

**CASH  
ONLY**



There's a weird energy in the building. Jenna feels it in her gut; panic and dread churning together to create a fear of not knowing what she'll be fearful of later. It knots and dissipates in chaotic intervals, roiling on a discomfoting wave. She winces.

“Gas?” asks Mo.

“What? No,” replies Jenna, reemerging from her thoughts. “Sorry, it just feels... weird. Right?” She watches an agitated group wander around the lobby and argue with one another. “Is Mercury in retrograde?”

“What’s that mean?”

“I don’t know,” Jenna admits.

She and Mo stand behind the counter at the coffee shop in the lobby of the Roark, a recently opened mixed-used tower that has just gone on full lockdown. Internet and phone access is also disrupted, so they can only accept cash. There’s yet to be an explanation.

They’ve spent the last few minutes watching the scene unfold by the fountain, where three paramedics are arguing with the Knudsens. Walter and Evelyn Knudsen are penthouse residents and twice-daily regulars at the coffee shop, where they’re generally quite pleasant. Jenna has never seen them so worked up. Their small dog hops around their feet, its yips keeping the volume elevated.

The paramedics don't deserve this harassment. They were just responding to a fatal assault that had occurred moments earlier, right where Jenna is standing. They'd loaded the body onto the stretcher and made it halfway to the exit when the doors were abruptly sealed. Now they're all equally trapped and uninformed: the paramedics, the Knudsens, their dog, Mo, her. She winces again.

“Cramps?” asks Mo.

Jenna sighs. “No, I wish it were just cramps.”

The stretcher separates the paramedics from the Knudsens, with Jeremy’s corpse laid out beneath a sheet. Jeremy had also worked at the coffee shop, just minutes ago, but he’s since moved on, his body now serving as a barricade between two aggrieved parties who misdirect their frustrations at one another. The dog yips and leaps and clamps its jaws on the sheet, tugging hard as a paramedic quickly snatches it back, and the two engage in a spirited tug-of-war.

“Let’s just shut down,” says Jenna.

“Fine by me,” says Mo, “but is that your call to make?”

It isn’t. It’s EJ’s call to make, the manager-on-duty, but EJ excused themselves to use an upstairs bathroom, abandoning Jenna to take over in their absence. But by this deferment of power, she assumes that she holds the proper authority.

“Yeah,” she says, “let’s flip the lights off and drop the gate.”

Mo shrugs in compliance and walks around the counter to the light switches in the seating area, but pauses when the Jenkinse walk in, engaged in a loud dispute. “This is why I told you we should have run our errands this morning,” Laura Jenkins loudly complains to her husband.

“Oh yeah? *This* is why?” Marty contends. “You knew they were going to shut the whole fucking building down?”

Laura rolls her eyes as she approaches the counter, and Jenna expects her to order a non-fat latte with oat milk, per usual. But instead, she turns back to her husband. “Fuck you. You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t know what you mean. We stuck around the waiting room for as long as we did because we didn’t want to lose our place in line. We had an eight o’clock appointment, and—”

“*What* line? Everyone had an eight o’clock appointment, you fucking idiot!”

Marty wants to hit his wife and Jenna takes notice. Mo notices as well, and the coworkers share a look from across the room, wondering if they should interfere in some way.

“What?” Laura asks her husband, indicating toward the balled fist at his side. “You want to hit me because I called you a fucking idiot? If you’re so pissed about being a fucking idiot, then you shouldn’t be pissed at me. I didn’t make you a fucking idiot. Blame your mother; maybe she didn’t read to you enough at a young age. Blame the schools maybe, or just blame yourself. Actually, yeah, *blame yourself*. Punch yourself in the face for being such a fucking idiot. See if that helps.”

“Hey...” Jenna interrupts with one long, calming syllable, until Laura turns around to face her. “We were just about to close up, and...”

Laura cocks an eyebrow to punctuate a look of seething contempt, “...And you’re going to make my drink first? Great. You know what I get.” She pulls a credit card from her purse and drops it on the counter, then turns back around to face her husband, his teeth clenched behind pursed lips to hold back every hurtful thing he’s ever wanted to tell her.

“I’m sorry,” says Jenna, “but our processing system is down right now and we’re only accepting cash—”

“I don’t fucking care,” says Laura, her back to the counter, “just make my fucking latte. I spend enough money here; I deserve one for free.” She glances down at her husband’s fist, waiting for him to hit her. Right here, in public, with witnesses. She insists on it.

