

## Chapter 1

Despite her best efforts Jean couldn't keep from continually salivating onto the rag wedged tight in her mouth. It tasted of grease and dirty hands. The men lugged her over a sandy hill and down a steepish embankment. The sand spilling into her boots became colder as they neared, and she smelled the brine of ocean. They mostly dragged her as the ground was so uneven and shifting that she couldn't articulate proper steps at the desired pace. However, always industrious, she used the time to unfurl the soaked rag from her mouth via an impressive combination of lower lip-curls and chin pulls.

"That was rather theatrical, even for you, Simeon," she said after being deposited roughly on a folding chair and the blindfold removed. The sodden rag hung cold around her neck. His back was to her. Tension flicked tight the flat ribbons of muscle that connected his head to his spine. A little bonfire licked like a thirsty cat against the dark wind.

"I'll cut out your fucking tongue, you old witch, if you speak to me again," Simeon said turning toward her. Stiff rivers of veins embroidered his temples betraying the immensely controlled tone. Jean's bound arms encircled the folding chair's back. Because the chair's rear legs had sunk several inches into the sandy beach, Jean stretched hers out leisurely before her. She cracked her knuckles out of habit and boredom. Her gaze left Simeon and rolled up to assess the limits of the little bonfire's reaches. Its unsteady but eager light touched the mossy underbelly of the pier, though the brilliant verdant was muted. The light glazed the faces of the pilings that surrounded them with a woody-orange. It made Jean think of a naked branchless forest, the sand underfoot like a pale fluid flesh instead of a forest's decaying leaves and earth. But the ocean, some black yards away ruined it with her quiet, indifferent song.

When the veins and tendons of Simeon's face had relaxed some he started pacing.

"I knew it the whole time, honestly." He ran a wide hand up past an eye and over to the back of his head. The lines of skin over the finger joints kissed together dark and black in the low light. "I know I did. I just didn't want to. Do you know what you've cost me?!" His rage escaped again, eyes saucering under the weight. He turned his back to her again. His chin made a serpentine motion upward to let ocean breeze calm him.

"Try to be wise, old Mayor," Jean addressed him by his professional title to help him remember. In the firelight Jean's face was even more chiseled with age. Heavy lines framed her mouth and shot from her eyes. Her lower jaw slacked forward, tiring of his impetuosity.

"Wisdom would be ending you. And your meddling, and interference in my affairs. If I am to lose this war at least you won't be selling your services to them anymore. Maybe the next one will be fair," he said, knitting a boyhood brow.

"Is that really what you're after? Fairness?" Jean gave a lift to her voice of disbelief.

"I'm sick of your fucking meddling, old woman! I know you're helping both sides. A mercenary witch or psychic or whatever you are, how am I supposed to account for that?" He slammed a fist on the side of a piling and forced a heavy breath out, tight-lipped and toothy.

"I am going to throw you, you and your betraying, wrinkled bag of bones into the ocean. And then I'm going to finish this war." He turned to face her, "I might just cut out your tongue for fun, Jean, before I do it."

Jean felt the robes of scapegoat lay heavily about her. She surveyed him. He was in the physical prime of his manhood, which can last decades, but his muscles had a thick experienced look to them that the young cannot emulate. He moved with a relaxed certainty in his form,

another attribute forbidden to youth. Jean felt no need to provoke him further, but rather decided to ignore this emotional rupturing. Stress and failure can surely melt mettle.

“I have to make a living, Simeon. You can’t begrudge me that,” Jean said looking out into the glassy blackness of the ocean. The stars danced and dreamed lucid on its surface. Turns out ignoring and provoking can be bedfellows.

Enraged, the soured leader took two steps toward Jean. He held her face by the jaw in one massive hand, shifting contours and lifting her by it.

“I can,” he growled through his teeth an inch from her face. Then he dropped her, the back legs of the chair sucked down into the sand.

The war had been ripping apart the criminal fabric of the city for nearly half a decade now, if one went back to the very beginnings. But as most wars, it had been going on long before anyone realized. Long before the first open conflicts. It hadn’t become a noticeable disturbance to the population’s lower rungs until about two years ago. Jean heard opportunity knocking about when things got desperate for the warring factions.

She possessed a valuable ability to know things. She could say where people were going to be and when. She knew how intense a conflict was going to be before it happened, how many were to die. Unfortunately, as with all the mystic arts, it was imperfect and could be imprecise. However, it was always correct, making her extremely useful to the empire builders.

“I do sell loyalty,” she rolled her stiff shoulder. “Exclusivity. But decide what you want, old Mayor. Revenge is a short sweetness. Success is a bit more enduring. Maybe you can have both, but the wind is speaking more toward one than the other. What is it you want?” Jean asked.

The Mayor lifted his jaw so he could place her lower in his view and sneered, “Your price?”

Jean met his eyes and stood up. The rope that had bound her wrists fell to the sand.

“I need favors, help for my own purposes,” Jean’s old ranch hands dusted some sand off her stiff work jeans. The ocean breeze picked up some and she flipped her collar against it.

The Mayor ran a hand over his bowed head considering, “How many? What are they?”

“We can weigh them as we go. They will not interfere with your business,” Jean assured him.

“And you will no longer aid my enemies?”

She gave a slow nod and bowed her eyes.

He put his hands on his hips, the unbuttoned black coat winged out.

“Agreed. But I will not insult you by explaining what will happen if you break this contract,” he glared at her. His lips parted, unconsciously showing tight glossed teeth.

“Nor I you, Simeon,” she retorted walking into the night and up the beach.

## Chapter 2

The confidence in Mary’s eyes was at least a full inch deeper than it had been last week. Still a thin confidence, something more felt than seen for her eyes were darkly rimmed. Since arriving in the city her sleep had been parched and shallow. A handful of years on such bleak restful rations will pitch the skin of the eyes to unhealthful color palettes. But despite this the confidence was still there in a looseness about the eyelids and a more natural tension in the mouth.

The inner city decayed about her. The tone of a once bustling center of respectable commerce had definitely dropped a couple octaves in the preceding decades. A moist sheen of filth lay on the papered windows, the littered gutters and sidewalk, the veined patched and potholed street. Though this part of the city was firmly sitting in the atmosphere of a washed-out baritone, the money flowing through this street had hardly diminished in the decades following respectability.

The moist sheen covered Mary too, so it must have just been the light more than any tactile reality. Night in the city is a starless mix of fluorescent and incandescent, the shops and the streetlights mix in a man-made cacophony of false colors and shadows. Most of this street's business was conducted a little further off, a block or so down from where Mary and a couple other freelancers pitched themselves.

The collar of a thin jacket was stretched across her mid back, the bulk of it gathered at her bent elbows. She walked, balancing skillfully on a tightrope of stilettos and cracked pavement. Her hips swayed in what looked to be a great test of the ball and socket joints' tensile strength. She was healthy and robust in an untarnished way with long lean limbs. Her body hadn't yet morphed itself to inner priorities as happens in middle age. The doughy mask of youth still graced her and covered all her scars. For all these shielding advantages her once bright eyes gave a dullness that encompassed years of sorrow. Though the new confidence flicked like an uncatching spark behind the green, it could not overcome the dullness. She paced with a lifted chin waiting for custom to come her way. They would. They always did.

She was rather young for being this far from the bustling center of the street. Usually she would have been a bit concerned about the disappointing trickle of business making it

down to her area. Her industry fed more than just herself. But after incorporating a fresh strategy to her business model her income had increased many fold over the past week. She didn't mind the slow traffic a bit.

This sanguine brand of patience was not left unrewarded too long. A car with a canvas sun cover pulled over to converse with Mary. The cover was dirty and dusty, its metal frame rusted as if it had only been opened for this night's purpose. She leaned down, the jacket lifted up her back concealing her body from the outside and framing her wares perfectly to the potential customer within.

His hands were already sweating and a white film arranged itself at the corners of his mouth. His eyes had never been trained to feast, only to identify what was for the taking. But in the tenderness of anxiety he ran a trembling hand across his lips and then wiped it on his jeans. Mary saw and graciously started for him.

"Hey baby, my feet are killing. Mind if I lay down?"

"Nah, no. Come in," he stuttered and fumbled, tossing fast food debris off the passenger seat. Mary sat on a clutch of petrified French Fries and he pulled away from the sidewalk.

The car reeked of the lust and excitement genre of sweat. It was all framed in by a sour fermentation of weeks-old body odor. He drove. The first part of picking them up he always found the most stressful. With that bit completed he was relaxing some now. He put his clammy hand high on Mary's thigh with an aggressive clunkiness that no woman in a natural setting would tolerate. Mary slid her hips down the seat, forcing his hand higher.

"So, what are you after tonight? You have a place in mind?" she asked. There were only a few places that everyone went and she already knew to which he was heading.

“Yeah, just normal. Like normal, I dunno.”

“I can do normal,” Mary said through a stretch. Her arms overhead, knees spread a little wider. His beady eyes performed the great feat of becoming more beady.

He pulled over and slammed the gearshift into park. He threw back the armrests between them as he lunged at her, pawing with inarticulate force at her chest. They were the uncoordinated movements of a man whose never touched a woman with the purpose of giving pleasure, only taking it. He felt a slow tremor run through her body and thought she must be enjoying his attentions. He’d never seen this in real life, only on T.V. Though he was no stranger to this business transaction, street girls aren’t paid enough to fake it. It was quite exciting to get such a positive response to his overtures.

But unlike the instructional shows depicted in the late nights of his celibate life, this tremor kept increasing. Her shaking ballooned before him, gathering strength and intensity until she was having a full-blown seizure. He backed away from her to see what was happening. As if a rattle snake’s rattle, her body shook like someone was whipping the base of her spine. Her head slung back. The muscles of her face and tongue were soft, only the eyes taut.

“Oh hell no. No, No. We are not doing this,” he said as he exited his door and walked around the car. He looked up and down the quiet alley, Mary still thrashing within. He opened the passenger door, grabbed her under the arms and drug her a short distance to a shadow.

“Fuck me, just wanna good time,” he said under his breath as he walked away from her writhing body. He sped off, much more annoyed than jarred or rattled.

Mary sat up laughing and leaned against the building’s exterior. She opened the Velcro wallet with a loud rip and inspected her loot.

"You always do the seizure?" a woman's voice shocked her from the pleasures of victory. Mary's eyes fierce as the jackal with a scrap of meat, scanned the alley.

Jean stepped into a beam of orange from the streetlight. Mary recognized her at once and relaxed back to her inventory.

"Sometimes I start talking in tongues. Haha, not bad, not bad at all," Mary said removing respectable stack of \$20's from the wallet. She looked back at Jean, "A few days ago I threw up, but that was a mess. Not worth it." Mary yawned and scratched at an eye socket.

"Not a very long-sighted business plan, Mary," Jean said.

"Why you even down here, Jean? I thought you stuck to the north, with your sheep or whatever," Mary stood and checked her watch, time enough for one more.

"And its working. So, who cares? Haven't been on my knees in like a week." Mary pulled her jacket up over her shoulders. "I'll be seein' ya, Jean. I got a little hike back to the shop."

Jean took a couple steps toward her. "When this goes bad, don't panic and don't wander too long. The second hands won't hurt you." In a pause she took in Mary's face, trying to steel fast an imprint. Making a memory of what she looked like before the next few days events.

"You're still staying with those kids, huh?" Jean asked.

"Yeah. Well, I wouldn't be getting fucked over for money otherwise," Mary said, shoving cash into her pocket, pretending to not hear the riddle of advice.

"Oh yeah, what would you want, Mary?"

Mary hadn't let herself think of that in a long time. Her expression flattened with depth.



“I’d be alone. And no one would need anything from me. And I’d need nothing. Everything would be quiet and still,” Mary said turning to go. Jean stopped her with a light hand to the shoulder.

“Remember, Mary - don’t panic, the second hands won’t hurt you.” Mary shrugged her off and walked the half mile back to the Row.

Jean used to be a fixed feature of the neighborhood, even after she’d moved north. But she hadn’t been seen much in the last couple of years. She gave girls work on her ranch sometimes when they were especially shattered or hard-up. Legends of her and her brothel from the old days filtered down to all the girls. But she’d left all that, decades ago for some unknown reason. Now she showed up from time to time to give the girls medical care, deliver babies, and listen. She knew most of the girls well, especially the freelancers.

The night was a cool break from the radiating heat of the desert days. During the day asphalt absorbed all the sun had to give and poured it back up onto the pedestrians with a cooking sensation. It suppressed higher thoughts and left the out-of-doors population in a state of sluggish survival. But in the night the pavement calmed down. And the people, newly freed from the daytime broiler finally found energy for their desires. Mary resumed her post and slipped her jacket back down to its elbow cradle.

A truck slowed to converse. The man inside was about as average lower-middle class as they come. He took pride in not being slovenly, in his neat haircut and tucked-in shirt. Mary liked that the truck didn’t reek.

“\$40?” he said it not as a question but with the boardroom firmness of an opening bid.

“What for? You wanting a feast?” Mary countered.

“Just the main course,” he said looking in his rear-view mirror.

“Dessert’s worth it baby, but it’ll be more than \$40,” Mary grinned and leaned down lower.

“Let’s see how I’m feeling when we get there. In?”

Mary opened the passenger door and climbed into the cab. The inside was clean enough and smelled of cold cigarette smoke. A red and worn aluminum thermos sat in the cup holder. The upholstery was matted with stains and burns in some spots, but there was a decentness to it all that made her think his wallet may even be fatter than the last.

No music, the truck’s great engine and the driver shifting gears were the only ambient sounds. Mary made some attempts at coy small talk but they were met with laconic utterances. When he drove past the last usual stopping area Mary felt a slight raise of the hairs on her arms.

“Hey baby, I like to stay close to the office. I’ve got more work tonight,” Mary said, smiling.

“Nah, you don’t.” He said not looking at her and slowly shaking his head.

Mary laughed, “Sure, but that’ll be more than \$40, sweetheart.”

The red glare of a stoplight reflected on his knuckles and diffused through the hair of his forearms. He rolled them up and over, kneading some energy the steering-wheel. His eyes dropped while his head stayed fixed. Then he slowly turned at the waist to her.

“What is it you want?” his whole face was different now, as if a mask had been removed. His eyes pierced a tentacled coldness down her spine. His lower jaw rested tight and slightly askew from the upper.

“Not this,” Mary said as she yanked on the door handle. It was locked so she started for the window. Which was also locked. With calm and rapid precision, she removed a switch blade from her bag. In half a second it was slung open and driven into the man’s thigh. This mistake haunted Mary for months. When in danger never wound, only kill.

She tried to reach over him to unlock her door. He threw her back against the seat with a straight arm, knocking the air out of her.

“Fucking bitch,” he said while grabbing the thermos in his left hand. He slammed it down on her head. Blackness took hold of Mary’s vision, though in that split second she fought it fiercely. Her last thoughts fused some ideas together, sleep equals defeat equals prey.

### Chapter 3

Mary awoke blind. Her pupils swallowed the green irises, straining for any scrap of light. She blinked forcefully and then peeled the lids back, trying again to use this most dear of senses. Nothing, blackness. Her mind switched to heightening other senses, as severe confusion will so search for relief in reality. She had developed a very handy instinct in her youth to suppress emotion mechanically during moments of acute stress. The skill’s strength existed on a bell curve, there was definitely a threshold of failure but it had served her well in the past. This kicked in without thought and she was able to survey her predicament with some level of rational detachment.

She started close and moved out. Her hands were bound but not by metal or plastic. It was some strip fabric. She articulated her wrists to assess the limits of movement, not much.

She took in a sharp breath of disappointment only to realize that she'd been panting with the uppermost chambers of her lungs.

Mary stopped her breath to listen for a moment. But she could only hear the rushing blood of her heartbeat in her ears. She gave her head a tight little shake to get it to stop focusing on internal sounds. The great whooshings fell away. The delicate sounds of her surroundings began offering a rough sketch of the terrain about her.

A drip, a slow pacing drip gave a cavernous echo some distance away. Small rustlings of insects, and then her breathing in drowned it all with a loud rush of air down her rough and tight throat. She held her breath again and scratched at the ground with the heel of her shoe. The air didn't take the noise, but let the scratching sound be loud around her so she knew she was in a smallish space. The ground was smooth and grainy like concrete, she kicked off a shoe to confirm it with her naked foot.

She was finally calm enough for the pungent rotting odor to reach her mind. And it did so suddenly with a nauseating grip. She sighed as the fog of confusion lifted, the Underneath. She realized she was in the city's tubed network of sewers known locally as the Underneath. Mary had heard of this place but never felt the urge to visit. Now the cold slime about her calves penetrated her notice. Then the curved wall she was leaning on, all the details now confirmed.

The Underneath was the domain of the Mayor and the headquarters of his crime syndicate. It was not a place to be without invitation as the Mayor tightly controlled all comings and goings. There would be no help from that area. The danger she was in doubled itself.

Mary's thirsty eyes yanked her head, a slip of light glowed distant and grey, an oasis amongst the black. As the source swayed and neared, the light bloomed lustrous like the dawn of an evil day. He limped, but still his heavy treaded steps landed with a silent deft in the stagnant puddles that paved the path between them. Fists of fear seized Mary's throat and lungs and every muscle group. She let all that happen unopposed. Deciding to only protect her mind from the fear, allowing it to consume her body whole in its hungry burning moment. She reasoned it was too late to run anyway as he was approaching through the only open path. Hope's first strokes lie in imagination and she was so frightened, so very frightened that not a bit of that cognitive area was accessible. It was the light of his flashlight swaying in time with his silent limping gait, though the man couldn't yet be seen. Another instinct from her brief childhood took hold; Mary cowered.

When he turned the last bend in the pipe and fully came into view Mary felt a wash of fear she'd never experienced before as her bell curve's threshold was surpassed. It was his size that frightened her the most. She hadn't noticed it so much in the truck before. Nearly every man was larger and wider than she, but in the normal concourse of life this discrepancy falls from conscious notice. As he engulfed the passageway, bowing his head slightly to avoid the upper horizon and forcing the light to wedge around him she became fully aware of the size of a man compared to herself. She eased away from this bad news and tried to look past him, at the geography in his wake, but she could make nothing out. All was black behind him. It was as if he were master of time and earth and space and all halted at his presence, that there would be nothing beyond. Really just the flashlight was pointed the wrong direction.

Upon seeing him she had thought his size her most formidable obstacle, that and the darkness, until his face came into view. Then the fists of fear relaxed for a brief moment in an icy bath of hopelessness. There was no deformity that inspired this, no uttered threat, no frightening weapon in his grip. He was not monstrous to look upon, not an ugly man. It was a symphony of mostly benign factors that iced Mary. It's harder for just the violins to move the soul. No, for one person to crush another with mere presence you need the whole ensemble.

The limp from Mary's defense in the truck, the dirty rag tied over it swollen with blood, the trimmed nail beds that curved too far over the tips, his jaw still askew but bit tight, the tendons by his ears pulled like stretched rubber bands, the loose relaxed grip on the weighty metal flashlight. Even the way his buttoned shirt bloused slightly over his belt. But if we're being honest, the violins are usually the strongest part. And his eyes were that. They were alive for themselves, alive for the coming act, yet when they rested on her she could see in them that she was already dead. That she was a thing that had never even been truly alive, at least not in the way he was. Like how most think of plants or funguses perhaps.

Neither Mary nor the man knew but another interested pair of eyes watched the scene unfold. People wrongly assume privacy in dark disgusting thoughts and places. Someone has always tread before, someone always waits. A great eternal truth is thus: always in darkness does company wait. But these eyes just watched. They watched to see how Mary would meet or make her fate.

The dawn was growing on the surface, merely dozens of feet above Mary. It would have lifted her to see it. Given her some strength. Her spirit lived on and was daily buoyed by the sky and sun, far more than by food or water. But alas down in the sewer Mary could only pull from

within. When she fumbled around her innards to see what resources she had to pull from she found a disappointingly shallow chest. All she came up with was a great heavy handful impetuosity. It would have to do. *Not without a fight*, she said to the cold waters of hopelessness. *I'll not die by you, I'll die in a fight*. They receded. Can hopelessness be disappointed?

The grand limping approach was over and he kneeled near, giving her no more notice than one would a stack of hay. He placed his bag heavily to the ground. Its metallic contents gave some muffled rubs against one another. Then he turned his eyes to hers. Mary valiantly damned up the icy waters as they fell unconsciously over her mind and body. He placed a hand on the arch of her naked foot. She jerked but the sole was already pinned, being forced down to the ground. Her knee bent quickly to accommodate, her hip lifting. Then his lower lip pulled down and went slack, exposing small tartar caked yellow teeth. His eyes feasted on her face while he shoved in her arch with slow, constantly increasing pressure. The delicate bones of her narrow foot crushed together. Unwilling to scream she cried out through her clenched teeth. While his attention here, Mary lifted the other foot that still wore the shoe and drove its heeled spike into the bloody rag on his thigh.

He gasped and yelled in agony. She twisted at the ankle and flexed her foot to drive it deeper and then gave a fast hooking movement so as to rip as much flesh as possible. She rolled to her knees and was on her feet running in a blink. She went the way he had come but the path was quickly winding and quickly black.

His screams and obscenities pushed her forward as the encouragement of a hurricane at one's back. Once the light was completely gone she had to force herself to slow. She leaned a

shoulder against the wall and drag it along to keep herself from running into things. It only partially worked. She still tripped and hit her head, but adrenaline kept the pain from her. She kicked off the other shoe to feel the ground better. Then she went back for it after realizing it could lead him to her. She wandered for hours trying to be silent, pausing to listen, and rubbing away the flesh of her forearms in an effort to remove the cloth tying her wrists.

As the hours drag on the silence around her became less comforting and more oppressive. She hadn't heard anything human since the initial escape. But now, as exhaustion was overtaking adrenaline, she began limping on the crushed foot. Her kneecaps shook, bouncing in the lax bend of each step. Still she wandered on, knowing at the edge of thought that she had merely traded the executioner's block for a tomb.

The unseen witness followed. His steps were silent as a rainy grave. He got so close at times that his fingertips actually brushed a few strands of hair. She did hear him on several occasions, but his sounds were so slight, so brief that every time she determined it must have been a rat or maybe even the echo of her own steps. But noises kept her nerves constantly frayed, prohibiting even the smallest moment of calm.

She found herself in a tunnel of ever decreasing diameter. It pinched her down to a crouched walk. When it was so narrow that she could go no more she finally stopped and sat and listened. She was usually quite unappreciative of tight spaces. But now, robbed of sight and oppressed by so many other forces she found herself cured of claustrophobia. For some long moments it was just herself she could hear, the blood in her ears again, the roughness of breath in her throat. She pulled and twisted at the wrist bind, nothing gave. Her foot was searing with pain. Its radiating arms morphed the affected area to continental proportions in her mind.



She got up after some moments and moved back through the widening aperture of the pipe. With her next step she felt a single bundle of muscle fibers strum like a too taut guitar string. As it sang out its warning she quickly collapsed her weight to the other leg.

“No no no no, not now,” she whispered. Then a great cramp seized her calf muscle above the injured foot. It threw her to the ground moaning through a netting of long hair. She tried to reach and rub it out but between the intensity and her bound hands she couldn’t get there. Her muscle felt as if it had twisted into a clawed fist, bent on impaling itself with an ever-tightening grip.

A great crescendo of knowledge and clarity about her situation fell upon her with the pain. She was going to die in the dark with the rats and bugs and never see the sun or anything else again. In the searing pain she thought of matted rat fur and cold naked paws touching her body as she slowly slipped away to death. Tears rivered down her flexed face, unseen in the darkness.

She was plucked from her misery by a horrid sound. A trip, a scrape of shoe over the uneven ground, again it was short and slight but as she was not walking - distinct. Mary tried to move, tried to get up or scuttle away or something but her leg was of no more use than a frayed ribbon. It sent ever greater shocks of pain with each attempt. Panic now took over. She thought she felt a brush of flesh on her calf. She screamed and reflexively yanked her body from the touch.

“Just wait,” a man’s light and tripping voice said in the dark. Mary screamed again, fully seized by panic. She tried to get on her feet to run, but she tripped and toppled with a hard thud onto the ground. The fall shocked her for a microsecond but then she heard him crawl

quickly toward her. She started kicking with all her might in his direction, the leg cramp's protestations now falling into the distant background.

"Stop, stop!" he said, grabbing the hurt foot. She cried out in pain and panic and kicked and kicked. But he held tighter.

"Just wait, stop," he said breathy with concern. He got hold of her other foot. She writhed under the grip, the side of her face flat on the dry cement heaving in and out bits of debris.

"Stop moving," he said, pinning both ankles to the ground with one hand and grabbing her forearm with the other. She couldn't stop even if she'd wanted to. She fought and fought and reached back to bite him. He moved his hand down her forearm to the wrists. Then in one smooth movement he released her ankles and cut her arms free from the bind with a knife.

Her full panic made her unable to process what had happened. She pushed her hands down to help her up and rushed forward away from him and deeper into the dark. Her arms and hands outstretched.

"Farewell," he said quietly to her wake.

Mary wandered the tunnels for two more days. The man checked on her from time to time, curious to see how long she'd last. She was near death and huddled in a narrow pipe when the Mayor's men finally collected her.

## Chapter 4

The soldiers preceded the Mayor, spilling out of the mouth of the center pipe. They moved like the gorilla warfare artists they were. They all bore the effects of having been

seasoned by combat. They were alert, casual, reflexive to threats in the environment rather than rigid against them. Jean watched the procession from her position at the bottom of the concrete drainage basin that these pipes fed into. Her big ranch dogs sat about her feet. Three massive concrete pipes lay side-by-side forming the main entrance to the Mayor's center of operations. The pipes ran under the city, a hollow network of veins that did not provide any nourishment to the life above. Rather, the Mayor's subterranean army fed on and flourished in the city's waste beneath.

With Jean's un-bifurcated help the war had come to a swift end. The Mayor's ambition was finally unchecked by competition. His empire was larger now than it had ever been, even before the war. The two years since the night under the pier had been his most vibrant.

As the men and women fell out into the dim night, flood lights from the nearby dump illuminated them unkindly. Some creatures are meant to not be seen. After evolving and contorting themselves to survival under great pressure and cold, the creatively deformed animals of the deep ocean bear record of their severe environments. When one of these creatures washes ashore or man finally goes down to have a look, horror and wonder fill the mind. Jean blamed herself for this, but needs must.

She had seen this military parade before; Simeon was very proud of his rebuilt empire. The three dogs bristled uneasily at her feet as the procession of soldiers kept coming. The men and women fanned out along the upper ridge of the basin, but still Jean sat. Her old hands patting the back of one of the dogs. She would not be rising for his soldiers, though they glared their menacing broken faces down at her. In the deep caverns and tunnels where these people existed, in the dark, they'd taken on transparency in their facial expression. They looked exactly

as they felt and thought. The baser feelings of man warped and billowed behind the sneers and incurious eyes. Perhaps 50 soldiers had filed out with still more coming. They each took a specific position along the ridge of the concrete drainage basin where Jean sat. She could see that there was a hierarchy to their order, but she was uninterested and ignorant of it. Their stances were slack, jaws lifted to look down on her all the better.

Jean wondered why he was showing off again. The dogs growled in quiet tones and she whispered a kindness to them. When the line of soldiers completely encircled them the silent animals stood, ignoring her relaxed energy. They each took a slice of the pie to guard their master. Jean found the Mayor's display unnecessary and annoying.

Finally, he emerged with a high collar and satisfied eyes. He paused at the mouth of the pipe to survey his army. Then descended the slope to where she sat. She rose when he was near.

"Looks like you've grown, Simeon," she glanced up to his little army.

"Oh, this isn't even all," he smiled, beaming with pride and spread his arms out for her to behold, "I wanted to give you a taste of what you helped create. What do you think?"

"I think you've taken an unhealthy liking to broken things."

"Says you, ha! What gall, Jean. How many girls is this now? You don't even keep them, do you? Haven't they all died? Or left."

"That's pretty much what people do," Jean said.

"Not mine. I actually love mine, Jean. But look! Business is booming, thanks to you," he bowed to her playfully.

She gave a slack unimpressed smile, “You’ve always been creative in meeting your needs.”

He was annoyed to realize how much he’d wanted to impress her. With a wave of his hand the line of soldiers returned to the pipe, leaving only himself and one man.

“Where’s the girl?” Jean asked, ready to get on with her purpose and return to the ranch.

“I thought we could talk a moment, Jean,” he paused. She merely patted the big dog’s head next to her.

“I’d like our relationship to continue. I know you said this girl would be the end of our arrangement, but I think we could still be of use to each other,” the Mayor proposed.

“I’ve done enough for you, Simeon. Time to live by your own wits. And after this one, you will no longer be of use to me,” Jean said.

“That’s where I think you’re wrong,” he said with quick excitement. “I have eyes all over the city now, and under it. We both know the things you see sometimes have gaps. I can help with your purposes. I know what you’re up to. And you can help me. My empire, my collection my not impress you but I have done a good turn for the city. For those ones you care so much about.”

“What goodness are you imagining you’ve done there? So much power that you’ve stripped basic words of their meaning? That’s a worrisome step, my friend.” Jean was both amused and uninterested. She fished a box of cigarettes from her pocket. He stepped forward to light it. The dogs growled. Her open hand silenced them.

"I've provided a steady world for you and them to go about your business. Things are predictable. You may think them awful and oppressive or whatever offence your utopian desires find. But the world, the city is steady. You know chaos would only make everything worse. Harder to navigate. You need peace for what you do, and I can keep it. And I can fill in some of those gaps in vision you have."

"I think you're putting more worth on stability than it deserves. The waning of your powers would be much harder on you than me," Jean said.

"Consider it," he asked. She pulled down the corners of her mouth and gave a quick nod to the side. He was pleased with that.

"The girl." Jean said.

"Yes," the Mayor said as if remembering something pressing but unimportant. He snapped his fingers and the man next to him went back into the pipe. "What's this one called?" he asked, feigning interest in her endeavors.

"Mary." Jean answered.

"Mary," he repeated the name, "She was right where you said. She hasn't woken up. Weak little thing. Pretty close to dead. You have strange taste."

The soldier returned with Mary's limp and unconscious body in his arms. Her loose dark brown hair nearly dragging the ground. He dropped her in front of Jean.

Jean slowly stuck out her lower jaw, wrath wedging it open. The fingers cradling the cigarette tensed. She looked down at the girl considering how best to react. But when she looked back up, the Mayor had the soldier by the throat. The point of a knife tucked under the

man's upper lip, lifting it away from his face. He squeezed the man's throat and then flicked the knife upward cutting the lip all the way to a nostril. Then he let him go with a shove.

"My apologies, Jean," the Mayor said bending over to pick up the girl himself. He carried her to Jean's truck and placed her gently in the cab.

