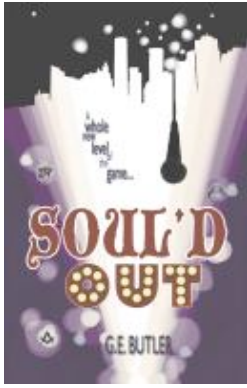




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game...

**SOUL'D
OUT**

G.E. BUTLER



A twenty-something singer, famous since childhood, finds herself on the verge of superstardom, where she discovers the ghastly price exacted for worldwide fame, the truth of her origins, and the sick secrets of the entertainment industry.

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SOUL'D OUT

G.E. Butler

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CHAPTER 1

Beatrice called it Ghosting: walking among regular people totally unnoticed. She tucked her weave under a beanie or hoodie, wore baggy jeans, no makeup, and sometimes didn't even need the shades. On the subway she heard her music spilling out of people's earbuds, but they didn't see her, even when she sat right next to them. The train was the best place to be invisible because the natives didn't look at each other — no matter how closely packed — out of respect for each other's space.

Lately she was doing it more often than usual. Whenever the driver dropped her off at rehearsal Beatrice told him he didn't really have to wait for her, she would call him when she was done. Her mother had no idea, but Beatrice knew it would catch up to her if she wasn't careful. The last time, she made it back to the studio and into her practice clothes right as Tammy pulled up outside.

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Nic went ghosting with her sometimes, though only a few people knew who he was anyway, and those people didn't ride the subway or hang out in the streets. His father headed one of the most successful labels in the music world — her label — but he made friends with Beatrice last summer when she was ghosting at Mandolin Brothers on Staten Island, messing around on an acoustic guitar. Neither one of them knew who the other was, but Nic recognized the riffs she was playing from an old tune his father produced. Nic thought “B” was a boy at first. Their rapport was instant.

With regret and by necessity they parted without sharing any personal information. Then one day they were introduced in front of his father at the Grammys and their bond was sealed when Nic recognized her but acted like he was meeting her for the first time. From then on, with her mother's approval, they became friends and he accompanied her to rehearsals or the studio whenever her mother was unavailable.

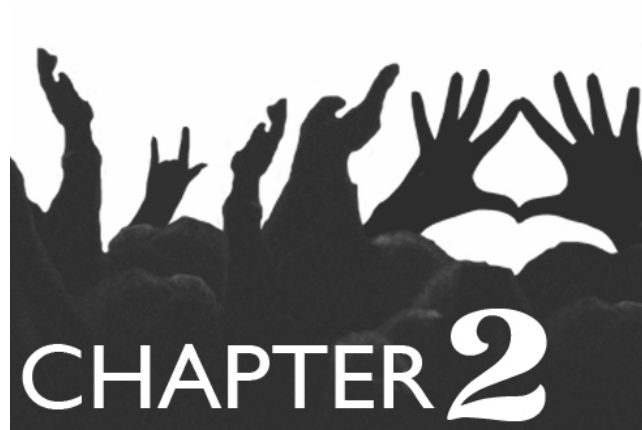
One night instead of rehearsal Nic took Beatrice to a party in Tribeca.

“Incognegro. Glass House,” Nic texted her. She deleted the message and hid her iPhone in its usual spot, switching it out for “B's” Blackberry. Ever since she lost her phone the first time she ghosted, Beatrice carried a totally clean one that forwarded calls or texts from her mother only. Grabbing her dance gear, she slipped out of the apartment; her mother didn't look up from her laptop screen from where she sat in the living room. The doorman had already called up to tell them Nic's Range Rover was waiting at the curb outside.

None of them knew it yet, but this was the last night of Beatrice's freedom. The next time she would ghost would be a year later, when she was one of the most famous people in

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the world, when no one would believe she could slip into a church in Brooklyn and be just another face in the crowd.



There aren't many buildings in Tribeca that were paid for in cash. But Thadeus Rawls' had been. In a creative accounting move, the biggest movie studio in America purchased it for him as a write-off and means of payment. His house was where he did his best work, after all. Throwing parties was only a part of it.

