



**JOVE
BRAND
IS NEAR
DEATH**

J. A. CRAWFORD

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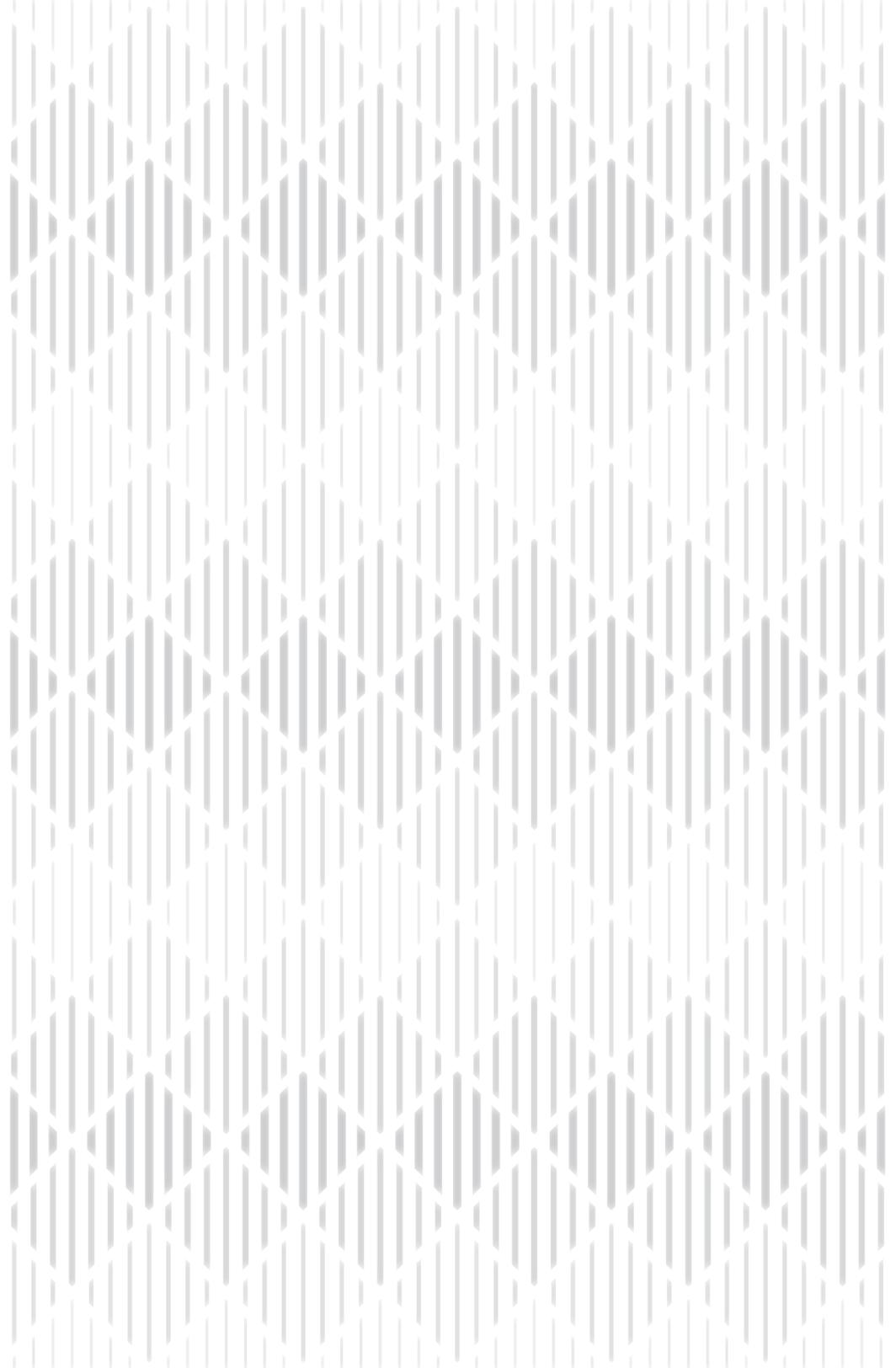
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To all the folks who ever knocked me around.

