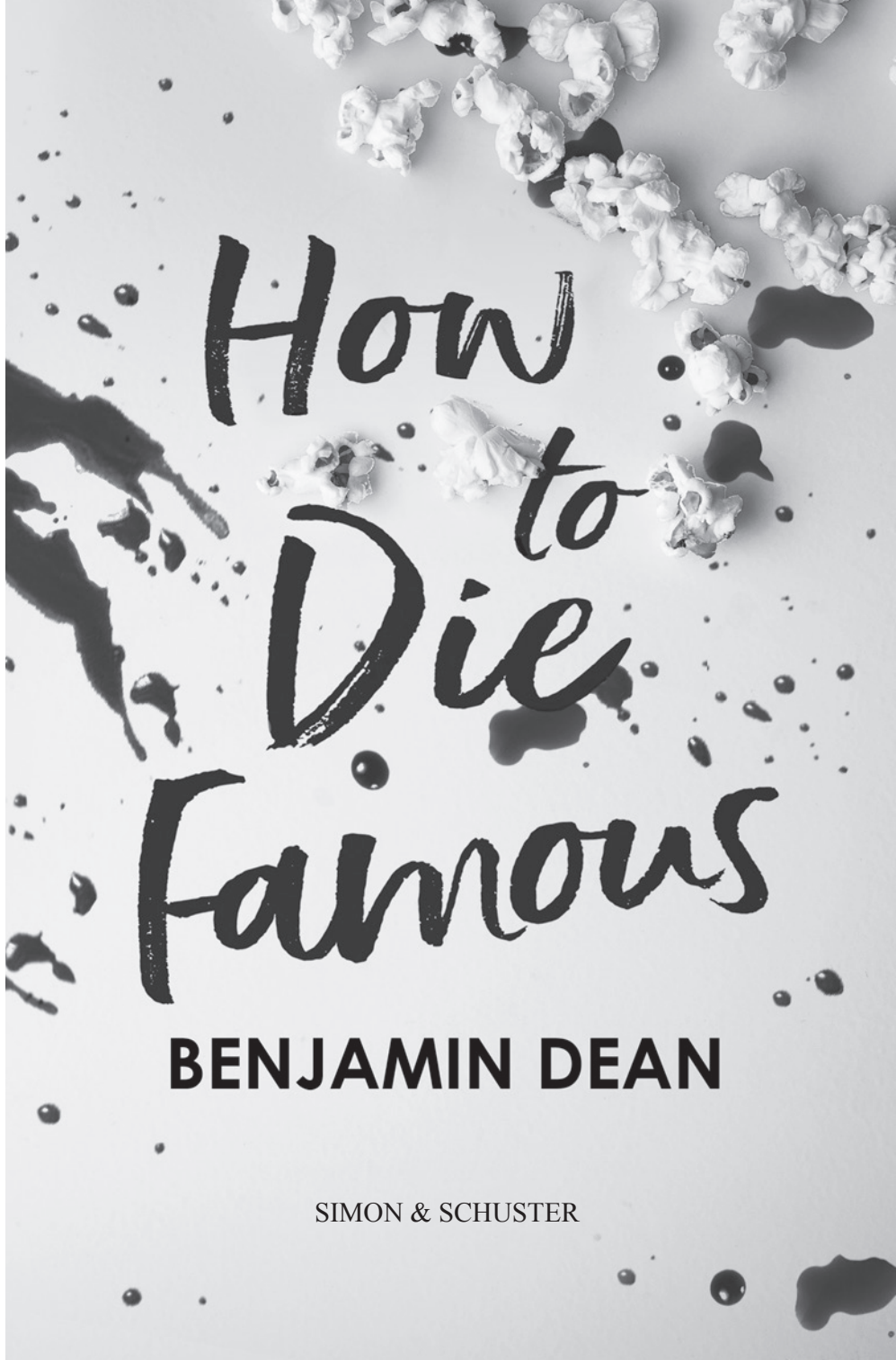

How to Die Famous
BENJAMIN DEAN
SIMON & SCHUSTER

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Content warning: This book contains on-page depictions of excessive alcohol consumption, death and murder.