The Glass House was designed to stun. Soaring windows swathed in thousands of dollars worth of fine silk, sofas that stretched twenty feet and cost as much as a luxury car, and furniture of such highly burnished wood it appeared to be made of gold decorated the first level. On five equally grand floors were an Olympic pool and gymnasium with a basketball court, three full service kitchens and a business center. Impeccably chic entertaining spaces and dining rooms along with guest rooms and living quarters for the large staff who rarely, if ever, left the premises occupied the rest of the building.

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Thadeus Rawls was retained by every major film studio and record label, not to mention global corporations, certain law firms, and the government. Though he called himself a contract man specializing in insurance and risk management, he was known for his decadent gatherings, immortalized in the Mezziah classic “King”: “My dick gets hard/ just thinkin’ bout Trawls.”

The first action guests made at the Glass House was surrendering their cell phones. It made everyone — especially the celebrities — feel more comfortable. Gibbs, head of security, collected them into official police evidence bags, labeled and sealed, then placed them into a wall safe right by the entrance behind his giant frame. During a party the nearly eight-foot man never left his post by the door.

One night in February was Kiddie Night, as Thadeus called his Oscar viewing party. Since most of the A-list was in Los Angeles to attend the event, he gathered what remained of the powerful and famous — mainly musicians, younger stars and the children of the most connected — along with the adults who floated around their periphery: certain directors, producers, and show runners. If a person didn’t make it to The Hollywood & Highland Center for the main event or onto the lists of the right parties afterwards, an invite to the Glass House was the goal of the truly ambitious. Every year Thadeus watched part of his previous year’s guest list graduate to the annual ceremonies for both film and music, some even taking home a gold statue or two. Thadeus had the eye and could always tell who was next up, even before it became obvious. This year he was betting on Skip Gray, a fifteen-year-old phenomenon being called the second coming of Michael Jackson, to lock up the Grammys someday. A sweep wouldn’t be for a couple of years, as the teen had a bit more grooming to go through, but his qualities were

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undeniable. When Skip Gray was at the top of the invite list emailed to Thadeus the day prior, the child's status as guest of honor was sealed.

Skip would be attending the party by himself, his security detail left to wait with the other bodyguards on the bottom floor of the building. This protocol was practiced without exception, even for the highest ranked politicians. Skip's young single mother, usually at his side for events like this, was still recovering from her last visit to the Glass House celebrating Skip's latest platinum record, and though the invitation was extended to her, she demurred and let her son attend alone.

As was customary, the younger guests and major league athletes arrived later in the evening; dinner was served to the others in the main dining room where huge antique mirrors slid back into wall panels to reveal large screens showing Zeta Leafwing's Oscar night interview special. Being the subject of a Zeta interview was the ambition of everyone in the entertainment business, though her Oscar special was the highest honor and had come to be watched by more people around the world than the awards themselves. The night's interviewees were iconic singer-actress Mylita Crescent and hip-hop mogul Mezziah, his interview being an unheard of second one in a row. Both were nominated for Oscars for their performances in the film "The Lightworker" as well as each coming off world tours and albums with reported record-breaking sales in the hundreds of millions. Mezziah and Mylita's faces and names were as recognizable throughout the world as Jesus, according to CNN, and were second and third in personal earnings on the *Forbes* entertainers list to Zeta herself, a media mogul of unprecedented wealth and influence.

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Thadeus was an expert at planning and hosting events and never used outside assistance. As powerful in his own right as he was, he saw himself as a servant and was practically incapable of sitting down and eating or otherwise enjoying himself at his parties like his guests did. "It's how I was raised," he would laugh, jumping up from a sofa or a dinner table to make sure a guest was comfortable, or disappearing to see that his staff was working to his strict specifications.

Though he was often asked, Thadeus smoothly evaded sharing where he found his impeccably trained and gorgeous staff members. "Goddamn, Thad," a high-powered agent told Thadeus one night at a small dinner gathering on the rooftop balcony, "I could turn any one of your waitresses into a star. They're all supermodels!" The owner of the global lingerie company across from him nodded in agreement. The editor of the fashion industry's most respected publication smiled cryptically and inclined her head.