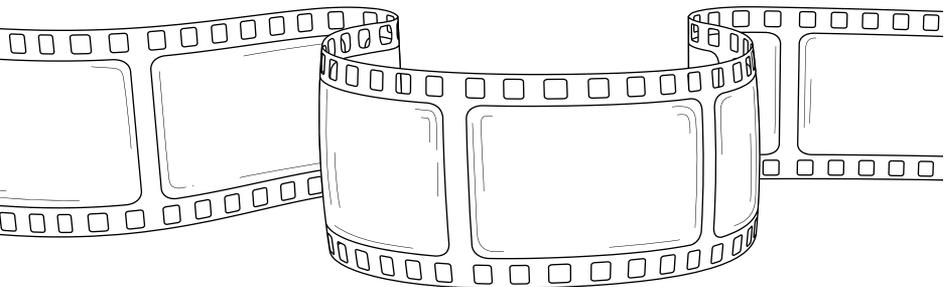
Thanks, I needed that.

*And to my wife, who, when I was down for the count,
convinced me to go just one more round.*



A stylized graphic featuring a grey silhouette of a man in a suit holding a handgun, set against a large white circle. A film strip graphic curves across the top of the image. The text 'Introducing Ken Allen' is centered over the silhouette.

Introducing Ken Allen



1

I WAS WAITING IN THE WINGS, STARING OUT AT A LIVE studio audience with seven million viewers behind them, and like everything that had ever happened to me worth mentioning, it was because of *Near Death*.

I looked good for my age, trim in my salmon blazer over a blue button-down and brushed-watercolor tie. Vintage Ken Allen, on the bare fringe of pop culture I occupied. For all intents and purposes, I was born in this outfit and had no doubt I would be buried in it. At least the jacket hid the wet patches under my arms.

“We might not even need you.”

The executive producer was hoping for the best, but you didn’t keep *Beautiful Downtown Burbank* running every Friday night for

thirty years without preparing for the worst. Which was why they dug me up. If there was one thing I was good at, it was taking the hit. If the scene needed saving, I would make the perfect sacrifice.

“Keep an eye on the monitors. Come back when the house band wraps up.”

It wasn't the most tactful way of telling me to get lost, but the guy had a lot on his mind.

“Just happy to be here,” I told him. I'd been living a lie for eighteen years, why not keep it going?

I turned away from the stage that didn't want me and wandered around behind the scenes, following the pre-show progress on the countless monitors mounted in the halls and cramped dressing rooms, both dreading and praying they would need me.

On the far side of an open dressing-room door, a drop-dead gorgeous woman was doing her own makeup. I didn't mean to stare, but it was hard not to, with her making those getting-ready faces that, for whatever reason, I had always found hotter than anything a woman did after getting ready. She was glamorous in an evening gown that had Brand Beauty written all over it.

She caught me reflecting. “Yeah?”

“Sorry. Just killing time until someone tells me to go home.”

“What are you here for? Like, who are you?”

I wasn't offended. All those fuses were blown long ago. I wasn't surprised either. *Beautiful Downtown Burbank* was known for its young cast.

“I'm nobody,” I said. “But once upon a time, I was Jove Brand.”

“No you weren't.” She looked up to think, ticking off the timeline on her fingers. “First it was the mean guy— so hot— then the prissy guy, before Sir Collin.”

“I was between the prissy guy and Sir Collin.”

She didn't reply, but her face said it all. Claiming you were Jove Brand was too big of a lie. You'd be better off pretending you were an astronaut or had invented touch screens. I took my phone off airplane mode and typed *Ken Allen Near Death*. It knew what I wanted when I got to the *N* in *Near Death*.

The first image result was me, eighteen years ago, pointing a pistol at the camera. I was trying for tough but came off looking confused about how this lemon tasted.

Pretend Brand Beauty—though I suppose they were all pretend—snatched my phone and swiped through the sequence of images that all too accurately told my life story. She stopped on the one of me holding up a container of Kick-A-Noodles.

“Nice.”

“A week's worth of sodium in one little can.” It was one of the ten or so responses I had ready for one-time exchanges. Meet a hundred thousand people sometime and you'll develop a list too.

Brand Beauty handed my phone back with an appraising tilt of the head, trying to decide if she liked what she saw. She stroked the front of my salmon blazer. “This isn't from props.”

“I brought my own.”

“You got the look, kid,” she said, giving my cheek a squeeze.

My blessing and my curse. “You can't get by on looks alone.”

I stepped aside to let her pass. She turned back, just out of arm's reach. That was when I caught the act. Until then her performance had been flawless.