For Mum, as always, and for Ellie B –
those therapy sessions while we were supposed
to be writing our silly little posts might
have just saved my life. Thank you.



Prologue

WHAT HAVE WE DONE?

Abel Miller / 11 August 2023 / 23:13

Nobody was supposed to end up dead. I thought the safety of fame would protect us from that. I assumed nothing could touch us. Hurt us. Kill us.

And yet, right now, there's blood on my hands. My shirt. The kitchen tiles. The cupboard door. It's splattered everywhere like a fucked-up paint by numbers. I guess I was wrong about the whole *being famous* thing. There was me thinking this blessed and gilded life was supposed to be fun. It wasn't meant to be a death sentence.

But I can't think about that. I need to stay focused on getting as far away from this crime scene as possible. I can't be caught here. Not with someone else's blood all over me. Especially now the police have arrived.

I reach the side door and take off running, pelting through the shadows of the garden, away from the flashing red and blue lights of the police sirens that seem to be chasing me. I hear the front door crash open and a loud voice demand that nobody move. I don't stop. I keep running.

History has a habit of repeating itself.

2010.

2020.

Now.

Maybe everyone was right. Perhaps this show really is cursed. The only difference this time is that I'm right in the middle of it, and I've had a big part to play.

I escape the way we got in. Through the trees, over the fence, down the mountain and back to the car. They're waiting, but the moment I appear covered in blood, their faces fall.

'Abel . . .' one of them whispers.

I nod. 'It's done.'

In a daze, I can't find any other words, but it's enough for them to understand. Four of us walked into that house. Only three of us are here now. The blood on my hands tells the rest of the story.

One of us is dead.

Part One

THE PERFECT SURFACE AND WHAT HIDES BENEATH



THE DAILY EYE NEWSPAPER

THE CURSED SUNSET RISES ONCE MORE!

By Hannah Wilkes, CELEBRITY REPORTER

1 August 2023

***AFTER MELTDOWNS, DISAPPEARANCES AND TRAGEDY, OMNI CHANNEL HAVE ANNOUNCED THE RETURN OF TEEN DRAMA* SUNSET HIGH.**

It's been labelled one of the most cursed TV shows in Hollywood history, but Omnificent, the famed production studio behind Omni Channel, have today revealed that Sunset High *will make its grand return to screens early next year, with filming due to begin imminently. The show follows the drama-filled lives of high-school teens at a prestigious private school in Beverly Hills, and its brand-new cast includes Omni Channel's go-to heart-throb Lucky Tate, marking his return to work following the death of his mother in a car accident last December. Tate's long-term girlfriend and fan-favourite Ryan Hudson, as well as Omni Channel's latest rising star Ella Winter have also joined the line-up.*

However, the murky past of Sunset High *shrouds its*

return in controversy. Many will be familiar with the streak of bad luck that followed the show since the original aired in 2010, with critics online dubbing it the 'Cursed Sunset'. At the time, millions of fans around the world witnessed the unravelling of twenty-year-old actress Mila Stone, who, after increasingly erratic behaviour and numerous public meltdowns, announced her retirement from the spotlight altogether. The star sensationally blamed Omnificent for 'ruining my mental well-being' and 'dragging me to the brink of a nervous breakdown'. Omnificent refuted the allegations and accused Stone of breaching her contract. Multiple on-set sources later claimed that her ego and demands made her 'impossible to work with'.

Things only went from bad to worse for the show in 2020 when it was rebooted with teen sensation Penelope Daunt leading a fresh cast. What started as a Hollywood fairy tale became a nightmare when the nineteen-year-old disappeared while on a solo sunset hike around LA's Runyon Canyon, something her friends said she often did in a bid for alone time. Daunt was last seen on the evening of 8 July that year, with door-cam footage picking up the star as she parked her car on a nearby residential street. A missing person report was filed on 10 July when she didn't show up to work. Despite a storm of conspiracy theories touted by amateur sleuths online, which persist to this day, no trace of the actress has been found. The case remains open more than three years later.