But the agent's date, an actual supermodel, blanched. This was their first time at the Glass House and she didn't want the chance of being invited back ruined due to his poor manners. The fact was her agent was a glorified pimp and she had signed her life away to him as a teenager out of pure ignorance. She was his career meal ticket and resented every dollar he made from her substantial earnings, but breaking her contract carried stiff penalties and even if she left him, he would retain rights to all her earnings in perpetuity. Plus, he literally fucked her in his office the day of her contract signing. "They're not waitresses, you idiot. They're called servants," she hissed, then flashed her famous smile at Thadeus and the other guests, a governor and department store magnate among them.

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“Waitresses, servants, slaves,” the agent laughed up into the face of the woman refilling his wine glass. “What’s the difference, right?” The server’s placid expression didn’t change for a second.

Thadeus grinned and chuckled softly. He looked at the young woman and subtly motioned for her to put down the wine bottle. “Elizabeth, please take care of our guest.”

At that moment, Elizabeth gracefully crouched down next to the agent’s chair and crawled beneath the table. Thadeus and his guests watched as surprise came over the agent’s face, then his eyes closed and a moment later his mouth hung open in ecstasy.

“Well how’s that for service,” the governor laughed. Thadeus raised a finger and more of his female employees appeared beside the rest of the men and women’s chairs, then dropped to the ground and disappeared beneath the table. After a few moments all that could be heard were the sounds of his guests panting and moaning. When all were finished, the staff emerged from under the table to disappear back into the main apartment, and Elizabeth resumed serving the meal. That was a tame night at the Glass House.

Thadeus was good at his job as a host and entertainer of the upper echelon of the spoiled elite but he was being put on his game in recent years. “There’s nothing new under the sun,” he liked to say, and needed to constantly reach to exceed his own reputation among guests who had come to expect transcendent experiences at the Glass House. The House’s décor was changed out with the seasons at a cost in excess of seven figures. When guests stole objects from the property as they often did, their thrill of theft was never ruined, and a discreet invoice was sent to the appropriate

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studio, label or handler; the bills were paid immediately and without question. The largest invoice sent was for five million dollars when a movie star sliced a Monet from its frame and rolled the canvas up, stuffing it into her pant leg. Thadeus was sorry to see it go — it had really tied that particular bathroom together — but expected something to happen to it, what with a box-cutter in the vanity drawer. The footage was more than enough consolation.

The crux of Thadeus' business in insurance and risk management was the technological capabilities of the Glass House itself. The nervous system of his property was its peerless surveillance program. Within the House's layers of indestructible glass and soundproofing was a world where even the smallest noise and movement was recorded. Sensors were carpeted throughout the structure, ones that could not only read the height and weight of the individual standing in a particular spot, but also physiological events such as blood pressure. Every line going in and out of the House was controlled, and every current going over those lines was subject to manipulation as well. When guests opted to spend the night in any one of his numerous bedrooms, the phones and computers provided were connected to Thadeus' control center. There was always someone else on the line or dialed in, always someone watching and listening, and that person was usually Danny Trager, the House Mouse.

Danny, a twenty-one-year-old who hacked into Planned Parenthood and released thousands of abortion records on a website called *HoShit.com* in protest of his divorced mother's promiscuity and its multiple consequences, was someone Thadeus knew he had to have for his team. Believed to be an original operative of the anonymous global hacking consortium Redacted, Danny seemingly lost and returned to his senses during the Planned Parenthood brouhaha and as

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contrition offered his services to the organization as a technology security consultant, but was flatly refused. Then suddenly the whole matter dropped off the collective radar and the public's attention was turned elsewhere, something relatively easy to accomplish through a couple of Thadeus' phone calls combined with the rapid nature of the news cycle. Of course no one knew that Danny had been snapped up as head of technology at the Glass House. Danny jumped at the chance to give up his old life in exchange for the tools he would have control over, not to mention an annual salary in the millions to continue to develop the Glass House programs. The fact he was on twenty-four-hour call mattered little to him, as he was used to staying inside all day anyway, though not with his current perks of endless room service, drugs, and sex provided by the Glass House staff.