"I hope you will not let a discipline issue influence your decision," the Mayor said while closing the truck door. Jean whistled and the three dogs jumped into the truck's bed.

"Goodnight, Simeon."

The Mayor bowed his forehead and returned to the Underneath.

## Chapter 5

Jean drove two or three hours back home over the black rivers of night highway. The earliest changes in the sky were beginning to denote the coming dawn when she slowed the truck to a stop on her desert ranch. Liver, Slow, and Always Hungry jumped out of the truck's bed and ran to check the herd. The teeth of the eastern mountain range were now in full black velvet silhouette against the rising blue of the coming day.

There were four buildings that made up the central heart of the ranch. One large barn and two largeish sheds wore old, sturdy, useful looks about them. The fourth building was a trailer home. Its aluminum skirt was pulled back around the entry steps in memory of some maintenance. The wooden four-step ascent to the door showed off its flexible bowing under Jean and Mary's weight. She carried the girl over her shoulder like a fireman and deposited her on the depressed cushions of an ancient couch. The floor creaked complaints and yielded a

shallow dip with every step. The structure itself seemed immature, unready and unable to contain the full breath of human existence within. But still it must.

Jean looked at Mary as she lay there limp and dirty with white cracked lips. She wondered if this one really would be any different. It wouldn't matter either way, she sighed at the thought. A good teacher gets pleasure from instructing at every level. But Jean had no illusions at being a good teacher, she merely taught. She longed for someone to take to the lessons quickly, for someone who could reach a higher level. Someone who would stay for the greater and longer work instead dying or leaving once they'd healed enough to face the world again. Perhaps this one.

The morning sun burst the horizon and fell into the small living room. Jean studied the bones of Mary's face, seeing how they'd changed since their last encounter. The girl's basic qualities were the same under the brown of dirt and grey of near death. Defiance in the brow, kindness through the cheeks, a sharp narrowness in the jaw. She was quite pretty actually. She was probably too pretty. So they most likely wouldn't be getting very far, Jean thought with disappointment. It is a common belief that if nature gifts beauty of bone and face then there must be a great deficiency in another unseen area, such as character or intellect. But, Jean gave herself some hope, it was likely that Mary had never actually seen herself. So maybe, she reasoned with the mathematics of nature's laws, the other deficiencies wouldn't be as pronounced.

She went to the closet and after some rummaging returned to Mary's side with a plastic IV bag, hosing, and sterile needle. Mary opened her eyes for a moment when the needle pierced her skin. She recognized the old woman.



“Oh Jean, its you,” she smiled almost, just a tightening of the eyes and cheeks. “The second hands didn’t hurt. The second hands didn’t hurt,” she said in the nightmare version of a dreamlike state.

“Aye, girl. Go back to sleep,” Jean took her rough fingers across Mary’s forehead to move the hair from her face. As she did Mary was soothed by her touch. The girl’s body relaxed and took a deeper breath. *She’s really not that pretty, Jean thought, that jaw is definitely weak, not just narrow. Her nose is too flat on top, her eyes are too big. She’s really not very pretty at all, actually.* Jean smiled down at the girl after deciding it. Then she took a warm rag and cleaned Mary’s face and neck and hands and feet.

Mary lay on the couch a week, rousing only to sip some broth or watch the sunlight do a veiled dance on the ceiling through the thin curtain. She’d dream pleasantly of the light moving and swaying, just shafts of light on the thin ceiling tiles. But into the second week, as her healing progressed, the simple dreams turned to simple nightmares of the bouncing shaft of light in the sewer and the heavy treading steps. Though her body repaired, her mind felt as though it were collapsing. Not into madness, but into little ball of dirty aluminum foil. The kind the junkies use and leave on the sidewalk. She was afraid and angry and afraid. At night she fingered the stiff piping of the couch’s upholstery, focusing on texture and form and trying not to sleep. She was good at not dreaming, as long as she made herself tired enough. After Jean went to sleep, she’d crawl to the door and let the dogs in. They’d lie about her on the floor and the other couch. Her fingers running lazily through the coat of the one nearest. Their breathing would finally ease her to sleep. Though more often than not she still woke in a cold sweated panic.

Mary didn't stray far from the trailer for another week. She hobbled around on a pair of loose and splintered crutches Jean had located in the far recesses of her medicine closet. Mary rested and dozed, cooked and cleaned usually with Always under foot. He was her favorite. There was an old cat too, but he did not find Mary worthy of his company and mostly stayed in Jean's room. Jean scolded her for letting the dogs sleep in the house when they were meant to be protecting the goat herd. But Mary would still let Always come in to help her live through the nights. Jean knew, of course.

The wind started kicking up early one afternoon. The little shrubs bowed to it and Mary had to tie her hair in a knot to keep it from whipping her face during the evening chores. She could now help with some out of door chores though she was slowed by the crutches. The wind pushed and pulled at her making all outdoor movement mentally exhausting. While Mary was filling a water bucket a young woman pulled up to the little ranch. She stormed out of her car in a bluster, obviously agitated to a level that matched the wind. The girl saw Mary and rushed toward her.

"Where's Jean?" she nearly yelled over the wind. Their clothes seemed vacuumed against their bodies. They stood stiff and rigid in the pushing air. Mary scanned various sheds in an effort to locate Jean.

"Goddamnit, where's Jean? I need to talk to her," the young woman repeated. She was almost shaking. Her hands fretted in front of her with energy she didn't know what to do with.

"I don't know," Mary said, "She's around. Maybe in the barn." Mary flicked her chin to the largest building.

The woman turned on her heels and jogged with the wind at her back. It blew her short blond hair down flat against her skull. The water in Mary's bucket sloshed over the rim as she put it down to follow. She crossed the distance with quick long-stride hops with her crutches.

Mary entered the barn just a few seconds after the girl but she was already in a loud and frantic plea for assistance. Jean was bent over with a goat's back hoof on her thighs. She hadn't stopped working or looked up.

"Jean you hearing me? You gotta find her!" the woman took a few rapid steps through the hay strewn floor and pulled on Jean's shoulder.

"Alright, girl. Say it again. Calm down," Jean said, letting go of the goat's leg and standing up.

"Calm down?! Fuck calm down! My mom's gone and I can, I can," she stuttered, "I can feel it in my bones something bad's happened to her. I can't calm down!" The girl was hyperventilating. Jean put down her hoof scraping tool and placed a firm hand on the girl's upper arm. She pushed her backward and down to sit on a bail of hay.

"Breathe a minute. Your panicking ain't gonna do a thing for your ma."

She took a deep breath. "I'm not panicking," she glared up at Jean. "I need you to do that thing you do and tell me where my mom is and what happened to her." She took another slow breath and added, "And I need you to do it now."

"What happened?" Jean asked.

"Now Jean! Do it now! I know you don't need to know that. Or you can find it out yourself. Tell me now Jean! Where's my mom?!" The petitioner was on her feet again, pulling at Jean's jacket.

Jean grabbed her by the wrist and quickly twisted it behind her back. She lifted and the girl cried out in pain.

“Stop and control yourself,” Jean said in the young woman’s ear.

“I would like to help you but you will control yourself, Lily,” Jean added. Then she lifted the twisted arm again.

“Ahhh,” Lily let out a cry of pain. Jean moved her back to the bail of hay and put her down again.

“Now. Tell me what happened,” Jean said. Lily rubbed her shoulder then cradled her arm.

“My mom,” Lily began, “Well, drunken fuckin’ Carl took all the stash we had for rent and diapers for my brother and the food money, everything. There was nothing there. And my mom’s smart, she keeps it in different places. Not all in one wad. But I guess he knew where all the places were and went around and cleaned us out. Now it’s like the rent’s due in a couple days, there’s no food,” she collapsed her face in a hand remembering the desperate situation.

She lifted it again with a squint to steady herself and continued, “So my mom, who’s been straight you know? She been straight for a while, working at the grocery store in town?”

Jean nodded.

“Well, she’d just got paid. There’s gonna be no more money for two weeks. And I lost my job. So she says she’s gonna go make some money in the city and she’d be back in the morning. But then she don’t come back. The whole day and another night. And she just would never do that, Jean. She’d never do that! She always come back!” Lily was about to rise from her seat but Jean gave her a steeling look and she took a breath instead.

“Look, Jean. I know you know. I know you can know what happened to my mom. Will you tell me? Will you do it and tell me?” Lily begged.

“What do you think happened?” Jean asked.

Lily broke down crying, “I think she’s dead! I think some evil’s happened to her. I can feel it touching me in my bones. I think she’s dead, Jean! That’s the only reason she wouldn’t come back.” Her head now bounced in sobs, “I think she’s dead.”

Mary was still standing by the doorway. The wind outside was loud against the thin walls of the barn. It licked its way between the wall boards and pushed tiny gusts around the women. Mary and Jean just watched the girl heavy in her sorrow for a minute.

“If you know it, why have you come?”

“Then it is? She is? That what you sayin?” Lily looked searchingly at Jean’s face. The old woman lowered her eyes and flattened her mouth.

“No. No.” Lily whispered as the weight of what was already known fell upon her.

“You need to go back home, girl. Go get you a job and take care of your brothers. Call the police if you see Carl at all,” Jean said.

“But no, you don’t know yet, Jean. You ain’t asked, Jean. You gonna ask? Just ask, please?” Lily implored.

“I already knew. Last night. I’m sorry girl. Now you must become something and take care of your kin.” There was a pause. Lily looked for comfort or softness on Jean’s old face. There was none. And as her search turned up fruitless, the girl’s face turned hard and severe like she’d just received a great insult. The shattered can easily turn to wrath. There’s a type of balm in it.

“God damn you, Jean. God damn you to hell.” Lily spit in the hay. Then she stormed out of the barn as quickly as she’d entered. The howling, grinding wind muffled the sound of her car speeding away.

Mary closed the door and entered the room more fully. Jean went back to her work with the goat’s hoof.

“What was that?” Mary asked.

“Hmm?” Jean answered.

“All that. What did she mean ‘you could ask?’ Who could you ask? You know someone in the police?” Mary said.

“Mmm, nope. I don’t know any police.”

Mary’s brow knitted in confusion. “How’d you find out last night then? What was she talking about?”

“Well...” Jean started and then stopped herself. “Let me finish this. You still got chores? Is the water done?”

“Yeah. No.”

“Well, get to. We can discuss it tonight. The day belongs to work, not talk.”

Mary didn’t move, she just stared at the ground thinking over the interview. Jean turned and dismissed her with a wave of her gloved hand.

“Think while you work, girl. That’s what it’s good for. Go,” Jean flicked the stiff glove at her again. Mary went back to her bucket and the wind.

Mary worked the rest of the afternoon and evening with Always shadowing her every step. When the sun stretched long Jean called her in for a simple meal of beans and cornbread. Mary had grown very accustomed to the filling but basic meals. She enjoyed them more than any other food she'd ever had. She couldn't decide if it was the work or the cooking that made them so satisfying. Some combination probably.

Mary could not let the visitor and her comments go unquestioned.

"Well, what was she talking about Jean?" Mary started.

"What?"

"You know what. The girl, this afternoon, Lily."

"Oh yes." Jean sighed, "She's going to have a rough go of it. But I think she'll figure it out."

"What was she talking about? You knowing something? Or you can ask or something?"

"First, let's play a game." Jean said.

Mary crunched up her brow and cheeks. She looked at the cat for answers.

"What?" Mary said.

"Yeah, let's play a game first and then we can talk about that."

"Kinda like 'let's do the chores first'?" Mary countered. Jean laughed softly.

"Kinda like that, yes," she said.

"What's the game?" Mary asked.

"First we're gonna sit and breathe for a minute. Close your eyes."

Mary looked sharply to the side and then complied.

“Deep breaths, relax your body.” The two women sat in silence for ten minutes, then twenty, then half an hour. Jean smiled to herself and nodded at Mary’s stillness. Then she spoke softly, “Now go in my bedroom and look around. Lay grid over the room in your mind and move systematically from square to square over the whole room. You’re mapping it, in a way. Not really looking at the items. Try that.”

Mary complied, her weight making the crutches’ bracings loud and tight and then loud and slack with each hop. She stayed in the small bedroom a minute and then returned to the couch.

“Now, think of the space between us and play the tape back of what you saw. But put it outside yourself, play it in the middle of the room. I’m going to try to catch what you saw.”

“What? Like see what I saw?”

“Mmm.”

Mary tried and failed. Then she tried again and Jean caught a little slip of the memory at the end.

“Ah, nice. Did you feel that? Could you feel how it felt different when I could see it?” Jean asked.

“Yeah,” Mary said, “Like you’re pulling on it almost. Holy hell, you actually saw it? How does this work?”

“Right. Now take that feeling and try to head toward it at the onset and make it bigger.”

They spent another hour on this until Mary was completely mentally exhausted. Her mind swam like a goldfish in a bowl, moving but unable to see or focus.

“Alright, that’s enough,” Jean said rising to go to bed.



“Wait,” Mary said through her tired fog. “The girl. What’d she want from you?”

Jean sat back down on the edge of her chair, determined to make the answer short.

“I can see and know how evil moves. Not just pure evil, but I have a window to darkness. Its actions bloom before my sight. And the wind. She was wanting me to ask the wind, because he will often tell me things as well.” Jean rose again before Mary could get out another question. “Her mother was an old friend. That’s how she knew to ask.”

Mary pondered late into the night. She let Always in when she heard Jean’s soft snoring. She lay on the floor with him to get a different vantage of the room. Her slender and strong hands dug deep into his soft fur.

They spent another week on memory casting until Mary was proficient. Jean would send her to the barn or to walk around the outside of the trailer. Then Mary would send what she saw to Jean. Meditation time became longer, with a solid hour early in the morning before coffee and another in the evening. Mary enjoyed the game of it but she still struggled for sleep and the food she had so enjoyed was beginning to lose appeal. She grew more lean, and more tired. The nightmares seemed to grab her as soon as she closed her eyes now. For some reason it all stayed separate from the meditation. She was able to block it out and just breathe. But that also seemed to feed and grow the disturbance.

Suddenly Mary had been at the ranch for a couple months. She was off the crutches and her foot nearly mended, though it ached and yelled at her if she wasn’t delicate with her placement. She enjoyed the work, her hands were callousing proudly across in shiny pads. Her

back and shoulders were filling out just slightly from hauling water in sloshing black buckets across the ranch. Jean was a stickler for manual labor.

“Why were you on the streets?” Jean said through a mouthful of dinner one evening.

“I was staying with those girls. And. And needs must, I guess.”

“I heard about what you did to Leena,” Jean smiled and chuckled.

“I don’t know what made me do that. Just didn’t like what she was doing.”

“It’s good. To be intolerant, sometimes. Eh, most of the time. Intolerant to evil,” Jean watched her face for any lighting at the words.

Mary swallowed hard and stirred her food around the plate, “it just comes and goes. I’m not intolerant regular enough to mean anything.”

“Well, regular enough for those girls. Meant something to them.”

“Eh,” Mary bounced an eyebrow and laid her head on the arm of the couch.

“Do you want to be?” Jean asked.

“What?”

“Intolerant?”

Mary shrugged.

“Steadily intolerant, I mean?”

“Yeah,” Mary said like anyone says when asked if they want a good thing. Do you want to be a better person? Sure. Do you want more discipline? Probably wouldn’t hurt.

“It’ll take a brush, Mary,” Jean’s eyes were intense like another world was behind them.

“Maybe even more than just a brush, with evil.”

"I think we've brushed already," Mary said remembering the Underneath with a heavy blink. Always was at her feet and her fingers traced the furry feathers of his spots. She played with his ears to calm herself.

"Hmm. I mean an evil more serious than that. An evil more intelligent more cunning than you encounter in the Underneath," Jean said rising to rinse her plate.

"Well, I about lost that one. I don't know that I'm fit for anything more serious."

"Evil must be reckoned with. When it comes stirring up to the surface. And if you meet it well you can be healed."

"I'm not sure that I've ever met anything well." Mary's eyes drifted to the floor.

"Well, you build up to that. That's just a matter of trying and trying is just a matter of will."

"But then you have to want to."

"There is that," Jean said. "Do you remember that girl that came last month? Lily?"

"Yeah."

"Her mother was killed by great evil. And he's going to continue."

"That's too bad."

"It is. But there is opportunity in it. Opportunity for you."

"To what?"

"To change Mary, to grow. To get better, to put your horrid dreams and the horrid life you've lived deep in an unmarked grave." Jean leaned forward in her chair.

"I don't even know what that means." Mary said mostly to herself. Then louder, "But, hey, Jean, I know I'm basically better. But can I stay? Just a little longer. I.. I can't go back. I'll help. I can work more now that my foot's better."

"How about going forward?" Jean asked. Mary didn't answer.

"You'll not stay here in one spot. You'll have to move. I want you to help me with this problem. If you help, you can stay."

"The Lily's mother problem?"

"The same."

"Okay. Is it dangerous?"

"Very. Of course it is, dummy, it's evil."

"Will I die?"

Jean studied Mary's face after she said it. There was no fear for that small moment, no crushing defeat. Her face was almost eager at the thought of death. Not quite eager, eager is too strong a word, but there was a pleasant lightness around the question. A readiness to the shape of the words, a serious playfulness in the brow. Jean was caught in the look, impressed and saddened.

"No promises," she said smiling at the girl in a narrow way.

"Deal."

## Chapter

The sun was about an inch over the eastern horizon when the morning chores were done. Mary was picking her breakfast from her teeth with a piece of hay when Jean approached her.

“Let’s go.”

Mary rose and followed. Jean motioned for the dogs to stay. It was unusual because Jean usually took one or two of them with her wherever she went. They got in the dusty red truck and left the ranch behind.

“Where to?” Mary asked from the passenger side.

“There was another killing a couple nights ago. We’re going have a look around.”

“In the city?”

“No, Highbeam. At a storage unit.”

“Oh.” A skip of unpleasant sensation pricked up Mary’s arms like the ascent of a static-laced tarantula. They drove the half hour in silence.

Jean pulled into the parking lot of the storage facility. The sun was already high enough to blind them with its bleaching of the whitewashed cinderblock walls and corrugated metal garage doors. The plastic of the welcome sign was brittle and yellow-brown from the sun’s constant beating. They walked around the back.

Even without the police tape it was easy to identify which unit had housed the evil act. A dried maroon puddle formed a half crescent under the door. Mary halted and Jean walked ahead.

“Looks like someone forgot to lock up,” Jean said, flicking open the latch over the vacant padlock ring.

“How lucky,” Mary said, her throat beginning to narrow. She cleared it with a forced cough.

Jean lifted the garage door about a foot off the ground and turned to Mary.

“Now, girl, I’m going back to the truck. You will open this door and lay the grid and take in the space. When you are done, close the door and come back to the truck,” Jean instructed.

Mary’s eyes had grown a bit wider.

“You hear?” Jean asked.

“Yeah, fine.” Mary said, rolling her shoulders and neck.

“When you’re done close the door and come back to the truck,” Jean repeated. “Got it?”

“Yeah.”

Jean walked away and didn’t look back.

Mary forced another cough to try and widen her throat. Then she stood staring, rehearsing in her mind the act of lifting the metal door. After stalling that way for too long she finally stepped forward onto the dry blood moon. She imagined she felt some kind of heat coming up through her shoes and touching the pads of her feet. Had that been there before? Must just be the asphalt. She bent and gripped the handle, breathed-in and lifted.

The air, cool and stale, reached her while her eyes were adjusting to the shadows. There was a dampness in it from the blood. Desert dwellers can always smell even the slightest humidity. She didn’t dare step in until her eyes could see.

Flecks and fibers of disturbed dust floated and blinked like airy shards of metal at the edge of the light. She looked past these and saw a mostly empty room. There were a few boxes stacked against a back corner, an old couch, and some stacks of newspaper. She stepped off the blood moon into the room and decided to get on with it.

She didn't really want to see anything with her natural eyes. The atmospheric feeling of day-old violence tripped electric up her arms. She lay the grid in her mind and moved her eyes systematically over the space, only looking and refusing to see. There was blood, oxidized and dried to a heavy maroon. Her eyes watered unsummoned and embarrassing tears. They glassed and blurred her view until she shouldered the eye sockets to press them away. She did this all suspended a foot above her feelings. They raged and splashed up on her feet but she would do her task and not look down.

When she was done the garage door stuck and she had to jump and use all her weight to get it down. Mary thought the metal rails were much louder than they ought to be. They rung and echoed a bit even after the door was down. And the sun was brighter than it should have been. She forgot to lift her toes a couple times on the walk back to the truck and stumbled an awkward gait.

They returned to the ranch in silence.

"Alright, now sit," Jean said as they entered the trailer.

"I've got to use the bathroom. I got chores," Mary said while she shut the bathroom door. Her eyes hadn't been able to catch anything. They floated and stuck and floated and stuck in the empty space of the room.

Jean was standing in the kitchen when Mary tried to walk out.

"Come and sit," Jean said.

"Nah, I wanna work." Mary walked past, her voice flat and hollow.

Jean laughed and caught her arm, "you're a tender little thing, aren't you?"

Mary glared at her and Jean's smile only broadened. Jean pulled her to the couch.

“Sit down a minute, girl.”

“Isn’t the sunlight for sweat or something?” Mary said.

“Oh, you’re gonna sweat, don’t worry my dear.” Mary’s stomach turned and she sat.

“What? I’m fine. I’m gonna work and I’ll show you tonight. I’m fine,” she said making heavily lidded eye contact. Mary tensed her thighs to stand.

“No, you need to show me now. It will eat you to keep it in. You’ll start walling it up and make it part of you. That is not what we are trying to do here.”

“Oh yeah, what the fuck are we trying to do anyway?” Mary said and then caught herself, “it isn’t even a thing, I’m fine. I’ve been around stuff before.”

“You ever been in a room where someone violently died?”

Mary pushed up her chin and looked to the side.

“No.”

“Alright. Take a breath, shut your eyes.”

Mary rolled her eyes shut and gritted her teeth.

“Now, show me what you saw. And then we’re going to do something else.” Jean could feel Mary’s breath stick.

“Relax, take a breath. It’s just like before. Play it back for me.” Jean said slowly. Mary said an obscenity in her mind before starting.

It began with the grid lowering over her field of vision like a net. Then she could feel Jean tugging on it and pushed her mind in that direction. The memory played. Mary was startled to realize that she wasn’t in control. It was like a video playing and all she could do was watch. She was forced to see what she had merely looked at before.



There were odd blood patterns on the floor, pools and streaks and splatters. Mary studied them as they played. Three semicircles of blood were arranged in a tidy row along one side. It looked like they'd been moved, because there were some more in other places but the blood ring was lighter. Mary reasoned he had only had three and then moved them around, rather than there being many. She was pleased that her curiosity had overcome the oppressive feelings of the place. There was a blessed distance in memory casting.

When it was over Jean said, "do it again."

Mary studied the scene more the second time and wanted to discuss what she'd seen but after it finished Jean just said to do it again. And then again. And again.

But now the memory was beginning to distort. The things Mary found interesting were growing in size and duration. The room was stretching in unrealistic ways. The ceiling pinched in now; the whole room was narrower. Then the light began to distort.

"What's going on?" Mary said.

"Run it again," Jean said. Mary obeyed. Now the garage door was shut and a low tendrilled mist flowed in degrees of transparency over the blood stains.

"What is this?" Mary watched as her body tightened.

"Now here's what you're going to do. And this is quite a leap, not everyone can do this. But we'll give it a try." Jean breathed in and out. Mary followed Jean's breath, holding onto its sound and force as a link back to reality.

"Let yourself dream now, Mary. Let go of the memory as yours. Let it drift out of your control. Try that first." Mary had no idea what she meant. But she tried to not be afraid of the distortions and twisting. She tried to just be curious about the scene and how it was changing.

To look at it like a movie of a dream, disconnected from herself. Jean had her play it several times like this.

“Drift towards the truth now. Know that there is truth inside of what you saw. Time and space hold the truth. You felt it while you were there. Let time slide while space holds. Go back. It will pull you back to the hot moment that is still there trying to cool. If you can let it. Focus on that. Hold the space of the memory, but let time slide back to where it wants to pull you.” Jean said.

Mary was too far in to be confused. The only things holding her now were Jean’s voice and breath. And these stretched like a long tether. A little red string crossing the great dark expanse between memory and reality. It was the only thing keeping her from falling in completely. She heard Jean’s words and tried to approximate their meaning. She tried to get her mind to perform actions she did not understand in a space that had become so terribly unworldly.

There was a scream that howled from different directions in the now very elongated and low-ceilinged storage unit. The mist gathered into a shape Mary couldn’t quite make out.

“Take a deep breath,” Jean said from the end of the red string. Mary obeyed and with the exhale she blew at the mist to move it away. But it didn’t move in the direction she’d blown. The mist seemed to take the energy and shift upon itself to become denser. It finally stilled and congealed into the shapes of a man and woman. Their figures had gone from mist to something clay-like and then finally to fully discernable people who were frozen and fixed in one attitude. Mary tried to back away but she was bound to her view by unknown rules.

The woman lay on ground, the man kneeling at her side. In his frozen raised hand the bright shine of metal nearly lighted the room. The light caught on the woman's tears as her grimaced hopeless face turned from him. Everything was fixed and stuck in a moment, the figures so real and lifelike in the distorted room. Mary again tried to back away, she tried to look somewhere else. But both attempts were to no avail. She listened for the red string of Jean's breathing and it was there but far away in the black distance. There was a thin comfort in it still.

Just as she was learning to be okay in the moment with the frozen figures suddenly time and action returned to them. They were animated and now moving. Mary was forced to watch.

The woman whimpered and the man gave a too long blink of pleasure. Her arms were bound behind her back and she lay on them crying. Then he lowered the blade to her throat. The quick vicious movement immediately turned to mist, starting with the red of her blood and the light of his blade. Mary watched as the woman's screams were muffled and dissolved into mist. Mary heard a retching sound somewhere far away. Then the man dissolved as well. And the room returned to as it had been, distorted and low with the dried blood on the floor.

"Time to come back. Move your fingers," Jean said far far away. Some part of Mary's brain knew how to control her fingers. She felt them brush on the upholstery of the couch.

"Move your wrists," Jean said. Mary rushed back to the surface once she could see the way. When she opened her eyes to the trailer's living room her stomach was churning and her head was splitting. She felt a cold wetness on her lap and looked down to find a shallow pool of sick. She groaned as she tasted and smelled it at once. Jean tossed her a towel and she did a

sloppy mop of it. Then she collapsed against the back of the chair, too ill and exhausted to speak or think or change her clothes.

Jean took the dirty towel and left her there for the rest of the day.

## Chapter

"Are the police going to get him?" Mary asked.

"Likely not," Jean nodded and closed her eyes. "If they did it's not like it would stop it."

The women were in the living room, dinner plates resting on the arms of chairs. Mary had slept straight through to the next morning. She woke rested but hung-over. The water buckets were hauled slow and groggy, sloshing over her tennis shoes. They were damp until after lunch when her mind finally caught back up with the day and life.

"Why not?" Mary asked. "We could go help them, we know what he looks like."

"It's not that kind of a thing," Jean said scraping the nearly empty husk of a baked potato.

"Huh?"

"We know what he looks like this time. But not next time," Jean answered.

"Like a different murder? What are you talking about?" Mary asked. Her face pinched horrified at the thought of more.

"He had that body this time. Next time he likely won't. It isn't a matter for police."

"The riddles aren't helpful," Mary's tongue grabbed a crumb of potato flesh from the corner of her lip. She wiped the moist spot with the back of her hand.

“I’d like to show you but I won’t. I think I did too much showing last time,” Jean said to herself.

“I want you to see for yourself. When the time arrives. When you’re ready.” Jean lightly scratched the back of her jaw near the ear, mostly just pressing the skin down absently. Then her attention and eyes returned again after deciding something.

“But, hmm... he’s a demon, Mary. He’s possessing them. That man you saw wasn’t really doing it. The initial owner of that body. The boy who was a baby and then child then man, it wasn’t him killing that girl. He was held captive. Prisoner. And likely had to watch. These are actions out of the realm of this world’s justice.” She reached out to put her plate on the coffee table, leaned back into the chair, then breathed deeply slow and loud.

“Once, long ago, there were two brothers.” She sucked a bit of dinner from between her teeth. “After a slight led to a row one brother left and went far from home. With the distance his bitterness grew into an opposite aim from how he’d been raised. But the industry of his youth could never leave him. So he works tirelessly at the new purpose.” Jean cleared her throat, leaned forward and scratched between her eyebrows, “the enslavement and destruction of us.” There was silence and Jean squinted to think about it.

“Us?” Mary asked, taking it personal.

“Everyone us. Not us us,” Jean clarified.

“So, yeah. It happened so long ago, the story has probably twisted. But who knows, is goes something like that,” Jean added.

“Can he go back?” Mary said.

Jean chuckled, "I think he could, and ought. But that's not the place of things. He was also brought up to be a great leader. Told and taught all the truths of it, just like his brother. So he has many followers. The man you saw was being inhabited by one of these."

"One of the followers? Not the brother."

"Mmm," Jean answered, nodding a shallow bounce.

"So what's your part in it?" Mary asked after some moments.

"Uhh, my part? Hmm, I don't have much of a part. Look over my goats, do what I can. I guess that's a part."

" 'Do what you can' ... a lot of short words for what it really is."

"Well, that's the hope. But I've had plenty of failures."

"Kinda high stakes," Mary said.

"The highest," Jean agreed, lifting her forehead and looking in the direction of the carpet but at nothing.

Mary sat blinking with her eyes a little too wide while Jean gathered the plates. When the door to Jean's room shut a great low feeling crashed over Mary. She got up and let Always in.

## Chapter

More months passed, more crime scenes visited. Mary slowly got better at the process with repetition. Seeing the violence always cut her but because she was forced to clear it so quickly; it couldn't linger. It was now the tail end of winter, which feels like the beginning of fall most places. The desert waits around for months for winter to come. The whole expanse gets

combed over with a bit of grey and crispness waiting eagerly for something to happen. She's stood-up every time. Finally she whimpers some great tears and starts spring.

Mary was laying on the floor gazing up at the underside of a chair. Jean had gone to bed some hours ago but she wasn't yet tired enough to let Always in. When things were calm like this her eyes itched for new views like an artist's. The painter who's seen the irises bloom 20 times now, lays half her face on the wet dirt and behold, the flowers are beautiful once more. But irises don't grow here. There isn't enough love or water. So, Mary had to use what was around. The chair cushion's particle board support gave her an interesting patchwork of shattered wood grain to trace with her finger. The chewing part of her mind could finally relax and so she pondered. The carpet's ancient settled dust and cat dander grew less offensive with each passing breath until it wasn't noticed at all. Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a tremor in the floor. Through her back she felt the foundationless trailer's floor pulse to the heavy steps of a woman coming up the porch stairs. A woman's because they were only heavy with purpose, not presence. The weight distribution and gait also clearly indicated a female guest. Mary tongued her upper lip and teetered between annoyance and interested in the late-night visitor. Whoever it was got to the top of the steps and waited. She turned around and then back again. There was no knock.