“I'm just screwing with you, Ken. Everyone is so hyped you made it. *Near Death* is such a piece of shit. I love it.”

I didn't step on her exit. That girl was going places. I hoped they would be good ones. On the monitors, the cold open was

crashing hard. The tension in the air said it all—Jove Brand was in the building, and the audience was restless for his entrance.

I reminded myself to breathe on the path back to stage right. Jove Brand almost ran me over, but I stepped aside in time. He walked onstage ready for action, the king of his jungle.

Bone dry under glaring, thousand-degree spotlights and 14 million eyeballs, Collin Prestor—sorry, *Sir* Collin Prestor—made a tuxedo look like casual wear. There was acting and there was acting and then there was being able to control when you sweat. Whether it came with British blood or was the product of a Shakespearean theater pedigree I would never know. Lawndale, California, wasn't exactly London, England.

The audience went wild. The world's most famous fictional superspy stood before them. Women wanted him. Men wanted to be him. And Jove Brand was about to announce his chosen successor to the waiting world.

That successor now stepped from the shadows to stand beside me in the wings, waiting for his grand entrance. Niles Endsworth would be the next Jove Brand. He bore the same label as his predecessor, but of modern vintage, with a body sculpted by a strict regimen designed to produce a physique like a special effect. I couldn't fault Niles. He was just giving today's audience what they demanded in a hero.

Despite everything Niles had on his mind, I rated a second glance. He had been expecting the Ken Allen of eighteen years past, an image imprisoned in cinematic infamy. The kid was a good actor. He was almost able to mask his disappointment.

When his cue came, Niles snapped to the present and rushed to join his predecessor on stage. The merest sheen of perspiration betrayed the junior man's anxiety. His calculated display won the

audience over. They'd be freaking out too, if they had been chosen to be the next Jove Brand. But the next Jove Brand would also have the nerve to mask it.

The two Brands, old and new, discussed the perks of playing an icon of fiction. You wore tailored clothes while driving luxury vehicles to exclusive locales. You could kill anyone who annoyed you. You always got the girl, who either conveniently died or disappeared between escapades. They played their roles to the hilt, master and apprentice. The production assistants could have ditched their cue cards and snagged a sandwich for all the good they were doing.

The problem was no one laughed. The part of Jove Brand had never been cast based on comedic chops. Fault for the only farcical portrayal of the character landed squarely on me and no one was looking to repeat that mistake. Sir Collin and Niles were gifted the perfunctory chuckles any incredibly attractive person with half a sense of humor scores, but the audience rapidly cooled as the initial rush of watching two Jove Brands together faded.

Beautiful Downtown Burbank's executive producer white-knuckled his headset, waving me toward the stage like it was a live grenade in need of a warm body. *This is what you're here for, isn't it?*

Yes, yes it was.

A life lesson: Go at whatever you're dreading full tilt. Sprint right into it. The worst thing that could happen was the entire world got to witness the train wreck for time eternal. That your epic failure would become an object lesson studied—literally—in college courses. That you became a walking punch line.

It really wasn't so bad.

I exploded onto the stage with a butterfly twist, transitioning into a flurry of fancy kicks, battling through a horde of unseen foes

toward Sir Collin and Niles. I kept the phantom attacks wide and slow to ensure the audience could follow along. This was all on me. I'd choreographed the sequence myself, drawing from an arsenal of techniques made instinctual through decades of dogged repetition. If you had enough tenacity, you could fool people into believing it was talent.

I hit my mark an arm's length from the two Brands. Right on the bull's-eye. My surprise appearance had shocked the audience into complete silence. A small section of the crowd hooted, then the hoots built to applause and my heart started up again. Some of them were ringers but the rest sounded like my demographic—hipsters in the know.

I stretched the moment, resting my hands on my thighs as if I had come a long way. Pretending to catch my breath let me avoid eye contact not only with the audience but also with the two men who were arguably my contemporaries.

Sir Collin and Niles turned to face the interloper who had fought his way into their conversation. The consummate pro, Sir Collin held his expression through the cheers, freezing the scene for as long as it had legs. Meanwhile, my stomach explored heretofore unknown depths. When the crowd quieted, the time had come for me to deliver my first line.

“Sorry, my good men,” I panted. “Bike broke down. Asian imports, you know?”