On the night of the Oscar party, Danny sat in the small workspace built within a wall of the entryway. It was the width of the comfortable chair he sat upon, with a desk, recessed lighting, and temperature control. He had his Mac open and a few other devices — all tagged with his custom Banksy mouse logo. He reached a gloved hand up to the small square panel above his head when the red light next to it flashed. One by one, he removed the sealed evidence bags, downloaded all of the information on each of the phones within the packages, dusted for fingerprints, and filed the information on his computer. He attached a microscopic tracker to each phone, returned them to new evidence bags sealed and labeled, and placed them back through the dummy panel of the safe.

Once the phones were done, he left the wall space and began collecting guests' DNA off of the glasses and silverware brought to him from the party. Over the years Thadeus had accrued a library of the personal and business

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contacts, text messages, emails, passwords, PIN numbers, fingerprints and DNA of everyone who set foot into the Glass House. Occasionally blood samples were filed.

Earlier, before his first guests arrived on Oscar night, Thadeus entered an elegantly appointed workspace off of the lounge area where his group would be gathering later on in the evening. He was there to supervise the staff working around a table covered with pills and piled with kilos of cocaine and marijuana. Trays were being set up as if they were hors d'oeuvres for a demented cocktail party. Arsenal, his main deliveryman, sat in the corner waiting for Thadeus.

"Nothing to drink?" Thadeus asked Arsenal, more as a reprimand to the staff, who stiffened.

"Naw, they kept offering, but I don't want anything, Mr. Rawls, I'm straight." The truth was Arsenal had enough inherent street sense to never consume anything inside the Glass House. He cleared his throat and began in his most respectful tone. "I was hoping to speak on this new stuff I brought you."

"The crazy Ephisia shit?"

"That's right, Trawls." Arsenal immediately caught himself. That kind of familiarity to Thadeus' face was reserved for people like Mezziah, even though on the street everyone called Thadeus Trawls behind his back. "I apologize, I mean Mr. Rawls. I just want to make sure you know all about this stuff, and that maybe you should think about..." Arsenal stopped and corrected himself again. "What I'm saying is I'm sure you know more about this particular weed than I do, I just want to make sure you yourself don't try any unless you're really aware."

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Thadeus smiled good-naturedly and put up a hand to stop Arsenal. The gangster was clearly nervous. “Thank you, I appreciate your concern. This is the stuff all over the news right now, correct?”

“Yes, sir. They call it The Shining, cause people smoke it and straight up lose their minds.”

“This was what that nigger who killed his family was on, right?”

Arsenal had a microsecond of a reaction to Thadeus’ slur and prayed he didn’t show it. “Yes, that man who cut off his wife’s head and threw his babies from the tenth floor up in the Bronx.”

Thadeus let out a low whistle and looked at Arsenal. His expression was inscrutable and his voice totally neutral when he asked, “This is the stuff you brought me?”

Arsenal started to sweat. “Um, I believe you requested this, but I could be mistaken and can take it out of here. I got the message that you wanted Ephisia, but maybe there was a miscommunication among my people,” he trailed off weakly.

Thadeus laughed and held up his hand again. “Easy, easy, this was the stuff I wanted.” Thadeus looked at the plant buds through the large Lucite box. It looked to him like any other high-grade marijuana, though this one had fine violet hairs with tiny yellow crystals. “How do they get it to be this way?”

Arsenal scratched his neck and shook his head. “It’s just a new strain someone discovered, I guess. Every once in a while people come across this kind of thing, the growers are crossbreeding and fuck,” Arsenal stopped and started again. “Messing around and the next thing you know they end up with something no one has seen before.”

“I heard they fertilize the plants with human shit and blood,” Thadeus said.

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“Yeah, I think I heard something about that, too.” Arsenal wasn’t sure if Thadeus wanted the drug’s background or whether his discretion was being tested. All he knew was that he wanted to leave the Glass House as soon as he possibly could. He knew too many people who went in and didn’t come out.

“They’re growing it up near Humboldt on some cult commune, from around where all those kids went missing. From what I know about human sacrifice, they think kids’ blood is the best since it’s so pure.”