News of Daunt's disappearance came on the heels of

a tragic accident that took place at an exclusive Beverly Hills hotel frequently booked for Omnificent cast and crew. On 9 July 2020, just one day after Daunt was last seen, it was reported that a junior assistant working for Omni Channel on the Sunset High *reboot had plunged to his death after falling from the hotel's roof, leaving members of the show badly shaken. A source with direct knowledge of the situation, speaking on the promise of anonymity, told Page Six at the time: 'The show can't go on. After the rooftop fall and Penelope's disappearance, nobody feels safe.' Omnificent were quick to scrap the reboot following the incidents, with the show's creator and director, Lake Carter, stating everyone needed 'time and space to grieve and heal after such tragedy and loss'. In response to the news, another source added: 'I'm glad* Sunset High *has been shut down. I hope it never sees the light of day again.'*

Chapter One

ON THE HORIZON

Abel / 1 August 2023

I'm walking through Heathrow Airport when I'm recognized for the first time. I feel it before I see the eyes that have found me, like an invisible hand has tapped me on the shoulder, raising the hairs on the back of my neck. Sure enough, when I turn round, there they are – a young couple holding hands, whispering frantically to each other while stealing glances in my direction. I tell myself it's not what I think, that they're not looking at *me*, but then I clock the large TV screen overhead, flashing up the latest news stories of the day.

CONTROVERSIAL TEEN SHOW *SUNSET HIGH*
RETURNS WITH NEW CAST.

I stop dead in my tracks. Above the headline are four pictures. Lucky Tate, every inch the white Hollywood dreamboat with ruffled brown hair, searing blue eyes and a face that looks like it's been carved from marble. Ryan Hudson posing on a red carpet, dark skin flawlessly smooth, full lips curving into a dazzling smile. Ella Winter performing the role of young starlet with effortless ease, tanned complexion gleaming as she tosses long silvery-blonde hair over her shoulder. The final picture is clearly a selfie masquerading as a professional headshot. The boy's mixed race, with short freshly faded hair and clear-rimmed glasses. He smiles but I can see the uncertainty behind his eyes.

Abel Miller.

I'm staring at my own face. Not weird at all.

I glance at the couple again out of the corner of my eye, but now I see they're not the only ones looking in my direction. A group of teens have noticed too and they're not even trying to be subtle about it – they're pointing right at me. My breath lodges in my throat like the oxygen has turned solid. I duck my head and get the hell out of there. I wasn't expecting to be noticed so soon, but news of the *Sunset High* reboot has clearly got people interested.

It takes me a minute to find the first-class lounge, not least because I've never had a reason to go to it before today. Only yesterday I was a nameless nobody who flew economy. I guess things have changed now.

I'm welcomed into the lounge by two smiling faces on the front desk. They offer to take my rucksack and hoodie, which

I politely decline, then guide me to a set of double doors that open into a world I've only ever imagined before. And, let me tell you, that shit is LAVISH! You get a whole separate lounge in the airport to chill in with food and drink and the option to take a freaking shower or a nap while you wait for your flight. There are literal *nap pods*! I've been slumming it in economy this whole time like a fool while the other half live it up like this? Wild.

I'm definitely the youngest person here, and by the way I stick to the outskirts of the room, you can tell this isn't my usual scene. I'm not even bothering with the food because what if I *think* it's free but I actually have to pay for it? I'm not about to embarrass myself like that. I should just be happy that I didn't have to pay for my own flight, because based on how my bank account looks right now, I would've had to travel to Los Angeles in the cargo hold.

I settle into a leather armchair in the furthest corner possible with a USB charging port built into the armrest, a mini desk that swivels over my lap and a view of the runway. There are worse places to mind your own business. I watch as a plane prepares to take off, bound for who knows where. It picks up speed, rumbling down the tarmac, then its nose lifts and the plane aims for the clouds, beginning its journey to a new destination . . . just like me.

With over an hour to kill before my flight takes off, I unzip my rucksack and grab my laptop. My stomach lurches when the internet tabs I forgot to close last night reappear on the screen, evidence of my last-minute research when I couldn't sleep. Even though I know the story like the back of my hand,

I can't help but read about that damn curse all over again.

The girl who broke down.

The boy who fell.