It was a good thing I was supposed to sound breathless. My American-*cum*-British accent was atrocious. I could have done better, but who wanted that?

It didn't get a huge laugh, but the audience members in on the joke lost their minds. No one wrote for the audience anymore, anyway. They wrote for the internet, for the bloggers, the tweeters,

and the streamers. They let the fans explain the references in postmortem. There was nothing like free labor, and no one worked as hard as someone made to feel smart.

“How *did* you get in here?” Sir Collin asked. Stressing the *did*, not the *you*, kept the question at the appropriate level of condescending. Considering the audience’s reaction to my appearance, it was the right choice.

“Who is he?” Niles asked.

Sir Collin moved to block the younger man’s view. “No one worth remembering. Now, as I was saying, a gentleman shoots only once, and never first.”

I stepped out from behind Sir Collin to add, “But he chops as many throats as required.”

Don’t ask me why, but that’s when I ad-libbed. Not a line, not on live television—I’m not a monster. I offered an unplanned hand to Niles, who furtively extended his own in return. As we were about to touch, I turned my shake into a knife-hand aimed at his Adam’s apple. Niles hopped back, genuinely shocked. I threw him a wink and a nod, my eyes a little crazy.

The big screens facing the audience had been playing a *Near Death* highlight montage from the moment I crashed the sketch. Now that everyone was in on the joke that was Ken Allen, the entire studio erupted in laughter at my action and Niles’s reaction. It was a dizzying level of hot onstage. I reminded myself to not lock my knees.

Sir Collin moved between us again, precise in rhythm and position. The stage was his native turf, the sacred ground he retreated to when he wasn’t playing a super-spy. He was fighting for Niles’s attention now.

“He always looks his foe in the eyes.”

The strain in Sir Collin's voice projected concern his successor was learning all the wrong lessons.

"Then gouges them!" I interrupted, darting my fingers at Niles like a striking snake. I mimed a second, goofier gouge as Sir Collin put an arm around my shoulders. He turned our backs to Niles for a confidential moment as we switched cameras, me and Sir Collin and the millions watching at home.

"Ken, old boy, I'm trying to impart some wisdom on the lad," Sir Collin said. "You understand, don't you?"

Trust me, I did. Sir Collin had starred in six Jove Brand movies over fifteen years, each more successful than the last. If anyone could speak with authority on how to play Brand, it was him. He was so authentic, so genuine, it made me want to leave. But that wasn't the scene.

I hoped my attempt at a wide-eyed, thoughtful nod conveyed understanding. "Oooh. Sorry about that, Sir Collin." I forgot to use my crappy British accent, but breaking character fortuitously worked for the scene. The audience roared at every beat. Opening monologues were tough pitches to hit, and the writers had knocked this one out of the park.

"There's a good man." Sir Collin gave me a pat I liked a little too much before turning to again address Niles. "Now, when a lady demurs—"

"Chop gently, but firmly," I interrupted again, "right where—"

Sir Collin silenced me with a no-look elbow—a short, tight shot, measured to be effective but not punitive. His gentlemen's strike sent me airborne. I managed a full rotation from a dead stance and hit the stage flat with a resounding thud. Not trusting myself to appear unconscious, I buried my face in the crook of my arm.

The crowd cheered while Sir Collin adjusted his cuffs. “And there you have it.”

He assured the audience they had a great show lined up, though when he announced the musical guest, it was apparent Sir Collin had no idea who they were. When they cut to commercials, I hopped up as the stagehands broke down the set for the next sketch.

The executive producer flagged me down with one arm while pumping his fist with the other. He wasn’t in the best shape and the effort turned his face red. “You killed it. Don’t go anywhere. Prestor is a dud. We might work in a callback.”

I froze, trying to process this as the producer stomped off to put out the next fire. He said two things I hadn’t heard in a long time: that I’d done a good job and that I should hang around. I snapped back to reality and headed toward the green room. Niles Endsworth was there, sipping a sparkling water. Hydrating, but not overhydrating. You never knew when you were going to have to take your shirt off.

I shot Niles a friendly, wide-eyed nod as if to say *Crazy, huh?* but I don’t think he saw me. He looked like he was beginning to grasp what it meant to be Jove Brand, his eyes flicking back and forth like he was watching different versions of his future unfold on the monitors.

I could relate.