Arsenal wasn’t sure where Thadeus was going, but he knew he didn’t want to talk about satanic rituals with a man who could probably be Lucifer himself. “I’m sorry, Mr. Rawls, I’m just completely ignorant on stuff like that.”

Thadeus laughed. “Yeah, that’s a white people thing. Most niggers don’t get involved with that kind of nonsense, huh?”

Arsenal was ready to piss himself. Thadeus was staring at him and even though his mouth was posed in a smile, his eyes were flat. Arsenal Baker had seen some terrible things in his life done by some of the worst humans on the planet, but Thadeus Rawls made his blood colder than all of them put together. “All respect, Mr. Rawls, like I said, I don’t know nothing.”

“That’s right, that’s right,” Thadeus laughed, holding up his hands in a motion of retreat. “You don’t know a goddamn thing. Except smoking this shit is dangerous and could make you want to kill your whole family.” Thadeus chuckled quietly.

Sweat was now running down Arsenal’s ass crack. “Yes sir, that’s all I know.”

Thadeus snapped his fingers and Arsenal suddenly sensed someone very large behind him. Thadeus spoke over

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Arsenal's head, who at the moment was doing everything he could not to cringe like a woman. "Gibbs, please give our friend his parcel and show him out."

Two floors away in the Glass House control center, The Mouse checked one of the screens on his bank of computers. Into Thadeus' hidden earpiece he said, "Nice work, Boss. 180 over 120. Surprised he didn't have a heart attack right there."

Thadeus went on a walk-through to make sure everything was perfect and ready for the party. He spoke into the air knowing the Mouse was listening. "Tell me about this New Age guru coming tonight. Has someone finally figured out the secret to life?"

"Sure seems like it." Danny rattled off the facts he knew. "Sophie Lepido, best-selling author of *Make Your Miracle with Malachite*, currently selling out arenas around the world telling people how they can manifest all their desires. DVD sales through the roof and she's got a syndicated show on Zeta's radio network."

"What do you have to do?" Thadeus asked.

"The tagline seems to be 'You are the creator.' If you tune everything else out and think hard on something it comes true? I don't know, Zeta had her on when the book first came out and she's been riding that train ever since."

"There has to be more to it, that idea is old."

The Mouse quickly googled Sophie Lepido; millions of results came up. "Lemme look at *Wikipedia* first." Danny paused to read before speaking. "All right, the idea is there are a bunch of universal laws we can see demonstrated throughout nature. It's science and physics and it goes into a basic breakdown. Law of Attraction is one of them but there's more. Okay, wow, listen to this. She says the whole book was

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channeled to her from an alien or a spirit or something. His name is Malachite or that's the galaxy he comes from?" Danny quickly read. "Malachite, yes that's it, like the gemstone, that's his name and he's 'sent here to assist man through the impending transformation of the universe.' He says there's a huge shift in the energy fields about to happen. It's been partially predicted through all kinds of ancient signs but he's got the whole story and how people can work the energy to their advantage with his help. Ah, so this is why you see everyone wearing the green malachite charm."

"Peacock Eye. So people pray to this Malachite?"

"Let me see...yeah, you tap into his energy field through incantations and meditation." Danny read, "Taking the time to meditate upon the results you want will strengthen your ability to recognize the opportunity to gain those things and place you in the correct energetic field to manifest them." Danny continued to search. "And all these people are saying how his advice has worked for them – lots of celebrities. There's this," he pulled up a new result. "Malachite loves the beautiful energy of human ambition and will assist in its magnification and effectiveness for those with pure desire. The smallest seed of this energy is capable of changing the world and universe."

"He's definitely onto something there," Thadeus agreed.

Danny continued, "Co-create your life with consciousness and the awesome force of the human will. Avail yourself of multi-plane assistance.' Oh, I see," he said. "You tell Malachite what you want, he creates it for you on a higher plane, then beams it down onto the material plane. He uses the metaphor of thought clouds and rain."

"And what's the significance of wearing the gemstone?"

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Danny scanned the screen. “Basically you’re establishing a sacred site on your body, a sort of antennae to send out and receive creative or divine energy.”

