

## MONSTER - Ep 1 Transcript

*Note: This entire podcast is performed by Tommy Bertelsen unless otherwise indicated (eg: phone interviews). Stylized flashback sections are highlighted in light grey and indicate that Tommy is imitating himself or another character.*

So I think it's worth saying right here at the top that this is a true story about a very complicated series of events in my life. And I know that some of the very real people involved in those events aren't gonna love what I have to say. But this is my story and it's my podcast and I'm trying to trim through some pretty thorny parts of my life by making work out of it. Plus I acknowledge this isn't the whole story... so there you go. Because any of the people involved are gonna have their perspective, and their take, or their own whatever... and if they'd like to share that, then they are welcome to make their own fucking podcast. I tried to be fair, and generous, and focus on myself and my own issues.

Some names and details were changed for the privacy of those who didn't want or weren't asked to be a part of my story.

Okay, so we're going to begin at the best place to begin, which is the end...

### Phone Interview

**Tommy** I think that leads us to the final and most intense experience of the entire trip, and that was our wrap party. I've told this story to many friends from my perspective but you are the person who was closest to it with me and I would love to know what you remember. As much or as little as you feel comfortable talking about. Or as much as is vivid.

**Marijana** You don't remember it? Or you remember it very clearly?

**Tommy** I think I remember it clearly but I'm really skeptical of people's memories.

**Marijana** We're always trying to add something or... okay.

**Tommy** So without telling you anything, I would love to know what you remember from that night and what happened to us. Or to you.

**Marijana** I didn't have any suspicion in my mind that he would give us drugs and not tell us.

[MUFFLED ELECTRONIC MUSIC]

It was fifteen degrees outside but I wasn't wearing a jacket. Just standing there on the balcony chain smoking these shitty Eastern European cigarettes. I wanted to leave. To go back inside and find wherever the fuck my parka was and get out of that apartment. I wanted to get out of Latvia. I wanted to go home. I'm too old to be at some stranger's place at 4am. I shouldn't be drinking. This was supposed to be the most significant experience of my life. This was supposed to change me.

From his penthouse you could see the whole city, St. Peter's Church, the Daugava River, basically every inch of Riga. And it was February, so everything was covered in white. But my eyes couldn't focus and I started to sway. Bursts of color, burst of white, bursts of black began interrupting my blurry vision. I looked down at my hands and my eyes start tracking a kaleidoscope of fingertips. I could hear the blood rushing to my head. And suddenly I was freezing. Like my body just realized that I was standing outside. Like my body just realized that I'm in Riga and it's Winter. Like my body just realized that I don't belong here.

I focused and tried to turn around shuffling my feet so that I could face the door behind me where the music was coming from. I slowly spin to discover a massive wall of sliding glass doors, my own distorted image reflected back at me in the moonlight. My eyes refocus to look through the glass, and I see Marijana, curled up inside her jacket crying on the large leather sofa, looking right back at me. Behind her Irina dances to the pounding bass, spinning around and around wearing her french maid's outfit and those nine inch heels.

More bursts of color. More bursts of blackness. Then, from the room just beyond, I see him... He enters in from the darkness with a smile plastered across his face. His eyes lock to mine and he strides towards me wearing nothing but a large fur coat. His naked body and barrel chest exposed underneath.

He slides the doors open and a wall of sound washes over me, the frenetic chaos of Ukranian house music.

He licks his lips --

**Dastan Character** What are you doing man? Is everything okay?

**Tommy Character** I, I don't know. I don't feel well.

**Dastan Character** It's no problem man, come on. I'll fix you.

He put his arm around my shoulder and guided me back inside --

**Tommy Character** I think I need to go home --

**Dastan Character** No Tommy, no no no. Not tonight. Tonight, we party...

[THEME SONG STARTS]

My name is Tommy Bertelsen and this podcast about dealing with my demons while making a horror movie in Latvia. Welcome everybody... you're listening to MONSTER.

[THEME SONG ENDS]

I hate being alone. I hate eating alone. I hate sleeping alone. I hate making this podcast alone. I really truly ab-so-fuckin-lutely hate being alone.

On November 12th of 2016. I was alone. I was sitting in my car on my way up to Santa Barbara, and I hated it. But I also knew that in just a few short hours I would be at my best friend Troian's wedding, where I was going to be her best man. The rain pelting my car felt a little off brand for the moment, but besides that, I was actually pumped because I finally felt ready to blend in with the guests I knew would be attending this bonafide celebrity soiree.