“Hey! Ken! Ken Allen!”

I knew who it was without having to look. Layne Lackey, owner and operator of JoveBrandFan.com, the number-one place for everything Jove Brand on the web. Layne Lackey, equal parts savior and devil.

“Ken, it’s Layne Lackey. From JoveBrandFan.com, the number-one—”

“Layne! How’re ya!?” I spread my arms for a hug and Layne took a step back. There was nothing like overenthusiasm when it came to setting someone on their heels. “You afraid of doorways?”

“Pass excludes the green room,” Layne replied, dangling his lanyard. “Can I get a shot of you and Niles Endsworth for the site?”

A glance back told me Niles would rather drink from the tap than perform fan service right then and there.

“Producers need Niles for promo crap.” I stepped to block Layne’s line of fire. Niles slipped past us as if he were late for something. Become an actor and never get work. Become a star and never stop acting.

“You were great, Ken.” Layne always used your name, like he had to constantly confirm to himself he was really talking to you.

“We’ll let trending decide.” I guided Layne away from the backstage chaos of live television. “That and my convention take. I have an appearance in Fresno coming up.”

“Already plugged it on the site,” Layne said. “The platinum pistol is going to be there too. Well, one of the five originals.”

“Double billing.” I was able to keep most of the salt out of my tone. “Sounds like they’re starting up again.”

“I’ll catch the replay,” Layne said, adjusting the settings on too much camera. “I’m going to run Niles down and ask if he’s ever thought about doing conventions.”

I didn’t wish him luck.

The Brand Beauty was on the monitors in a sketch where she brazenly threw herself at Sir Collin, who was more interested in the strapping bartender. He killed it but got few laughs. Sir Collin was simply too understated for the American audience.

I winced at the screen. Watching other people bomb struck my most tender places. It was an empathy thing. I sought solace in

Sir Collin's dressing room, telling myself it was out of everyone's way, but that was just me telling myself. The truth was, I wanted to sit in his chair.

I wasn't bitter. Sir Collin deserved everything he'd earned. His Brand movies really were better than the early ones, though the lens of nostalgia kept the fans from acknowledging it. His performances helped restore the series to the juggernaut it had been in the sixties and seventies. I wanted to be Sir Collin the way I had once wanted to play guitar in Nirvana. The ability was simply beyond me. It was a pipe dream—only it wasn't. I had been Jove Brand, once.

But *Near Death* was indeed a piece of shit.

"Harsh lights, wouldn't you say?"

Sir Collin's voice was purely chummy, but it launched me out of his chair.

"Sorry, Sir Collin." When in doubt, it was best to come clean. "Guess you caught me."

Sir Collin waved my apology off as he came over to stand with me at the dressing table. "Of all the moments we spend in the light, these are the ones I dread the most. Having to face myself, every flaw exposed."

He was right. His age showed in the bulb-bordered mirror. Jove Brand was not a young man, but he could never be an old one. Four walls and two generations away, the musical guest kicked in as if on cue. If anyone deserved accompaniment, it was Sir Collin.

"You saved me out there. Thanks, old boy."

"I don't have range, but I know my role," I replied.

"I didn't want to do this, you know," Sir Collin said. "Every time such an offer is tendered, I tell myself it's more money for the troupe, to put on the shows we want. Being Jove Brand has given my fellows a life on the stage."

I'd read as much but took it for PR until that moment. "Same here. But I did want to be a great Jove Brand. Problem was, I did my best."

Sir Collin laughed as he rested his hands on my shoulders. "Without your film, I would not be here, and the fifty men and women I support would have been forced to abandon their dreams. Tonight, you again displayed a true player's spirit, putting the show before the man."

It was the nicest thing anyone had said to me in eighteen years. I lost my voice. I couldn't even look at Sir Collin.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I'm off to sneak a drag or two before my next sketch," Sir Collin said. I managed a nod as he gave me a last squeeze and left me in reflection.

Going purely on appearance, I was the spitting image of Jove Brand as described in the books. The passionless killer. The distant lover. Tall and pale, with light blond hair and ice-blue eyes. A face and body reminiscent of renaissance sculpture. But sculpture didn't come to life, which also accurately described my acting.