Jenna looks to Mo, still standing by the switches, who shrugs. “I’m sorry,” Jenna interrupts again, “do you not have cash then...?”

Laura snaps. She turns around sharply and slaps Jenna hard across the mouth with the back of her hand, a large diamond catching Jenna’s top lip. Jenna staggers backward into a workstation, knocking over some cups, but catches herself on the counter to prevent further calamity. She touches her lip, then stares dumbfounded at blood.

“Now make my fucking latte,” Laura demands, then leans over the counter to add, “bitch.”

Jenna is stunned silent.

There's commotion near the fountain as the stretcher is knocked over and Jeremy's body rolls out to trip a couple of paramedics. The Knudsens immediately launch a coordinated attack against the one left standing as their dog prances and yips them on. Jenna watches the scene escalate and forgets completely about her own situation.

And that's when the chair hits her face.

She never sees it coming and it drops her instantly, her nose taking the brunt of the impact. Curled up on the floor, she props herself upright with an elbow and makes the mistake of touching the wound. She wants to sob but it hurts too much. A snuffle nearly kills her.

"Don't you dare fucking ignore me!" Laura shrieks, leaning over the counter. She pauses to admire the damage she's wrought. Among the broken glass, stirrers, and a couple sleeves of disposable cups, Jenna writhes on the ground, cupping a hand over her nose. She's losing a lot of blood, all flowing along along a crevice of her wrist, down her forearm, and pooling at the elbow she's using for support. She slips.

"Get up!" Laura demands. "Get my fucking latte!"

It takes her a moment to reorient herself, but Jenna eventually climbs back to her feet to face Laura across the counter, who's glaring at her with arms crossed. "Well?" she asks.

Jenna should answer her, and she knows this, yet she is too entranced by the unfolding riot in the lobby. Residents of the building, most already established regulars at the coffee shop, are clashing with timid security guards. Through the melee, Jenna can make out Jeremy's lifeless face, his body now uncovered as it's splayed out on the ground. It looks like he's staring at her, but then she remembers that it's not really him. He's gone.

She's slapped hard, then again, but is spared a third when a security guard announces his presence in the room, as if that could be enough to quell the violence. Instinctively, Marty picks up a chair and swings it at the guard's face, landing across his jaw and sending him straight to the floor.

“Marty! Why’d you do that?” his wife asks.

“I don’t know!”

For some strange and stupid reason, this brazen act of senseless violence arouses Laura. Her husband the brute. “That was kind of hot,” she tells him. “Do it again. Then get his gun.”

The guard picks himself up from the floor and begs for calm, and Jenna wonders why he doesn't just use his taser to defend himself? Or his gun? Why resort to begging? Jesus, she thinks, if this is how he’d intended to manage the situation, why even come at all? Then she sees Marty grab another chair and she quickly shields her eyes and squeals, loud and long to drown out the gore.

When she expects the worst to be over, she quiets down and can hear Mo crying out for help. Then Jenna opens her eyes at the precise moment of impact as another chair strikes her, again on the nose. She plops back down into her puddle of blood.

“Help!” she cries out painfully through her broken nose, then a gun fires and she’s reduced to bawling. None of this makes any sense, she thinks. The Jenkinses were always bad banter and lousy tips, but they’d never seemed like murderers.

There’s a second gunshot and Jenna knows how the math works out. Either she’s safe and the Jenkinses were shot, or she’s the next to go after Mo and the security guard. Like Jeremy before them. She shuts her eyes tight, but Jeremy’s face is burned into the back of her eyelids.

Then she feels something softly land on her, like a piece of paper. A napkin, maybe? She slowly opens her eyes and realizes that it’s a five-dollar bill.

“That’s so funny,” Laura says, laughing. “I coulda sworn that I didn’t have any cash on me.” The gun in her hand bobs while she chuckles.

“That’s irony, right?” She looks back to her husband, “Hey babe, did I use ‘irony’ right?”

“Sure did, babe. You’re doing great.”

“Anyway,” she says, staring down at Jenna, seeing her as less than a person; as a thing that provides some other simple, stupid thing that she regularly consumes but has presently lost interest in.

“I’ve changed my mind on the latte.”

*Cash Only* takes place during Chapter 9 of *The Roark*, an upcoming novel, and occurs after the events of *In Death He’s Briefly Kevin*, a short story.