“Sounds like the pyramids,” Thadeus observed.

“Exactly. The charm they’re selling is a triangle with a hole in the center. Lots of Egyptian ties to malachite. Women used it as kohl to line their eyes for protection against the evil eye, among other things. This page is too long to read.”

“I get it,” Thadeus said.

“Zeta even wears a charm on her bracelet, so you know everyone believes in this.”

Thadeus chuckled. “Yes, she’s always an effective endorsement. And what does he want in exchange?” Thadeus stopped at a hallway table to straighten an already perfectly set vase of Calla lilies.

“Marshmallows.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Yeah, you’re supposed to leave marshmallows on this little altar you build. Oh, but look at this, people were having issues in their homes with bugs cause of the marshmallows, so there was a bit of debate over whether you could just leave them in the bag.”

Thadeus looked in a hallway mirror and smoothed an eyebrow. “A powerful energetic being wants people to build altars and put out candy? There has got to be more to this theology.”

The Mouse quickly scanned the *Message from Malachite* page on the *Make Your Miracle* website. “Here we go, he talks about the only moment is now, that this life is all we have, that the key to happiness lies in embracing your natural self and we should respect desires and follow where they lead us because they’re the ‘truest form of energy evolving from the most energetic sources on earth, our living

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bodies.” He paused. “This is pretty interesting. Did you know the human body contains enough energy to power a city as large as Los Angeles for two days?”

“Is that so?” Thadeus asked.

“Yes, that’s pretty cool, huh? I know if you pulled out and straightened your intestines they would stretch something like twenty-five feet, so I guess it’s possible all the atoms in our bodies can generate that kind of electricity. Matter is pretty dense.” Danny had paid attention in physics slightly more than in his other classes in school.

“Yes, I believe I’ve seen something about the length of intestines,” Thadeus murmured.

“Okay, so back to the marshmallow sacrifice,” Danny said. “Malachite says the marshmallows are just a ‘symbolic reminder of the meaninglessness of sacrifice and all other unnecessary mental and emotional impediments to desire’ and that doubt and fear are ‘static on our energy waves’ and morals are basically a social construct invented by man to control other men. He says we have a ‘severely limited perspective of the universe and what is possible.’ He says we’re only looking at the universe through five senses, that there’s so much more to it and he can help us with getting the rest of the picture, since he’s not restricted to the Earth plane.” Danny quickly glanced over the rest of the page. “Then it goes into this whole thing about how religion has always been used as a tool to hold people down and is the source of more torture and death than any other cause on Earth.” Danny read more. “Listen to this one. They say Jesus was a fine teacher but the Bible has so many chapters missing from it and has been re-written so many times that it contradicts itself and doesn’t apply to modern life anyway.”

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“Always comes back to the classics.” An expert in a wide variety of subjects — including the Bible — Thadeus rarely corrected anyone.

“Lepido used to be an ordained minister.”

“And this Malachite says he’s an angel?” Thadeus asked.

“Um, let’s see...here we go: ‘Heaven doesn’t exist as men imagine it, but foregoing that, I’m what most would call an angel. I am simply an inter-dimensional energy source existing on different planes than man, who exists on the lowest material plane.’”

“And people are going to be glad this Sophie woman is here tonight?”

“Hell yeah, she’s like a guru to the stars. She predicted a bunch of those celebrity deaths last summer in pretty serious detail and who was gonna win the World Cup. She even gives out stock tips, people have cashed in on her IPO advice big time. Everybody is giving her credit for shit left and right. Well, to Malachite.”

“But really to her, being she’s his rep here on Earth.”

“Yeah, he says she’s a unique channel for him based on her ‘energetic composition,’ whatever that means. He says he’s been trying to come through for years to other people, but they were basically not the ‘right outlets.’”

“Or they just thought they were hearing voices in their heads,” Thadeus offered.

Danny kept reading. “You can hire Lepido for private Malachite channeling sessions, but the price is ‘upon request’ so that means it’s major dollars. She’s always being photographed with the talent, so that helps.”