I looked more the part now. Eighteen years ago I was eighteen years too young, but casting had been tight. *Near Death's* entire pre-production took place on a flight from Kiev to Hong Kong. Had the internet of today existed then, my tender age would have caused the same uproar it did with Niles Endsworth now. A combination of professional discipline and CGI smoothing had sustained Sir Collin for a spell, but his time had come. Soon he would meet his fate—most likely during a pre-credit sequence—and the alias of Jove Brand, Royal Gamesman, would be passed to Niles.

The executive producer burst into the dressing room, breaking my self-indulgent reverie.

"I didn't do it, I swear," I said.

“Where the hell is Sir Collin?”

The executive producer bent over to rest his hands on his knees. The dash to the dressing room had left him about a burpee away from a heart attack. I checked the monitors. The *Beautiful Downtown Burbank* regulars were dying on stage as they fumbled through a cut sketch.

“He left like five minutes ago,” I said to his back.

I trailed after him, hunting for one of the most recognizable faces in the world. The EP was coordinating the show and the search simultaneously through his headset. “Go to break while we set up the house band. I don’t care. Wait—the national anthem. It makes everyone clap.”

We checked the coatroom, then the coke room, but found no sign of Sir Collin. The EP leaned against the wall to stay on his feet. “A-listers,” he wheezed.

He was worried about the show, but I was worried about Sir Collin. Stage royalty didn’t miss their mark. Sir Collin did not require an understudy. Sir Collin was his own stand-in. Then I remembered.

“He went to smoke.”

The EP almost bowled me over reversing course, but when we hit the stairs up to the roof I overtook him, ascending the flights in bounds, ignoring the handrail as I regulated my breath. While I came off as having Asperger’s in reflective close-up, I owned interval cardio. I hip-checked the door, expecting resistance, but it blasted open. Instinct forged by thirty years on the mat sent my forearm up to block the backswing.

The bare bulb above the doorway cut into the night sky. Sir Collin was on his knees at the edge of the light, clutching at his collar. The asthmatic EP had me thinking heart attack.

Then I saw the bloody pits where Sir Collin's eyes should have been.

"I got you," I said, reaching for where he was groping.

It wasn't his collar he was looking to open. It was his airway. Sir Collin's Adam's apple was crushed, his throat swollen past his jawline. I tore his shirt open, spraying buttons everywhere. He was turning blue. His state triggered uncomfortable flashbacks. It was happening all over again, and all over again I was helpless to stop it. I forced him onto his back and rifled through his pockets, praying he was a cigar smoker.

The EP finally caught up. When he saw Sir Collin, he coughed up a string of curses.

My heart plunged when I found a case of custom gold-banded cigarettes. "You got a knife?"

Sir Collin was gulping air like a fish out of water. The EP wasn't doing much better. I jumped to my feet and patted him down.

"Call 911. Do you carry a knife?"

"Why . . . why . . ."

Near Death and everything it cost flashed before my eyes.

"This isn't the first time I've run into this. We need to cut his airway open."

The rooftop was an island fifteen stories high. I scanned the area, hoping for a tool box, but didn't spot so much as a door stop. The neighboring building had a broken window, but the glass shards were out of reach. I dodged knocking heads with the EP and yelled down the stairs for medical.

All the while Sir Collin was drowning on dry land, kicking and clawing at the gravel. I tilted his head in an attempt to open his airway to no avail. There was nothing else left but to talk to him. I took my lines straight from cliché.