"Come in," Mary said, her recumbent attitude unaltered. She decided to see what the moment brought before choosing how to feel about it.

The latch of the thin aluminum door popped when the visitor turned the knob. Lacking any seriousness or heft, the door swung open with uncomfortable quickness.

Crys burst in slamming the door behind her with a flick of the wrist. The pre-fab shook like the weak thing it was, swaying like a willow to the passions of its contents. Mary felt every bending accommodation of the home though her back as she lay on the floor. This yielding always bruised her spirit some, an irritation bruise if there is such a thing. Though flexibility in the extreme could offer survival to those wise or cowardly enough to incorporate it, Mary reckoned it could never offer protection. No one sought refuge in the willow tree, except maybe the beetle who could eat its way down to the unyielding bits of it. Or the cockroach who doesn't care because he knows he'll survive anyway and only makes a pretense at the concerns of the living. Mary was neither. Sensitive people do better in tents or the open air than single-wides. Then nature can hold them up and gravity can hold them down and somewhere between these two great forces they find fewer bruises and peace.

Crys threw herself in a chair, forced her body down aggressively into the cushions. She extended her legs and arms, rubbed deep and down the padding on the chair with the heel of her hand. But no, the stillness was unbearable. She drew loose and trembling fingers through her flat and tinny red dyed hair then jumped back to standing. The unkempt bangs clung to her scalp with grease. Mary watched with interest building. What shape of burr could be causing her old friend's skin to crawl so? Pure curiosity can get dangerously close to callousness.

Mary pushed the chair away and propped herself on one elbow to assess her guest more fully. Her legs remained outstretched; feet stacked heel to toe.

"Oh, hey," Crys said on seeing her lying there, "I didn't hear anyone, but it was unlocked."



Crys walked the room with aggressive nervous energy, only stopping to when she hit a barrier of wall or furniture. A quick turn of the heel sent her marching to the other side. The tracks crisscrossed, matting the shaggy carpet in a star or explosion's pattern.

Crys was short with tight dense muscles. The kind of body a farmer would look for in a wife. Her body was highest ideal for all the honorable work of womanhood; strong shoulders, squat hips, short sturdy fingers. Hauling heavy loads, bearing children, dispensing freely the most practical of wisdoms; in another time and place her body would have excelled at all these things. But in this time and place, she paced tense and anxious about the room. A sheen of dry blood cracked on the back of her hand as she picked up nick-knacks absently, inspected them without seeing, and returned them heavily to where they were they had not been.

Mary watched Crys' discomfort fill the room. She felt no need to ease this kind of suffering. It must either run itself out or Crys master it on her own. Mary looked away and began trimming her cuticles with her teeth. Once the initial feast of Crys' behavior was over her eyes grew bored at its static nature.

"I just came by...," Crys finally blurted and then didn't finish.

Mary lifted the innermost part of her eyebrows, looking up at Crys who had yet to make eye contact. She said nothing. Another minute past, but now Crys was standing before her, rocking her weight from one foot to the other, rhythmically running her hand through the clumped bangs and petting them smooth against her skull.

"I heard from some girls that you and Jean were... well, the word was to come and say if anything weird or whatever happened," her eyes flicked big and rolled on the word 'weird' while her fingers stretched to accentuate it even more.

After another over-birthed pause Mary said, "Something happen?"

"Yeah. Shit." Crys said throwing up her hand and turning away in disgust or fear.

Mary lay back again and closed her eyes. It was late. The little lamp in the corner lit the room with a gentle orange hue. The wind had finally stopped and relieved the trailer home of its incessant noise. After the short peace of winter the wind was beginning again to whip itself into its one directional fury. As if nature had finally done her housework and ironed a tornado flat. Everyday Mary braced herself against the noise, the forever pushing and pulling. It made her want to escape all the earth for its constant touching. But now all was quiet and she could untie the bracings. She liked the taste of quiet. It tasted cool and blue and returned energy to her for the processing of other stimuli.

Crys' anxious shadow kept cutting over Mary, she watched the red-orange light bloom and dim through the thin skin of her shut eyelids. Finally, the pacing slowed. Finally, Crys' breath began the deep dives of self-soothing. Mary heard her fall into a chair exhausted.

Mary sat up and crossed her legs like a child waiting for a story. Crys met her eyes for the first time and Mary rewarded the self-mastery with half a small, lukewarm smile.

"Okay, okay, kay kay kay." Crys forced a long breath out. Once composed, she stretched and cracked her neck. Then hooked a finger under a tight black elastic and clawed at her scalp. After these preliminary comforts had been tended to, she began.

"So tonight, I went to the soup kitchen on 7<sup>th</sup>. I'm just like bone tired and I go in and sit and eat at a table. This man comes in, I didn't notice him at first. But he sits a couple tables down. The first I see of him, he half stands, like crouching over his tray and then he slams his fist on the table. Like everyone stops and looks at him. It was hard too, made all the trays on

that table bounce. All the forks and spoons chink together, that metal sound,” she fluttered her eyelids. Her tongue rested on the inner ridge of her upper lip. It quivered, then she continued.

“Something about his fist slamming down on the table made the whole room smell worse. You know, the smell of those places?” Crys said. Mary nodded and the smallest of scowls expressed familiarity with the mentioned odor.

“Whatever the fuck that cheapest cleaner is. I won’t even wash my hands there, cuz then I have to smell it for the rest of the day. McDonald’s ain’t even that bad. McDonald’s ain’t only for the beggars.” She answered her own question.

“You know they do it on purpose,” Crys said like a demand.

Mary shrugged.

“Yeah, they do Mare.” She nodded with conviction. “The fuckers do it on purpose, so we remember. Can’t be letting the scaley poor be forgetting where they belong. Don’t want them thinking they’re too human, make them remember they’re fuckin’ beggars. ‘They’re grateful just to have anything; they probably can’t even smell anyway’,” the last bit she said in a funny voice with her lips turned down mimicking how all people clinging to the lowest rungs of charity speak.

Mary grinned and let out a soft laugh, “It’s probably just the cheapest,” she said.

“Oh, I know it’s the cheapest. Everyone knows it’s the fucking cheapest.” Her hands trembled while she lit a cigarette.

“I think they’d rather spend the money on the food than nicer smelling cleaners.” Mary said.

"I'd rather they give us oatmeal for dinner every time than have to smell that," Cry said.

"The kids probably wouldn't," Mary said.

"They'd do better to. Man, it gets stuck in my nose. Ugh, if I think about it I can smell it." She leaned over the cigarette. The weight of her torso transferred to her elbows and knees so the smoke ribbon deposited in a pool under her downturned face. Then she sucked it in deeply through her nose.

"But the scout, the guy with the heavy fist, he was looking for something. I saw him search the crowd. Meeting everyone's eyes. Looking for something. Out looking for upturned bellies, that's what he was sniffing for, I'm pretty sure. And I'd been looking for a man. I was tired. So so tired of getting cut and robbed and beat at this game and having no law on my side. Ain't no one to take my part, Mare, never." A tear escaped her. Mary followed it as it bounced once off the soiled carpet and then disappeared. The drop's resilient surface tension caught her attention first, and after that, the emotion that created it. Mary curved her back sharply under the weight of sorrow and truth and rested her chin in a hand. It smooshed up a side of her face.

"But I knew it was gonna cost. Probably about as much in hurt as money, but I think that's more or less what its gonna cost anyone. And I really needed a rest. So I didn't let my knowing he's out scouting show. I met his eyes and played the game. I forced the thoughts that I wanted my face to look like. So I thought a couple times while we're looking at each other *I'm weak, you're strong*. A little chanty thing, over and over in my mind. It wasn't too much a lie. I am weak. I am weak. Fuck." She pushed that mirror of reality violently away with both hands

into the air in front of her. A couple good deep puffs and she calmed down. Mary caught herself biting too hard on the inside of her lower lip and released it.

“And that fucking cleaner smell bleaching out my brains. He looked good too.” She sighed at the admission. “Clean. He looked like he was clean.” She rested her head a moment, giving mercy to an honest folly of discernment.

“He saw me and knew. His face slit narrow on me and he flicked his head toward the door. I forked in a couple more bites fast and went out.”

“Outside it’s all already dark. I start a smoke. I got maybe halfway through, I don’t know-- this takin’ too long? I’m all back in it. Maybe I go faster over the next part... So he comes out like ‘What’s your name, pretty?’ standing all close. Like our chests were touching but he’s not getting anything out of it. Like fake, like he’s trying to sound like he wants it but he don’t.”

“I go, ‘Hey man. I’m Crys.’ Being sexy, confident like I know my business. But that didn’t... well. I’ll just get on with it.”

“He says, ‘bet you are. But I like Pretty better,’ And I’m just like ‘whatever baby’ and then I laugh. I looked away for just a second, I just look up the street for just one goddamn second. It wasn’t long.” Her breath and the cords in her throat forgot themselves and the last sentence cracked.

“Then he’s got me by the throat, tight and getting tighter slow like a snake. He pushes me against the wall. The smoke, from my cigarette, got stuck like behind my face in my nose,” she waved the hand holding the cigarette in front of her face creating a messy circle of smoke.

“I was choking on it. It burned, like my face is burning off. And he’s smelling me. He’s fucking smelling me, Mare! Like I can feel his nose on my neck and ear sucking in all the air off

my skin. That's what he's getting off on. I knew it, he got excited. Then his other hand went hard between my legs. Felt like he punched me in the clit. I jerked back but then there's the wall so it was no use. He lifts me a bit so all my weight is on my fucking clit, and I can't fall forward cuz he's got my neck pinned back." She was speaking faster, thrown back into panic. She looked around the room desperately for reality.

"So then he says, 'Come on, what are you made of.' And I don't know what the fuck he's talking about. He's like annoyed that I ain't answering him. Cuz he's got my goddamn throat shut. So he lets me drop to the ground, and I dropped hard like a rag. While I was down there, and it was just a few seconds maybe, I was just like I am so tired of this shit. I am so so tired of this."

"Get up, we're goin,' he says. I could tell he wasn't even looking at me. Like I'm a dog," She bore her lower teeth and reached her chin up to the ceiling wrenching with internal pain.

"I say 'Okay' or something, I don't know what I said as I was getting up. Something. Then I touch his chest. And I say, 'hey, we don't need to start like this baby. I like you. I wanna like you a lot. I know how to like you a lot.' I'm like being all kitten on him. He's like thinking or something for a minute."

"And I shoved my smoke in his eye. He cried out and I probably coulda gone but I couldn't stop, I was so fucking pissed. I shoved my thumb in there too, and my nail and scratched slow at whatever hard thing I ran into in there. And I screamed at him, I yelled, 'You fucking fucker! I was tired. Why?!' And he's like yelling and being a little bitch there. So I figure my luck's about to run out and I better git. I ran and ran till I got to the place where I've been leaving my car. Then I came here. That's it."

Crys lit another cigarette.

“Why you lookin’ for a pimp, Crys? What the hell’s that?” Mary said.

“I mean, like I said, I can’t shift it. It’s just, I hate floating around waiting for people to not be shit,” Crys’ upper face crumbled in desperation and then her lip curled in disgust.

“Still.” Mary sighed deep and looked away from the disappointment.

“Still what?” The words were dangerously paced. “No, for real Mare. Still the fuck what?” The sentence was slow and controlled like the approach of hungry violence. Her jaw jutted out and the words were a reckless challenge thrown over the lower teeth. Crys’ eyes crisped up. Whatever mush of confusion and pain had been clouding them before now sharpened like the sun eating quick a morning fog.

She stood and took two slow steps toward Mary who did not alter her position seated on the floor. Her head was cocked down and her arms back, gathering into fists. All the feeling of her evening now flowed in one rageful direction like rain finally reaching the gutter. It gathered steam with its uniting purpose.

Mary met her eyes with a sharp unyielding. Crys halted her forward assault like an itchy trigger finger.

“That right there. That temper of yours doesn’t make a good quality in livestock, Crys. And it’s the reason you’re still alive, you dumb bitch.” Mary said.

Crys laughed. As quickly as her rage had risen, it dissipated.

“Mary, girl. It’s been a long time,” she threw herself on the couch in a relaxed mirth. Mary stood and yawned, shaking her head.

“Care if I crash here tonight?” Crys asked.

“Nah, but I’m here,” she nodded to indicate the other dilapidated couch. “The old lady’s up early. You’ll have to tell her what happened,” Mary said.

“You think she’ll let me stay a bit? You been here a minute, huh?” Crys said as they were bedding down.

“Probably, but it’ll cost.”

“I gotta little coin,” Crys said.

Mary gave a short throat noise of acknowledgment and then a tired smile to the back of the couch. She assumed a fetal position, curled in a ball with the old, stained beach towel as a blanket. Crys threw her arms above her head and slept on her back like a laborer after lunch. She slept the easy sleep of one who lives by the work of her hands. Mary lay a long time waiting for exhaustion to finally outpace the nightmares. She found Crys’ steady breathing serving the same purpose as Always’ and didn’t let the dog in. She left the lamp on every night now, for she’d learned bitterly over and over that the dark is no place for rest.

## Chapter

Crys woke a few hours later to a percolator thumping and popping in the narrow hallway that served as a kitchen. After a couple minutes, she heard the carafe scrape on the heating element followed by the sizzle of uncaught drips. Soft voices hummed a low inaudible conversation. Crys willed her tired body up to sitting.

Mary’s weight rested on the sink’s chipped lip. The early spills of sunrise bathed her back harshly. She had her arms folded tightly across her chest and little nubs of back bone stuck



out through the back of her shirt dotting an arch of poor posture. Her head stuck out, straining the neck and causing her hair to fall in a way that shielded her face from Crys' view.

Jean stood further back facing the room where Crys sat. Jean's great width and upright stature filled any room no matter the size. But standing there in her shaggy pink matted bath robe silhouetting Mary's bent and diminutive figure, she looked like the boulder that holds up the cliff.

Jean and Mary came back to the living room. Mary set a coffee cup with brown drips clinging to its sides on the small table beside Crys. The dripping had pooled when Crys lifted it to her mouth. She wiped the coffee ring away with a quick hand and dabbed the cup on her the ankle of her sock. Her short thumb smoothed away the drying brown streaks on the cup's exterior.

Mary sat clutching her warm cup silently smelling the fresh bitter steam while rubbing its still cool rim on her slack upper lip. Jean lowered herself into her well-worn recliner.

Jean's face was a wrinkled slab of granite. The deep heavy lines looked as if they'd been carved with a chisel, each one severe and bought in full. Jean had the face of a general whose every battle, won or lost, was etched proudly for all to see.

"Tell me," Jean said, her voice rough from the damage of early morning and years of smoking. She breathed loudly, the cavity of her nose protesting forced intakes.

Crys recounted her experience with much more brevity and self-control than the night before.

"Think that's him?" Mary said after Crys finished.

"Yeah. Its him. Where were you?" Jean asked.

“Just downtown. The church on 7<sup>th</sup>,” Crys said. It was quite a nice puzzle piece, Mary had thought on the story long into the night. Certainly not a lynch pin but it gave a clearer view to his hunting mannerisms.

Jean thought for some long minutes. Holding each shallow sip of coffee in her mouth until it cooled and then swallowing in overly labored gulps. The morning was getting bright. The light that came in through the sheets hung as curtains swallowed up the little lamp’s gentle offerings. Mary noticed and she felt for the lamp. When forced to stand next to the sun, great efforts can feel very small. She flicked it off to preserve its dignity.

Crys was unaccustomed to leisurely mornings and bounced her legs in quick staccatos off the balls of her feet.

“Hey Jean,” Crys said squirming a bit behind her face. Jean made no acknowledgment aside from a slow blink, but that could have been coincidental.

“Hey Jean, umm, could I crash here for a few days? I lost my place and I hate sleeping in the car,” Crys couldn’t look at her while she asked. There’s a variety of shame that grows in asking for unearned favors.

Jean nodded slowly with a downturned mouth and shoved away the arthritic looking tabby with her slippered foot. The cat seemed to be the only being who did not take her seriously. He let her foot push his haunches without resistance but then pivoted on his tired and grey front paws and made another pass at her ankles from the other direction. She had a weakness for persistence and reached down to scratch his neck this time with her old, wide ranch hands.

"I need you girls to do some things for me," Jean said. Mary felt the command suck in all the gravity from the room. A light dis-ease came to her mind.

"Sure, anything," Crys said. Mary sighed in annoyance at Crys' free and ignorant use of the word 'anything'.

"I want you to go somewhere tonight, have a look around for me," she said it like she was uncertain and then as if hearing the idea in the physical world had convinced her, "Yeah, tonight. Just have a good look around and come back."

"Like the others?" Mary coughed and asked dead in the eyes.

"No. Better than the others," Jean replied flattening her eyes to match Mary's but adding a sparkle of dare to them at the end.

"Better how?" Mary felt her gag reflex being tickled by recent memories, a lightness in the stomach, a tightness in the throat.

"It will be better because you will do better. You've improved each time, my girl," Jean said with an encouraging wink and a light slap on her thigh. Mary winced and swallowed a hard viscous ball of coffee flavored saliva.

"Okay, sure," Crys said deciding to ignore what couldn't be understood. Jean tilted her head to Mary who bowed a shallow acceptance.

"Good. There's work." Jean ended the conversation.

## Chapter

Dusk hinged toward night before the women realized. The day had been filled with care for Jean's goats. The 200 head herd took everything you had to give it. There was always

something that needed to be done. It was a wonderful and ever giving resource for Jean and her guests. Water needed to be hauled, milking, tending to the sick ones, mending fences, and Jean wanted a cluster of stalls mucked out, too. Crys took to the work as if she'd been bred for it. Mary had been slow and awkward at the beginning, even if you accounted for her previous injuries. As Mary showed Crys around and told her what was needed done she saw Crys had a natural fluency with the work that Mary never had. Mary did it because she knew it was good for her. And because it was the price of needed end-of-day exhaustion. Crys seemed to instantly like it in a much deeper way. Her body moved as if it were dancing with the work not merely performing it. Mary's body did the tasks in a rote and automatic way to allow her to think and feel. Crys became the work. The joy and purpose of it filled her, brimmed over in her. Before the afternoon was out she knew the needs and pulse of the ranch better than Mary, who had never thought the endeavor alive enough to feel for a pulse. For Mary the work was good and a way to keep her mind from eating itself. For Crys, within just hours of experiencing it this kind of work was the most fulfilling of her life.

The wind started up at about noon. It threw loose needles of hay in their eyes and hair. It added to the weight of already heavy buckets by pulling them back and away. It was a constant and grating level of opposition to their honorable efforts. The three women finally rested in dusty heaps on the couches late in the evening.

"Now," Jean started after she had fed and watered her laborers, "there's a rest stop on the highway between Highbeam and Larson. Somewhere between them, I'm not sure where. Drive the length and find it," Jean said.

“Yep,” Mary said. She deposited her dinner plate in the sink and went out. Crys followed.

The early night was already much cooler than the preceding hour. The wind had calmed down early and was nearly just a breeze at this point. Gentle moving air licked cold at their perspiration; Mary shivered. Crys felt it too but had a greater physical resilience to her environment. Crys had a sturdy sovereignty over her physical self. The two women were also opposites in this. Everything Mary touched and everything that touched her went straight to her soul and caused an opposite and more often than not unequal reaction. It was a temperament greatly unsuited to life at the edge.

They drove a couple hours under the blanket of desert night. The stars showered stillness everywhere disrupted only by the black stoppage of the horizon. The drive was mostly silent. There is a sacredness to night after a long day of work. It takes some effort or a large amount of numbness to resist the pull to be quiet and calm in the night.

“There,” Mary said, pointing.

“What doing here again? Are we supposed to get something?” Crys asked as they pulled off the highway.

The rest stop looked like a small compound of many brick box-shaped buildings. Some efforts at the aesthetic had been made, but it was dark and they couldn’t see the scrappy desert shrubs and cactus landscaping. It looked almost like a little prison without the threats. No razor wire or fencing, but very economically built low roofed buildings. The two larger structures had entrances facing each other and housed the separate men’s and women’s facilities. Several other smaller maintenance buildings were dotted about. They had heavy

locked doors and lacked purpose signage. The place was empty, desolate, and completely still except for some loosely strung yellow police tape which billowed thinly in an unfelt breeze.

The women exited the car. Mary was engulfed in a wise and cautious curiosity. She moved with a silent grace, eyebrows tense and mouth slightly agape.

“Just have a look around,” she answered as she neared the police tape.

“Huh?” Crys didn’t hear her. She lit a cigarette and kicked some gravel off the sidewalk. A placard engraved with information on desert animals caught her attention. She slowly ran her fingers over the relief of a rattlesnake, tracing its tight coils again and again. Only when the cigarette’s ember died at the filter did she think to find Mary.

After instructing Crys, Mary had entered the women’s bathroom ducking under the X of yellow tape. Pale teal tiling formed a shiny crust on the entire lower half of the room. It went about as high as Mary’s shoulders and then became a white painted wall through to the ceiling. The ceramic sinks clung to the tile without a counter, their metallic innards hung disemboweled beneath. A large unbreakable metal mirror, barely perfunctory in purpose, reflected Mary and the electric hand dryers behind her. Adorning all these familiar structures was a sometimes thin and sometimes thick veil of blood.

Mary shut her eyes against the shock of it, but the metallic smell and taste of violence was all over her and in her. Closing her eyes did nothing. Then the familiar instinct to panic and run seized her. It took all her energy but she grabbed the feeling and forced it with a firm disgust to sit down like an undisciplined dog. Then she breathed in several purposeful times reminding herself in a small soothing internal voice that there was still oxygen in this blood muddy air.

Annoyed at how long it had taken to regain control this time, Mary tried to look about the room a bit before laying the mental grid. She forced a casual inquisitiveness that became genuine after a few seconds.

It had been a massacre of one. If one person can be killed with the same ruthlessness that it takes to kill many then this was it. Deep maroon dried blood was splattered everywhere on the walls in long cascading streaks and haphazard shotgun patterns. The floor bore record that it had all started in the handicapped stall at the end of the row. A much thicker pond of blood had pooled and dried there. Something had been drug, the body presumably, from that spot past the other stalls and to the sink area where there was a smaller pool. Drug by the neck or shoulder it looked because there was a lighter smaller track parallel to the main, painted by bloodied long hair. Amongst the splatters and ponds were the heavy prints of deeply treaded boots.

As she slowly made her way around the room, Mary noticed some wads of brown hair and another small reservoir of blood in one of the sinks. Finally, she laid the net and took in the whole space, creating a memory to show Jean.

"Mare? You in here..."Crys pushed open the heavy door, "Holy shit."

Crys had an earthlier sensation of shock but not panic or fear.

"Whoa," she said. And then took a couple steps into the room. The door swung shut behind her.

"Jesus Christ, this doesn't look good." Crys said. Mary was almost done and grinned at the understatement.

"Who was it?" Chris asked.

“I dunno. Someone short,” Mary said assessing the blood pool in the handicapped stall.

“Hopefully someone short and not a kid,” she added.

“Surprised they haven’t fire hosed this whole thing with bleach yet. Shit.” Crys said, eyes big as though she were beholding an offensively unimpressive mural.

“I bet it was just last night, maybe early morning. Look the blood’s just barely dry in some places,” Mary said tossing a hand in the general direction to indicate.

“Christ, what a mess. Some people just gotta make a party out of everything.” Crys said shaking her head. Mary looked at her to confirm she had just said that and then laughed.

“Let’s go. Did you look around outside?” Mary asked.

“Yeah, I mean, kinda. What am I looking for again?” Crys replied.

“Well, let’s go check around for a second and then head back.”

The long commute had the women back in the early dark hours of the morning. Like all the best foot soldiers they were quiet in transition. Jean had left the little lamp on for them. They immediately crumpled in its soft atmosphere onto their respective couches. Some hours later the glow of morning roused them.

Jean never dwelt in the late night anymore. She said the truth got strangled by unnecessarily strong emotion creating an unruly thing that couldn’t be trusted. Never make a decision in the dark that can wait for the light, she said. The bloom of hope, possibility, and a sharper mind greet every daybreak and is well worth the wait, if it can be afforded at all.



She sat on her dilapidated throne, a cup of strong coffee as a scepter. Her pink matted robe billowing majestically while she squinted into a sharp beam of the light from a new day. She heard their breathing change and knew they were awake.

“Well, women. Let’s get started. Up,” she said in a loving command as to a child who’s overslept. Mary and Crys willed themselves up slowly.

“Mary?” Jean asked.

“Yeah, I couldn’t see anything while I was there. I don’t know why, I still haven’t been able to yet,” Mary said. Her face held the worn exhaustion of a night that’s taken more than it’s given.

“Did you dream it?” Jean asked.

“I didn’t let myself dream,” Mary said.

Jean smiled, her eyes all warmth and her mouth piteous, “You’ll ruin yourself for fear, girl.”

Jean’s amusement at Mary relaxed her some. They were just girls, at the very most they were first sketches of women. Women in body but not yet in mind. The poor little girls were ruddered by fear. Jean’s amusement came from a wash of the deep maternal pleasure at watching weak, young, innocent things alternately fight and hide their way to strength and competence. She had yielding to this biological pull years ago and no longer doubted her place in it.

“Show me,” Jean said, her eyes in a long blink softening the intensity of the command.

Crys was scratching her stomach and stretching. Her yawn lengthened her words, “We didn’t bring anything back. But holy shit, what a mess that was. Wonder how long it takes

before they clean it.” She smacked her mouth some and lifted her brows over droopy sleepy eyes while looking about the room.

At once she was fully alert and tense. Mary and Jean both had their eyes rolled back in their heads, the whites red rivered and ghostly. Jean had her chin pointed up, the angle of her neck crooked sharply as the weight of her skull pulled it back against the chair. Her whole body looked uncomfortably unanimated, as if thrown down dead. The only thing visually lending her life were the straining taut open eyes.

Crys placed her hands gingerly on the cushion at either side of her hips, everything tense. Her eyes wide. Mary’s head had rolled forward and dangled over her chest. Her eyelids bounced and fluttered over the pearled and veined whites. Her left hand flicked with a quick and constant twitch at the wrist.

Crys eased her weight from the couch to her legs, assuming a rabbit’s fearful squat.

“Jean? Mare?” she whispered, not really wanting them to answer.

She took a crouched and cautious step forward.

“Jean?” she said again and touched the possessed woman’s knee in a feeble effort to rouse her.

At the touch Crys was immediately flung in her mind back to rest stop bathroom. Before her she saw the blood veiled tile, the metal mirror. They were familiar. What wasn’t familiar was the dead girl on the floor. Then she heard as though an echo a hallowed scream. Hallowed because it was a last scream, one that died with its creator in a gummy whoosh of air through thick liquid.

Then Crys heard in her mind Jean's firm voice, "Sit." And she barely controlled a backward fall onto the couch.

Some minutes passed. Crys sat in shock trembling, eyes open and honest as a doe's. Mary and Jean remained the same. She avoided looking at them, studying the carpet and kitchen hallway. She was about to leave as her discomfort was approaching its threshold. But then at last their strained eyes blinked forward. They took in great natural breaths to recover from all the controlled ones. Mary immediately fell asleep. Jean sat squinting. Her face piercing through some deep problem. Crys' eyes jumped between the pair of them and for once she didn't know what to say.

"Hmm," Jean said, rising. A sharp and loud noise of determination sang through her flaring nostrils.

"There's work. Five minutes," she said to Crys over her shoulder and she disappeared into the bedroom.

## Chapter

When Jean emerged from her room Mary was slumped over fast asleep. Jean draped the old towel over her. Then she went outside where Crys was leaving the barn with a 50 lb. bag of feed over her shoulder. Jean smiled and went about her own duties.

The work of the day went on without event. Crys wanted to ask about the eyes rolling back and seeing the dead girl but she didn't know how to say it. The ranch had a gravitational pull, an atmosphere that riveted her to reality and goodness. Images of the fright flashed in her

mind occasionally but then the smells and the light and textures of the ranch chased them away. Crys could only be awed by and submit to it. Though she did try to form questions the natural law was for her to fall into the orbit of the ranch. They both worked the morning away separately. Crys was never at a loss for things to do, never had difficulty locating anything and was fascinated and enraptured by all.

She'd been expecting Mary to join them after some hours, but by noon she had still not come out of the trailer.

Crys threw a shovel full of muck from a stall into the wheelbarrow, streams of sweat matting some hair down against her temples and neck.

"Mary okay?" she asked without pausing or looking up. Jean was bent over at the waist digging through the unpowered chest freezer that housed her pharmacy of veterinary medicine. Didn't need the cold to keep the mice out.

"Mmm," Jean said in the most casual and absent form of 'yes'. Her lips were folded inward as she wrestled with the foil seal on a tube of ointment.

"Need to walk some of fence line today. Been putting it off. We'll start out after lunch. Finish up, I'll get us something," Jean said.

Crys wiped her brow and wheeled away the muck. Then she spread fresh straw across floor of the stall. The smell brought to her mind a feeling of familiarity, though there was no initial memory from her lifetime. All her days had been spent in the jungles of city pavement and public housing. Her shoulders burned a gratitude at the purposeful endeavor. It wasn't exactly a spiritual moment as those weren't part of her existence, but the peace and familiarity kept her raking and perfecting the lay of the straw long after the task was done.

Jean reentered the little barn. She held a cold can of ravioli with its jagged lid bent upright in one hand and in the other a can of baked beans. She set the ravioli with a fork on the broken chest freezer while Crys removed her gloves. The women sat at their leisure on bales of hay in the barn's cool shade and enjoyed a peaceful meal.

Crys was so content after the food and moment's rest that she forgot her concern from the morning. She dozed, daydreaming things and feelings she'd never thought of before. Jean kicked the sole of her shoe to rouse her.

"Come on," she was already armed for the expedition with a coil of barbed wire round her shoulder and a wire stretching tool. Crys looked back at the trailer for Mary as she followed Jean out. There was no sign.

The desert landscape is a mix of pebbles and rocks blanketed with a sad dust trying desperately to be dirt. It made a good effort and could sometimes be categorized as fine sand, but life-giving earth it would never be. The pretense had gone so far as convincing various forms of shrub and cactus to stake their hopes in that place. Most went unrealized, but some survived.

"Did you see anything this morning?" Jean started. The fence line running parallel to their casual walk.

"Yeah," it played again in Crys' mind soliciting a grimace.

Jean nodded her bent down head.

"That killer," Jean breathed in, "that's the sixth girl in three months. He likes them young. Developed, but still small and young looking." It seemed like the last information made the killings all the more offensive.