The star who vanished.

You can see why people call it the 'Cursed Sunset'. Whenever the show comes back, something tragic happens.

I swipe through the tabs and headlines, various pictures scattered underneath them. There's Mila Stone looking the essence of glamour on a red carpet before filming for *Sunset High* started; then again, this time her face blurred in anger as she lashed out at photographers days after the show aired. On another tab there's a video of Penelope Daunt accepting an award, the one she dedicated to her estranged father, Max Daunt, who was in hospital at the time. Penelope went missing weeks later.

I stop on a tab that contains a video of the door-cam footage dated 8 July 2020. I press play and watch as a rusty white car passes through the shot a minute before Penelope's Mercedes appears. She climbs out, a rucksack slung over her shoulder, and scrapes her auburn hair back into a ponytail before putting on a baseball cap. She looks . . . agitated, glancing round every few seconds like someone might be following her. There aren't many other people or cars around at that time of the evening, though. A blacked-out jeep passes by, followed by a guy on a bike who does a double-take in Penelope's direction and slows down as if he's recognized who she is. The driver of a blue BMW must beep impatiently because the cyclist gives them the middle finger and pedals away. They exit the shot just

before Penelope does. She walks out of the frame, and that's it. Ninety seconds of footage. The final moments of Penelope Daunt before she vanished.

It was the celebrity story of the year, maybe even the decade. Countless front pages, news articles, podcast episodes and fan videos had been dedicated to Penelope's story, and they all asked the same question – how does one of the most famous faces in the world simply disappear into thin air? Penelope had joined Omni Channel as a teenager, and after starring in a bunch of their most successful shows, she'd become their queen. Even if you weren't a fan, it was hard not to know who she was. Surely *someone* had answers.

Various conspiracy theories had been offered up and passed around the internet like sordid secrets. The most popular revolved around the guy on the bike. He'd seemed to recognize her after all. But Porter McKay, as he was later identified, had been interviewed by police and cleared of any wrongdoing. Not that it stopped people online from calling him a murderer, even though there was no proof to even suggest Penelope was dead. For all anyone knew, she could've slipped away to a paradise island to sip on piña coladas and escape the suffocating frenzy of fame that followed her everywhere she went.

I sink into my chair, letting my head fall back and my eyes close. Even then, I can still see the tape and the headlines as if they're imprinted on the back of my eyelids. Maybe I've been too obsessed lately with Omnificent and *Sunset High* for my own good.

My phone vibrates, dragging me back to the lounge. I see

the name on the screen, then quickly glance around the room to make sure nobody is in earshot.

'Hello?' I say, keeping my voice quiet.

'Not too famous to answer your own phone yet?' Hannah Wilkes asks.

'Not yet. Give it a few days.' I take a steadying breath, ignoring the tingle of anticipation that's crawling up my spine. 'So . . . do we have a deal?'

Hannah pauses. The silence crackles in my ear, enough to spike my heartbeat. But then she says the words I've been waiting to hear.

'Yes, we have a deal.'

I close my eyes with relief, clenching my other fist. It might be the eleventh hour, but the last piece of my plan has finally slotted into place.

'You give us the stories, we publish them,' Hannah continues. 'But if you get rumbled, you leave the *Daily Eye* out of it. We can't be caught conducting an undercover investigation into Omnificent. They'll have us in court quicker than Lake Carter can yell *action*.'

'You have my word,' I say.

Hannah chuckles to herself. 'You're going to blow this shit apart from the inside. They won't see it coming.'

I remember when I first walked into her office for a meeting. I'd received the call that I'd got the role on *Sunset High* the week before after endless gruelling auditions. I was glad to see that years of being a theatre kid and drama school had finally paid off. After being told all my life that it would be almost impossible to

make it as an actor, I'd landed myself a pretty sweet role – I'd be playing Rex, the best friend of Lucky Tate's character. I'd heard it was down to me and Saint Morgan. He was a Hollywood bad boy, much more established and a sure favourite for the role. But fate must have smiled down on me because he got busted for drag racing his sports car while under the influence of drugs the week of the final audition. What a shame.