Fifteen feet down the hall a beautiful blonde servant halted and stepped aside, lowering her eyes and yielding to

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Thadeus. He stopped in front of her and adjusted her perfectly arranged collar. "My kind of girl," he said.

Nic drove Beatrice down Broadway. "Who am I tonight?" she asked.

"I was just about to tell you." He smiled at her. Nic had been around entertainers his whole life but never got used to the way clothes and cosmetics could utterly transform a person, especially in the hands of professionals. He had seen Beatrice in full costume and hair, her face made up for the stage; she was utterly dazzling, truly breathtaking, like a leonine goddess. But with no makeup and her hair tucked under her fedora, she looked androgynous, like a pretty boy or a really butch girl, still attractive either way, but someone who wouldn't be mistaken for *the* Beatrice Ball. Her gorgeous skin and tight dancer's body were hidden: her breasts were strapped down for dance practice and she had layered a long-sleeve under her t-shirt and hoodie, then topped it with a leather jacket so none of her curves and elegant muscle tone could be seen. Slightly sagged men's jeans and vintage Jordans completed her look. He reached into the Rover's console and tossed her a beanie. "Wear that instead, we can't have your hair come down."

Beatrice pulled down the visor and looked in the lighted mirror while she changed hats. "I'll wear these, too." She put on lightly tinted aviators from her jacket pocket.

"Okay, this is your story tonight. You're being considered for Mylita's new choreographer," he told her.

Beatrice clapped her hands and whooped as if it was true. "Really? Oh my god, that woman is my idol." Beatrice raised her hand and started singing her favorite Mylita song: "Everything for you," she crooned, "I'll give everything for

youuuuuu.” She stopped suddenly. “When am I gonna meet her!” she yelled. “Do you know how many times we’ve just missed each other? I’ve worshipped her since I was a little girl, she’s the reason I sing!”

“Your voice is like, a million times better,” Nic said. “You just want that kind of fame.”

“No I don’t!” Beatrice said, as if he had accused her of something shameful.

“It’s okay, you’ll get it,” he assured her. “I know you will.” She smiled at him. “But tonight you’re a come-up from L.A.,” he said.

Nic was the perfect witness to this fabrication, since Mylita Crescent was on his father’s label and only people on the deep inside knew that her longtime choreographer, Augie Matthews, had apparently killed himself three days prior with an overdose.

Augie had been with Mylita since the beginning of her career; he stood in for her absent father and gave her away at her first wedding. Though Mylita had siblings, she was on record saying Augie was the only true family she had; her origin was a mystery beyond the commonly held knowledge her mother died of cancer when she was young, which led to her father’s abandonment “because I looked too much like my mom, he couldn’t stand looking at me,” Mylita said.

The label decided to withhold the news of Augie’s suicide from the public so that Mylita’s Oscar interview with Zeta wouldn’t be derailed from focusing on her nomination and experience on the film. Zeta was aware of Augie’s death and was willing to let it go unacknowledged in the Oscar special as long as Mylita would do Zeta’s weekly show in the coming days so she could break the story and walk Mylita through her heartbreak. The narrative of such an emotional roller coaster ride was pure ratings gold; Mylita was on top of

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the world one day, completely devastated the next. Audiences loved seeing personal prices paid for riches and fame, the more proportionate the better. It reinforced a comforting sense of justice, and that no one could fully separate the bitter from the sweet in life, no matter who they were.

Augie left behind a partner and two kids, and there was discussion whether Mylita would add the children to her already sizable brood of adoptees. The fact that she was the egg donor for both of Augie's children was a secret few people knew; that information was on reserve by the powers, to be deployed in the future if necessary. In the meantime the possible adoption would be thrown into the media for at least a few cycles. Combined with Mylita's rejection of marriage despite possessing an equally famous though aggregately less profitable movie star boyfriend, the entertainment media complex would be able to get a great deal of mileage from the stories.