Troian Bellisario and I went to college together. She's my closest collaborator. And along with three other best friends we started a theater company and created what are still to this day my proudest achievements and fondest memories. Everything between me and her has always been plutonic, but still. She's the closest thing I've ever had to a muse. She's my partner. And I love her.

Right out of college Troian got cast in a TV show, and though we've continued our collaboration, her life has expanded to include a whole new cast of characters with a healthy helping of the celebrity type. And typically I feel intimidated around her "new" friends... While they're talking about launching Netflix shows and tent pole movies, I always feel like I'm sitting at the kids table.

Ashamed of where I'm at in my career. And over the past few years at her parties it's felt I went from a starring role to a guest spot and it's been really hard on me.

But today I felt like I finally belonged for two reasons. (1) I was Troian's best man, speech and all, and (2) 24 hours after the ceremony I was hopping on a plane and heading to Eastern Europe to direct my second movie.

Sure, I'd secretly been wrestling with rewrites on the schlocky horror script, trying to reverse engineer a trope filled text into high class horror, but I was optimistic, truly optimistic because I had a secret weapon - Troian.

I'd been struggling pretty deeply with the fact that the lead of my movie (who was already attached when I got hired) and myself didn't exactly see eye to eye creatively. So, I'd asked Troian to come aboard and join me for the ride, to take on the other starring role and help save me, and this movie. To save my career really.

I knew that with her by my side I'd have the confidence I needed to crack the code of this script and that I could count on her to hold things down in front of the camera. Because I always feel like when I'm surrounded by my friends I can fuckin' do anything.

Sure she hadn't officially said yes yet, but I knew that she was just overwhelmed with planning the wedding and everything that entailed and that at the end of the day. She'd have my back.

So yeah, I was driving alone at that moment. And I may hate being alone. But I was speeding up the 101 as Los Angeles shrunk in my rear view and the best weekend of my life was ahead. It was time to celebrate my best friend, and our future, together.

So I cranked up the radio and settled in for the ride.

[UPBEAT MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

An hour later as I got off the freeway and checked my GPS I noticed that I'd somehow missed a message from earlier... it was from Troian, so I checked it as I began winding down some dark central California rural roads.

### Voicemail Message

**Troian Bellisario** Hey Tommy, it's Troian. Um, I got your message and I wanted to say thank you so much for considering me for the role. You know I would do anything to work with you. You're my favorite director. I just kinda feel like with the timing of it all... with the honeymoon and everything it's just not gonna be possible. I'm a little worried that I just wouldn't be able to be there menatly with you. But I do really think that it'll be a really amazing moment for you to build something new and try something new and be with a whole new crew of people... and to do this one on your own. Maybe there's areas that it's not the right timing. But I love you and I'm so so excited to see you and you and have you be a part of this ceremony. I can believe this is happening. Alright I'll talk to you soon. Love you. Bye.

As I approached the estate nestled between rolling coastal mountains where the wedding was going to take place, the news settled in.

I didn't know what to do. I pulled up to the massive main house, and parked around the side. I was confused, I was angry, and whether it's fair or not I felt betrayed. But I didn't want to bring those bad vibes into my friend on her wedding weekend so I hopped out and smoked a cigarette beneath the overhang, just to get my head straight. Fuckin' bullshit.

From here I could see into the backyard and a well manicured main lawn that seemed to extend forever, flanked by Dozens of enormous Mandalay Fig trees, each at least 40 feet tall. On the grass behind the house was where all the guests were gonna stay, including me. 100 large glamping tents, each setup with a four post bed, rawhide rug, and western blankets. The optimee of bohemian wealth. Even after dark, on the day before the event, the whole thing was lit up like a music festival. But none of the guests were here tonight, just the wedding party. So it looked like a fantastical ghost town, a very very expensive ghost town.

I snubbed my cigarette and walked inside to find Troiain's family and closest friends gathered playing board games, laughing, and of course drinking bottles and bottles of pricey champagne.

I think right now is a good time to mention that I'm sober, and probably some particular kind of alcoholic. But we'll get to that later.