“Six in three, huh? That’s a clip,” Crys said. She started kicking up some dust by dragging her feet each step just to watch it billow. The noise of Crys’ shoes on the desert floor was too much for Jean. She believed the proper way to be in the natural world was observant and quiet. However, she also knew nature was a great classroom for children. It was meant to be played with and manipulated and experimented upon. But annoyance won out this time.

“That’s getting in my mouth, knock it off.” Jean said indicating with her chin to the dust.

“Oh, sorry.” Crys said and returned to a normal gait.

“Why you guys looking like the undead this morning?” Crys finally mustered the rebellious energy needed to blurt it out.

Jean shifted the weight of the barbed wire. Without thinking she handed the tools to Crys to soothe her rebellion. Crys took them reflexively.

“I mean, I heard you but I don’t think you spoke. And I saw the girl, I heard her die,” Crys said. The desert will demand brevity, there’s not enough surplus for much else. Confusion and disturbance at the memory stormed over her brow.

“Oh good. I wondered if you’d take to it. Not everyone does.” Jean said. They walked on several yards quietly enjoying the shifting sand and gravel under their soles.

“Mary’s going to stop him but,” Jean halted her speech in a wince and then abandoned the sentence.

“Mind helping?” Jean asked.

“Can I stay?” Crys replied, remembering in a rush the men with their panted breathing, the dark soiled hotel rooms and narrow bricked alleys. She probably would have given half of all

her necessary organs and the entirety of the rest to stay among the goats and rocks and dust. But she didn't want to give that away.

"Help Mary and you can stay," Jean nodded approval of her own proposal.

"Sure," Crys said beaming and nearly skipping. She pushed out a mouthful of air in joyous disbelief.

They reached a slack part in the barbed wire fence. Jean attached the tightener and started wrenching at it. Crys watched on, fascinated. They had resumed walking before Jean spoke again.

"Tonight I need you to take Mary back to the city. I know where he'll find the next one, but I can't see who it is. I want you and Mary to find him and see him, but don't let him see you," Jean added the last bit as a nearly forgotten but urgent warning.

"You want us to stop him?" Crys was confused.

"No. Just see him."

"But he's gonna kill someone tonight?"

"Mmm," Jean nodded at the sad weight.

"But not stop him?" Crys wanted to confirm.

"Correct. Don't even be seen." Jean said.

"Okay," the word lengthened as it was drug through a curtain of moral murkiness. In hard worlds the shades of sin are much more varied. Although allowing the death of a fellow worker of the night panged her, she'd saved her own skin at the expense of the weak and foolish many a time. Life doesn't long last without such brutal choices.

“Go and return tonight. I’ll see it in the morning,” Jean dropped the order. Crys accepted and Jean ignored a last kick of dust.

## Chapter

Mary slept most of the day but she did help with the evening feed. Jean’s sense of propriety demanded one hot meal a day. She reheated a pot of beans from the fridge and baked a few large potatoes. The women ate on the stairs of the trailer while the desert repented for its harshness with the burnt golden vibrancy of dusk. Hot bowls of simple food balanced on their knees.

The salt in the beans and their tired bodies was enough to flavor the food to complete satisfaction. Bellies full, Jean collected the bowls and told them to go. It was a three-hour drive to the city and the night was already steaming towards them.

Again, the old colleagues didn’t speak. Crys was mildly curious but not enough to make a conversation out of it. She turned on the radio. Mary, now nearly well rested, was alert and awake. She didn’t hardly hear the radio or Crys singing along, absorbed as she was in her own pensive thoughts.

She was annoyed at herself for sleeping all day again, but it was an improvement. At least the splitting headaches had stopped. Each time she generally improved but still the initial battle had to be waged and it wore her thin.

Then on top of that trying fire, was casting the memory to Jean. She’d finally become fairly proficient at holding the space of the memory and letting time slide. Sliding makes it sound a bit playground, really it was like surrendering enough to let time yank her by a fistful of



intestine off an icy cliff. She'd only vomited the first time. Thankfully that had been a short-lived symptom. Then time deposited her, wherever it wanted, forced to receive its horrifying secrets. She still clung to the red string of Jean's breathing. Always afraid that if she dropped it she'd be lost in time. Unable to find her way back to the surface and trapped in the violent welts seared in the past. She liked to think it a silly fear when the world and reality were before her. However, that red string probably got its color from her blood, tight as she held it.

There had been searing headaches as her mind tried desperately to shut down the offensive activity. These left her dizzy with nauseating feathered vision. The only thing she could think of to relieve the pressure in her skull was to crack it open with a hammer or slam it into the pavement. These had taken several days to recover from. Thankfully and finally this last time, her body relented to the task and merely dropped her down into an irresistible sleep. Mary slept after these events in a deep blackness. A sleep of sensory deprivation that relieved the burning of her mind like a cool breeze. The dreamless, mindless nonexistence replenished her so fully it made the whole process nearly worth it. There was some combination of submission and control that she hadn't quite mastered. A letting go of something and a tight grip on something else, but she fumbled in her mind to find these. When she did accidentally find them, she couldn't quite get the pressure right.

Mary watched sadly as the desert's crisp blanket of stars retreated in the growing light of the nearing city. She felt small and alone under the stars, but she felt smaller and more alone when they were gone.

"You know where were goin, hot stuff? You fucker! Did you see what they did? People can't fuckin' drive." Crys asked between songs.

“Skid Row. Park a bit away. We’ll walk in. We want to seem on a shift.” Mary said.

“Easy enough,” Crys answered, the words were heavy. There would be no need for a great deal of acting.

## Chapter

Crys parked outside a convenience store with the hope that the regular traffic and strong lights would deter theft. Mary slammed the door shut and had walked a short ways before noticing Crys was not with her. She looked back. Crys sat still in the driver’s seat; her head hung down, forehead braced by her wide fingertips. Mary came back and lightly tapped on the glass.

Crys cracked the door, the window motor was broken.

“You okay?” Mary asked with more distraction than concern. Her eyes flicked from the patrons entering and leaving the store to those at the gas pumps, assessing constantly and unconsciously for mood, temper, and danger.

“Yeah,” Crys said dropping her hand and lifting her head, “home sweet home. Hey, get back in.”

Mary sat on the back seat and shut the door.

“What? We kinda got a time thing,” Mary said checking her watch.

“There’s a box under the seat, grab it.” Crys said, “you gotta move the board.”

Mary reached under and pushed on the felt covered bit of floorboard that came up to the seat. She couldn’t get it with her hand but a backwards kick with her heel knocked it ajar. It concealed a custom-welded rectangular metal box which she lifted to her lap.

"I didn't know you were running." Mary said, acknowledging the purpose of the box.

"It was there when I got the car. Here," Crys said handing back a small key.

"Oh, yeah? Key and all, huh? How nice." Mary said grinning.

"Well, yeah," Crys said slowly, stretching the words and then relented, "turns out I don't have a head for business."

Mary chuckled opening the box. It contained two small handguns and five or six various sized switch blades.

"Hmm," Mary said, "probably just a knife, we don't want to get lifted with a one of those." She took one for herself and handed another to Crys. Then returned the box.

The city street was loud with vehicle sounds. Thumping sound systems, revving engines from traffic light drag races, and screeching brakes all created a cacophonous atmosphere that grated against the two women after the stillness of Jean's place. There were other people too, but they walked with their heads down. No one interacted here. The culture of this street was to mind one's own business. To get hastily to where one needed to be, there was no lingering on these streets that made up the periphery of the neighborhood known as Skid Row. That center of commerce was a half mile or so from where they were now. Crys and Mary did not communicate but rather scanned every doorway and alley for movement as a mouse would if forced to traverse some open cat-riddled space. The din of people noise got louder as they neared their destination.

Mary motioned for them to change in one of the last alleys before the Row. She opened her bag and started untying her shoes. Crys followed, removing hers from the heel with the toe of the other.

“Okay so what’s the plan? What are we doing, Mare?” Crys asked.

A lump on the ground next to them groaned. They both looked at the heap of a man and, not wanting to invade his privacy, moved away some steps.

“I just have to see him, get a look at him in the flesh. Jean will help with the rest. We just need to find him. Jean said he’ll be at Ranker’s around 2:30 or 3:00. Just need to be there before then.”

“You seen him, too? Ain’t he grabbin’ a girl tonight?” Crys asked.

“I have in a way. Yeah he is. We want to see him before that. Maybe watch him hunt. If we’re too late he’ll be, uh, busy.” Mary said.

The women were now adjusting their clothes to fit the local culture. Crys rolled the waist of her skirt a few times, shortening it to leave little for speculation. Mary removed her coat and twisted the bottom of her shirt. She then made a knot of the twist just under her chest exposing her lean abdomen.

Crys tucked back her chin and curled her upper lip, “That’s gross, girl. Ain’t nobody want to count your goddamn ribs.”

Mary was looking around, tying up her hair. She ignored Crys. A high chestnut ponytail cascaded to her mid-back. From her bag she removed two pairs of heels and deposited the trainers they’d been wearing.

“We can’t stand out. Don’t act like some lost goat farmer,” Mary advised as she slowly eased her old injury into the shoe’s unnatural position. She eased her weight onto it, testing cautiously. It took. There were some dull protestations coming up from the foot, but it took.

“Yugh, what happened to you? When we were working together you weren’t a skeleton.” Crys said, still disgusted at the severity of Mary’s body. Mary didn’t look thin in a wasted way, she looked thin the way a strong rope is thin. Muscle from the labor, but too much leanness from lack of appetite. Her skin had lost quite a bit of its youthful softness. Crys continued, “You havin’ trouble finding your mouth at meals?”

“Lay off.” Mary shot her a direct and threatening look. Her sore foot and the environment were putting her in a bad mood.

“Oooo, nerves. We’ll be okay, princess. This is a home game,” Crys said, pretending she hadn’t caused offence and smiling at having got under Mary’s skin.

“Come here,” she said to Mary while stepping toward her. She apologized with a maternal grooming of Mary’s appearance. Crys untwisted Mary’s bra strap, tucked in the back tag of her shirt and scratched a bit of crusted sleep from the corner of Mary’s eye. Mary glared but allowed the apology.

They emerged from the shadowed alley greatly changed. The heels corrected their posture, forcing them to throw their shoulders back and down to keep balance. They were both masked and yet more naked at the same time. Their bodies fell into old well-worn habits. They both now walked with an exaggerated slink of feminine bravado, hips rocking wildly at every step, neck long and chin high. They stilled their flicking eyes, as the outward expressions of prey had to be suppressed. They turned a last corner and the market was before them.

Throughout all human history the marketplace has remain virtually the same. No matter the culture, nation, tongue, or clime the marketplace retains its hallmarks. It is the first expected thing from any sizable clustering of humanity. An exchange of ideas and goods,

usually with lights and bright colors, loud voices, bursts of laughter and yells meld symphonically to create the market. The buyers, sellers, owners, workers, and those just out because they have nothing better to do rub shoulders and shout greetings. They mix and churn like an industrious ant hill.

The market here was much the same. Offensively honest fluorescent light spilled out of the shop windows that lined the street. The false color spectrum of the stores' neon lettering reflected off the women's shiny faces. There were many more women than men. Cars crawled down the street assessing the wares slower than any school zone. People moved and spilled off the sidewalks and into the street and then back again rhythmically like breathing. No one was unmoving here. There was a small difference between this market and most others. This market specialized in human flesh and the tools of self-destruction via pleasure, which brought with it some unique features.

It was all actually very well organized. Repugnance can sometimes give an illusion of chaos, but that's just meant to steer the unusable clear. Products for sale were easily identified. The managers of said products were also clearly accessible throughout making sure the licentious atmosphere remained positive and upbeat. Product for sale did need to be disciplined occasionally but this was done with impressive efficiency. Sometimes it wasn't so efficient, but this was also to a purpose. Examples are made and everyone learns.

Upper management oversaw the whole operation from within the shops and bars along the street. They collected cash overflow and saw that quotas were met. The whole street was policed in sections by the various enterprises. Low level violence went ignored as long as it did

not interfere with commerce. Business must have a hard surface of order in which to operate. Where said surface begins and chaos ends is highly negotiable.

Drug addicts and the insane vomited and defecated in corners and upon themselves freely. The intoxicated stammered jerkily with wretchedly inhuman gaits along and among the more self-sovereign. They clung to benches and poles and people, desperately trying to stay on their feet. An admirable effort until, clinging to the wrong shoulder, they are retired of their consciousness with a quick fist to the face. The body then lies, alive or dead, in the walkway as an unwelcome piece of terrain. No more noticed or considered than a lumpy garbage bag. Occasionally cursed at or kicked when the unobservant tripped over it.

Every shady corner, and even the not so shady ones, housed an endeavor meant for human relief. Public defecation and urination, drugs ingested through all available means, and of course every manor of transactional sex imaginable.

The eyes of the unliving are hard to catch. They are covered with a glossy remoteness when one does make eye contact. But most often they cast down. The hooded half shut eyes wishing to be asleep or dead or alive or anything but witnesses to meat being consumed over and over again. Most of the women and men for sale smile and laugh as actors trained by the rod rather than method. It rings like hollow tin. Try as she will, volume never could cover falseness.

But to the buyers, the types of people who prefer to make their dwelling in fantasy rather than reality, plastic smiles and vacant eyes go unnoticed. These people float only on the surface of communication. They mistake the taboo and vulgar as true authenticity because it is

the only sliver of human experience left for them to feel. One wonders if their senses were dulled by the cruel sorrows of life or never developed at all.

Those buyers with more private sensibilities or complicated tastes leave with their goods in the car or hurry off to small rooms behind the shops designed for such purposes. The air in those chambers never fully clears of the rutting smells. Thick as a blinding fog, the purchased take only the shallowest of breaths while the purchasers heave it in and out. It was a peak hour, the busiest of the night when Mary and Crys entered the bazaar.

The street was filled with people but it was not a homogenous mix. The products offered were grouped in type and category much like at any store. The venders operated as handlers, too. This person was generally a robust and healthy-looking man who sat at the helm providing order and safety to his consumable tribe. The man's specialty was reflected in the look of his wares. Black women, white women, Latins, men, and the very young were clustered in little groups along the street. The freelancers were mostly at the ends of the road. With freedom comes a lack of clout and therefore not the premium shelf-space. The independents looked much more varied and didn't move as if tethered but their greater freedom came with a risky cost. They were more likely to be picked off by predators. Like any herd animal, safety is in the center.

Mary and Crys walked purposefully as if returning from a job. The street was overwhelmingly complex in terms of stimuli. This intensity kept Mary's gaze right before her, watching her surroundings with her periphery vision. She'd spent many long hours posted on this street being purchased and used and returned. It was all extremely familiar in a stained sort



of way. She pulled her mind away from the personally historical landmarks and forced herself to focus on the task at hand: get to Ranker's, see the killer.

Each vender had his wares clustered about him. These he would wave into the street to solicit the slow driving customers. Their personalities varied as much as any other collection of small business owners with the same uniting trait of ambition. Some were loud and flamboyant, others quiet and reserved. Some were very hands on, micro-managing their product. Others let the girls run it themselves while they looked on taking mental notes for the next morning's debriefing. Business is a complicated endeavor, requiring integration of one's personality to the task. What's left for buyers and observers alike is a rich and varied garden of commerce.

Mary and Crys passed a man doling out discipline. A woman stood buoying, her legs moving constantly and loosely under some intoxicant's influence. The manager had to hold her upright by the arm to land the hit where aimed. He let go right as his backhand made contact. The woman recoiled, her head swung loosely on connective tissue more than muscle. Mary had to step out of the way to avoid being taken down with her. The woman slid across the sidewalk on her forearms and thigh. Mary's eyes were stuck on the small pieces of sidewalk dust that clung to the ripped hose and seeping blood of the deep scrapes.

The man turned his back on the disobedient and said to another woman, "Get her up."

Mary slowed down and looked over her shoulder as she walked on. The offending woman was hoisted to her feet, her lipstick and mucus smeared up past the nose. With deep tones and chunks of spraying saliva the man began explaining to the woman.

"You think your food is free? You think that bed you want to sleep in is free? Me being here protecting you is free? Get it to-fucking-gether and do your job! Its going to be a hungry

night for you, princess, if we don't..." his admonition was swallowed by greater sounds as distance was gained and Mary could hear no more.

Mary and Crys were now single file, walking with purpose but not in a hurry. A new scene unfolded ahead. A customer was holding \$20 in one hand and the back of a woman's head in the other as he leaned casually against a bench. The woman kneeled on the sidewalk before him. His friends in polo-shirts and light-colored button downs circled around, laughing at the show. Some yanked at their belts in preparation.

A man nearest them grabbed Crys' arm as they walked past, "Come on, I'll give ya \$30," he offered jovially, "Let's get two going!" to the great cheers of the group.

"Not tonight, baby. I'm off," Crys said with a wide smile. The man didn't let go.

"Well, that's what we want," rich peels of fraternal laughter followed.

"I'll give ya \$40, it'll be worth your while," he countered.

"Nah, honey," Crys pulled her arm, the skin ballooned through his tightening fingers.

"Where's your man? Let's see if we can't convince you," he scanned over her head knowing the owner wouldn't be far.

"Right here, sweetheart." Mary stood close behind him, her body pressed up against his back. Her right arm reached around and below his open belt. Her left hand held the switch blade dangerously close to piercing the flesh of his lower back.

She pulled herself to him, made sure all his friends saw her lick the back of his ear lobe. His body was confused at the mix of pleasure and threat.

"I don't think she's gonna be the one tonight," Mary whispered slow and hot in his ear.

He gasped in the distracting brew of knife point and her hand inside his pants.

Crys' arm went free. Mary flicked the blade shut. The women crossed the street and entered a bar called Ranker's.

A murky atmosphere of sweat and alcohol and stale body fluids engulfed them as soon as the door swung shut behind. Sometimes low light is forgiving, but here its only purpose was to conceal. The room jarred one's senses with filth and the only things more jarring were the people comfortable in it. Old broken men who hadn't seen a razor or mirror in years dotted the bar in slumps of human defeat. Some women, taking a rest from the street, slept at the tables on folded arms. Crys and Mary found seats with a view of the room and waited for business to pick up.

"Hey girls, this ain't the library!" bellowed the bartender upon seeing them sit without ordering.

"Two of whatever, Evans," Mary yelled back.

"You goin' back out or you done?" Evans asked to help guide his selection.

"Maybe," Mary shrugged.

Business didn't pick up until the street scene started dying down an hour or so later. Mary watched the door intently but didn't see anyone of interest. The soiled room began filling with a livelier crowd. Groups of girls spilled in laughing and joking much more sincerely now that quotas had been met and the night's work was over. The men came in to, like shepherds they delivered their flocks to the watering hole and then went to socialize and relax some themselves. They huddled with their broad shoulders hunched around circular tables at the back of the room. They spoke in low graveled voices of the trials of business and management. The center of the bar climbed with gaiety to a dull roar.

It was now nearing 3am. Evans caught Mary's eye and pushed a pointed finger down into the wooden bar in front of him. Mary acknowledged dully and then said to Crys, "Go get us a couple more, Evans' getting fussy."

"What are you girls doin' here for so long? Ain't you got a place to go tonight?" Evans said when Crys approached. She laid her arms across the damp sticky bar.

"Yeah, course we got a place," Crys smiled at him. She wiped her forearms on her skirt then collected the two drinks he'd poured. Evans squinted down from his great height at her with skepticism.

"Jeez, Evans, we're fine. Such a mother hen... we're just out. Nightlife, you know," Crys said making her face as casual as possible and looking about the room.

"Mary never stays anywhere this long," he paused to assess. "You sure you don't need a bed, girl?" he said more quietly.

For this, she looked at him with her full attention. His grizzled brow furrowed at her.

"We're really fine," she said seriously and gave him a small genuine smile.

"Hmm," he said unconvinced. But a man slapped his hand down on the bar for service and Evans turned away.

"Was he grillin' you?" Mary said when Crys returned. "Evans' such a nosey old woman."

"Nah," Crys answered. "You seen him yet? I wanna bounce."

Crys slouched in her chair and kicked a leg out in boredom. Mary rolled her eyes.

"Should be soon. Sometimes Jean doesn't get the times right," Mary said.

"Psh," Crys said, "I'm goin' to the can."

"I don't have a goddamn crystal ball," Mary said under her breath as Crys walked away. She rested her face in her hands, propping her head toward the door.

A fight broke out in one of the corners and Mary turned to see the commotion. A barely clad fat woman held a much younger girl by a fist full of hair.

"You bitch!" shrieked out above the din.

Mary stretched her neck and rolled her head back to the door. She studied every man who entered, but her attentions were becoming a bit lazy as time went on. She didn't quite know what she was looking for. She could only eliminate, not knowing exactly what would nominate. But in some pocket of confidence she knew she'd know when she saw it. It is the providence of women to see and judge men. Mary leaned on that, scanning and assessing their faces and movements. If she saw fear or pride or arrogance, if she saw confusion or insecurity within a specific range, she dismissed them as mere men.

Then one entered and there was a slight trip in the wire. His ever so slight departure from the norm led her eyes to study his hands and the way he held his weight. He was small but wiry, strong looking with sinew and tendons. Then alarms were going off everywhere as things didn't match. The angle at which he held his chin and his body type. The slovenly hair and nails versus the precision in his eyes. Then the feeling ran all the way through her. That staticed tarantula was under and over her arms and clasped tightly around her lungs. Then she saw the man for what he was, nothing but mask. And she felt the monster underneath.

He walked directly into the center of the room. Then stood still, surveying the landscape. Mary flicked her eyes around the room, following what he was looking at. No one

noticed him, the room was too busy. Everyone was too occupied in their little parties. Once he had turned the whole room, he walked to the back of the bar toward the restrooms.

“Shit shit shit shitshit,” Mary said to herself. Crys still hadn’t returned. Mary stood and did a quick survey of the room assessing the usefulness of each cluster of women. She chose one for their youth and loud laughter.

Mary quickly walked over to the table, loosening her gait against her foot’s angst, and tossing her head back in a free full-bodied laugh. She put her arms around the waists of two women standing at a high table round table. Unthreatened by a woman’s touch, they turned toward her opening the group.

“Heeey ladies, I was just over there,” Mary slurred and chose a Southern drawl because that genre of foreign is instantly trusted. Then she grinned open and honest, “I was just lookin’ at you beauties havin’ a fine time over here.” She let out a moan of approval and pulled the two women she had by the waist against her. The tight group laughed and immediately warmed to this intruder.

“I’m not gonna lie, I ain’t not a liar,” Mary continued, affecting convincing tones of inebriation.

“But, my man just give me a party, yeahyea!,” she giggled and let go of one of the women to lift her bag.

“Ya’ll wanna?!” she squealed in excitement.

“It’ll be fun, come on, ya’ll look fun,” Mary licked the ridge of her upper lip with a point of tongue. The women laughed. Mary took two by the hand and the rest followed past the bar and toward the bathrooms.

## Chapter

Crys sat on a toilet smoking. She read the poems and prophecies and contact information graffitied on the walls. The latch was broken so she kept having to push the stall door closed with her hand. Someone came in and turned on the water. Crys was bored but she needed to get back. She put out her cigarette and waited for the person to leave. The water turned off but the door didn't open. She was about to exit the stall when something made her stop cold. The lock on the main door clicked.

Crys stepped up on the toilet seat, crouching though she knew there was no point to it. There was a tapping on the stall door. Crys froze, not even breathing. The stall door squealed on its hinges as it crept open.

Crys waited until she could hear his breath.

"You don't have to make such a fucking meal of it," she said and kicked the stall door shut as hard as she could. It slammed into the man's face, knocking him back.

At that moment Mary was turning the key on the other side of the bathroom door, laughing with her new friends. Evens always kept a spare above the door frame. All the women spilled into the little two stalled restroom.

During the mix Crys whipped open the stall door and pushed the small man against the wall opposite so she could get a look at him.

"I'm off the clock, baby, next time," Crys said, surveying his face and bloody nose.

“Hmm,” she said in disappointment, the face wasn’t familiar. Mary gripped her by the wrist and pulled her through the crowd of laughing women. They were a quarter mile out of the Row before they spoke.

While they walked Mary dug in her bag. Crys lengthened her skirt and Mary handed over her jacket. When they got back to the car, they looked about as they had when they’d left it, except they were still wearing heels. Mary eased her’s off with a grimace.

“Did you find him?” Crys asked Mary.

“That guy in the bathroom. I could tell when he walked in. That was him,” Mary replied.

“Nah, it wasn’t.” Crys said again in a downcast manor.

“Yeah, it was.” Mary repeated.

“Well, if that was him then the guy at the soup kitchen wasn’t,” Crys said.

“Why?” Mary asked.

Crys was getting annoyed, “Because the guy at the kitchen was big and tall and, and...” She searched for her words, “And missing a fucking eye!”

“It was the same guy, Crys. In a different body.” Mary said.

Crys shook her head and rubbed one of her eyes while the car gained speed to join the highway.

“What? What does that even mean?”

“It’s complicated. Well...,” she stopped herself to think. “Maybe it’s not. He uses the bodies of different men to kill the women, because he doesn’t have a body of his own because he’s a demon,” Mary explained, impressed by how simple it actually was.

“A what?” Crys asked.



"A demon." Mary said again rubbing her foot.

"Eh, okay." Crys shrugged. Then added, "Why can't he just kill them without a body?"

"Because he can't. There's rules." Mary said as though Crys had asked a very stupid question.

"Oh, there's rules. Of course there's rules," Crys said. "Mare, I love ya girl, but this is getting a bit over my head. I might just not be down for all this."

"Crys, he's not gonna stop. And he's killing us. Not just random women but our's, us. We gotta do somethin'," Mary said.

"What do you even care? You just let him have one of those girls you took in the bathroom. Who cares someone's picking off whores? We're picked off all the damn time." Crys scowled at the truth and studied the horizon.

They had left the city now and were returning to the blackness of the desert. Mary sighed.

"I know," she said, "I know."

Crys doubled down, "Seriously, Mare, all the goddamn time. When have you ever cared before? You didn't care about me." She let it slip though she hadn't wanted to.

"I looked for you, Crys. I thought you'd left," Mary said.

"You did not. No one came in that room, except them." Crys said.

"I did. I looked around the place after they all fell asleep and I didn't see you. You know I wouldn't have left you if I'd known you were still there," Mary said.

"Bullshit," Crys said.

“Whatever Crys. Look, no one’s gonna make you. You don’t have to do shit. Drop me off and then split if you want.” Mary said.

Crys was still seething at the old memory, “I was in the hospital for a month!”

“I know! I came to visit you, remember? I didn’t know they did all that to you. Crys, you lived. It didn’t break you.” Mary added in a serious tone, “I swear I didn’t know, Crys. I would not have left you. I swear I thought you’d gone.”

Crys relented at the sincerity, “I believe you. I believed you then. Sorry, that one’s hard to shift.”

Crys continued, “But for real, Mary, why you want to be doing this? If you die, no one’s coming. No one’s going to care. You’ll be another dead whore, they’ll put your body in a cardboard box.”

“What do I care what they do with my body? My life is mine. Yours is yours. It ain’t more or less special ‘cause someone else cares about it. I’d rather die trying to do a thing than live a pussy.”

Mary could feel Crys’ ire raise. She laughed, “Relax. Death just isn’t that much a thing anymore. I mean, I don’t wanna die. But if it comes, it comes.”

“You look like you trying to die.” Crys said under her breath.

## Chapter

Getting a new body was a bit like a snail getting a new shell. Except the original occupant is shoved deep within the narrowing spirals instead of being evicted. Weaker minds and spirits compress much more easily, but they had to stay within the body. This was always

annoying and tiresome. The great tethers of earthly birth bound the spirit to the body a force that only yields to death. Having been denied this privilege by a great trick of injustice, Hiedron was forced to do this borrowing and sharing of bodies in order to grant himself earthly animation.

He'd been sent to research and study the more elusive and mysterious half of the species. But two centuries observation had yielded very little fruit. Their simple and instinctive discomfort near him had made long term studies of interesting subjects very difficult to maintain. In fact, it had been impossible. The stronger ones just flat out fled from before him and weaker ones collapsed in on themselves before he could discover anything. They were like flowers that withered at the touch of a bee instead of letting it explore the structure and landscape. It had become extremely tiresome and frustrating. Only the mad, the severely infirm of mind would allow him near, and not even many of these. A warped and deformed subject is not preferable for study anyway. Hate and love and curiosity for these unmappable structures took root within him. The three seeds grew and supported each other together within his great intelligence. They would have been nipped. They'd have been ripped up or suppressed as the weeds they were if not for his youth and distance from home. The most interesting shapes of being can form when a culture's grip falls from a present reality to mere memory.

At about a century in, Hiedron's mind began a gentle erosion. The seeds took root and grew slow and unnoticed. Only just recently had they reached an insuppressible size, eclipsing all else. These desires had only just taken the helm. It is a shame because it wouldn't have happened if he'd had more regular contact with his kind. If only he'd had some supervision of some sort. Unfortunately, intelligence can be mistaken for discipline, so his betters hadn't

thought it necessary. But the truth is that even those fully converted to the tight moors and order of a culture can easily lose their faith. Even the culture of hell can be unlearned by its citizenry, given the right circumstances. Isolation and distance are the key ingredients here.

Hiedron fell forward, the screaming snail of a man trapped within this body had taken control for a quick instant because of the shock and pain. It had shocked him too. He did not think them capable such deft quickness. But now this body was marred and missing an eye, less than ideal for his purposes. He shoved the snail back in its place after the woman had already run off. Then he got in his host's car and drove out of the city. This body was now useless to him and needed replacing. It was bleeding profusely and the eyeball hung out of its socket by the optic nerve. He reached up and ripped the thing off, tossing it to the back seat while the caged snail of a man within screamed and writhed in pain. The experience had been interesting. The most interesting to date. He pondered on it while simultaneously bull whipping the man trapped in the cage to shut-up and driving the car.

A cluster of semi-trucks and black SUV's were parked on the side of the highway just beyond the city's limits. Very convenient, Hiedron thought. Perhaps he could get some more work done tonight after all.

## Chapter

The mother of George's child died terribly young, whitewashed fully mind and body in the violent madness of self-destruction. Mercifully the child was young too. He found the babe a screaming red lobster on the bathroom floor next to its poor gone fish-eyed mother. The little jointless fingers stuck out straight and the limbs shook stiffly against the cyclone of its terror.

George had to hold his daughter against his chest a long time before the little muscles relaxed. The babe, exhausted from the cold and lonely world, fell asleep and breathed her father in for perhaps an hour while he stared hypnotized at the glassy fisheyes.

He'd retreated to his own mother then, back in the woods at the end of a long dirt road no one but the postman frequented. She cooed the baby and blamed him openly for the young mother's demise. He told her he was haunted. She told him he should be. Then his uncle said there was better money in driving truck. So he did. The big-rig, the open road, the long days - all of it fit perfectly like a lonely glove. He took \$50 from each paycheck for himself and sent the rest as penance to his mother.