But this wasn't about getting my first big break. No, I had much bigger plans than that. So I pitched my idea to Hannah – use me and my role in *Sunset High* to peel back the Omnificent curtain and see what really happens behind the scenes. She'd looked at me like I'd not only grown a second head, but like that second head had turned out to be Kim Kardashian.

Sure, the *Daily Eye* newspaper was one of the trashier tabloids, one that many wouldn't even waste spit on. But that rag also happened to have one of the biggest global readerships in the world. Any story they published would be seen by millions, which was the exact platform I needed to expose Omnificent for the liars they really were. If I was going to risk everything to do this, then I wanted to make sure that the whole damn world knew about it.

'I do have one question, though . . .' Hannah says. She clears her throat. 'Are you going to tell me why you're doing this? What do you have to gain from it?'

I weigh up which of my guarded secrets to let free and decide a little sprinkle of honesty can't hurt.

'I want the truth,' I say. 'Omnificent, Lake Carter, *Sunset High* – they've already ruined so many lives. Why should

they get away with that? Why should we let them destroy anyone else?'

It's not a lie, but I'm glad Hannah doesn't push for anything more. She acknowledges my answer with a hum of satisfaction, then throws me a curveball.

'I'm sure you've already seen the latest news. Looks like you're flying straight into the eye of the storm.'

I frown. 'What news?'

I hear a faint gasp in my ear. 'Holy shit. You don't know?'

'Know *what*?'

Hannah cackles with glee. 'God, I'm so happy I get to be the one to break this to you. You're not going to believe it.' I hear some tapping on the other end of the line as adrenaline plunges its needle into my heart. 'This just in from TMZ. Check your texts.'

I swipe at my phone screen and open a screenshot sent from Hannah. It's from an article posted an hour ago. I must've missed it while checking in for my flight. The headline reads: **LUCKY TATE CHEATS ON RYAN HUDSON WITH BEST FRIEND ELLA WINTER!** I can't even hide my shock. I'm sure I haven't read that right. Lucky and Ryan have been the golden couple for two years now since meeting on the set of Omni Channel's hit show *This High Life*. They played characters who fell in love on screen, and then they fell in love in front of the world off screen too. There were even rumours a while ago that they'd got engaged. They're kind of couple goals, even though I think I might be allergic to seeing straight relationships with my own eyes.

Ella Winter was in *This High Life* too. She's pretty new to the spotlight, but she's quickly become an Omni Channel favourite. People are already saying they think she might eclipse Ryan. Her star is rising at an alarming pace. I see her face everywhere. I'm sure I even saw it on a billboard advertising make-up when I first walked into the airport this morning. But Ryan and Ella are supposed to be best friends. Everyone knows that. This is huge.

There's a second screenshot too, this one including a couple of pictures clearly taken at a distance. I inspect them properly, feeling my jaw drop as I see Ella's silvery hair and Lucky's brown curls. Their faces aren't visible since they're glued to each other's, but it's unmistakably them.

'Oh my fucking God,' I say as I bring the phone back up to my ear.

'Really shakes the table, doesn't it?' Hannah says, as if she couldn't be happier. 'I'm just reading E! News now. *Lucky Tate has been pictured getting close with Hollywood's newest starlet Ella Winter, the best friend of his supposed girlfriend Ryan Hudson. The intimate moment was snapped by fellow diners at a hotel bar in New York.* Blah, blah, blah, everything's terrible. Reps for Omnificent have now come out to say Lucky and Ryan broke up quietly a few months ago. Funny that they failed to mention that earlier.' Hannah tuts to herself, then carries on reading. '*Lucky hasn't been seen in public with Ryan since earlier this year following the death of his mother.* I suppose cheating on your girlfriend is one way to deal with grief.'

I flinch. Grief isn't something I joke about. I act as if I didn't hear what she said.

'It's happening again,' I say instead, thinking about the supposed curse.

'I know! Isn't it great?' Hannah says, completely misreading the apprehension in my tone. 'The scandals are already starting, and you're going to be front row for the whole thing.' She sighs to herself. 'I'd kill to watch this unfold with my own eyes.'

'I'll send you a postcard,' I mutter.