That night I tried to play it cool and bury my pain and raging anxiety but it was all too much so I dipped out early and ran through the drizzle to my tent to bunked down for the night. Maybe things would look different tomorrow. Maybe I could convince her to change her mind... At least I hopped.

I woke up the next morning and peaked out of my tent to find the property teeming with guests. The rain had left and was replaced by clear skies and warm winter sun washing every inch of the lush surroundings.

The estate was set up like some satellite Coachella installation. It was absolutely insane. Just off from the tent encampment were these unbelievable outdoor showers planted in a citrus orchard. Teak planks and covered changing canopy complete with turkish towels. There were games, endless food, and more beautiful people than you could stand to look at.

Oh yeah, did I mention there was a string quartet playing live all day? Crazy.

[POP MUSIC CLASSICAL COVER]

I ducked back in the tent and began getting ready. And as the rain had left, so did any lingering resentment that I may have had about my friend turning me down. I didn't want her to be doing something that wasn't right, and I would never hold that against her, but my frustration was replaced with the usual crippling insecurity. And an immediate awareness that I would be spending the rest of the day talking to people who were more successful than me. Who were happier than me. Who were more important to my friend than me.

And to make matters worse, I had yet to finish my speech --

My thought was that by coming here and surrounding and the event I would be inspired and know what to say. But now I was stuck with this ever present insecurity and somehow needed to find private time to decide what the fuck I was gonna do.

As I wandered through the crowd to make my way toward the outdoor showers I steadied myself for one fucking ego kill of a day -- "This is my wife. Have you met my agent? What are you working on lately? Have you watched my show? Did you catch my movie?"

As the sun went down they had the perfect wedding ceremony. We all celebrated and walked down to the beach to take pictures. They popped champagne and ran into the ocean. Everybody clapped and smiled. I was beat and I still didn't know what I was gonna say.

I was so anxious that I left the pictures early to come back and rehearse my speech alone inside the bridal barn where we'd gotten ready and dressed before the wedding.

It was quiet inside, empty now, except for the half finished bottles of champagne that were screaming loud at me. I wondered if a glass might calm my nerves. Even poured one just to see how it felt. Watching the bubbles climb the edges of the glass and softly pop once they hit the air. Nobody'd know.

But my alcoholic flirtation was interrupted when some of the more adventurous hangers-on burst in early. I left and sat outside at the tables, waiting for everybody to arrive back from the reception down by the beach.

I wandered alone under giant Oaks and Weeping Willows while the servers finished arranging the scene. Three dozen gorgeous vintage tables set for twenty people a piece. Glittering silverware, tasteful ivory plates, hanging iron lanterns. I know this is what people say about weddings, but I mean it, really. It looked like a fairy tale.

Eventually everybody arrived and we began to eat while the band played classical versions of Troian and Patrick's favorite contemporary pop hits. I was seated at a table close to the front with all of Troian's closest pre-Patrick friends. My best friends. We all laughed and ate.

After some mingling the speeches began. Parents first, then the wedding party. Person after person stepping to the stage to pay tribute to the golden couple.

But I looked around and I realized that I didn't know any of these people. Again, feeling like a tourist in somebody else's life. A tourist in my own friend's life.

Since college she'd created a whole other world and it's like I never even noticed how happy this new life made her. Maybe I never wanted to notice.

When it was my turn, I stood up and made my way through the crowd, navigating to the front. Standing right beside the bride and groom. Here I was, about to give a speech about my best friend to a colossal crowd of strangers.

This is not how I imagined today would be.

But here I was. So I took a deep breath, and I dove in --

**Tommy Character** My name is Tommy Bertelsen. I'm a friend and creative collaborator of the bride. We're all gathered here enjoying some of the finest things life has to offer... Food, friends, flora, fauna, magic mushrooms, naked saunas.

For some people, it seems like everything comes easy. They're beautiful, they're smart, they're successful. The finer shades of life just seem to fall on them. And from the outside people must think that about Troian. Because she has become such an incredible woman.

But I know a secret about this person.

I've grown closer to Troian every year that I've ever known her. Our relationship is rugged and round and has been built over time.

We weren't immediately best pals. It's taken 10 years to get here. I honestly can't tell you if I even liked her that much in the beginning. Too pretty, seemed a little arrogant, smoked Cartier cigarettes for god's sake.