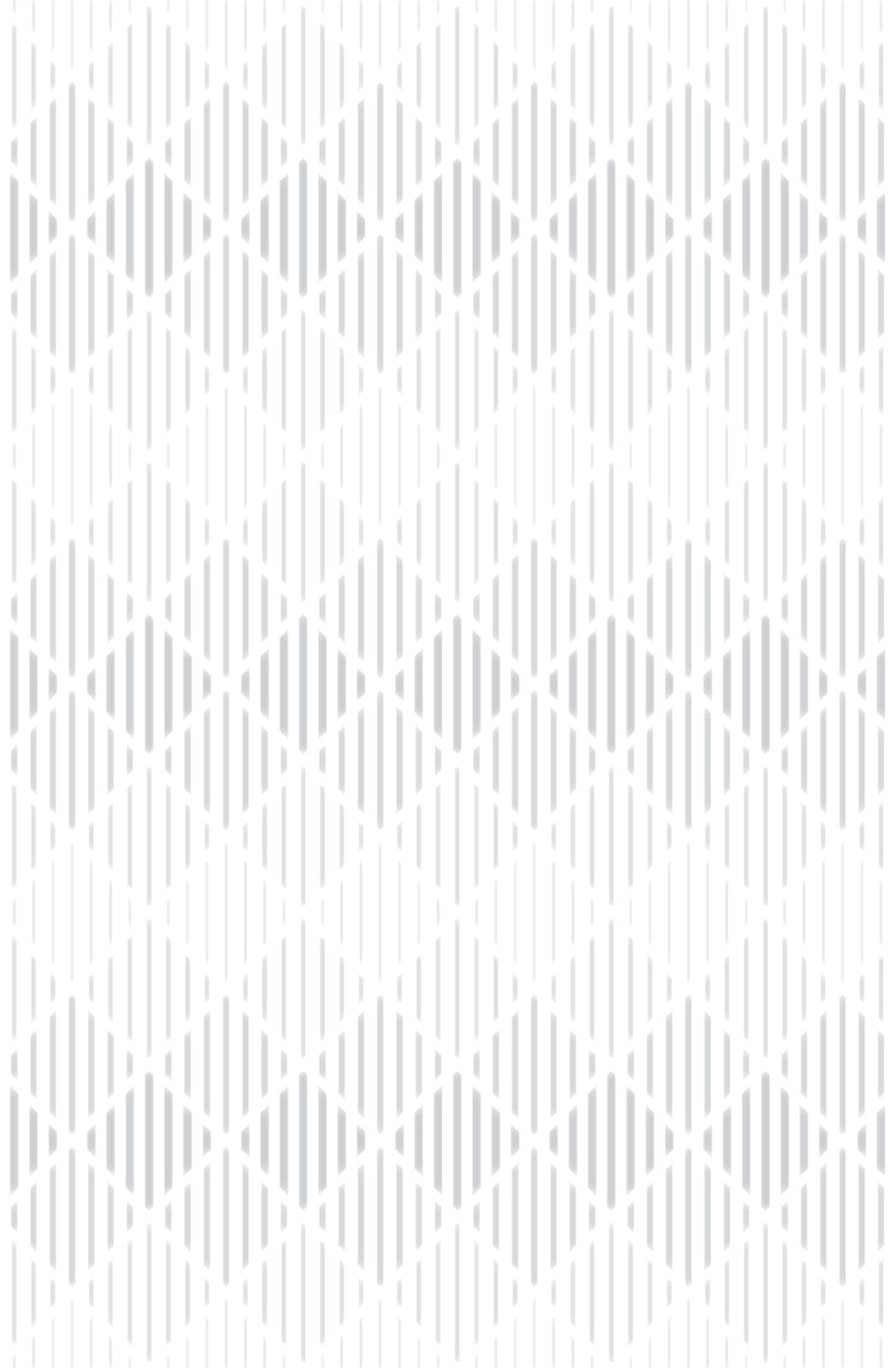
JOVE BRAND IS NEAR DEATH

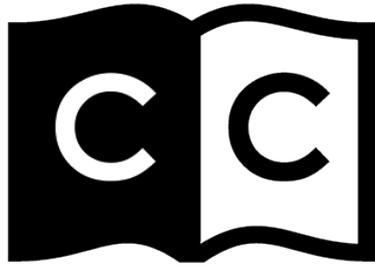
“Hold on. Stay with me, Sir Collin.”

His lips were moving, mouthing the same windless word over and over, but I couldn't make out what word. I wish I could say Sir Collin went peacefully, but he fought until the end, groping and scratching, gasping and pleading.

Sir Collin Prestor died in my arms on that rooftop, his eyes gouged out and his throat crushed.

Just like the villain at the end of *Near Death*.





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**These days Ken Allen is
a nobody. But once upon a time,
his name was Brand.**

JOVE BRAND.

Eighteen years ago, Ken Allen played the famous fictional superspy in *Near Death*, a movie so bad it was never meant to be seen. Since then, Ken has faded into cult obscurity, but when his celebrated successor is killed in the same ghastly fashion as the villain in *Near Death*, Ken is cast as the prime suspect.

The only way for Ken to clear his name is to go full method and once again play the part of Jove Brand, except this time it's for real. As murder surrounds him, the secrets behind *Near Death* Ken fought to keep buried for eighteen years begin to surface.



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