A melodic sound plays over the speakers in the lounge, followed by an announcement that my flight is ready to board. This is it then. I say my goodbyes to Hannah, who makes me promise to keep her updated on every small detail, then I hang up and start gathering my things before setting off for the gate.

As soon as I flash my ticket, I get ushered to the front of the crowded line as if I'm royalty. Once on board, a flight attendant offers me a glass of champagne or freshly squeezed orange juice. I choose the champagne. I'm not stupid. If I'm going to do this, I plan to enjoy every single perk that comes with it.

Another smiling attendant guides me to my seat, which is actually a suite with sliding panels to create privacy and a leather chair that folds down flat to make a bed. I've seen apartments in London with less space. And as if that's not enough, a first-class care package provides me with luxury bedding, a pillow, loungewear, slippers, an eye mask and a toiletry bag filled with mini essentials, such as a toothbrush

and hand cream. In economy, you're lucky to get leg room and a seat that nobody's kicking from behind.

In a little cubby under the TV screen is a bundle of magazines. I barely glimpse them as I reach over to see what movies I can line up for the flight, but then I realize Lucky Tate is staring back at me from the top cover. He looks like he's just fallen off a ruffled-hair, blue-eyed, Hollywood fuckboy conveyer belt. He has this easy grin that spreads over his face, and even in print it's like he's pinning me in place with his stare, looking *into* me. I may as well admit it right now – I have a huge crush on him. To put it simply, he's hot. *Stop you in your tracks, heartbeat fluttering* type of hot. But still, I won't let myself get distracted by a disarming smile. Nope. No way. I refuse to be that pathetic. I pick a magazine with Meryl Streep on the front and cover Lucky Tate. There. Problem solved. God love Meryl Streep.

When I settle back into my seat, I think I spot Tom Holland a little further down the aisle. I can't be sure because whoever it is has a cap and shades on, clearly not wanting to be disturbed, but that mixed with Lucky Tate is enough to make me feel a little dizzy. To take my mind off the crush I also have on Spider-Man, I check my phone, automatically opening my messages. The first thing I see is the text chain pinned to the top of my screen, and it instantly wipes my mind of anything else. It's probably not wise to keep it there, so visible, but I can't let go. It's a reminder of what I've lost. And now it's a reminder of why I'm doing this.

Thu 9 July 2020

Adam
I know you're probably still asleep
but can you call me when you wake up?
I don't care what time it is here, just
call me straight away. It's about Omni
and it's urgent. I don't know what's going
on but it's fucked up. Call me asap
06:04

No worries, false alarm!
Love you bro x
06:17

Me
Since when do you call me bro 🤢
Just woke up and called you but
no answer. Everything okay?
08:38

You must have crashed. I'm heading
to school. Call me when you wake up
09:02

I'm seeing stuff online.
Someone fell from a hotel roof in LA?
Isn't that where you're staying?
What's going on?
10:29

Adam, please pick up
10:31

Please . . .
10:36

My brother was only twenty-two. He'd gone to LA to pursue the job of a lifetime working on the reboot of *Sunset High*. He'd said it was going to be his big break because he never believed in maybes. For him, it was a matter of fact, written in the stars. He wanted to be a director. He used to always say, 'Hey, Abel, I'm going to write a script someday. You'll play the lead and we'll win an Oscar. Two Black brothers standing up on that stage together in front of all them white people, mad that we even got a foot in the door. You in?' I used to laugh because it seemed like a daydream to me. But I always said yes. He had it all mapped out, and nobody was going to stop him from getting there.

Nobody except Omnificent.

They said it was a tragic accident, and my brother's death was quickly swept under the rug when it was announced twelve hours later that Penelope Daunt had gone missing. Adam became nothing more than a nameless victim to a supposed curse. But I haven't forgotten. His last texts have played over and over in my head for three years. He wanted to tell me something about Omnificent, and I won't stop until I know what. I won't stop until I get the truth.

The plane begins to rattle as it sets off down the runway, and before I know it we're in the sky, climbing into the clouds, beginning our journey to LA. Possibility lingers on the horizon. Fear too. But so does revenge.