I once had a conversation with Troian, freshman year at college, behind USC's Bing Theater after a rehearsal for a disastrous production of a Shakespeare problem play. (I played a clown. Troian was the ingenue.) She already fancied herself a jet setting intellectual, and during one of our first ever talks she said some shit to me

like "I consider New York my second home, half my heart will always live there." That type of talk doesn't go over well with a white trash redhead from San Diego just learning the creative ropes of life. So our friendship may not have been immediately mapped in the stars. But I was drawn to her. And soon I learned the secret about this person.

Troian was in the first scene that I ever directed, an assignment for a college class. Out of Gas on Lovers Leap. It was her and Shane. She's been in everything I've ever made. People say we work well together. I like it when people say that. She inspires me. She challenges me. She pisses me off. I've always depended on her. And she's always been there for me when I needed it.

Through our friendship, our creative collaborations, late night Skypes, and sometimes hikes I learned the secret that only people close to her can really understand.

The secret about Troian is this: despite what it seems, things don't come easy to her. She's been blessed with an intellect, okay looks, and a wonderful family, none of that can be denied. But she struggles with demons, insecurities, a complicated psyche, a sexist industry, and bizarre external expectations. She's not great at her job because her roles or her writing come easy to her. She works hard for what she has.

She works hard not to just attain things, but also to maintain things. She's consistent. She's dependable. And I have more faith in her than anybody else on the planet. You can't trust the pieces of life that come easy, but you can trust the work. Because the work will last.

You don't maintain a seven year relationship across the continent without putting in work. Just imagine for a moment, what that must be like. She's made sacrifices for this relationship, I've seen them, and I am so proud of the grace and integrity with which she lives.

In an era and an industry that functions on the immediate and temporal this young woman is a fine example of what a person should be --

Troian Bellisario is built to last.

And with those words I almost lost it. I mean I knew I loved my friend. That I was speaking the truth. That I was celebrating somebody I had looked up to and depended on. But I didn't realize until that exact moment, that I was also letting her go.

**Tommy Character** Temporary frightens me, so does change. And in watching two people endeavour to do something as difficult as build a marriage together, I find refuge and confidence in knowing my friend's secret.

Because when times are hard, I know that this secret can save them. I know that the incredible human we see before us is not a product of luck, of fortune, or predefined fate. Troian is not just special, she's not just blessed, this woman works, she fears no challenge, and she's built to last.

To my collaborator, to my friend, to my partner — and her new husband. Troian, may we, your friends and family, follow your lead and put in the work to support you on this journey. May we all stand steadfast, and help you find your way towards the fields of forever. Troian, Patrick. May you last.

I've always been confused by the crossover between work and life. Between friendship and love. Between the past and the future. But at that moment, looking into my best friend's eyes on her wedding day. I knew I was happy for her. But I also knew that I was tired of being a tourist in other people's lives.

It's like for the first time I realized that I had been defined both personally and professionally by the people who surrounded me. And I knew that I'd been lucky to have that... But I was missing something very fundamental.

I decided that I had my whole future ahead. I was gonna take the opportunity of this movie, of this trip, of this adventure and start living the life I'd always dreamed of.

I was gonna go find something for myself.

At 4am everybody was still dancing, high on life and every conceivable substance. Lifting Troian and Patrick over their heads while dancing to LCD Soundsystem. I grabbed a water and walked away from the tent as the sun began rising.

I got into my car headed for LAX while the thumping bass and boisterous laughter of her wedding faded behind me, muffled by the citrus groves and dispersed into the open sky, swallowed by the cold morning sun.

I was off to Latvia. And to meet the new me.

What I didn't realize while I lay sleeping on that plane, is that halfway around the world there was a man waiting for me. He was walking down the narrow cobblestone streets of Riga, flanked by bodyguards armed with automatic weapons. He was a big man, with a big beard and small dark eyes. He was a Central Asian business magnate, a mobster. And he would become my friend... and the most dangerous figure in my life.

[OMINOUS MUSIC]

Voicemail Message

**Susan Bertelsen** Hi sweetheart it's Mom. I was hoping to talk to you before you left. I thought you were gonna give me a call but you're proly in the air now. That's okay. I know you got a lot going on. I saw pictures of the wedding on instagram and it looked incredible. Just beautiful. But you! You're the one who looked handsome in the suit. You in the tuxedo. What a handsome man you are. I know there was a lot of drinking going on and it's been nine months for you, not drinking. And I know that was probably tough and just wanted to make sure you're okay with that. And let you know how proud of you I am. That's a huge accomplishment sweetheart. I love you so much and I'm gonna miss you and I know you're gonna

do great. This is your second movie sweetheart. My Mr director. My Mr Tommy. I love you alot sweetheart. Talk to you later. Bye boo.