He hadn't done it before but the lonely glove had him by the throat tonight. A first round of girls knocked on his passenger door. They giggled and said vulgar things that didn't fit their faces. He shook his head uncomfortably, and they went to try their wares at a neighboring truck. He was about to leave, having thought better of this kind of succor, when a second group approached. One of the girls looked at him in a kind way, maybe it was just a soft way. Her hair, her face were like the young mother's. Not exact, but he took from her a familiar feel. He opened the door for her.

Afterward, as he handed her the money, he regretted the whole thing. The girl's coy smiles and softness had gone vacant during the act. She had become just a body under him, limp and uninterested. And this unpersoned person with her dead fisheyes looking off in a corner made it difficult for him to finish the task. He looked away from the girl and for some pocket of lust to help get over the finish line. When he paid her, he decided there are things more bitter than loneliness.

As the girl was exiting the cab and he was reaching up for his seatbelt, she was suddenly shoved back in. A man with a bloody face and only one eye stormed into the cab. George was in shock for a second too long. The man shoved the girl again into the sleeper and then knocked her out with a quick punch. Then, he was outside the cab and on the metal steps, leaving. George saw the man's sole eye flutter and then roll back in a faint. Then the man fell with a thud to the ground outside. George got up in a dream of shock to check on the girl, confused and hoping against hell that she wasn't dead. His last thoughts while still sovereign in his body had been to get rid of her as quickly as possible, alive or dead, and get out of there.

George's body slammed back into his seat and then forward onto the steering wheel, pushed with the force of a great internal wave. We take for granted, and its honest because most know no different, the eternal space that is one's mind. The vast stretching and breathing we are all permitted both sleeping and waking. George learned that very suddenly. He found himself stuck, caged in the black back of his mind. He thought maybe he was dead at first. But then he could see and he could feel. All his senses gave him information albeit in a distant way. This was because he couldn't react to it. Imagine if one could feel through a window as one sees through it, the distance that's created. He was now a passenger in his own body.

That night he saw himself perform horrors that went beyond his soul's limit and shattered his mind into a thousand mirrored pieces. All of them constantly reflecting up to him the evil and suffering he had seen his hands do to that poor girl. They drove her to an empty rest stop in the middle of the desert, drug her into a bathroom. She woke up as it was beginning and he saw her recognize his face from the evening. He couldn't look away. He could do nothing to stop it. Whatever George had been died with the girl in that bathroom.

Now he knew the full weight of being a prisoner and accomplice. He was defeated and formless. Thankfully the monster didn't talk to him at all. But he could hear it thinking sometimes. George curled himself into a ball in his cell trying desperately to numb himself from all sensation. He whimpered only occasionally now when pain cracked through his forced coma. George remained in this dreamlike shattered state with horrific images lacerating his soul from time to time. He lost all sense of the physical world. He had no idea if the things he saw were memories or happening in the present. There is mercy when a soul breaks down enough and the evils before it turn as infirm as dreams. George saw a bar. Then he felt pain in his nose, a gush of hot blood, metal taste in his mouth. Then he was away again, thinking that he'd probably died and this was hell.

## Chapter

The whole sky was a soft blue by the time Mary and Crys got back to Jean's. She was sitting in her chair waiting for them.

"We saw him," Mary said upon entering the trailer.

"Good," Jean said, "Get a cup and we'll have a look."

"I'll go feed," Crys said, standing.

"No." Jean said, "Sit."

Crys obeyed, looking around the room and drumming her fingers on the arm of the couch.

"I don't really...," Crys started. But Jean and Mary had already begun slumping and rolling their eyes back. Crys looked away, wishing desperately that she could leave. Then she

heard Jean's voice in her head, "Close your eyes. Take deep breathes." Crys did, her eye lashes fluttered untrustingly.

After a few minutes, Jean's voice said, "Now picture yourself. Your body standing upright. Now watch it fall back, very slowly. But there is no ground, no floor. Fall back lower and lower into the darkness. Let the weightlessness relax you. You now are falling deeper and deeper, you have no sensations except the weightlessness. There is nothing to see or hear or touch. Just falling."

Crys was rather enjoying it. It was almost like a hyper-focused sleep. She wanted to continue falling forever. When suddenly she was back in Ranker's with the whole loud busy room before her.

Crys tried to think, which she could, but she could not control anything. The view of the room was moving, but she was not controlling it. The bell on the door rung and a monster walked in.

It was a man but also not. Crys could tell it was a small man, but his face was obscured by what looked to be a smokey and shifting mask. It had large yellow glossed eyes, the color of which was cut into broken tiles by a network of black veins. The irises were slit up and down like a serpent's. The flesh of the face, if you could call it that, had a red and black pattern, but it was hard to see with the shifting smokiness. Yellow fangs arranged in two interlocking rows took up the entire lower half of the face, from ear to ear. While he was still Crys could only see the face, but then as he moved to the center of the room a greater smokey overlay of a monstrous body moved with him. The man's physical body was in the background and dulled, but it could still be seen. The red and black pattern of the face followed down the rest of the



body. The knees were bent backward and it walked on hooves. It had a huge muscular back that humped forward. It pivoted on one hand, while it looked around the room. The thing's great weight resting on a set of meaty knuckles pushed into the floor.

During all this the noise of the room had fallen away as though the volume had been turned down. Crys could only hear the monster breathing. It was something between a purr and a growl, like the rattled heavy breath of a dragon. It scanned the room, searching for something. When the thing's serpentine gaze neared herself, her view dropped to the table. Crys had no control over what she saw. When the view popped back up, the creature's muscled back was turned, heading past the bar and toward the restrooms.

Then there was a sudden sickening feeling of being yanked by the intestine and wrenched by it all the way back up to reality. Crys heard someone cough and vomit before she knew it was herself.

"Oh good, its not just me," she heard Mary say though her fog of dizziness.

Jean tossed her an old shirt to clean up with.

Mary and Jean left her there in a pile of her own sick while they went outside to tend the goats.

"Well, what do you think?" Mary finally asked after they'd done the water.

"A couple more." Jean said.

"About the guy. That's the first I've ever seen it. Him like not as a man, but really seen it. Have you seen it before?" Mary asked.

"No, not that one in particular. He seems young." Jean said.

"Does that help us?" Mark asked.

"I don't know. Maybe. He still has greater intelligence than we do, but that wasn't going to be how we finished anyway."

"I felt pretty out of my league seeing that thing," Mary said.

"Yeah, I bet," Jean chuckled.

"But really what are we going to do? He's just going to keep at it."

"That he will," Jean wiped some sweat off her brow with a handkerchief. Then she pressed it into her upper lip and breathed through the wadded fabric.

"Haven't you done these before?" Mary said.

"Aye, but this one ain't following the rules." She ran her gloved hand over a rusted pipe fence, the brown-red powder clung happily. She looked and then clapped it away.

"What rule's he breaking?"

"He's switching bodies too quickly. And I'm not sure what he's doing with the girls. The general purpose of these things, these beings, is not to kill but to enslave. To breakdown the soul and lead it as far away from water as possible. But this young thing ain't doing that. He's looking for something, he's not working."

"How do you know?"

"Because of what he's doing, its like madness but its not. Its got method and order to it. I need more information. But he's still getting caught up in feeling, you can tell by him getting so impassioned in the act. He doesn't know how to moderate his feeling and that goes with how he looks, young. He's studying also. Trying to learn. I need to see more." Jean said.

"I think we have enough, I've seen too many of these," Mary said.

"Oh yeah, you know what to do then?" Jean asked.

“Can’t just keep letting girls die for information,” Mary said to the ground in what would be her very last display of timidity. She was learning her own mind as she spoke. Learning to feel and sense the hard walls of what she could live with doing and what she couldn’t, “I don’t wanna keep seeing them.”

“Needs must,” Jean said unwisely mistaking the womanhood blooming before her for mere fear.

“That’s a bunch of bullshit, Jean! Come on now, I know you’ve done this before. How do we stop this fucking thing?” Mary said aflame with intolerance.

Jean gave her an assessing look, realizing too late the hardening of Mary’s spine. Then she took a seat on the edge of a water trough. Mary slung her foot up on the lowest rung of the fence.

“You can’t destroy them, you’re not going to actually ‘win’ this if that’s what you’re hoping for. They don’t die. You can only cast them away, send them far from your people and kin. They’re bound to this earth more than we are because they don’t die. They generally operate within ranks and order. But this one..” she shook her head.

“I need more information,” Jean added. “That last rest stop one was the clearest you’ve been able to get, but I still couldn’t feel what he’s feeling and really see what he was doing. You remember, you had it all cloudy,” Jean said

“I tried,” Mary defended herself, “I thought it was better.”

“Girl, what are you doing? You gonna feel sorry for yourself right now or something? We ain’t got time for that. The facts are as they lay, having feelings about your contribution is not needed. Sow your emotions in the proper field.”

Mary acknowledged by returning to the subject. "Why can't we just kill the host?"

"Of course you can. But he'll just abandon it so it won't do anything."

"Well, it'll save the girl."

"It'll save one girl. And then he'll know who you are. Its a bad trade. There's laws of economy here too, Mary. You want to make it stop, I know. I know it hurts to see. But sometimes you gotta let evil have his way for a minute. Sometimes, little girl, you have to watch and learn before you know enough to stop it." She wasn't belittling her, just trying to get her to see that although decisiveness was very new and exciting to her, it must be tempered and bridled by knowledge and timing. Jean's point did not make contact.

"Sometimes that means you're just a fuckin' coward," Mary said meaning it to be under her breath but passion caught the volume before she could. Jean was impressed and so very pleased that her efforts at nurturing this sad broken thing she'd found were finally paying off. Because to Jean that was much more important than dead whores. Mary had caught a first glimpse of herself as person with the power to act in this world, with the power to be intolerant of things in it. Jean looked down to hide the excitement in her eyes. Now was the time Mary could learn by doing, to try and learn quickly by the sharp blade of failure.

"A coward, huh?" Jean was standing now, gathering water buckets. "Its easy to find something to die for, especially when you really want it. Like you do. Recklessness never was bravery, darling. Use your head, you want to fight one battle or 50? The war ain't over just because you got tired, tapped out and called it courage. But then you'll be dead and leave work and pain for others. Kinda sounds cowardly to me." Jean shrugged and smiled a hidden thing

and started walking away with a stack of buckets in each hand. Goading the young into growth gave her an unvirtuous amount of pleasure.

Mary grabbed the top rung of the fence and let her weight lean back loosely. She swung herself side to side thinking on Jean's words. She didn't want to fight 50 battles, one good one would be very acceptable. Then when it was over she'd earn for herself the sleep of the just. It was a new concept to her but it fit in her mind like a home she'd never known. 50 battles, to have to live for 50 battles. Is suffering brave? She wondered. Not pointless suffering, for sure.

Mary found Crys playing with a length rope, inventing pretty knots when she returned to the little barn. Jean had gone in the trailer to get lunch.

"You okay?" Mary asked.

"Yep, that was some crazy shit. But yeah, I guess I'm fine," Crys said.

"How, in the actual hell, are we going to stop a thing like that?" Crys asked, her eyeballs dipped in panic.

Mary sat on a stool and rubbed her face with her hands. "Oh, hell if I know," she said with a long sigh.

Jean reentered. A can opener and three forks jingled in her pocket. She held three cans of food. She laid everything out on the broken chest freezer and began opening the cans.

"I need to really see one. I want you girls to set a trap and watch him do it." Jean said handing out the order like a commandment.

Crys looked to Mary. Mary didn't look up.

"Like watch the whole thing? Like watch him kill a person?" Crys asked in a whisper of horror. Jean didn't look up.

"No." Mary said. "I won't do that." A wall she'd sensed finally firmed up in an instant to something immovable. Now suddenly there many immovable walls, she could see them all around. Things she'd would die before doing. But her vision was pinched, she could not see or imagine a life that did not throw her up against these walls constantly. Running through and away from these blockades of action was a clean and pure river with a strong current that would carry her away. The river of death sounds rather slow and bloody and unappetizing to most of us, but to Mary it clear as glass. It was the best existence she could think of now that all these erected barriers were cutting her off from nearly every aspect of the life she'd known. Death, sweet death, and now a valiant list of things to die for.

Jean handed her a can. Mary took it, uncomfortable with accepting and rejecting at the same time.

"Why not?" Jean said assuming a comfortable position for the oncoming wrestling match with Mary.

Mary lost her cool, "Because I'm not going to fucking do that Jean! I'm not watching some kid die like that, I won't do it. I will go, I will fight him, I will die. Or I'm not going. Either way I'm not seeing it again." Mary set the can down beside her. She couldn't eat she was so upset. And she could hardly hold the can, she was shaking so much.

"The girl's gonna die anyway, Mary. And many more after her. Whether you're there or not," Jean said with the seriousness of great composure. "If we know more then we can do more."

"I don't believe you. What are you going to do? Huh? Sit here with your fuckin' goats? Leave the innocent to be slaughtered and dissected or whatever the fuck he's doing?"

Something dawned on Jean, like a little flame at the edge of a dark tunnel.

"He is dissecting," she said in full thought. "Why do people dissect?" she asked quickly.

Mary was still seething.

Crys shoved a cold ravioli into the side of her mouth and said, "I dunno. See what's inside."

"Yeah, yeah, oh my," Jean said, realizing. She put her hand up to her forehead, supporting the heavy thoughts.

"He's studying. He's trying to learn. He's confused," Jean said.

Mary's curiosity overtook her moral grandstanding.

"What's he studying?" Mary asked, her brow tight already from an instinct for the answer.

"What's he killing?" Jean answered.

There was silence for some moments. Then Jean said, "You got to do this, I need to see what's going on. I need to see what he's thinking."

"Then you do it," Mary said folding her arms.

"Well, my dear, when you let him kill you I'll have to. But think, Mary, what is it you want? What is it you really want? Is it truly to die, to give up? Or do you want things to stop? No more nightmares? No more dead girls? A death that won't haunt you for shame into the eternities? Because that is what a wished for death would do. You wouldn't be dying for anything or anyone, there is no honor in that," Jean said in a low voice, lifting her eyebrows at the questions. It was the first time Jean could use the language and philosophies of civilization

against her. Before now Mary had no internal understanding of such concepts so they had never been worth the mention.

“A life that won’t haunt me for shame,” Mary said. Her eyes welled with fat, deep tears. Her lips parted heavily.

“Ha, well, one begets the other my dear.” Jean turned and hung her head. She pressed with her fingertips on either side of her nose between her eyes.

“I need you to do this. Everything that’s happening inside your mind is an ocean that drowns only you. Action. I need to stop this thing, and I need your help. You want to jump off a bridge after, go right ahead. I’ll even give you a shove if you get nervous,” Jean grinned with half her face at Mary.

Mary couldn’t help but give a wide smile and laugh at the generous spirit.

“Alright. My terms.” Mary offered.

“Just get it,” Jean accepted. “He’s not hunting tonight. Get some sleep. Tomorrow.” Jean added.

## Chapter

Early and long hours of ranch work filled the next day. The goats were tended. Mary and Crys walked the rest of the fence line tightening and mending any areas of disruption. A load of hay was delivered and had to be moved into the rickety barn. The sun was casting long golden beams and steep shadows when Mary said it was time to go.



Jean handed them each a sandwich. She told them not to call if anything happened, she'd find out eventually. Mary laughed softly. Jean saw Crys' take a couple shallow breaths and look away.

"You will either succeed or fail. Either you have what is needed inside you for the task at hand, or you don't. Most people never get the chance to really see what they're made of. "

"Yeah, like literally if this thing goes bad," Crys added.

Jean roared with laughter, slapped the roof of the car and said, "Get on now, women, I'll see you in the morning." Then she turned back toward the barn. The big dogs followed, excited to have her to themselves again.

The sunset beat in through the window onto Mary as they drove south. She squinted and tried to look the other direction. The setting sun's last light spilling so near the horizon emphasized distance and perspective across the desert valley. Mary kept turning back toward it, unable to not behold the beauty. She forgot the task. She forgot her angst and her desperation at existence. She only saw and was seen by the brief eternity held within a desert sunset. Soon enough it was gone, the early evening with its blues defeating the golds had come.

Mary puffed her cheeks with breath and looked forward. She mentally went over her plan again. The overarching goal was to get the information for Jean and still be able to live with herself. She assessed her new feelings and shapes of old ideas. Before life had been a desperate, pathetic grasping at avoiding suffering and pain, soothing and protecting wounds. Death had been a cold and dirty grave where the suffering was probably eternal. She would have lived that way for a whole lifetime, as most do.

The city neared. The stars slunk away to where they were wanted.

“So. What’s the plan?” Crys’ voice was flat and defeated. Mary looked over and her eyes were viscous with tears.

“What?” Mary asked, leaning forward to make sure it wasn’t a play of light.

“What are we doing?” Crys sniffed and wiped her face with the back of her hand.

“Where we going?” Crys added emphatically trying to cover her emotion, tears now running down to her neck.

“What’s going on? Stop.” Mary pointed with a relaxed index finger to the highway’s shoulder.

Crys slowed the car over the loud rumble strip. She clicked on the hazards, then aggressively rubbed her tears into her face with both hands. She cried out and shook her head attempting to make the outflow of emotion cease. Mary just looked at her. Crys slammed her fists down on the steering wheel. She let them bounce there several times. She yelled out again desperately trying to turn the flow of fear into rage as was her instinct.

Mary spoke through a finger she was chewing on. The pressure on either side of the nail bed felt nice.

“Hey there, little lady, what’s going on?” she said, her tongue unable to form the harder sounds with her mouth wedged open by the finger.

“I just...I want out, fuck!” and she slammed her fists down again.

“I don’t want to be done in by some crazy fucken...whatever that was. I don’t wanna feed the worms. I don’t want to play this fucken game anymore. I don’t wanna play, Mare, I don’t wanna play.” Now she was rocking herself, holding herself with her hands pumping vigorously up and down her biceps.

“Yeah, that’s a thing. For sure,” Mary sympathized flatly.

“What are we doin? I don’t want to do this. I don’t wanna do this, Mare.” She shook her head rhythmically.

“Hey, hey!” Mary saw Crys slipping from reality. Her eyes had grown tired. They glazed, fixed at a distant spot. Her rocking slowed but didn’t stop.

Mary punched the horn a couple times to break the spell. Crys snapped out of it and was back in the car with her.

She continued, “What we gonna do, Mare? We’re just going to die? We’re gonna die. But its worse cuz we see it coming. We’re like running right at the fucking train. At least them other girls don’t see it coming.”

“Oh, that’s better?” Mary said disgusted at the thought of having her life taken without choosing the fight.

“Yes! Its better! You crazy... fucking... suicidal..” Crys couldn’t string her words into a sentence.

“Listen, okay,” Mary took a breath and tried to see things from Crys’ point of view.

“Okay,” Mary continued, wincing at Crys’ free falling tears reflecting the taillights of traffic.

“Hey,” she said in a softer way and put a hand awkwardly on Crys’ shoulder. Mary didn’t know how to touch people for comfort. But she thought maybe the gesture would help.

“Don’t touch me, you psycho.” Crys said deadpan.

“Okay, fine.” Mary gave up. This was just going to have to be blunt, she lacked the patience and will to learn to be soft.

“We have to do this. We just have to. We are the only ones who know about it. It will continue if we don’t do something. I think we can do it. I think I’ve gotta decent plan for tonight,” she looked over at Crys, who was still crying.

“Hey, this is the price. And I hate that that’s the way of it, but it is. We’re at the bottom. The very fuckin’ bottom. And we’re slaves. We’re slaves to our own goddamn minds and we’ll always be afraid and weak unless we do somethin’. I think this is the price, and we all gotta pay like you said,” Mary paused and sighed, she looked out the window for the dark to agree with her.

“You want out? You want to be free?” Mary asked the night and herself.

Inside Crys was submitting. As Mary had spoken the truth rang out like a horrid mirrored bell. It burned in Crys’ chest and sent spiders of needles running down her arms. The truth had been laid before her, and she had heard it ring deep in her being. There was a half second of choice after the realization. She could submit and accept reality or to turn away and ignore it. She chose to submit.

Relief rushed like a cold burning and soothed everything. It did burn. It demanded action and great doings, but it was relief. She accepted the price and would pay.

“You still in there?” Mary asked.

“Alright,” Crys nodded at herself. Her physical person giving support and approval to what her soul had decided.

“You good?” Mary asked, her mouth parted in uncertainty.

Crys breathed out forcefully and shook her arms so her hands dangled at the wrists.

“Alright, Mare, let’s do this. Where we going?”

They entered the city. The desert's scabs of life were replaced by civilization's scabs of life. Spindled desert shrubs and small tufts of yellowed grass gave way to lonesome souls waiting at bus stops and shuffling aimlessly in unthought patterns. The different pavements and their various discolorations were as hostile to life as the desert. Hostile to living, but welcoming to the clawing scratches of survival.

They drove some ways into the city's long abandoned heart. But nothing is ever really abandoned. As one atmosphere leaves another enters. Humanity's presence or absence will always carry an intangible aura that leeches into minds and hearts. Resistance can be futile, but it's not tried often enough to know.

Crys pulled into an old strip motel's parking lot. The site hummed with activity and the movements of humans though all external lights were off. The curtains were drawn in the main office's window, but light spilled around the seams. Upon exiting the car they heard laughter and a woman's play-scream muffled by thin walls. They entered the office.

A busty girl sat on the owner's lap, his fingers lost down her chest.

"Oh looky here, some more darlings of the night," the man said after the door had shut. The woman on his lap giggled. He bit her breast, growled, and shook it playfully.

"Lance," Mary walked up to the counter and leaned over it. She grabbed the guest book, "Max and the girls here?" perusing names.

"Hey hey hey!" he slapped the side of the woman's ass to get her off him. She hopped up with a coy pout.

"Mary, give it," he snatched the book out of her grasp, closing it quickly.

"No no no touching my shit, Mare, we talked about this," he said.

“You’re not supposed to be leaving it laying around,” Mary said. She made a tisk-tisk noise with her mouth, “Daddy will be mad, Lance. Playin’ with the whores, not minding your work...”

“What do you want?” he said unamused.

“Max and the girls here?” Mary asked again.

“Yeah. They’re in four,” he tightened his lips.

“Thank you, baby,” Mary said turning to leave with a playful smile.

Rooms one through four were used for lodging and five through 12 for business. But not every girl staying worked at the place. Some just paid the rent and worked the streets of their own choosing.

The lights along the strip were either burned out or off. The exterior of the motel was only illuminated by a streetlight down some ways on the corner. It was enough to lick the edge of the brass numbers on the doors. But not enough to avoid stepping on the needles and garbage that littered the walkway.

When they got to four Mary lifted her hand to knock, but instead paused, listening. Someone was crying and yelling. Then there was a hushed calm voice. Then the yelling got louder. Mary put her hand on the doorknob and turned it slowly. Cautiously she opened the door so as not to disturb the scene inside.

A woman with short blond hair wearing an oversized T-shirt and underwear was overturning an end table. Crys and Mary slipped in and immediately shut the door behind to conceal the view of weakness and chaos to any possible predatory onlookers. There were five or six little girls sitting in a huddle near the window, as far from the blond woman as possible.

Some stared with frightened peeled eyes at the scene. One stared at the wall completely shut down to the chaos. Two played with a doll as if they were at the park on a sunny day. Their ages ranged from five-ish to ten-ish. They had the odd behaviors and facial expressions of severe trauma but not the filth or ill color of neglect. They all had rosy full cheeks, clean hair and faces, and poorly fit but clean and seasonally appropriate clothes. The little girls lighted when they saw Mary, but their short and painful lives had taught them nothing if not volume control and concealment of their true feelings.

The woman was raving something incoherent. Then she slammed her head into the wall with force enough for a good bruise. After a half second of dazed peace, she realized she enjoyed the sensation and repeated the process with growing enthusiasm. Max, whose full face and petite frame made her look 12 but really she was 16, was trying to calm the situation.

Crys lit a cigarette dully. Mary, after assessing that the little girls were out of harm's way, sat on the floor with her head against the wall to watch what unfolded. A couple of the little girls whispered excitedly "Mary! Mary!" and rushed to her lap.

This did not penetrate the experience of the mad woman or Max.

"Susie, now let's not do that. Come on honey, you're scaring the girls," Max coaxed with her arms outstretched and down like you do to an unpredictable dog. When Susie allowed a soft touch on her back, Max gripped her shoulders more firmly and pulled her beyond striking distance from the wall.

"You're okay, you're okay, we're okay," the Max said with a quick authoritative calmness. She pulled Susie into her and stroked her hair.

“That’s better, let’s calm down,” her voice sing-songed, trying to force an atmosphere into Susie.

“Now what happened, honey? Why are you so upset?” Max said. Mary sighed heavily at the mistake, shook her head and lowered it to breathe in the little girl’s clean scalp who was resting tensely against her chest.

“Max, I didn’t...he didn’t...” the answer could not be understood and came in breathy wails. And it riled her up again, naturally. Suddenly her panicked fit returned to her. She leapt from Max’s arms and grabbed a green glass bottle from the table. Before Max could reach her, Susie had broken the bottle against the wall and was cutting at the inside of her thighs with it. Then there was blood.

Susie then, getting more and more lost in her crumbling mind, moved the weapon to her face. Her tears collected in the glass’ indent. When the skin was broken, the tears flowed on top of the blood, unable to mix.

Max couldn’t go near now. She tried yelling over Susie, but it was no use. The woman’s mind had parted ways with this earth and was now in a world of her own.

Crys put out her cigarette on the wall and looked down at Mary who was still sitting with the girls on her lap. Mary nodded at her. Crys crossed the room in a few sturdy steps and punched Susie in the face. The shock of it relaxed her grip and the jagged bottle bounced without breaking on the thin carpet. The wailing paused for a moment, but then she started sobbing and laughing hysterically. Crys punched her again and she fell over unconscious.

“We didn’t need the second one,” Max said picking up shards of glass, “Girls stay over there while I clean this up.”



“Just gonna let that go on all night, huh?” Crys said.

“It wouldn’t of lasted that long, she wasn’t going too deep,” Max said. She went to the sink in the bathroom and wetted a dirty shirt. Then she knelt beside Susie and began cleaning the wounds.

Mary stood and the little girls scuttled away and back to the safety of a corner.

“You gotta just keep her out of it. Don’t let her go back in. Distract.” Mary said to Max.

“Well, I thought it would help if she got it out. She’s been a wreck since some trick last night. But yeah, you’re right,” Max said. She stood to rinse the blood out of the shirt.

“What are you doing here, Mare? You staying?” Max asked from the yellowed sink.

“Nah, I need your help. You free tonight?” Mary asked.

“Sure. But I can’t leave crazy here alone with the girls,” Max said.

Mary looked at the sleeping young woman and thought.

“Let’s put her in three with the users. If she wakes in a fit they’ll just shoot her up,” Mary suggested.

The three women drug Susie to the neighboring motel room. It had four or five occupants consumed to various levels of intoxication, their muscles slack with an unnatural disinterest. They hardly noticed the women deposit Susie’s unconscious frame on the soiled bed.

“There’s food, watch t.v., don’t answer the door. Lance knows not to come here and Wilma’s got a key. She’ll be back in the morning.” Max gave her parting instructions and locked the door.

“They miss you. Since you left,” Max said when they were all in Crys’ car.

"I can still help," Mary said.

"You coming back?" Max asked unable to stop a happy expectation from blooming.

Mary shook her head in a tight shallow way.

"Psh," Max said leaning back against the seat in disappointment, "What do you need help with?" she got back to brass tacks.

They drove some minutes. Mary knew there was a good way to say it, a good way to present the idea. But she didn't know what that was. And she felt that any effort to soften the thing asked would be manipulative. She defaulted to a direct style as was her comfort.

"I need you to be bait," Mary said.

"Oh yeah, for what?" Max was intrigued.

"A man we're trying to find, he likes them young. You look young," Mary hedged the truth. In that split second her purpose outweighed the desire to not manipulate.

"Don't they all," Max said, "You know where he's gonna be?"

"Yeah," Mary said already feeling uncomfortable with herself.

"It could be bad," Mary said turning around in her seat to look at Max in the eye.

"It could be bad, but it won't be," Mary said again, "I won't let it." This made her feel like she had told the truth. At least it quieted her rising conscience, slightly.

"Pay me for my night?" Max wasn't too concerned.

"Course," Mary said facing forward again.

"I'm game," Max said.

“We’re going to a dock party. You know, those industrial ones we’ve done?” Mary said looking over to Crys who nodded. “The guy we want will be there. And I think you’re perfect to catch his eye.”

## Chapter

A vibration of heavy bass could be felt through their seats as they neared the destination. Crys parked in an industrial area. Grey and blue business offices lined the street like turtle heads. The massive loading warehouses sat behind as the shells. The lights and music led the three women behind one such row. Two semitrucks were parked blocking the view from the street. They’d left only a narrow entry way, wide enough for one vehicle. The party on the other side was already raging. Mary wanted to assess the layout before deciding how to proceed.

They walked between the trucks and beheld a huge party with at least a couple hundred brightly dressed people. It was a massive concrete yard with room enough for many trucks to back in and be filled at the loading docks which dotted the perimeter. The place was flooded with people and their collective noise, all reveling in opportunity.

A quick glance might not have informed one that this was as much a meat market as Skid Row. Here the women mingled with the men, draping themselves lazily and drunkenly over strong shoulders and arms. The men were all either the handlers staying near their vehicles and keeping watch from the edges, or the owners and workers of the industrial park. The blue and white collars were easily distinguished, but that is where their difference ended. Every man,

who wasn't a handler, wore the thin happy face of pleasure and fun and lust regardless of his tax bracket.

Mary looked around. The music and drinks were coming from one single open loading bay. The opening was rather high as it was designed to be level with the back of a semi-trailer. It was an awkward mouth of services. Some people took to a generous spirit and hung with one hand on the garage door's metal track and with the other handed down drinks to their fellows. A fourth of the drink's contents was spilled at each attempt but everyone involved laughed merrily.

As much as drinks and music flowed out of the raised doorway, couples and groups flowed in. The preferred method was for the male of the group to jump up first and then lift the giggling woman by the arm after. Occasionally she was dropped or opportunity found under her skirt while she dangled there. But in general this bit of logistics was handled rather chivalrously. So the people came and went, in and out through the raised entry. Finally, a group of great thinkers had the idea to drag a dumpster over and people began using its back ladder. But then some fell into the dumpster's cavity and had serious difficulty getting out again.

Mary assessed while the three of them stood in the shadow of a corner.

"Could make some good money here. How'd you hear about this?" Max asked Mary. Handlers were usually contacted to service such events and the freelancers left out.

"Jean said," Mary answered.

