would have moved an inch have long since quit.

Rogan stares at none of them in particular as he speaks. "Your size. Your strength. Your technique. It's all secondary to what's inside of you: your chi. Your chi is everything." He brandishes an eight-inch hunting knife from inside his gi, having casually kept it concealed there pressed against his bare skin. This is completely normal to the students, where weapons training and defense is par for the course. What isn't normal is what happens next.

"Control your chi," Rogan extends his arm straight out the side, takes a moment to focus, then slides the blade across his extended arm's wrist. The students gasp, but Rogan's face remains calm. A second wave of gasps erupts — one of a different kind of surprise — because not a drop of blood drips from the cunt-like wound.

"Control your chi and you control life itself."

The students are far too awestruck to truly take in or understand the lesson, but they'll be forever changed regardless. Rogan doesn't see it as his job to make them understand. It's his job to provide the opportunity.

He knows he can't manufacture the greatness he seeks. He can only be lucky enough to discover and foster it.

Maybe discovering the next great martial talent will be the key to calm his uncertain heart. He's developed an unusual feeling that's grown over the past couple of weeks, acting like a siren call for him to push his students to become stronger, lest they be eaten by the wolves he has come to sense but can't see.

He knows nothing of the black van.

CHAPTER 8:

THE LOLITA EXPRESS

“Word is Degarzo loved that new redhead.”

The words come out with a snicker. It’s Colinton. Epustein’s right-hand man. In another life he’d be a twenty-something heartthrob on the cover of Tiger Beat magazine. Tall and slender yet strong. His pretty face, adorned with tiny hoop earrings, along with his flashy bracelets, only add to his model demeanor. That’s not to speak of his fighting acuity. He’s a man with too many tools to beat you. His reach. His strength. His speed. It’s all visibly keen. A wise fighter would simply let him talk trash and walk away, or in the case where their pride got the best of them, they’d push forward knowing defeat was an inevitability.

“Well then. We’ll just have to find him another one for when she gets worn out. If she isn’t already.” The man next to him, Sopacey, is the polar opposite. The living embodiment of the sex offenders list. There are many such men unfortunate enough to have this look,

many who are perfectly fine citizens. Not Sopacey. He's even worse than he looks.

Both men are powerful in ways that we have yet to see, and both are high ranking members of the Lolita Express, where membership only comes at the cost of your decency and soul.

"Ain't too hard to catch flies these days, is it?" Sopacey giggles.

As both men huddle around the parked van, Epustein emerges from the onyx chasm of the back doors, like a whale breaching black water. His voice bounces off the alley where the van is parked. "Flies don't make good bait. Ya can't catch gators with flies, and we gotta catch us some gators to get to the next level. Small timers in our pocket ain't enough, boys. We gotta think bigger. And bigger means more fresh chicken. That's what'll catch us some gators."

It's a problem Colinton has considered for some time, "You're not gonna find any fresh chicken with skids."

Epustein plants his giant paws on each man's shoulder, making them suddenly seem much smaller, "Skids only get some of those goofballs hard anyway. We need more options if we're gonna make more important friends. 'Cause important friends expect high quality."

Colinton squirms under Epustein's grip. "'Run down' and 'desperate' is easy. How exactly are we supposed to get high-quality girls?"

Sopacey quickly adds with a grin, "and boys."

Epustein gives them a painful yet friendly squeeze on the shoulder before turning back to the van, "Easy. Make joining us a better deal than flipping burgers." He throws a duffle bag of cash out of the van. "Most of these kids just need a little carrot hangin' in front of 'em and they'll do any damn thing you ask 'em to."

Colinton smiles his charming smile, “then consider me Bugs Bunny.”

Further down the alley, a beastly man picks up an old beer bottle. The man could be a clone of Mike Tyson, or maybe a discarded offspring. He throws the bottle in the air with a flick of his wrist, then throws a lightning quick hook punch at it, but nothing happens. Seemingly no contact.

The bottle lands on the ground upright, perfectly intact, then slowly slides apart, cut clean in half. This is Gatesu of the Lolita Express.

Joe Cabello's

BROTHERHOOD IS A SYMPTOM

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ABOUT JOE CABELLO



Joe Cabello has written comedy & horror screenplays, comics, and post-it notes. Beware saying his name five times in a mirror, lest you want him to appear, asking for gas money reimbursement.

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