After I landed at the airport, I grabbed my bags and made my way outside to find the driver.

All the production company had told me was that I'd be picked up by one of Dastan's guys, and that he'd be waiting for me.

You see, Dastan was one of our films financiers. And at the time, I didn't know anything about him. I mean besides the fact that he was some businessman from Kazakhstan who had enough extra cash to finance a film.

At the gate I saw a young guy with a shaved head and scars across his neck holding a sign that said Bertelsen, so I waved him down. He didn't say much, just grabbed my bags and guided me to a black SUV with tinted windows. He did ask me one question though...

**Driver Character** Hey Tommy, do you like rap music?

**Tommy Character** Uh, Yeah.

[TIRES SCREECH AND MUSIC BLASTS]

The first time I met Dastan was over dinner, at a small Italian restaurant just outside the Old City in Riga. I had just arrived in Latvia after 24 hours of travel and it was freezing outside.

I walked into an intimate candle-lit atmosphere totally empty except for a man in black tracksuit standing next to the door. He eyed me and nodded toward the back of the room where I could hear music echoing off the walls.

I made my way back and found fifteen folks gathered around the table and one empty seat next to a big man with a big beard, and small dark eyes... This was Dastan.

**Dastan Character** Welcome Tommy. Sit down

He introduced me to everyone -- An eclectic Eastern European production team made up of Russians, Latvians, Ukrainians, and Kazachs.

After all the casual pleasantries, without asking Dastan poured me a shot of vodka. I watched the clear liquid shake and settle flat in the glass as the diluted but unmistakable smell of ethanol floated up and stung my nostrils.

Then Dastan leaned in and whispered to me --

**Dastan Character** You give speech now.

I thought he was joking at first. So I smiled at him. But he just watched me. And waited.

Obviously I thought it was a weird first request and I didn't prepare anything, but I didn't know how things worked here and I was trying to make a good first impression. This is the new boss. This is my team. I'm the director I and gotta play the part. If there's one thing I can do it's talk to people, so instead of declining and shrinking away... I stood up and I just started talking.

**Tommy Character** Hey guys, good to meet you all. Uh, we're here to work...

You know, I believe that in order to do our best work we gotta have a genuine level of trust in each of our collaborators.

In my experience, sometimes we're led to that trust by an almost unreasonable amount of optimism and enthusiasm because trust can be instinctive and immediate. Other times, we're guided by a healthy amount of initial skepticism... while trust grows through a series of trials and tribulations.

But the path doesn't matter because the destination is the same. Connectedness and confident collaboration. I'm looking forward to working with each of you personally and mapping our own individual timelines of trust.

So, tonight I'd like to begin, here, by committing my trust to each of you, and to thank you for the trust you have placed in me, a stranger, to come to your country and direct this movie.

At that point I'd been sober for nine months, so without even thinking, I poured myself a small cup of sparkling water and lifted it toward my new team.

But then Dastan leaned into me again.

**Dastan Character** Do you not like vodka, Tommy?

**Tommy Character** I just, I uh, I don't really drink that often anymore.

**Dastan Character** Oh, but this is very special Vodka Tommy. Drink...

**Tommy Character** Uh...

**Dastan Character** What's the problem?

**Tommy Character** Uh, there is no problem.

He eyed me carefully and placed his hand on my shoulder.

**Dastan Character** Tommy, if you don't drink, how can I trust you?

The last time I drank it was a warm night last year in Malibu. My friend Cameron had rented a house out for his birthday. I remember everybody dancing in the waves. Taking their clothes off and running into the ocean. I saw my ex grabbing the hand of my friend and disappearing under the water.

I remember walking upstairs and drinking shot, after shot, after shot.

Blowing lines in the bathroom.

Stepping outside into the courtyard and seeing the flames. A gas fireplace that stretched eight feet long.

I bet I could walk over that. I'm gonna walk over that.

Addicted to the attention and the excitement.