"I thought Jean was off with her sheep. Didn't know she still kept up," Max said absently.

"I want you to sit over there, and look sad. And young. See, I'm thinking he'll take you between those two buildings, in that little alley way there. He likes privacy, he won't want to go in the warehouse with everyone else." Mary said.

"He gonna pay or what? You gonna talk to him or something?" Max asked.

"Something." Mary said, ignoring the pang of lying by omission.

"Hey, how much I getting' for this? This guy dangerous?" Max asked.

"Yeah, he is. But I got you." Mary flashed Crys' handgun concealed in her waist band.

"Nothing's gonna happen. You're not leaving the alley with him, got it? \$500." Mary said.

"Hey, nice. I might not work tomorrow neither. Now?" Max said approving of the amount.

"Yeah." Mary said.

Max walked with a slight uncoordinated bounce, which only added to her appearance of youth. Her cheeks were still full and ruddy. Her eyes very round doe-y disks that slightly drooped on the outside corners. She flung herself onto a step and sat with her chin in her hands. The overall effect was perfect: a sad young girl, all alone.

Crys and Mary walked around some large pieces of equipment, staying near the building and in the shadows. They finally stopped at a good position with a view of both Max and the alley.

"Did you get bullets for that?" Crys asked.

"No, you didn't have any in there." Mary said.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Crys was appalled but still whispered.

"I have a knife. You think I'm gonna let anything happen to her? Relax and be useful."

Mary said. She squatted down next to a dumpster while Crys paced in the darker shadows behind.

"Oh, right, you're gonna hand to hand combat a demon, huh? You, with the skeleton rib situation. What a great fuckin' idea, Mare." Crys said, her hands on her hips and walking faster.

"I have a knife, I'm not going to get in some fist fight."

"Good, cuz you'd lose. Please tell me you know that. You will lose against a man one on one, let alone a demon," Crys said.

"It's not one on one. I'm not an idiot. Look, are you going to help? Shut the fuck up, Crys," Mary said, not waiting for an answer.

"You're right, you dumbass, it's like 100 to one!" Crys said bending down and whispering loud and close in Mary's ear.

"It'll be fine!" Mary shoved her way.

Crys paced off her steam and then came and squatted next to Mary.

The party blared on, more people were arriving.

"Hey," Crys whispered tapping Mary's leg and flicking her chin toward Max. A rotund greying man was approaching.

Mary side punched the garbage can. Max knew to get rid of him.

"Hey, you okay little thing? You look so sad over here, Daddy wants to take care of you." the man said smiling through a stinking haze of whiskey.

He pulled her hair back from her face, his wedding ring winked as it caught the flood light. She looked up at him, her eyes the blue of cut crystal.

“Tell Daddy your troubles. I’ll make it better,” he said kneeling next to her. His hand wrapping with pressure about her waist.

“I don’t think you’d like me much if I did,” Max pouted and hung her head.

Mary drummed her fingers on the concrete, annoyed that Max was taking so long.

“Oh Daddy will always like his little girl, just ask mine. Look at her,” he pulled out a school picture from his wallet. “Maybe you two can play. And we can all play together.” He smiled again hungrily.

“Tell me, baby, what’s wrong?” his fat hand danced to her knee.

“Well, okay, I guess I can tell Daddy, right?” her eyes hopeful.

“Of course,” he assured her, reveling in his perverted game.

“I just got this thing, it burns so bad. And I got like cheese fallin’ out of me every time I stand up. Its like chunky yellow wet cheese. My daddy over there says I can’t work cuz it’ll look bad on him and I gotta stay over here. And I can’t walk without it itching like 50 mosquito bites. I just been clawin’ at it for days now and it smells so bad, wanna smell?” Max shoved her hand under his nose, flicking some mustache hairs with her nails. She had said the whole thing very quickly so that his comprehension was just catching up when the fingers touched his face.

He recoiled so abruptly that he nearly toppled over. She reached to try to help him but he slapped her hand away. Then he was on his feet, shuffling off with the wide legs of his slacks spinning about his short girthy legs.

“Daddy?” Max said after he had been reabsorbed into the party. She shot a quick grin with her tongue pressed between her teeth to where Mary and Crys were concealed.

Crys was doing everything she could to not laugh audibly. She was leaning with her back against the wall, dying with suppressed laughter. She hit her fist on the wall at her side to help move the energy.

“Sh!” Mary whispered, her chest bouncing with her own amusement.

About 15 minutes passed before another man approached. The hungry look in his eyes was not for lust but another thing entirely. Crys knelt next to Mary, the movement a question. Mary nodded only just.

He was smaller, not quite middle aged but still residing in the last gasps of youth. He wore a boxy leather jacket that didn’t move with him very well because it was too big. The cuffs came near down to his knuckles. It was the same man from Ranker’s. He smiled a dead forced thing with too many teeth when Max looked up at him. Max knew this was the man when she didn’t hear anything from the concealed corner and took up her part.

He stopped in front of her and opened his mouth like he was going to speak. Then he closed it again without saying anything. He surveyed her sitting there on the step. His mind tried to assess things he did not understand. Unable to get to the core, he looked at how she was different from the others. Then how she was the same. It’s natural for the intelligent to begin at trying to understand a thing with a simple compare and contrast. They were all almost the same, all the women and girls he’d studied. The same inside and out. His search was for differences because though he knew they were there, but he was blind to their nuance.

He extended his hand, palm-up, down to Max. Her cheeks and doughy face were all the younger when she smiled and placed her hand in his. Once he had her he glanced around the



area for a private place. His face dropped all pretense of peaceful countenance. He found the alley he pulled her and her light steps after him.

They disappeared behind the opaque shadow of the building. Mary had already moved in a low feline noted crouch to the mouth of the alley. She was only perhaps five seconds behind them. Crys was close at her back, both women had knives at the ready.

But the alley was silent. They entered, concealing themselves with an obstruction. There were no sounds of anything except the dull roar from the party. Mary's concern grew to a panic with a couple short steps. The alley was empty.

"Where'd they go?" Crys said, her voice mirroring Mary's thoughts.

"I don't know, there's nowhere to go," Mary said. The alley ended dead against the outer wall of another building. Crys ran to see if maybe there was a path out being obscured by the darkness. Disappointment tightened her ribs as she spun back around to Mary. Mary turned and turned around looking up and down for any indication, any movement. Max's face, her little girl steps kept echoing in her mind. She tried to hold them there like a hunting dog does with scent. But nothing caught, the trail was dead cold. Mary's head was spinning now, caught in a loop of Max's young face and her gait and then to Susie and the broken bottle.

Crys grabbed Mary's arm and swung her around to be still and face her. She held Mary's jaw with her other hand, unconscious of her tight grip.

"Figure this out right now," Crys said through her teeth after she'd captured Mary's panicked eyes. "Now, Mary." She released her with a shove.

Mary pushed out Max's image. She pushed it down deep in the rich wet dirt of her mind. She put a hand on the wall to brace herself. Then she closed her eyes and took a couple

deep breaths and thought of all their oxygen going like a deluge into her mind. She did this quickly for it had to count. Then she was in.

With her eyes still shut she saw the landscape of the alley. There were points of color, but they were not light. In the back corner, maybe 15 feet or so from where she stood, lay Max with the black and red cloven-footed monster above her.

Max's screams bounced around the alley in a slow and echoed way because Mary wasn't hearing them with her natural ears. Mary opened her eyes, but there was nothing. All was dark and quiet. Then she shut them again, dove into the dirt, and viewed the ally once more through her mind. The monster smelled something and looked up but he either didn't or couldn't see her.

Mary stood trapped and frozen by the restraints of horror. She watched. The demon went back to his purpose. His visage floated between man and monster. A man's hand pinned her head to the ground by the neck. She flailed about under it like a spider that's gotten a leg trapped. Her weak blows and writhing did nothing against him. A gnarled taloned club of a creature's hand hovered over her chest. He hooked the neckline of her flower print dress with the needlelike points of his claws. They were so sharp that the dress's loose fabric hung as if it were being lifted by straight pins. Mary watched his talon move like a knife through soft butter down and down to the hem of dress. Max's exposed and naked chest heaved and shook. Her soft ribs mirroring and caging her panicked breath.

He lowered his head gracefully to breathe in the sweaty air from her sternum. He moved his face along down to her writhing navel and then further to just above her pelvic bone. There he turned his head and lay his face on her flesh as if he were listening. At this new

touch Max panicked with a greater energy. She pushed and wrenched and hit but it was to no consequence. He moved like a symphony completely caught in the rapture of the moment while Max's useless brawl raged under him. He seemed neither excited nor perturbed by her protestations. They were nothing more than a piece of the moment's existence.

Mary noticed there was blood already around Max's face and under her jaw from an injury that preceded her presence. A line of blood fed into her hairline and left a shiny gleam behind her ear. The flesh gaped with her pulling against him.

He lifted his head and gazed down at her, cocking it slightly. Then he sighed as if trying to decide what to do next. The age-old dilemma of the feast: what to eat first. His vertical oblique irises flicked over her squirming torso. Then he raised a clawed hand and let it descend just off center of her lower abdomen, where a surgeon would start a cesarean incision.

Max suddenly became very still at the pressure. She sucked in her stomach as an equal and opposite reaction to the pressure of the talon, but the sharp claw just followed her down until she could not take in another breath without its pointed blade violating the sovereignty of her skin. He was enjoying this part. He wanted her to make the choice. She could always just not breathe.

What was wanted was not given. She breathed with merely the upper chambers of her lungs. Out of disappointment and boredom he drug the talon across her flesh, gaining depth with distance. Max ceased screaming and fighting and began to cry. Her chin wadded into brainy folds, her eyebrows pulled down and away. At some point the frog on the dissection tray quits fighting, and even if she's still drawing breath.

Mary said, “No,” using only the tip of her tongue and a puff of breath through the meditative freeze. She blinked herself awake and back to the empty alley. Then she threw every muscle’s effort along with her body weight down with the knife upon spot she knew they were.

Crys had been glaring at Mary in the trance while deciding how best to murder her if anything happened to Max. Had she let all this happen precisely so she would have a good enough reason to kill Mary? Details like that can incumber justice, best not to think about it.

Time and reality and two separate dimensions blinked back together with a jarring wave when the knife pierced the man’s back. After the rippling of the physical world Crys could see them both clearly. Max lay, passed out or dead, beneath the man. Mary lifted and stabbed and lifted and stabbed with an impressive quickness and ferocity. It spoke to an intimate familiarity with violence and the energy required to overcome inequalities in size and strength. The man stood with her on his back and slammed her into the wall, but she had already gotten three blows in. Her head hit with a hard thud. Crys rushed over and hoisted Max’s limp body, blood dripping off her ear lobe and barely pubescent hips. She glanced back at Mary for half a second, then turned and ran out of the alley with Max naked and unconscious in her arms.

Mary didn’t see them go, her vision was squeezed shut with a blackness and then opened up again. She was still clinging to the man’s back, one arm under and the other over his shoulders. He was smearing her against the brick wall with such force that it ripped the skin off her upper back. He let up to see if her grip had been thwarted and then slammed her back again. Her raw flesh seared against the gritty toothed wall. Mary couldn’t take a breath in. She felt the blackness creep again on the skin of her forehead. She released her hold on his left shoulder. Before the blackness took her, she shoved the blade into the side of his neck and

pushed out. It hinged stubbornly behind the tough rope of his esophagus. With unconsciousness closing in she used the wall and him still pushing against her as leverage. With the extra force the rope yielded and her arm and the knife burst free to the other side.

Then all was black. Unearthly screams and growls encompassed her. In the blackness of her mind she saw him alone without the echo of a man's body. He reckoned her. She felt his eyes lick over her soul, surveying and assessing. His lipless fanged face somehow warmed to her.

"Aren't we ambitious?" he said, though his mouth didn't move. The words were slow and without time, with the cadence of a snake demanding to be seen. Each word echoed until it the meaning left and it was nothing more than sounds. Then the question all together repeated back again and again with a torturing more than inquisitive purpose.

But Mary didn't want to engage. She found him being in her mind a gross violation of space. Space. What boundaries of space were there here? She had lost her fight. It was left back in the alley with the man's head half off and blood sheeting everything like dust covers. There was peace here in this black dome of her mind, even with the annoyance of an intruding demon. Space and distance were easily had here.

She fell back slowly and then down into a wet fertile dirt where she had put the images of Max. The dirt moved and brushed like wet feathers on her skin. Down and away from the demon's pulsing question, down and away from the black dome. Down and down to where Max smiled and walked like a little girl under the dirt.

Hiedron found himself absolutely fizzled with emotion and excitement. He hovered over Mary for some time, studying her face. He assessed every fine muscle, the ratios and lines of her. He wanted to number the hairs on her head. Here was a subject worth studying. This was a wild specimen. It had deviated from its natural life cycle and become some kind of beautiful freak, different and exotic to him. Something he had yet to encounter in his long centuries. Though he thought himself ever the cold and logical scientist, those passionate and suborn weeds inside of him all turned to face this bright creature before him like they would if the sun shone at midnight. He wanted to touch her and understand her. But this one was much more special than the subjects before. He could just go get a new body from the party, but what a waste to kill this one before he could know her. No, this would be different. The crown jewel of his studies and then he would return home a great scientific hero. Hiedron took her likeness as she lay unconscious before him. He felt the hot ridges outlining her soul, touched them, rubbed his face on them. The burning landscape of her was intoxicating. Her just existing there dizzied him with pleasure. He pulled himself away, finally, after taking in all he could. *Mary. Mary.*

## Chapter

"Bout time one fought back," a fat, late middle-aged paramedic said upon arriving in the alley. His big ear lobes laid nicely on his wide neck. The first call of the shift, his shirt white and ironed as the driven snow.

"I've seen 'em fight back," his partner, Mack said. He was younger with perfectly white juxtaposed teeth. His crumpled uniform said double shift.

“Yeah, course they fight. Sometimes. But don’t see one win too often,” the fat one responded scanning the crimson scene with his hands resting on what would have been hips. Lower side stomach is perhaps more accurate.

“You call this a win? Draw at best,” the younger one said kneeling down next to Mary feeling for a pulse.

“Ha,” his face pulled into a jolly wide smile, “these whores are women first. You ever know a woman to say a thing a draw? It isn’t even an idea that exists for them. Ain’t matter what a woman does with her life, she’s always a woman first. And they either win or lose.”

“There’s draws,” Mack countered. “My wife and I have draws.” He tossed it absently into the conversation before leaning down to check for any breath.

“Well, she’s either a saint or a liar. And since she’s not old, she’s probably a liar.”

“You think men have draws?” Mack asked after a smile.

The fat one pondered behind an overly stretched pair of spectacles.

“Come to think of it, nah. We don’t either. But,” he countered, “but we got a more okay-ness with losing than them.” He raised his eyebrows at Mary.

“Hey, get me the oxygen, she’s still here,” Mack said kneeling next to Mary.

“Oh, see, a win.” He went into the ambulance and retrieved a tank of oxygen with a clear plastic tube and mask dangling like a jellyfish stuck to a stone. It would have been a win even if she’d been dead, he thought while looking the man’s nearly severed head.

Mary’s eyes fluttered with the oxygen.

“Hey, miss,” the Mack said, “Can you hear me, miss?” He was checking to see if any of the blood was from her.

As Mary awoke every feeling she'd left in the alley returned to her. First shame and guilt for Max. The knife was still in her hand and she gripped it as the first waves of physical control of her body returned to her. Survival dethroned guilt when she felt a thing covering her mouth and nose and saw a man above her. She couldn't understand what he was saying, the words didn't mean anything. With a fluid movement she ripped the mask off her face and took a broad swipe with the knife at the man.

His cheek caught it, but it wasn't too deep. Blood pearled a string of perfect orbs. Then after surpassing the limits of surface tension fell in four or five lines down his unshaven jaw.

Mary was nothing but the animal of herself, unable to reason or see context. She crouched with the knife outstretched, her other hand shaking with adrenaline. She moved slowly with the wildest of eyes to position the alley's wall at her back.

"You alright, Mack?" The fat man said without removing his eyes from Mary.

"Yeah, yeah," he touched his cheek and then wiped the blood on his pants, "Where are the goddamn police?"

"More important things," the fat man said calmly to Mack, his experience shining through.

"Radio?"

"Nah, we got this," he answered quietly.

"You're okay, ma'am. It's all over. We're not here to hurt you," He was inching toward her.

"Get away get away get away," Mary said. Her chin trembled. The paramedic could see her humanity returning to her as the tense panic in her face melted a bit.



“You need some help, miss?” Mack said.

“Let’s put down the knife, ma’am.” The fat man’s face was soft with concern, but his voice was firm with control.

“He’s gone. You did a number on that one, my dear. Well done,” he smiled approval and motioned over to the dead man.

“Let’s have the knife,” he asked opening his palm to her.

Mary looked over to the body and remembered everything then. Max and the man and Crys and the demon. The trap and the hunt and the failure and the hunt again. Then guilt and shame paved over everything, all of it. Next, a great wave of drowning pain smothered her.

“No!” she wailed out and crumpled at the base of the dumpster. She cried such a deep sorrow that the men were transfixed by it. It’s something like a train wreck to view a person actually feeling the deepest sorrow their soul can bear. The viewer can see the fabric of the person limits sometimes rip right before them. It is a sacred moment. Paralyzes the best of us.

Her head strained back. The ribs of her trachea caught the light in the stressed flex. She sobbed in waves of undulating heaves. Threads of thick dehydrated saliva suspended between the upper and lower teeth. Mary cried a depth of pain that shouldn’t be allowed on this earth. The men watched, trapped in time as spectators to a soul surpassing old ceilings of pain.

Mary stopped it before it was done because an apex of emotion to the unschooled will always feel more like the edge an icy cliff than the damp step off a curb it is. She could bear it no more, solutions often come to the creative and desperate at this point.

She remembered the knife in her hand. She dipped the tip into the soft flesh of her forearm and drug it down toward her wrist. Her wailing relaxed at the relief and she did it again

and then once more before the paramedics could remove the blade. Mary sobbed no more and passed out.

Mack wrapped a tourniquet. Then the fat man lifted her light frame. He carried her limp exhausted body over to the white sheeted gurney. He passed through beam of midmorning sunlight that geometry had somehow delivered to the shadowed alley. His eyelids redder than normal and the light exposed pools of moisture on the puffy pads beneath. All the way to the hospital the fat paramedic wept.

He caught in the rear-view mirror Mack leaning over the unconscious Mary, blood from his cheek fell on her fallow face.

“Don’t bleed on her!” he yelled back to Mack, slamming his fist on the metal partition between them.

“What? She bleeding somewhere else?” Mack called back over the din of siren and traffic.

“No, nothing,” the fat man said, defeated and disappointed in himself for some unknown reason.

“What?!” Mack said.

“Nothing!”

## Chapter

Mary sat on a padded folding chair in a little room lined with lockers. She cradled her bandaged arm attempting to conceal it. A dark-haired nurse sat opposite her, his legs in light

blue scrubs outstretched. He held a clip board and had just finished going over a list that Mary hadn't been listening to.

"Really, you have more rights in here than I do," he said meaning to be kind.

"Except you can leave," Mary said, "Why am I here again?"

"Oh, I thought they told you upstairs." He felt bad for not covering that first.

"I'm sorry, it's just the law," he looked at her bandaged arm. "If you harm yourself like that, they have to put you on a hold. But it's not bad in here, I've been working here a while and this is one of the better ones," the nurse said. "I'll show you your room." He stood and she followed him out.

"Another nurse will show you around more in the morning, but here's the shower," he opened a heavy metal door with paint chipping.

"And your room is just across the way here. No roommate right now, we're not as full as we were last week. Toilet, sink back there," he motioned to the back of the room.

He handed her a small lunch sized paper bag, "Toiletries."

"Thanks," Mary said.

"Medicine dispensary is up the hall next to the nurses' station. You will most likely have access to a sleeping pill which is available after 8:00pm. And anti-anxiety medication which you can have every 4 hours throughout the day. Your actions and whereabouts will be checked every hour around the clock, so don't let that bother you. We usually just peek in at the window on the door. If you're in the bathroom or something, we'll give you a couple minutes and then knock. Just let us know you're okay." He checked a couple more boxes.

“There’s a schedule of the different types of groups we have throughout the day listed in the dayroom. Its at the end of the hall down there. Breakfast will be in the room opposite, it starts at 8:00. There’s a menu for you to choose and order off of but those are collected in the afternoon of the day before and since you’re coming in so late we’ve missed it for tomorrow. They’ll probably just give you whatever was most popular, but then you can fill it out tomorrow and the next day we’ll get you taken care of. Okay... what else?” he scanned his clipboard and then checked his watch.

“You have appointments in the morning with one of the physicians and another with our psychiatrist when he does his rounds. One of the staff will come get you when its time, so don’t worry about it. All the staff are pretty nice, just ask if you need anything. Alright Mary, well, goodnight. Nice to meet you.”

He retreated into the dimly lit hallway. Mary sat on the bed nearest the door. A woman’s screams echoed from down the hall and there was a sudden hurried shuffle of soft soled shoes from the nurses’ station. Mary lay back unable to resist her exhaustion. She’d only been brought to the hospital that morning. The afternoon had been spent waiting in the emergency room after they’d dressed her arm wounds. She had arrived unconscious. The doctors decided it was mostly shock. Only one of the arm wounds was deep enough to need stitches. Mary cradled the arm as if it were a separate thing from herself. Something that deserved love and protection. Creation and destruction come from the same place and in her muddled exhausted mind they swirled together. She had created a bit of destruction and that creation evoked a maternal protection. But also the arm was damaged and hurt and that catalyzed a feeling of protection as well. Her mind lingered on these simple feelings of purpose

for the minute or two before she fell asleep. Exhaustion's greatest gift is allowing us to be satisfied with simple feelings.

"They won't give you anything but decaf," a man said as Mary was circling her breakfast choices off the menu the next day.

Mary looked up at him, annoyed at being observed. She stared into the finely-lined face. His skin was just beginning to loosen, yielding a map of his most used emotions and expressions. But setting and internment matter, so he probably looked older than he was. He was broken and beat and common. When Mary had taken in all she wanted, she returned her eyes to her menu.

"I know it gives the option, you can circle decaf or not. But they won't give it to you," he said, sitting down opposite her. "I've asked a bunch of times. They lie."

"Why do they leave the choice?" Mary said.

"I think they think we're so sick we'll see freedom in a fake choices. And that will make us feel better." His speech was a little too fast for comfort, it brimmed on anxious but didn't quite get there. He was excited to get to share his theories with someone even just partially interested.

"There's no way in hell they'd give an upper to anyone in here," he added gazing at the population of the room.

Mary put an X through the word Decaf and circled Coffee. The man smiled as he watched.

"I'm Rick. You came in a few days ago, huh?" He knew exactly how long she'd been there.

“Mary,” she said. She got up, handed her order to the nurse and went back to her room.

Mary spent the first few days laying in her room in the throes of chaotic emotion. But then a cold shell was formed over her decisions. In the stable coolness she grew bored in her room and began to venture out more, befriending the locals. Rick was easy company and the two often floated about the ward and to the different group therapy sessions together.

Physical damage was the least of what Mary had done to herself. She’d betrayed herself and recovery from that is a long uphill hike through a dark valley. Her mind was bruised from the act which fuzzed her thinking for some days. She refused to talk with the psychiatrist or take any medication. This elongated her stay in the hospital. She also had no home or family to release her to so they ended up keeping her much longer than the hold. As the days passed her physical strength regained and exhaustion was fed and quieted. When the shield of tiredness abandoned her, she was hounded by roars of chaotic feelings, unable to sort or quiet them. The great white jaws of guilt and shame and neglected duty took gnashing bites out of her almost constantly throughout the waking hours. She was left with unpredictable moods of sourness or sullenness or sobbing. At night they growled sleep away. She lay awake on the narrow bed hearing the mixed screams of inmates down the hall and the girls she’d failed to protect. The hospital bloomed into a three meal a day hell. Her eyelids mostly sat half shut, pushed down by the prison within. Unable to think, unable to solve any problem. Alive, but just enough to feel pain and not know what to do with it.

Mary only ate because she felt she deserved to feel it all. That her only purpose now was to suffer for her deeds, feel fully the shame of her incompetence. She decided to bear that as long as she could and hopefully it would kill her someday. She had no thoughts except that,

to suffer until the end. She forced herself to eat. Because of this her features softened. Her ribs and striated muscles retreated back to health.

One morning, all the sick and afflicted sat in a semicircle around a healthy well-groomed woman who had the privilege of shoelaces. She sat comfortably in her role of aid and savior. Perhaps she deserved it, Mary thought. Someone must aid and save this fallen lot.

Mary watched her. She smiled with a plastic practiced warmth at each patient as they entered the room and found a seat. She introduced herself to anyone she did not recognize. Everyone she did recognize was forced into an exchange, a few words for all to hear. It was some nonsense but personal to the patient. She was working a grid, doing math. The woman was executing “compassion”, “make the patients feel seen”, “interact with each person as they come in”, “rehearse their names uncomfortably so everyone knows your little memory game is more important than they are”. A forced joke, laughed at too loudly, “display intimacy and a good sense of humor, lighten the air”. Then to a fellow staff member her face dropped to something human. For a good five seconds she was as real person, without forced affect. For those five seconds of hushed exchange with the nurse, the woman’s face moved as a human’s.

It was all a show. The ladder of love for one’s fellow man has low and very densely populated rungs. The woman was about to put on a performance art with herself as the star and the patients doubling as supporting cast and audience. What an offence to the natural world is an actor deficient in both skill and talent. The only mercy was that most of the people in the room were too far gone to care or notice.

“Alright. Welcome. Everyone.” she said with breathy mystic pauses. She adjusted her stone necklaces and straightened her shirt. Cameras on.

“Here we are. It is so so good to see everyone,” she took a deep breath, “welcome, welcome.” She clasped her hands over her heart.

“For anyone who doesn’t know, I am Rhiley, one of the social workers here. I am here to help you, to love you, to be with you.” She made eye contact with everyone who would look, imparting what depth of love and care she could approximate with each awkward gaze.

Mary and Rick sat together in what would have been the corner of the semicircle if it had one. Rick was a broken shell of a man, but all his shattered pieces were so bright and the edges so worn down and nonthreatening that Mary had found his overtures of guileless friendship easily tolerated. He was an old hand who’d been there many times and for longish stays. He liked the predictable stability of Mary’s self-loathing. It was a strong but quiet one-way feed which he preferred to the hysteric and unhinged qualities of most of their peers. In exchange he offered information, details and old stories about the people who lived and worked in the ward. Mary found the bargain good and it helped pass the days and weeks.

“I would be so honored,” Rhiley went on slowly. She breathed and somehow worked a misty glaze over her eyes, “So. So. Honored.” *Fuck you fuck you fuck you*, Mary thought in a matched cadence to wash the social worker’s words with a little truth as they entered her head.

“If you would be willing to share what brought you here. We’re all friends. You, you, you,” she emphatically opened her hands to different people, “are safe here. Are loved. Yes, yes.” She smiled, nearly moved to tears by her own words.

“Alrighty,” she recovered quickly. “Got my coffee, can’t do anything without this,” she giggled and gingerly toasted the room.



“Bethany, would you like to start us out?” the woman’s face was confused with concern and encouragement. The two feelings couldn’t blend in her expression because they didn’t stem from anything real. Mary looked away unable to bear the falseness. Rick leaned over and whispered to her, “the hospital director’s daughter.”

Mary looked at him and he raised his forehead at Bethany and nodded in answer to Mary’s slightly widened eyes.

Bethany didn’t seem bothered by the mess of affect on the social worker’s face.

“Okay, but Rhiley, I don’t wanna next time, I told ya,” great stress poured over Bethany’s face. Then as she readied herself for the requested monologue the burning anxious flare was cooled by something else. A great wave of fantasy came over her. The fantasy or imagination was mingled with having been told too many times how special she is while being neglected. Mental illness is the great spotlight on parents’ unwise mistakes and cruel sins.

After a pause that was too long for the social worker’s comfort she said, “How’s your head?” Everyone looked at a piece of gauze taped to the center of Bethany’s forehead.

“Oh this?” a mischievous pride upturned her mouth. She rolled her eyes up as if to see it.

“I did that,” She leaned forward like she was sharing a confidence.

“How?” a little man asked from the edge of the semicircle. Self-harm is always of great interest in these groups.

“I went to the wall and I hit it,” she slammed her head forward to reenact.

“And I hit it and I hit it,” now she was slamming her head into her hand with impressive force. Blood began to trickle from the reopened wound beneath.

“And I hit-,” she continued, very much enjoying herself.

“Okay, okay, Bethany, now Bethany? Let’s please stop that,” poor Rhiley, the other actors hadn’t learned their scripts as well as she.

Bethany stopped. The whole room watched a thick but slow line of blood flow down the bridge of her nose, around a nostril and then begin to pool above the crest of her upper lip. Her tongue snaked out to taste it.

“You would like a tissue, Bethany? Yes.” Rhiley was desperate for her to accept and already out of her seat with a box extended.

“Nah, it’ll stop.” Bethany sucked in the surplus of blood above her lip and then smeared the rest across her face attempting to wipe it away.

“Umm, maybe. That’s not good. Umm, Claire,” Rhiley called for a nurse who promptly entered. “Claire, could you help Bethany clean up please?”

The nurse came and helped Bethany to her feet. She complied.

“Okay thank you, thank you. Bethany we’ll have your turn when you get back, okay honey?”

Bethany laughed as she was pulled from the room, licking the blood from her hand.

## Chapter

“You have a visitor again. You want to see her?” a nurse asked as Mary lay languid across her bed.

Mary grunted, “Now?”

“Yeah,” the nurse said, “In the meal room.” And the heavy door swung softly shut.

Mary sat up, slipped on her lace-less sneakers and headed to the meal room.

"Hey Will," she said to the back of a man who was talking to a light switch in the hall.

"Hey Mary!" the man called over his shoulder to her, "They're saying stuff Mary, you gotta know!" emphatically he shouted the whisper.

"You gotta know Mary! Come here, I'll tell you. Shhhh, just you Mary," he glared at another patient walking past.

"Just a minute, bud, I got a visitor. I'll be back," Mary said.

"You have a visitor? You sure? The wires told me you was an orphan in this world. That you'll always walk alone and your only company will be your shadow and you'll name him Lonely," Will laughed at his prophecy, forgetting to hold back an overflow of spit. He slurped when he noticed it escaping him.

"Why would my shadow be a man, Will? Doesn't even make sense," her eyes were warm to him.

Then his face went abruptly melancholy, "There's a devil after you, Mary. He licks your face. And he knows you'll come to him. But I wouldn't do it if I were you. I think it'll end bad." He paused to think, "Yeah, don't do that, okay?"