Charlie Pindar, her manager, was the mastermind behind Mylita's decades-long career as an icon. As a brand, Mylita was acknowledged as the most valuable asset in modern entertainment, generating billions for the corporations that capitalized on her. Besides music, she sold films, books and magazines, and even had a political presence through her position as an NWO ambassador. Mylita single-handedly dictated not only fashion trends, but also influenced entire eras, her face on billboards and magazine racks around the world. She was in the universal pantheon of beauties; women went to their plastic surgeons requesting Mylita lips and the Crescent nose. "When you make your deal with the devil, Charlie is the one to show you around," was the industry jest.

"That woman sold more than her own soul," an Oscar host once joked about Mylita's success after another win. "She got some kind of group rate." Mylita and the audience

G.E. Butler

laughed appreciatively. Unlike any other superstar in history, even her own fans didn't purport her to be more than a technically average singer, dancer or actress. Instead, she was a Fascinator. No matter how much people detested her frankly mediocre work, very few people could resist or escape knowing about her; mundane details like what she ate or how she was dressed were interesting to most of the world.

"I can't turn away when she's on the screen," a famous producer once admitted, "even though her voice is garbage and she's got that lazy eye. I can't explain it, she makes you watch her."

"Bewitching the World and Being Paid Accordingly" was the Pulitzer Prize-winning series of the "Mylita Effect" on the global culture by *The New York Times*. Unscripted and highly personal matters like her love life or the unexpected death of her best friend provided grounds for insight into the superstar that translated into millions of dollars.

Trawls happened to be involved in the Augie matter because he handled the coroner's office paperwork to make sure there were no appearances of embarrassing lapses of time between the death and its acknowledgment. He also ensured the cause of death was reflected as a cocaine and prescription pill overdose. There was a great deal of money to be made from photographs of a grieving Mylita at the funeral, along with those of her celebrity guests. Thadeus would provide the rest of the mourners, people who were trained to be crowd fillers at these types of events. The coffin would be empty since the body had already been cremated.

"Who's gonna be at this party?" Beatrice asked.

"Everyone. So don't talk to anyone," Nic told her. "And only smoke what I give you, don't take anything off the trays."

"I'm not smoking, my voice."

SOUL'D OUT

“Don’t drink anything unless I give it to you.”

“They spike the drinks?”

“Just saying, be careful. One time that kid from the robot movie roofied that hot chick who played his girlfriend and fucked her on a coffee table in the middle of the party with a champagne bottle. In the ass. Shit was everywhere.” Nic didn’t tell her the rest of the story, how the kid was egged on and other objects were introduced to the rape. The actress was practically disemboweled and left to bleed profusely from her rectum, still unconscious, while people laughed and drank and talked about themselves, ignoring her once the show was over. The next time Nic saw her she was being interviewed on a red carpet. She was even thinner and her eyes were dead.

“So all that stuff is true?”

Nic briefly considered not taking her to the Glass House. “Do you want to go to La Esquina instead? Diana loves me,” he said, referring to the restaurant’s maitre d’.

“No! I want to see this!”

“The only reason you haven’t been asked yet is because of Bishop.” Her manager kept himself and Beatrice away from Mezziah’s artists and crowd as much as possible, and since Mezziah was well known to be friends with Trawls, that meant Beatrice had never been to the Glass House, a place she was dying to check out. Michael Bishop used to be tight with Mezziah. They started their careers together, then had a mysterious falling out neither would talk about. It was an apparently peaceful standoff, but one which naturally kept Beatrice out of Mezziah’s ever-widening circles of influence.

“I’ll stick by you so you won’t have to talk to anyone,” he told her.

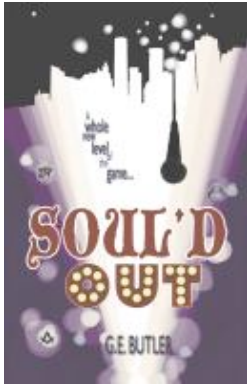
“What if I want to?”

Nic looked at her. “Don’t. Just don’t, okay? I’m taking you to the zoo, that’s all.”

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“The zoo?”

“Yeah, just look at the animals, but don’t get too close.”



A twenty-something singer, famous since childhood, finds herself on the verge of superstardom, where she discovers the ghastly price exacted for worldwide fame, the truth of her origins, and the sick secrets of the entertainment industry.

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