I stepped up onto the cement that surrounding the fire, a blur of dozens of faces all around me. Unsure if they were terrified or encouraging... Everything feels like a wave of momentum at a moment like this... no way to stop. Like a car crash in slow motion.

The flames kiss the edges. I look over at my ex. And I think smiles.

I feel the rush of cocaine and it feels good. I can do anything.

I'm not invisible, I'm invincible. I'm confused.

I lift my left foot up and step onto the coals. My skin sears and the smell of burnt flesh fills the air.

I watch her scream. Then somebody else screams. And now everybody's in a panic. Yelling at me and I look down at my feet. I can feel the pain but I can't move. I'm just standing as the fire licks my legs and my feet burst into flames.

**Dastan Character** This is very special vodka Tommy. C'mon drink.

I look into Dastan's eyes. His hand still on my shoulder. Smile plastered across his face. His beard only inches from my skin. I can feel his breath on me. Almost taste it.

Yes, I could have just said no, but I didn't. Because I felt challenged. So, I did what I always do when I feel challenged. I step up to the plate without a helmet and swing as hard as I can.

I didn't just take a sip... I filled a water cup halfway up with what must have been four shots of vodka and lifted it. Hands slightly shaking as alcohol licked the edges of my glass... Looking at nine months of sobriety.

I was in a new country. I was in over my head. I was insecure and confused. But there was something so warm about the smile on my new enigmatic financier's face... Something so

comforting about the idea of warm alcohol flowing through my veins. I thought maybe here it would be different. Maybe I just needed to relax and embrace what was coming.

**Dastan Character** This is very special Vodka, Tommy.

I figured, fuck it... what's the worst that could happen, right? It's just one drink...

Looking back I've often wondered what would have happened if I'd refused it. How different would my life be today if I'd drawn a line that night between me and Dastan. Was this the moment? Was this somehow the first decision that began a chain of events that would eventually end with me locked in that room, incapacitated and terrified?

I pressed the glass to my lips with a smile and swallowed. To trust

Everybody lifted their cups and called out in various languages, then Dastan leaned into me.

**Dastan Character** Tommy, this was very good speech, I think I like you very much.

And for whatever reason from that moment on, everybody else disappeared and Dastan only wanted to talk to me.

Dastan took me on a ride that night. His driver guided us around the serpentine streets of Riga. Past 13th century cathedrals and other medieval monuments. Famous art nouveau architecture that dominates the skyline planted right beside austere soviet structures and modern glass buildings. Passed the massive unfinished towers at the edges of the city. A three dimensional historical record of eras and foreign occupations. And while Dastan showed me his city he probed me with questions about purpose, philosophy, and art.

**Dastan Character** I feel like this is the beginning of something. Can you feel it?

**Tommy Character** Yeah, I'm really excited. I'm gonna make you a great movie. I promise.

**Dastan Character** I know this Tommy. I can see this in your eyes. You are a wolf. Eh. Like me.

It was all so surreal, to be enveloped in this environment and immediately taken in like this. And listen, I was excited, wouldn't you be? Our financier wasn't some stodgy studio, it was a guy, this guy. A mysterious foreign businessman with bodyguards. I was there to make a movie, but it felt like I was living in a movie. Dastan was smart, powerful, and he liked me.

After a few bottles of wine, a few packs of cigarettes, and a full tour of his city, Dastan dropped me back off at my place.

**Dastan Character** I am leaving for Bulgaria in two days, but I'll be back. If you want something you tell me, eh. You are my director. Anything you need, Tommy... I will fix you. I mean this.

**Tommy Character** Alright, thanks Dastan.

**Dastan Character** You know, we come into each other's lives with a purpose, and we change each other. How have you changed today? Think about this, eh.  
Goodnight.

Look, I know what you're probably thinking... And yeah, I'm not an idiot. I noticed that he had a very dangerous guy kinda vibe. And I was curious where all his money came from, and I heard some rumors, whispers around the office, but mostly my producers just seemed really excited that he'd taken a shine to me, and so I felt excited by that too.

The next few weeks flew by. Meeting with my designers, location scouting, hiring crew, and re-writing our very problematic script. But I was back on my game. I was building my new life, and everything was going according to plan. Let's pause here and back up for a minute.