"Sure, yeah," she cleared her throat, "I'll be right back." With no intention of returning.

"Okay," he slumped his boney shoulders and returned to the hushed conversation with the light switch.

The long tables in the meal room were folded up and pushed to the side. Eight or ten small round tables dotted the room. They were respectably distanced to create a veneer of privacy over the intimate and desperate conversations had across them.

“Don’t make a scene. You always have to make a scene,” a husband said as he petted his eyebrow.

“It seems like that’s what you want, Gary! Come down here to see me and the freaks, don’t you want a show?!” his wife returned. She stood.

“You don’t want me back, huh? Fuckin’ fine!” she said, overturning the flimsy table. It hit Mary in the shin as she walked in.

“I didn’t say that Beck, but it’s every month now, please..” he implored, but the staff were already carting her away. She strained against them but didn’t really fight.

“I’m sorry, are you okay?” the husband asked Mary. Mary met his desperate eyes.

“I didn’t say I didn’t want her,” he said trying to convince Mary.

“Seems like that’s the drift she caught,” Crys responded, smiling at the show. Mary sat opposite her.

“I didn’t say it. I didn’t say that,” he said to Crys pathetically defeated.

“Sir, will you come this way?” a nurse asked and led the husband out of the room.

“I can’t imagine being married to her, it’d be a nightmare. She’s a voluntary. The voluntaries are the most pathetic,” Mary said laying her head down on the table.

“I mean, the first time you can forgive, because they don’t know any better. But her and the regulars, they’re just hankin’ it,” Mary added.

Crys considered the theory and then nodded and opened her hands at its likelihood.

“Jean’s been sendin’ me. How come you refusing visitors? You think I like driving all this way?” Crys said.

“mmhmm,” Mary said, enjoying the cold table on her face.

“Hey, beautiful, get up,” Crys said tapping on Mary’s exposed temple. Mary shoved her hand away.

“I don’t wanna do things. Don’t come here,” Mary said, the table’s surface absorbing and muffling most of it.

“Get up,” Crys pushed Mary’s chair with her foot until Mary had to lift her head because table was getting too far away.

“What do you want, Crys? I’m stuck in a fuckin’ loony bin. What the fuck do you want?” Mary said.

“Hey girl, we got a thing to do,” Crys slapped Mary lightly across the knee. It swung with a smoothness only defeat can accommodate.

“I tried doing a thing. See me almost get Max killed?” Mary asked.

“Almost isn’t a word. You either did or you didn’t. And you didn’t,” Crys shrugged at the obvious logic.

“She okay?” Mary didn’t want to know.

“Eh, yeah, she’s fine,” Crys said.

“Hey but you gotta snap out of this because we got shit to do and Jean says I’m not so great at the seeing stuff. So, you need to shift this place girl. You been here like a month. Vacation’s over, Mare.” Crys said.

Mary sighed and let the weight of her skull rest on her palm. Crys scowled down at her with a frustrated confusion.

“5 minutes,” a nurse called from the doorway.

Mary and some other patients stood, “it’s bad luck to go all the way to the end,” Mary murmured.

“Not everyone’s going,” Crys said.

“They only know bad luck,” Mary answered.

Crys caught Mary by the wrist and pulled her back down to the chair.

“Jean wants a word,” Crys said. She scanned Mary’s face for understanding.

“She says you ain’t sleeping deep enough,” Crys said.

“Okay,” Mary jerked her wrist away, uninterested in the confidence.

“She says you need to be tired,” Crys said. Mary smiled at the joke.

“More tired, tired in your body,” Crys clarified.

“Okay, thank you everyone for coming and supporting your loved ones...” the nurse announced.

Mary stood, Crys grabbed her wrist again. And then said quickly, “Do push-ups and sit-ups and jumping jacks and shit until you throw up. That’s what Jean said.”

Crys let her go.

The halls were empty when Mary returned to her room. If anyone hadn’t drugged themselves to sleep yet, they were in the dayroom and she wasn’t feeling very social.

She leaned against the painted cinderblock wall and rolled her head back against it. Then, following a feeling more than a thought, she lowered herself into a wall-sit. She held it for longer than she could and then dropped to the floor after because she couldn’t stand. She then circuited between sets of sit-ups and push-ups and wall-sits. Doing each until the muscle group completely failed. She thought of the ranch, of Always, the goats, the sun, Jean. Then the warm

thoughts faded and she saw Max laying there terrified and then all the other dead girls. She saw the demon. Then the physical work became punishing, she wanted it to hurt. Obsession followed in on the heels of that thought and now she could not stop. She pushed and pushed.

“Aren’t we ambitious?” echoed in her memory with silky amusement. The exercise had tricked her body into thinking she could outrun the question.

Then it came. Dinner came lurching up her throat. She rushed to the toilet, braced against the seat and relieved the pressure. She collapsed on the bed, swallowed the last dregs of vomit in her mouth and fell asleep.

The sleep was black and taking. A nonexistent dreamless sleep caressed her with suppression. A forced submission is sometimes just the ticket. Mary slept far away from everything in the part of her mind where peace needs no support. It doesn’t require the convincing powers of a calming scene or conscious relaxation. Complete sensory deprivation will get a person as close to a peaceful nonexistence as possible. That’s where Jean found her.

In the timeless blackness Mary heard Jean’s voice. It was grating and unwelcome because it returned a sense of time to her peace. A conversation is measured in turns. To understand a sentence one must be bound by order and sequence. Time was forced to reenter her space of relief and Mary soured.

Jean didn’t present herself visually, she knew Mary needed the rest. Just a voice, as quiet and calm as Jean could make it, entered.

“There’s a work, Mary. There’s a task,” Jean’s measured and firm voice said.

Mary recoiled at the intrusion, tried to pull away from understanding. But there were no doors and no walls here. No floor, no sky. Nothing but the peaceful black and now Jean bidding her attention.

"I don't want to play, Jean. It's not fun. I can't win. I'll lose and more blood will be on me than I can bear. I can't bear it now," Mary felt relief at finally hearing a coherent reflection of her chaotic feelings.

"Some games will never be fun, but still they must be played," Jean said.

"No."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you said you would and you will never know a second's peace unless you do the thing or die trying," Jean said.

"I don't deserve peace. Blood only buys peace for the future, if you're lucky. But then you're held to the past because you spilt blood. So why pay? Why buy a future I'll never see?" Mary asked.

"You don't buy it for yourself, my dear. People will always be paying for others. Some are here to pay and others to receive. I'm here to pay and so are you," Jean said.

"Just going to fail. What's the point?" Mary said.

"You seem to have not yet been to hell. Trust me, failure is better than what you'll do to yourself if you turn your back on this," Jean said.

"I already deserve it."



“You’d rather live with shame than die of failure?” Jean’s words were rounded from an unseen smile.

This stark fork in the road pinned Mary down in the black. She was riveted now and could see. But still disbelief caught in her throat.

“Just two choices, huh?” Mary said.

“People think fate is a buffet, all the choices, all the options. Small decisions build and all that bullshit. Really it’s little more than a hand of crappy cards and a yes or no,” Jean said.

“You can not play, Mary, but hell awaits. And it won’t be the kind of suffering you think. It won’t relieve you, there is nothing purifying about self-created hell. It won’t make up for anything you’ve done. If you play the game, you’ll still suffer but at least it will have a purpose.”

“I deserve to live as a coward,” Mary was just saying things now. Saying things that were true minutes before, a eulogy, the last gasp of dead decisions.

Jean knew. She heard a past tense in the shape of Mary’s words. Jean left her in the loving black.

## Chapter

Fits and screams were a pretty common thing. Mary usually heard them from her room or snaking their echoes down the dirty halls. It didn’t really frighten her, but it took her back to a place where she did not want to be. This ward of the hospital served a unique purpose. Whereas all the others had a main directive of health and recovery, the goal here was merely containment. Keep the mentally infirm away from harming others or themselves, but mostly keep them away. It’s basically what was done with lepers before modern medicine. Psychology

is still awaiting its modern movement. That's not to say that people don't get better sometimes. Some of the lepers probably accidentally got better, too. Then all the medieval therapies were championed. The failing sciences need very little to celebrate themselves. Optimism can grow in the most unproductive of gardens. For the blind and self-serving, the unscientific; optimism and self-congratulation are the only harvest.

When the containment of drugs failed a poor soul and force was required, all the compliant patients were shooed away, yelled at to return to their cells, or the day room door was quickly shut. A generous mind could conclude that privacy was being offered.

Only one time did Mary see the main event. The view was afforded because an adjoining hallway had not been cleared. Through a kiddie-corner slip Mary and Rick observed order be maintained by only real line of enforcement, physical might.

"No, the Roman, the Roman said!" Bethany yelled.

"Oh, it's her damn Roman thing again," Rick said. They were both crouched at the corner watching.

Bethany was outside the social workers' offices making a bit of a mess of their neat row of waiting chairs. She was tall and heavy set to the point of her hands dimpling at the knuckles. Her face was pink with flush and pasty from rarely meeting the sun. The energies of her youth had been so suppressed with drugs and television and food that they glazed back an understandable rage in her unsteady eyes. She had fortified herself behind a line of upturned and askew chairs. Using one as a weapon, she lifted it above her head. Bethany shouted as the muscle of the staff panthered ever nearer. Worse than useless and cardiganed, Rhiley was

working through in unheard soothing tones whatever acronymic diffusing strategy she'd been taught worked 10% of the time.

The muscle closed in. The two men silent in their scrubs moved the upturned chairs impeding their path like assassins. Clearly one diffusing art was a bit more practiced than the other.

"Put down the chair, Bethany," one of the men said.

"Come on, we don't need to do this today. Let's put it down and go have a talk with your therapist here," the other said.

"Yes, Bethany. That would be a positive choice," the cardigan chimed.

"See, she wants to have a chat. And you know that's not going to happen if this goes bad, honey," he added. His hand was already on a leg of the weapon-chair.

Seeing she was caught, Bethany couldn't help but go out with a bang. Why drown in 9 feet when you can drown in 15?

Bethany threw the chair at him, which he easily caught. And then pulled her clawed hand across her face in a downward diagonal direction, laughing hysterically all the while. Her nails weren't long or sharp so the top layers of flesh ripped mostly from pressure. Her laugh-screams seemed to give her momentum rather than relieve it. Both her face and claw were actively pushing against each other. When the staff pulled her arm away to restrain her, it finished the job.

She was forced to the ground, fighting and screaming and laughing the whole way.

"I did my best Commander!," she howled up at the moon.

Mary pulled her eyes away when the zip-ties came out, not wanting to see the end. But also silently approving of the fight. She looked at Rick who was spitting sunflower seed shells into a styrofoam cup.

“You at a ball game or something?” she asked.

“Bethany’s the best for that,” he nodded a shrug.

“You said she’s the hospital director’s daughter?” Mary asked as they meandered into the now open day room.

“Oh yeah,” Rick said getting excited at having her attention for a story. He knew his great collection of gossip and the webbed interactions of his fellows would pay off someday. If that vast pot of knowledge and legend and speculation and half-worked theories bought him nothing more than something to do with the vacant hours his mental day and value in Mary’s eyes – well, then it was all very worth it. They sat down across from each other at a chess board. A black bishop, white rook, and three pawns were missing. Mary started breaking crayons.

“Ugh, Will keeps stealing the damn pieces,” Rick said.

“Well, he put the queens back at least,” Mary noticed.

“Why do the klepto’s have to come here? It’s why we can’t have nice things,” Rick said to himself. Mary placed broken pieces of crayon on the vacant spaces.

“Can’t we just play checkers? I can never remember the colors and I think you switch them and cheat,” he accused.

“Well, then, remember. It’s good for you to lose anyway. Help you learn to cope with disappointment or unhealthy expectations or something,” she added with a grin.

“You think I have a problem with losing and disappointment? Look where I live. And I caught that, by the way... me beating you at chess is an unhealthy expectation,” he said. A laugh and wide smile burst out of her. Rick’s eyes danced all over her face. He smiled, watching her enjoy her own insult.

She recovered with a deep breath, “Okay, remember. Blue’s are pawns, I made them smaller too. Red is a rook. See? ‘R’, red, rook,” she said slowly and nodding with the R’s, still warm from the laughter and unable to put down the little upturned corners of her mouth.

“Helpful, yes, go on,” he said.

“And the bishop is green but there’s only one, so you can remember that,” Mary decided. Now that the war of the game was about to start, she was all seriousness.

“Why can’t the bishop be blue and the pawns green?” he asked.

“Because I already did it, just go. Tell me about Bethany. How do you know she’s the director’s daughter?” she said.

“Well,” he leaned in and rolled a fragment of blue crayon forward two spaces, “He comes to visit her. And all the scraping from the staff when he gets down here, it’s pathetic. Especially because everyone knows his daughter shouldn’t be here. She needs a higher-level facility but he won’t do it. Just brings her in and takes her out, every week. Probably spends the weekends babysitting her. What a life... Before she was 18 he would use this place almost as a day care. Bring her down here at the beginning of his day and then pick her up at the end. But now she’s old enough he leaves her overnight. I think they all kinda hate him for it because she’s such a pain in the neck but authority breeds such silent compliance,” he wasn’t pleased with these last two words, they came out slowly.

"Well, ass-licking compliance," he corrected himself.

"Check. What's the Roman thing?" Mary asked.

"Check?" he said.

"Yeah, the bishop," she said.

"I thought the bishop was blue?" he asked.

"No," she said like he was an idiot, "I said the bishop was green, the pawns are blue.

You've got to not act like such a fucking loop." She looked at him, his eyes were bright at the victory of having wound her up.

"You're cheating again," he said as he made a suicidal move.

"Now you're not even playing! You're such an ass, Rick, check-mate," Mary said.

"You. Are. A. Cheat. Er," he said, tipping his king.

"Take it like a man, my friend. Cowardice won't help your exit strategy. What's next?"

She glanced at the caged clock on the wall. It was almost 10:00, when groups began.

"Who said I have an exit strategy? What day is it? Tuesday. Umm, art therapy with a social worker. You'll get in trouble for breaking the crayons. Or..."

"Is it cardigan or mustache? They wouldn't know I broke the crayons anyway. Just put a little drool on them, they'll think Will did it," Mary said.

"Cardigan, mustache has group this afternoon," he said.

"Ugh," Mary groaned, remembering Rhiley, "Or?" she asked hopefully.

"Or AA with some outsiders. In the meal room," he nodded his choice.

"Do you have to be an alcoholic?" she asked, interested.

"Nope, just an inmate," he said.

“Check, check.”

They stood to walk out. Rick remembered her question.

“She thinks Roman commanders are telling her to do things. Like build forts, make attacks, stuff like that. She’ll talk for hours on it if you get her started, so don’t. Please. She is always highly complimented for her creativity and imagination by our betters.”

“Even while they’re stringing her up?”

“Well, probably not then. Right after, I’m sure. They think we’re dogs or very small children and can be controlled with praise. Hollow, fake praise,” he said feeling sad and insulted for his kith. “But then, surprise surprise, it never works and no one cares. Kinda like they’re all masturbating, the staff, in a weird way. Kinda like that,” he was working out the weak analogy as he spoke.

“Masturbation usually comes to a successful end, so maybe not like that,” she said smiling and enjoying the mental game.

“Well, if successful means they feel like they’ve done something positive, with long caressing self-serving strokes,” they both laughed.

“That’s kinda cool, though. Romans, huh? She some history buff?” Mary returned to the original inquiry. They wandered into the meal room and found seats toward the head of a long table.

“Her father is,” Rick said.

## Chapter

The AA leader's hair was longish for the modern style, but likely in concert with the trends of his youth. It was one of the few artifacts from that time in his life that he still permitted in his company. It was thick and on the whiter side of grey, long enough to curl lazily. It would have been a point of vanity in a lesser man. Perhaps he kept it longer to remind himself that he was once a lesser man. He had purchased character out of ruin and returned to his shattered compatriots to tell the encouraging tale. Some are born wise, some let life make them wise, but most are neither.

"Welcome, I'm Vern and I am an alcoholic," he began. There was no welcome back from this unseasoned and haphazard group.

Vern turned his face down and away from the room's attention, just slightly. He cleared his throat and hopped on the flow of the meeting.

"We usually begin with a round around the table, I'll start. I've been sober for 37 years. The last night I drank ended in an actual gutter with my car all smashed and folded around a traffic light. My wife was gone, my family too. And it had rained, which isn't a common thing here. I sat in the gutter, not even on the curb. I had pissed myself in the accident and didn't want anyone to see. So I sat in the running gutter water to hide the stain. I'd lost my career. But the last and worst thing was my daughter. She was limp in her carseat. But I was more worried about the stain on my pants than checking on her. Actually, I had forgotten she was even there until the ambulance arrived. My wife and I had just separated. She'd said if I would get some help for my drinking then she'd come back. But after the accident... and I thank God almost every hour that He spared my beautiful daughter's life that night. She recovered fully. But the



fact that it happened at all broke whatever was left in my wife for me. I lost everything.” He paused to swallow it, glad and relieved to still feel the pain after so many years of saying it.

“Alright, who’s next? Would you mind starting? I’ve seen you before but I forget your name, son?” he held out an open palm to Rick who sat next to Mary at the corner of the table.

“I’m Rick. I’ve been sober about six weeks, as long as I’ve been here. I was living in an abandoned car.” Rick looked to Vern, unsure whether to continue. Vern leaned back and encouraged him with a warm face. Rick went on, “My mind cleared long enough for me to see, just in that little window between hits. I bet just a glimpse though. I don’t know how long I’d been high. I was filthy. I looked in the little mirror, you know on the visor?” Rick looked to the older man for understanding. He looked to Vern to be seen by a man who knew what he felt and where he had been. He looked for a father to meet him in his pain and confusion. Vern met the moment. His old face and eyes steadied Rick with the lent strength of one who has gone before.

“I said a prayer. But I don’t believe in God,” Rick said quickly. The discomfort of escaping emotion brought his hand to his face. He blinked a few times to compose himself. He felt Mary looking at him, suddenly brought back from his story for a second. He wouldn’t look at her, but she saw his eyelids tighten and flick her way with the remembrance. Then he leaned forward at the will of an unconscious instinct to make himself smaller.

“Right then some paramedics knocked on the window of the car. And I knew what to say. The Magic Words. They said the owner of the parking lot had called them. They brought me here. The shrink is trying to find me a place at a half-way house or in-patient or somewhere.”

“Thank you for sharing, Rick. There are a lot of really good places in this area, I’m sure the doc will find you a good spot. And we have meetings everywhere. Let me know where you go and I’ll set you up,” Vern said knowing his roll to broken men very well. A hallowed silence filled the meal room, nearly sanctified it. Mary didn’t understand where it had come from. But she felt it all over her. Then she looked about and the room seemed glazed in something of a cathedral. It was all still the same, but somehow all the flaws and grime were muted. Like someone had turned the colors down. What was left was a shine, a glow nearly of only goodness. The light sang in through the window as if it were eager to be there. Was it what Rick had said? Was it Vern? Mary decided she was ruining it by trying to understand, and instead just breathed in slowly the sacred air. She was next. Vern looked at her.

“I’m Mary. I’m not an alcoholic. But I run and I escape and I’m a coward. So,” her eyes and mouth grew solemn and heavy and defeated. She continued quietly, “So, I hope that makes me welcome here.”

Vern smiled at the sight of an honest soul.

“It does, Mary. Welcome.” He kept his grey bright eyes on hers and bowed his head. Mary looked down in grateful return.

The hour passed Mary like the breaking of a fever. No, not the violence of the breaking but the cool first moments right after. When the sweating has stopped and the mind gets that first familiar taste of proper existence again, when priorities and the decisions that enforce it have all firmed back up. She saw through herself. It is the curse of newly hallowed moments.

Some shared genuine accounts of themselves. Others hid behind disjointed verbose monologues. All was welcome. But the inauthentic, the irresponsible, the eternal victims

glared as offensively to Mary as mud in a shrine. Vern didn't mind, all was humanity and he met each where they were. In that hour Mary felt mercy and truth mix as a new color that blanketed all the room.

Before it was over Mary was also washed with the full feelings of completion and expiration. It was time to go. The hunt awaited and with it her fate. This she knew now in an untangled way. Her nocturnal conversation with Jean brought her most of the way and this last hour pushed her across the finish line.

## Chapter

Mary's fingertips drummed a patient war march as the nurse placed her lunch tray before her.

"I'm heading," she said to Rick.

"I thought it might be soon," he said with a sigh. Then composed himself, "It's been a pleasure, Mary." He looked at her, but her brow stormed with concentration. She didn't see or hear him. Mary began to stand. He placed a couple fingers on her rising tray to halt her. The physical interruption paused her scheming and she looked confused from his fingers to his face. He looked up at her.

"You might not be long for this world," he said. Then he looked down and his mouth tightened in rage against it.

"Yeah, but it's like that for everyone, Rick. Being in here doesn't make it any different," she leaned down near him so as not to be overheard, "As soon as you can feel that, grab it and get the hell out of here, my friend." The advice was lost on him in that moment. All he could

think of was her closeness, the heat coming off her face and touching his. He'd have to save her words for later.

The spell broke as she stood to move away. His fingers dropped off the edge of her tray. She was behind him now. The orbit that they'd fallen into together was about to be broken, he could feel it snapping. As if they'd been as an asteroid sling-shotting around the pull of a dying planet. He wanted to say something, to give her something but nothing came to him. And then she was gone across the room. He watched her and decided to delay his grieving by being curious as to how she was going to pull it off.

Mary sat next to Bethany, the mealtime's din cocooned them for a private conversation. Mary smiled and loosened her bearing. The fat girl with fresh claw marks down her face immediately took to the attention. Mary got her relaxed and laughing. Then her face grew abruptly serious, snatching away the warmth. Rick smiled and shook his head, realizing the clever plan. Bethany grew serious as well. The women huddled, sending paranoid glances out to search the room. Once Mary knew she had Bethany mirroring her, she led her along the garden path until the fever pitched perfect.

"I knew it! I knew it! I told them I knew and I was right!" Bethany said now yelling above the lunch noise.

Mary said in a lower voice, forcing Bethany close to her, "You were, but what can we do? They know you've failed so many times. I've heard them talking about you. They say its so sad that you try and try and never really make it. Some people just don't have what it takes, nothing wrong with that of course. But maybe you do and you've just never really given it your all?" Mary's face was all masculine discipline behind a thin veneer of concern.

Bethany's head snapped at Mary. "What do you mean not given it my all? Failed? I have the stuff. I do. I'll show them," Mary observed anger and panic and shame mix as if she were playing with a chemistry set. Just a little more heat.

"Of course you've failed. Looked around, we're in the enemy's clutches. Your father probably keeps putting you here to see if you have it. But then you don't so he has to come rescue you all the time. He doesn't let you know you're so disappointing, does he? I'm sure he doesn't, that would be mean," Mary said.

Bethany thought of her father. The General who always saved her. Memories of his approval flooded her undisciplined mind. First a caress of warmth, then a ravenous hunger consumed the weak flames.

"Too bad he doesn't know what we know. Me and the soldiers. Too bad he doesn't know what you can do because you always let him save you. It's a shame, I think he'd be impressed. But careful, I can hear the enemy, can you?" Mary crouched down.

"Where?" Bethany gasped out.

"They're behind. They're all around. What, are you blind Bethany? They've come for you." Mary's urgent voice had turned sinister and heavy.

"Can't you see them for Christ's sakes? Bethany!" Mary threw her tray hard on the ground right behind the girl. The crash gave everyone a start, but mostly Bethany. She snapped to attention and the great battle began.

Mary slipped away during the commotion. The muscle had to be called in and when they rushed through the locked double doors that led to the rest of the hospital Mary silently

swam upstream. She caught Rick's eye in a last look, his eyebrow was lifted with the impressed version of disapproval. A flash of grin and a shrug was all she left to explain herself.

Mary moved through the main part of the hospital unaware of its geography. She looked for scissors at a vacant nurse's station, but couldn't find any quickly enough. So she grabbed a sweater from the back of a chair to cover her brightly colored psych-ward wristband. She moved on casually to a different part of the hospital, growing more and more annoyed at the lack of signage. When she had covered some ground, she found herself in the cardiac unit and peered into the patients' room windows as she passed. She found a room with a woman about her size sleeping and a suitcase tucked under a chair. Mary slipped into the room, silently rifled through the suitcase, and changed from her scrubs. She cut off the wristband with a pair of scissors she found on the counter.

The next bit was easy.

"Oh my husband said he's waiting for me outside the main entrance, but I've gotten so turned around in here."

"Of course, I've been telling them we need more signs. Just down that hall, third left and then a right and you're there."

"Thanks so much," Mary smiled and had to control herself very tightly to keep from running.

Though she knew no one would stop her, her steps through the hospital lobby had been supported by a scaffolding of forced confidence, an act. It was hard to not feel like a convict. But once through the sliding glass doors and past the welcome awning she collapsed the act and her natural, honest air returned to her. The city's pollution had never smelled so sweet. She

had the thought of a cow wandering accidentally from the slaughtering floor and to freedom. Her own hurried steps and squinting eyes surprised her but she was herself again within a couple city blocks. Natural light is so blinding when one hasn't had the privilege to bear it for some time.

Crys called to her from across the street. Mary stopped and waited for her to finish swearing at the driver of a car she'd stepped in front of. After finishing the tirade Crys joined Mary on the sidewalk.

"Holy hell, woman. That took forever. Jean kept sayin' you'd be getting out, but took your damn time, huh? Then she said it'd be today and I had to go wait," she glared at Mary and then softened but still added, "I been waiting," with a comical bounce of her head.

Crys threw an arm around Mary to pull her up the street, "You okay? You good? We gotta go."

"Have a nice little rest?" Crys said when they got in the car. She glanced over the new scars on Mary's arm. They shined pink and loud.

"Mmm," Mary said in the affirmative.

"Good. Jean said to take you straight to the Underneath and then back to the ranch," Crys said.

"The Underneath? Oh, come on. Why we need to go there?" Mary asked. A bouncing shaft of flashlight eclipsed her consciousness for a punishing moment.

"She says you need to talk with the Mayor," Crys said.

"It's a pain to get to him," Mary said, trying to brace herself for the afternoon. She felt herself begin to sweat slightly.

“No. What for? That guy doesn’t know anything about anything that happens outside the Underneath,” Mary said.

“Jean was bid. You represent. I escort,” Crys said as if stating laws of nature.

“She was bid? Guess he does know something,” Mary said.

“Which way you wanna go in?” Crys asked.

“Just the main. If he’s expecting us, that’ll be the easiest,” Mary answered.

“Where’s that? I’ve never even been in, only heard of it,” Crys said.

“It’s where all the gullies meet. Near the dump.”

“Yum, yum,” said Crys under her breath anticipating the smell.

## Chapter

The great concrete entrance pipes were each 12 feet in diameter. Three of such lay side by side. If you didn’t know what lay beyond you’d think it looked like an exit. A return to light or merely a transfer point for the city’s water overflow to a nearby treatment facility. But upon knowing of the kingdom beneath, the three pipes took on a different feel entirely. The pipes performed a psychological barrier like the outer walls of cities in ancient times. When the pilgrim approached the gate he felt small. Greater ideas and forces than him were held within. And upon passing the gate these forces of culture and law and social mores, perhaps in total opposition to his own, would completely encompass him. The walled city gate can be a threatening port of entry. But an open pipe with its only warning being the blackness within, well that another thing entirely.



The women climbed the gently pitched concrete drainage basin then entered the twilight zone. The Underneath had such a zone as all open descents into the subterranean do. The length of this timid scratch of thin light is determined by the aperture of the entrance, time of day, directional positioning. This one was short and dry as a bone except for what looked like an asymmetrical puddle of spilled gasoline that turned the last frays of light into uneven ribbons of pink and orange. The sole of Crys' trainer disturbed the tangle of colors. The ribboned tendrils moved lazily at the intrusion with a vicious disinterest.

Twilight zones present a stark choice for the mind. Does one go towards the light or the dark? Those who aren't frequent spelunkers will feel the eerie tingle of the soul recoiling as the body puts its back to the light and moves toward the dark. Some call it adventure, others stupidity, this pull to worlds and climes hostile to humanity. But with a purpose both of these opinions can be left behind. Crys and Mary headed not only toward darkness but into a kingdom not their own with a specific but blurry purpose. And as they did they gave up a great percentage of one of man's dearest defenses, sight.

The unimpressive beams from their flashlights now reflected back brightly on the stagnant water. The pipe narrowed and the women were forced to bend their backs and assume a single file.

"Do you know this place? How far do we have to go?" Crys asked in a whisper, the foreign space draining confidence from volume.

"I don't really know it," Mary admitted matching her whisper.

Crys halted a moment and then took a quick step to stay near Mary.

"What?!" Crys said.

"I mean I've been here. A few times. But we've already been seen and reported. The only reason we haven't been attacked yet is because we're expected," Mary said.

Crys gave a shudder to the blackness down her back. "Sooo..." she asked and then gulped down the danger.

"So," Mary said also lacking confidence in the dark dripping pipe, "We're just gonna walk straight ahead until they collect us and take us to the Mayor."

"Oh God." Crys said in reaction to the plan.

"There's no way we could ever find him ourselves," Mary added.

"I thought you knew this place?" Crys accused.

"What do I look like, some kind of cave beetle? How would I know this place?" Mary said.

"There is a kind of spiritual similarity," Crys teased. Her nature adjusted quickly to uncertainty and danger.

Mary chuckled at herself then said, "I don't want to talk more. We're just being listened to and I hate it when these fuckers jump out and scare me. Just listen for them, hopefully they'll get us soon."

"But you know the Mayor, right?" Crys asked.

"I mean, I've met him. I know what he looks like. But I don't 'know' him," Mary said, "Jean does. They're old friends."

"That's good," Crys said trying to find hope in the information.

Mary was stressed and annoyed. She was engaged in a constant internal fight to retain her spiritual sovereignty over the oppressive and encompassing atmosphere.

“It is, because we’d be dead by now otherwise. So shut up already,” her patience was thin as Jean’s kitchen towels.

“Well, we wouldn’t be here,” Crys said under her breath, but then complied and the pilgrimage returned to silence.

They stepped over a grate and into a vast concrete cavern. It domed overhead so far that the cheap lights could not touch the uppermost wall. Mary stepped to the side keeping her body near the wall. There was a jarring within her from moving so quickly from the tightness of the pipe to this abundance of air and space. The new vacuum of sound instead of a quick return overwhelmed her senses. It kept the women close to each other and the nearest wall.

Crys saw it first. She touched Mary’s side with her elbow and whispered a breathless and dry mouthed, “Mare.”

Mary turned and looked. A figure just beyond the flashlight’s beam stood at the mouth of another pipe across the room from them. He lowered himself into a squat.

“We were bid, don’t be afraid,” Mary whispered with a slight turn of her head to Crys.