Before I even left for Latvia, I took a month long trip to New York City, it was stateside pre-production. I stayed in Brooklyn and slept on the couch of my therapist and her husband who also happen to be the parents of my really close friend Peter. While I was there I was working out our shooting schedule, tinkering with the script, and building the shotlist with our DP Igor Kropotov who also happens to be my really good friend. I basically only work with my best friends.

We'd already started crewing up and hired most of our department heads, local or regional hires who were introduced to me through a series of Skype sessions and FaceTime phone calls where I struggled to break through language barriers and glitchy signals.

We had a talented costumer based right there in Latvia, special effects and make-up artists from neighboring Lithuania, and a brilliant Croatian production designer named... Marijana Gradecak.

Now it's true, I had met Marijana via Skype before heading out to Latvia. So we'd seen each other face to face in a manner of speaking. So yes, I did happen to notice that she had the smokey eyes, sultry lips, and high cheekbones of some sort of Eastern European Bond babe, but I swear to God it had nothing to do with why I hired her.

She's great at her job. She's trained as an architect, made a brilliant and deeply detailed vision deck before we even had the interview, and her cinematic references were obscure, on point, and special. I didn't hire her because I had ulterior motives. In my decade long in theater and film I've never had a single dalliance that even flirted with crossing the line, not one. It's just not my style.

#### Phone Interview

**Bryce** I remember before you met her you actually talked about your first skype all with her and you were describing the vibe between you guys. I think you were basically saying this is my future wifey

**Tommy** No... Did I?

**Bryce** Yeah, kind of.

**Tommy** Because I claim that my intentions were only honorable.

**Bryce** Well maybe I'm conflating the timeline, but I do feel like you had fallen in love with her.

That is my very good friend Bryce who you'll meet more later. He is a collaborator and friend of mine. He's not conflating the timelines, he's right. So let's correct the record. I had told a few of my closest friends that I was very intrigued by our production designer even though we had never met in person. But it was really not the first thing on my mind because I was focussed on the work at the time.

And besides, when I was in Brooklyn I'd finally won over somebody I'll call Olivia. The talented, tall, the New York based photographer who trains at a fucking boxing gym for God's sake. We'd had a seven year flirtation that finally came to fruition just weeks before I left for Latvia. I mean, I'd

almost brought Olivia a ticket to Troian's wedding but didn't want to rush things... So instead I bought her ticket to Latvia for New Years. A little much, yeah maybe... But how often am I traveling the world and making a movie... If there's a few good ways to fall in love, that's definitely one of them.

Anyway, point being, yes I noticed that Marijana was gorgeous in the same way that you notice anything else... it was just a fact.

But once I was on the ground in Latvia that casual interpretation of the situation evaporated within five seconds of meeting her. Have you ever walked into a room, made eye contact with somebody and immediately known that you both were thinking the exact same thing.

We had this insane chemistry. I mean she'll tell you.

### Phone Interview

**Marijana** It was a very very strange connection because it doesn't happen everyday that everything clicks so well.

She had this aura all around her. And I don't use that. I don't even really know what that word means. But whatever it means... she definitely had it. There was a gravity to her.

And she's absolutely the smartest person I've spoken to in real life. Zero exaggeration. She knew more about everything than me. And not like I'm some genius and that's such a high bar, but I mean EVERYTHING. Even the things that I was supposed to be deeply educated and experienced in. Not just her field. Not just architecture or painting or design... I mean, she knew more about theater, and American politics. She knew more about the state politics in California than I did. And I listen to a lot of podcasts. And to me there's something undeniably attractive about talking to somebody who is so much smarter than you. It's stimulating, it's challenging, it's fucking hot. And this person, she thought I was stimulating, and I could feel it.

And more than just her intellect, there was something else... It's like she could read my mind. She called herself a witch -- I am a young witch -- She'd always say.

After location scouts, and production meetings, we'd grab dinner, we'd go for walks, we'd watch live jazz shows at Le Trumpette, a small smoky bar nestled right up against the Daugve river. And afterwards we'd walk home together because our apartments were pretty close to each other in the old town. And the feeling that was growing started to get harder and harder to deny. I mean, it was the most romantic fucking environment imaginable.

After a long day of work and extended night of jazz and dancing afterwards we got to her door, and Marijana invited me up. Our heads were heavy and words slurred a bit from all the Black Balsam we'd been drinking (it's a local herby alcohol).

**Marijana Character** Can I show you something?

**Tommy Character** What do you want to show me?

**Marijana Character** I want to show you a video. Come up.

I didn't hesitate, I just nodded and walked through the door.

Once we were inside I lit a cigarette I sat leaning halfway out her window and waited as she pulled a video up on her laptop.

**Marijana Character** Come here.

We sat on the floor.

**Marijana Character** This is beautiful and I thought of you.

She pressed play and I immediately recognized the music and the images. You're actually listening to the sound right now.

The video she showed me is called Mortal Engine it's from a 2010 performance by an obscure Australian avant garde dance company called Chunky Move... it's my favorite piece of video art ever created and nobody knows about this video, well very few people and even weirder I've shared this at the beginning of every significant relationship I've ever had. All of my multiyear

girlfriends, any two month trise, not as like a move but as a test... to see if we're on the same page. And here I was, sitting with her with her showing it to me. I couldn't believe it, I didn't understand. I immediately began wracking my brain to figure out how the hell she knew... I actually considered whether or not she's somehow hacked my browser history.

**Tommy Character** How did you know that I love this?

**Marijana Character** Because I know you. Listen, come here.

She leaned in towards me and our lips met and it was the best kiss that I've ever had.

We devoured each other, sucking air in from teh other person's mouth, have you ever done that. We were gripping onto each others clothes, each others bodies, it was fucking crazy.

But I came to my senses and I pulled away.

**Tommy Character** I can't do this. I can't do this.

She was so calm.

**Marijana Character** Why?

**Tommy Character** Because we're working together and it'll get too complicated it's just a really bad idea.

**Marijana Character** I am a professional, are you not a professional?

**Tommy Character** I am but I don't think that's how it works, it'll get away from us and I just don't trust myself.

**Marijana Character** Do you trust me? Because I know you, Tommy.

And we're kissing again and I stop. And I confess.

**Tommy Character** And there's another person, and she's not my girlfriend so this isn't cheating but before I came here we made plans for her to visit for New Years and I just can't be doing both of these things at the same time, it's not... this isn't right.

**Marijana Character** So cancel her. Tell her not come.

**Tommy Character** I can't. I can't do that.

**Marijana Character** Do you not feel this?

**Tommy Character** No I do. I feel this. But I can't, I can't right now. I should go.

She was still so calm. And then she looked at me dead in the eye. Quiet, and somehow kind and she said.

**Marijana Character** Okay. It's okay Tommy. But when you are fucking her. Just know, you will be thinking of me.

She kissed me on the cheek and handed me my cigarettes.

**Marijana Character** I'm going to bed. I see you tomorrow.

She walked into her bedroom and quietly closed the door.

I walked down the stairs, out the door, and into the snowy cobblestone streets... I knew what I was doing. A better man would have been clear. Wouldn't have kissed her. Wouldn't have led her on. I created that vibe over the course of weeks... because she was right, I felt it too. And I'd convinced myself that if I didn't say anything that I couldn't stand by, then I wasn't lying. If I was "honest" about my situation with these people then I wasn't cheating. But what I was really doing was being reckless and selfish because the affection and attention made me feel good. Getting what I wanted and just articulating the "complicated circumstances" that surrounded me at that moment. And it's true, the circumstances were complicated. And so were my feelings. And I didn't lie. But I knew exactly what I was doing.

And no, I wouldn't do anything to Marijana to intentionally hurt her, not really. But intentional or not, the decisions we make affect everybody around us. And if you're not thinking about that (and I certainly wasn't at the time) you are playing a very dangerous game.

And because of that, later on in our relationship she'd get wrapped up in something that she didn't deserve, something that she didn't choose, something awful. Because as I got more involved in Dastan's world... So did the people around me.

Phone Interview

**Marijana** I saw that he was always calling you to go somewhere and relax with him. I realized that he liked you very much, I think, and that he always wanted to hang around with you. I didn't ask you what kind of relationship you really had... I can only say that I started to notice that you were not comfortable with him around because he would drag you somewhere with him.

[PHONE RINGING]

**Tommy Character** Hello?

**Dastan Character** Tommy, where are you?

**Tommy Character** I'm almost home just walking

**Dastan Character** Okay I'll pick you up in ten minutes, I've got something I want to show you.

[RUSSIAN RAP BLASTS]