Mary took a step away from the wall to convince herself. Crys followed standing directly at Mary’s right.

“The goat shepherd’s?” the man asked. His voice was deep but heavily lisped with an unseen facial deformity.

“Yes,” Mary said matching his firm tone but not his volume.

“Come,” he said and then disappeared into the blackness of the pipe.

The women were alone again in the dark domed cavern.

“What if...we...don’t. Do that,” Crys said in a slow way to herself.

“Ahh, come on. Would you rather be mucking goat shit?” Mary smiled wide, her spirit quickening in the danger. She traversed the open space to follow the man.

“Yes. Yes I would,” Crys said also to herself. After a moment’s hesitation she gave a little jog to catch up with Mary and they both entered the new pipe together.

The air was danker and moister in the narrow passageway. Stagnant water chilled their feet as it flooded the porous sides of their shoes. The guide had gone ahead in the dark beyond the reach of their flashlight’s beams. The pipe was sloping ever downward, and the water was now up to their ankles. When they touched the walls for balance a slick slime greeted their soft fingertips, like the surface of a passing fish.

Mary grew claustrophobic. Her eyes blurred and sagged heavily under it. She tried to focus on the space around her body and stretch it out in her mind. It helped, but then it pushed Crys too far away and made her feel lonely so she quit doing it. She was beginning to try mentally expanding the space around both her and Crys when the flashlight caught the guide waiting at a fork in the pipe.

She hadn’t been able to get a good look at him before when he was across the cavern. But now as they approached she let the dimmer outer ring of the flashlight’s beam rest on his face. It was weathered but mostly from dirt and sin than experience. But the most notable feature besides his little pebble eyes trying to be big and useful in the dark was a reopened harelip. He or someone had sliced his upper lip just off center and parallel to an original cleft palate scar all the way up to his nose. The two upper lips couldn’t meet evenly because the strip of muscle had been severed like a cut rubber band. There was an empty piercing hole on either side at the bottom corners of the split. He winced at the painful light and gave her a chaotic

sneer with one half an upper lip. The effect he wanted was lost in an unnatural abundance of gums and teeth. She lowered the light.

He grunted to indicate the way and disappeared again down an even wetter and smaller pipe. His grease coat was stiff over his bent back and stuck out behind. Mary maintained a distance of her comfort, or what she could tolerate, and did not let them get any nearer.

As the passage narrowed tighter Mary tried to force thoughts of small comfortable burrows. She tried to convince herself that there is safety in dark and small spaces. Like rodents... Unfortunately the stress and atmosphere were too much for her efforts to succeed. Like rabbits and hedgehogs (she didn't know what a hedgehog looked like), and furry tarantulas and snakes and tarantula wasps and black widows. She shuddered. The burrowing life of her desert home was far less welcoming than the grasslands or forests. She tried again. And coffins and ice climbers who die deep in the tight crevices between great glacial slabs, her feet grew colder. She searched her mind for a memory of a small space that was safe and warm and comfortable. Under the bed, the closet, she drew up only old memories of being a little girl hiding from the aggressive actors who dominated her childhood. Frustrated, she let out an exasperated sigh and shook her head free of its poisonous efforts. She decided to force herself to stay in the present.

Mary breathed in and smelled the acrid water whose dormant scents wafted up at the disruption of her shoes. She could smell the guide's lingering body odor and the fragrance of Crys' shampoo. Then she focused on the sounds, intent on not permitting them to take shape into symbols or meaning in her mind. She focused on forcing everything to be exactly as it was.

And this effort blotted out the claustrophobia, or at least kept it off the shelf of panic and on the more manageable plane of alert discomfort.

Finally, after several more forks and varying apertures of passageway they reached a round metal wall fit to the pipe blocking further progress. In its center was a narrow portcullis with a black gloved hand resting between the grating.

The split-harelip murmured something unintelligible and the black hand slid away. Next a cranking sound preceded the lifting of the portcullis.

The entry was rather high, its bottom being about at Mary's lowest rib. The harelip had to enter head first and catch himself with his hands on the other side. Crys gave an incredulous slack jawed look to Mary when she realized they were expected to follow. She made the negative "uh-uh" sound with the back of her throat quietly.

Mary sighed in accepting and defeated way. Then she went in head first through the small square opening. Slowly she walked her upper body down the back side of the metal wall with her hands and lowered herself into a cold puddle. Knees sopping, she turned back after rising to her feet and offered a hand to Crys.

"I got it," Crys said and Mary stood clear of the entry. Once the women were in, the portcullis slammed shut behind them.

"Take off your coats."

Mary felt Crys shifting to comply in the space next to her, but Mary was done with following and obeying. The hours of internal distress colored his order more offensive than it was meant. Running low on the patience required for compliance had been a regular situation for Mary. Internal distress can do that. She reached out a hand to stop Crys.

“No. We’re the shepherd’s. We were bid.” Her jaw clenched unseen in the eternal subterranean night, but her voice carried the words as an unyielding wall. Crys shrugged her coat back up, her eyes would have sparkled if there’d been any extra light. Her nature couldn’t help but get excited at the prospect of a good fight.

“You are whore scum,” he lisped at the women. Then he stepped fully into the light, meaning to intimidate with his masculine size and the horrors of his face.

Mary and Crys squared themselves. Then there was a long slow and even scratch of something sharp on the concrete wall but it was veiled in darkness and Mary didn’t dare flinch her light away from the harelip.

“You’d die over your coat?” An unseen man laughed. The scratch eased its pressure and slowly stopped. “You are the shepherd’s,” he concluded.

“I guess she taught you that’s dignity or something? Was it hard for you to learn such a concept?” A match was struck and with the delicate flame a massive man lit a candle and then used it to light three more. With each ascending step in illumination more and more of his sheer size was reveled. The harelip looked merely diminutive by comparison though he still towered before the women. The chamber awoke softly. The Mayor glanced at the women still tense and ready to fight and lose.

“You shall not be harmed here. Dismissed,” he said to the harelip. He backed away compliantly but without speed. Whether he went just beyond the light or fully from the room, Mary couldn’t tell. Nor could she see the perimeter of this room completely, but the sound was carrying like it wasn’t too large.

The women eased slightly at the promise, but not much. Mary adjusted her footing, Crys cracked the knuckles of her right hand with the thumb.

The Mayor wore the darkness like a cloak, always standing so it clung over his shoulders and up his thick neck. The man had to be over 6 feet, Mary reasoned, with the musculature of a heavy weight boxer. The dark laced in sharply under his cheek bones and jaw.

“Mary, Mary, Mary. I do remember you. Scared little thing sleeping amongst the refuse. A little burnt grain of wheat in the chaff,” the Mayor said smiling with pleasure at his poetry.

“I’m honored,” Mary said dully. “What is it you’d have Jean know?”

“I have something to show you. A clue perhaps in whatever heaven-sent distraction Jean’s got you running on,” he said with a dismissive wave of his meaty hand. Then he paused to reckon the women. He looked them deeply in the face and then down their bodies, surveying the substance of what was before him. They found it unsettling and violating to be lick over by the Mayors assessing gaze. Mary forced herself to be still and bear it, but Crys squirmed when he got to her. When he’d seen all he wanted he turned away again to hear himself talk.

“You know she’s run through many before you. Wears them down past the nubs they began as, then they leave. By box or fox, they are called away. Usually both,” he laughed like railroad spikes falling to the ground.

“I keep my soldiers. Keep them well.” He grinned into the darkness and Mary knew the black ring surrounding them was not empty.

He returned his attention to the women with oppressive intensity and a broad smile, “Would you like to be kept well?”



Mary saw hunger in his eyes. It was not the hunger of destruction or consumption, but the grasping hunger of a collector. The look of a menagerie keeper, where be it animals or persons the pleasure is in the hoard – the broken spirited orbiting hoard. Mary saw living things fenced and chained by psychological means behind his smile.

Mary felt Crys' body relax slightly at the handsome Mayor's offer.

"We keep ourselves well, Mayor, thank you," Mary said hoping to add some distance with politeness.

"Huh, I doubt it." He let out a disgusted puff of a grunt but accepted. He was nothing if not a respecter of property rights though temptation sometimes pulled against the principle. The interview was growing tiring and unproductive for him.

He lifted a muscled arm. The massive bicep and striations of his forearm were accentuated by the sharp contrast of the shadows and golden candlelight. Even Mary was distracted for a slip of a second by this zenith of the masculine form. But she caught herself, annoyed, and returned her eyes to his face.

"Church here will show you what we've found and then deposit you at the surface," the Mayor said concluding the interview.

The split harelip stepped forward into the circle of candlelight. He regarded the task as completely beneath him. Scorn for the pair of whores tripped violently from his dirty mud-colored eyes.

"Send Jean my warmest regards," the Mayor said, "and know you are always welcome in the Underneath." He looked them over one last time while dragging the back of his fingernails along his jaw line. Then he was gone, swallowed by the dark.

Mary shifted her weight and tried to ignore feeling Crys' disappointment at the Mayor's departure.

"Come," Church growled.

Mary and Crys clicked back on their flashlights and followed him. As they progressed they saw that the area they had been in was a type of atrium to a much larger room. They walked past rolls of sleeping bags and what seemed like soldiers' private spaces lining a near wall. The concrete ceiling here was much lower than in the room with the Mayor. Church had to slump to avoid scraping his head, but the women could walk upright.

The ceiling continued to slope and now all three of them were bent over at the waist to avoid it. Then Church entered what looked like a crack in the wall at the very end of the long room. They followed and the ground became suddenly sandy and much more uneven than in the pipes. They were now in the natural earth. Mary's sense of direction was unreliable without the sun and mountains. Whether they were outside the city or more deeply under it she could not discern. But the path before them had been made by the earth herself and not any man. It made her feel more at ease to be back in a natural space although the back of Church's grease jacket, in the occasional moments when flicked into view disturbed her peace.

Crys followed on, the Mayor's smile and muscled features lighting her spirits in the dark. *Was the dark that bad? She wondered. I bet you get used to it. Look I already am. I like the cool chill and not having to see everything. To be protected from the awful sun and the damn wind that never stops and the heat...* Crys' thoughts ran in dangerous veins as the silent journey stretched on.

The path before them narrowed again and they had to turn to their side to traverse it. The rock walls seemed as if to grab at their faces and clothes, marking them with wet silt. Church was closer now and Mary hoped that meant they were nearing their destination. His temper didn't seem to have improved with the hour's walk. When the pocket of his coat caught on a small outcropping he ripped it free with a grunt of injustice and more than necessary force.

Finally he stopped and said, "Here." And flicked his head toward an extremely narrow slit in the rock.

"I can't fit that," Mary said after looking through the crevice. It was a little wider at the bottom but not enough for her to crawl through. It wasn't even a smooth crevice. The walls of both sides hung like the narrowest of longitudes with blades of rock reaching out in a frozen attack. To articulate the pass would mean threading herself amongst and around these sharp arms. None of which was in Mary's realm of possibility.

"She can't. You can," he took her roughly by the shoulders and shoved her sideways into the slot.

Her cold dis-ease spiked to panic in the confined space and she froze in it. She forgot completely how to move for a long second. It was long enough though for Church place the muddy sole of his shoe on the side of her rib cage and slowly wedge her around the first outcropping. Then he lowered his shoe to her hips and forced them past another, wedging them with his strength into place.

Mary was stunned for a moment longer. Her claustrophobia now flooding her mind like a diluvial myth. The pain from her hips, the flesh and muscle having been forced to move around the rock ached and the bruised muscles didn't want to work for her. Church took hold

of her face and articulated it to the proper angles to get past the tight space around it. The rock cut wide and shallow scrapes along her cheeks and temples. She felt them heat up as blood rushed to the area.

Mary suddenly became aware of Crys. She was beating on Church's back yelling things Mary's mind wouldn't make out. The freezing wave was thawing and Mary became horribly hot and broke out into a sweat. She tried to move her body back to the wider area where Church and Crys were fighting but she could not. Every limb and body part pushed against a solid surface. She was stuck.

Church turned to Crys and placed a hand on the upper part of her chest. He pushed her against a wall.

"Stop," he said as she swore and clawed at his arm.

"Stop!" he said again, louder. His deep commanding voice caused her to quiet but still her teeth clenched and she strained against him.

"Alright whore, you cannot get out by going back. You have to go forward," Church said to Mary.

She knew he was right. There was open space in the air ahead, but her face was turned back toward Crys and Church. There was no room to turn it. And while her arms could feel some freedom of motion further into the slot, her rib cage was stuck and there was no moving it.

"You must breathe out completely and you'll be able to go on," Church released Crys and she closed the distance enough to kick him in the shin. It smarted and he backhanded her.

“This little whore won’t fit. We’ll meet you on the other side,” then he shoved Crys back down the passage they had come.

Mary was left wedged in the crevice with nothing but undulating waves of panic for company. The rational and thinking part of her brain knew forward was the only option, but that part was not in control right now. She felt a full panic rise up within her. When it licked a cold swipe of perspiration across her forehead she knew she wouldn’t be able to stop it. Her only goal now was to not pass out and keep ahold of the flashlight.

She heard herself cry out, felt the muscles strain and push chaotically against the unyielding jagged sides of her tomb. In her panic she tried to go the same direction her face was pointed but this was a useless endeavor. As soon as she felt the panic’s pinnacle pass she began forcing her breathing to obey her. Then she went through her body and relaxed every muscle group by conscious force. After a few minutes she regained control.

Mary took a deep breath in, at least as deep as the confinement would allow and then pushed the whole breath out. As her rib cage shrunk in diameter she pushed herself further into the wedge.

There was the sharp coldness of a more serious cut across her face, but she didn’t give it notice. She was wringing the last slips of breath from herself and moving forward. She got to the end, the very bottom of her lungs. There was nothing left to force out and reflex tried to bring a new breath in. A new panic gripped her when her ribs could not expand more than a centimeter for the air. She tried to just fill the upper chambers of her lungs, hoping there was space in that area. There was not. And to go forward she had to squeeze out what very little she had taken in. Her last thought before the black sparkles invaded her vision was annoyance

at such a pointless death. With that and her mind falling away without its tether of oxygen Mary gave the last push of a dying animal.

She fell through. The hard ground caught her frame without warmth but with a loving abundance of space. Her ribs heaved like a puppy's whose just been rescued from the bucket. They sucked in life and a clawing return to homeostasis.

Her breathing slowed and she lay in relief, collapsed and sprawled on the dusty floor. She had no interest in her surroundings except that it held life and air and space. Then the loose beam of the flashlight caught something that caused her spine to stiffen. She rolled from her back to her feet in a swift feline move.

She found herself in a small but high chamber. It had a heavy feeling of past occupation like a childhood home does even when it's been emptied and sold. The room didn't contain many things but it did have well-worn paths on the dusty floor, the goat trails of pacing. She was hypersensitive to the space, more so than she had been since entering the Underneath. She used her flashlight to scan the perimeter and surfaces of the room.

The flashlight halted stiffly on an exhibit. Its unambitious beam had found a row of thick nails driven into the wall at eye level. They began very near to where Mary was standing and wrapped a half circumference of the room. A least 12 nails had been driven into the rock and something was laid over the exposed head of each. Mary stepped forward to examine though some part of her already knew what it was. An electric current of stress and knowing ran the length of her legs.

It was some kind of dried and leathery muscle. But all were about the same size and shape. Mary inspected the first nearest her at the beginning of the row. It was black and held

stiffly to the shape it had dried in. As Mary went down the row it became clear that they were all the same thing, but she didn't know what it was. More details emerged as she proceeded. The things became more fresh and less dried as she seemed to move in an advancing chronology. They were all same small fleshy sack that looked a bit like a boneless and skinned bat. The only difference was the stage of dehydration. The ones closest to the entry were older. Those at the end of the row were fresher, with the very last being still bloody.

Mary took slow steps along the row trying to figure out what part of the body they were. She recognized the shape only finally at the end with the fresh ones. They were wombs, surgically extracted uteruses. Her ribs seemed to petrify in her chest with the realization. She walked the row again, this time descending from the newest to the oldest specimens. Some had the ovaries still attached, some didn't. One looked rather diseased, but it was clear they all were the same thing. Mary ascended the row again. She walked past the women until she reached the present day. The limp freshest one had some fluid drips caking the dust under it.

Mary turned her head and the flashlight to the opposite wall, searching for a quick sensory escape. But instead of relief, she found a horror of beauty and intimacy - a portrait sculpted in a relief-style into the wall of her exact likeness. Her body stiffened. Suddenly the room felt small and she could only smell the blood of the freshest womb. It filled her lungs with the odors of rot and iron. She took a step toward her chiseled self.

It was clearly and exactly her. She saw her own lips and brow, her hair flowed down and framed her face. Mary had never seen herself so beautiful. She felt disturbed and disgusted and awestruck all at once and then in turns. Then she was frightened. Her mind got confused lost its grounding. Was she the woman frozen in the rock looking at herself living? Or was she living

and looking at herself etched in the rock? She reached out to touch it, hoping that would help solve the mystery but was interrupted.

“Hey. You done yet?” It was Church. His voice was coming through a hole in the floor near the wall.

“Mary?” Crys’ voice rang through.

“I’m done.” Mary said and walked over to the hole.

“Come through,” Church ordered.

“How about you fuck yourself, Church.” Mary said having decided to hate this man and delight in his every misfortune as long as she drew breath. She walked over to the exit.

The hole was wide enough for her body but when she shined the flashlight through its opening she could see it was well above Crys and Church’s heads. She would have to fall some distance.

“Come,” the order came again.

Mary took a last scan of the room, trying to avoid the portrait, and lowered herself into the hole.

It was a short passage, barely the length of her body. She scuttled down it like Santa or a chimney sweep and then braced herself at the bottom mouth. Crys and Church were at least 15 feet below her.

“Just jump,” Church said at her hesitation, “fall to your side when you hit.”

Mary put the flashlight in her mouth and lowered her body as much as possible through the opening. She was dangling by a pair of steady hand grips when she decided not to fall. The view from her lateral hang gave her an appreciation for the surface of the ceiling in this new



room. It was pocked with uneven water erosion creating a very convenient landscape of hand and foot holds.

Mary kicked off her shoes as she hung and then swung her feet up to the ceiling's surface. Crys smiled watching Mary's lithe frame cling and swing upside down along the surface of the ceiling. She reached the wall and then easily descended.

Crys brought her shoes over. She pulled the laces to undo the knots before handing them to Mary. Crys face had the loose tension of relieved exasperation and a darkening bruise across the cheek from the backhand. Mary saw it and remembered Church with a seething hatred. However, the path back to the surface was still unknown so the feeling had to be damned up and wait its turn.

Church was disappointed and rather disgusted. For one she hadn't died on attempting to escape his wedging maneuver and secondly she hadn't broken an ankle falling from the hole in the ceiling. He had been so looking forward to her whimpering and dragging her foot in pain on the way back to the surface. He accepted the defeat without acknowledging her skill like all sore losers. He grunted to indicate the next tunnel.

This last leg of the journey was the shortest. It was perhaps only a half mile by Mary's reckoning. They didn't realize how near they were to the surface because the night had robbed the sewers of a twilight zone. Church gave a final grunt and flicked his hand in the direction of the exit. There was a wonderful relief when the harelip finally removed himself from their company.

The desert night welcomed them home and soothed their tired nerves on the long trek back to the car. The exit was different from their entrance and quite a distance from the car.

But the night was cool. The air was fresh, even with its low notes from the dump. They could see the sky and her blanketing eternities. Peace and relief were the only feelings for a blessed quarter mile.

But once accustomed, the mind will return to her problems. Mary's thoughts began to spin around the portrait from the cave. She felt seen and naked and known all at once. The naked feeling wasn't new, but usually that was worn as a kind of mask. Her body to many made her an object and as such unknown and unseen as a person. So her soul could retreat and hide behind that small and terrible gift. But with the chiseled image, it was as if someone had taken an artist's rubbing of the contours of her soul. Danger, exposure, a cruel violation of the most intimate of privacies. He had known her in creating that likeness. When she thought on it an acid ripple gained steam through her deepest being and left nowhere to recoil.

## Chapter

The early morning found Mary in the trailer's bathroom with a pair of scissors. Her chestnut hair fell to the floor in clumps as the veil of a jilted bride. Mary's untrained and emotional hand left some areas much shorter than others. The lengths varied from about a quarter inch to an inch and a half depending on how good her view in the mirror had been. There was only one terribly bald spot in the back by her crown where, because of the mirror's mirrored reflection, she'd tilted the scissors opposite her wish. The effect was startling. Mary smiled at not knowing herself in the mirror. She smiled for not seeing the cave portrait looking back at her.

Crys saw her leave the bathroom and couldn't help but stare. Mary had been one thing and was now another. Crys' eyebrows lifted to a great height of merciful shock. She covered the bottom half of her face with a slack hand to be polite.

Mary took a seat with a steaming cup of coffee. Jean was off in her head analyzing the new information from their report.

Crys said in a low and tender way, "Hey Mare." Not really knowing what to say.

"That's not going to work, sweetheart," Jean said assessing the young woman. Mary's eyes were bigger and more expressive now for the lack of hair.

"Why not?" Mary asked.

"He knows you now. If he were blind he'd know you in a crowd," Jean answered. She got up and left the room.

Mary wasn't so worried about that, she merely couldn't bear to look like anything she'd seen in the cave.

Jean came out of the bedroom having donned work clothes. Then she went to the kitchen and got a knife.

"Come," she said, pointing the knife in the direction of the door.

They walked out to the herd. "Pick one," Jean said.

"For what?" Mary said looking at the knife.

Jean just looked at her.

"Why?" Mary asked.

"He won't know you. Pick one."

Mary walked over to an old goat. He was slow and kind and past his prime.

"This." Mary decided.

"No. Pick a good one."

"He's good."

"Come on, you're dragging this out. Just pick the best one."

"Not the best, Jean." The rims of her eyes reddened. "You pick."

"No, you must."

"I don't want to."

"I know. Pick the one that chooses itself."

Mary walked through the herd. An all white billy came and licked her hand. It nosed her palm over its head. Mary glanced at Jean. Jean took the animal by the horn and led it to the hanging shed.

"Come," Jean said over her shoulder to Mary.

"I don't think I need to do this," Mary said after Jean had explained how to slaughter the animal. Jean petted the white goat.

Jean smoothed the goat's back, combed his beard with her calloused fingers. "Don't think too much about it. He's livestock. He exists only for our purposes."

"I don't want to do it," Mary said.

"I know." Jean held the flat of a knife between her fingertips and extended the handle to Mary.

Mary killed the animal and left the hanging shed shaking. Her lips unable to hold themselves together. Jean and Crys did the butchering.

Jean took a hunk of meat and went back to the house to start it roasting. It cooked for hours and filled the home with a rich fatty heavy smell that would have reminded most people of holidays. Neither of the women had such warm memories to return to them. The smell was thick. Mary found it oppressive when she came in from work and opened some windows.

Jean served Mary a plate of potatoes that had been cooked with the meat and several pieces of the roast. Mary tried a bite.

"I think it's bad. I don't want it." Mary said like a child.

Jean smiled, "Its not bad. Eat it. Every day until this is done. It will cover him feeling you, at least in a crowd."

Mary lifted a small bite aloft with her fork to inspect it. She sneered a bit, trying to see what was so offensive about the meat.

"The stuff in the cave. Its more than I knew about. Why is he doing this?" Mary asked.

"Most evil's pretty simple. This one is no different," Jean said between bites. "What do you think?"

"He's hunting and collecting," Crys offered.

"No, hunters like to hunt," Mary said.

"Go on," Jean said.

"He's studying, he's like trying to learn. He's not really a hunter. He's like a scientist or something." Mary sat thinking about what she'd said.

"What is he studying?" Jean asked.

"Women?" Crys said.

Jean nodded many shallow times with the corners of her mouth pulled down.

“Women.” Mary repeated while tapping her lip with an outer tine of her fork.

“If he’s just studying, why doesn’t he just possess a woman? Have his way with her, from the inside out,” Crys was chilled upon hearing her suggestion out loud.

“That does happen sometimes, most women are still in touch with their enmity. I’m sure that makes it difficult for him and it’s not to his purpose anyway. You can’t observe a thing by being inside of it. And I’m guessing he’s not real interested in the thoughts of women, more their... composition,” Jean said with a cold tilt of her head.

“What’s enmity?” Crys asked.

“Hatred. Hatred of evil, one of woman’s first gifts. But it goes both ways. Evil has enmity towards woman. It’s caused some problems,” Jean acknowledged. Crys and Mary pondered this for some silent moments of chewing.

“Seems like something we could use,” Mary said.

“We are. That’s why you’re here,” Jean said putting pepper on her next layer of potato.

“I don’t get how we solve this, Jean. He’s smarter-,” Mary started.

“Intelligence without morality is merely thin ice, its lot of words and doings unhinged to reality and humanity. It’s a lonely place,” Jean said.

“We don’t even know what he’s going to look like ever-,” Crys said.

“Mary knows. She sees him,” Jean said.

“And he sees her!” Crys said, getting frustrated.

“Not anymore,” Jean said looking at Mary’s plate, “eat.”

Mary took a bite without thinking.

“There’s millions of women and girls in that town. There’s no chance.” Crys was defeated.

“He’s only going after the weak. The ones who will sell themselves. The ones he doesn’t really have to work to get close to,” Jean assessed.

“There’s plenty of that,” Crys said.

“Yeah,” Jean said a bit absently.

Crys found hopelessness in the pause and went out to the goats. She had an unfortunate survival instinct to follow the person with the plan. She didn’t enjoy these war-gaming conversations. They felt weak and indecisive. The fact escaped her that even the most confident person with a plan must do this too, if only internally. For all her wrath, the powder keg that thumped within her breast, Crys liked to be told what to do. She enjoyed participation in the execution, not the planning. She was the muscle and did not like being involved in other stages of the game.

In her discomfort she messed about in the sheds for a bit but her mood robbed her of physical labor’s gift of peace. There was a rocky hill in the center of the property. The wind always likes to be more aggressive on summits, so all the branches of the resident desert shrubs yield and bend one direction at the top of it. All mankind yearns for high ground when confused or submerged. She set down her shovel and ascended, deferring to a serpentine goat path because they probably knew the way better than she.

Crys ambled, kicking up sand and dragging her feet for pleasure. Her hands were stiff hard fists in her pockets, the arms rigid and straight. Because her head was bowed the whole time she reached the top before knowing it. When the incline underfoot became flat she

stopped and looked up. The vastness of the valley spread before her. She could see at least a hundred miles before the horizon's mountain range stopped her view. The greatness, the blue of the sky, and the brown of the earth, and the punching wind all worked together on her. The spread of the world before her made her feel small and relaxed her shoulders. Her fist unbound and came out of the pockets. She sat down for shelter from the wind.

In the lowness to the earth she heard a cry that had been muffled by the wind at her full height. It was weak and broken. She lost the sound when she stood but crouching brought it back. It was the bleat of a lost kid. It must have wandered recently for Jean was very attentive to the numbers of her herd.

The little thing was trapped in a smattering of loose rock and couldn't get its footing. Crys lifted it and carried it down the hill. During the descent she thought of Max. After returning the kid to its mother she left the ranch to visit her friend.

## Chapter

Crys pulled into the decaying motel. The correct room was easy to find in the afternoon light. Max was sitting on the bed watching cartoons with four little girls cuddled around her. She smiled warmly and rose with a pained slowness at seeing Crys. The little girls reformed the huddle after she got up. There was a chair near a mirror next to the bathroom door. Crys slid her back down the wall and sat on the floor. She kicked the chair out for Max to sit.

Max lowered herself into the seat at a tender clip. Crys watched her brace herself on the chair's arms.

"You're not working, are you?" Crys asked.



"Well, this beautiful home doesn't pay for itself," Max smiled.

"I'll give you money. You shouldn't be working," Crys said.

"Oh, I'm not doing much. I've got enough regulars and freaks and savings to cover us for a bit," Max said.

"I thought you didn't do freaks?" Crys asked.

"I didn't, but it's really not bad. Better, easier really. Some guy wants me to watch him suck on my soaked tampon," she nodded, "Yes, I will let you pay me for that. And they pay top too. Should have gotten into it before." She laughed and added, "I will let you gizz all over my feet in fishnets for \$100. Yes, yes, I will."

"\$100, really?" Crys said.

"Oh yeah. And I don't hardly have to do a damn thing, except make them feel like I don't care and its fine and normal. Yeah, I like it a lot better. I don't see having to get on my back again for a while," her eyes grew a bit at catching herself in the hopeful prophecy and she added, "knock on wood," with a laugh to apologize for challenging fate. She finished the apology with a quick rap of a knuckle on the faux marble vanity.

"I think it has to be wood," Crys said.

Max smiled, though not embarrassed by the superstition, and rapped on the arm of the chair.

"Mary get out?" Max asked.

"Yeah, yesterday, I think."

"She okay?"

"Well... she's herself, so I guess," Crys said.

"I hope she's alright," Max said, her brow bent to worry. There was not one fold or crease in her young face. Emotion could merely be read by changes in the angles of her brow and mouth. Only the facial muscles betray the feelings of youth, not the lines and wear of experience.

"Why? She nearly got your ass killed."

"She saved my life. What are you talking about?" Max said.

"You wouldn't have been there. She used you as bait and didn't even care," Max said.

"Ha. Didn't care," Max repeated.

"She didn't tell you how bad it could get. She didn't let you make a real choice. Fucking arrogant and played with your life," Crys said, her teeth tight.

"Eh," Max waved a hand dismissively.

"Are you kidding me? You'd of died, Max."

Max sighed and assessed Crys who was near brimming over with disgust at Mary's actions. "You know Mary came here first, when she first got to the city. I was one of them," Max lifted her eyebrows and tilted her head in the direction of the heap of girls on the bed, "and everyone worked, Leela was in charge. She the littles were her game. Mary came in and could only stand it for like a week, the little girls being sold like that. Leela and her got into it. It looked like Leela won out because Mary'd taken off. But then she came back and did her in."

"Leela's face? That was Mary?" Crys said.

"Oh yeah," Max was smiling with pride. "Leela said, 'You're stealing my property, them girls belong to me.' And Mary goes, 'Let me show you what stealing property looks like' and

then fucked up her face with a little pocketknife. Ha!” Max was chuckling, still impressed by the memory. Crys laughed and scratched behind an ear.

Max leaned forward to rest her head in her hands, but thought better of it when her abdomen seared at the bending. Crys met her eyes.

“I’d jump off a bridge if Mary said it’d help her in some way,” Max said.

“That’s what I mean. And I know she did a good turn for you, that. But still, she took advantage of your loyalty, your friendship. She abused her place.”

“It’s every mother’s right,” Max shrugged. “And every mother will use her kids to make herself better. It’s just natural. They must grow you. The best mothers get far with it, and the worst. Well, everyone knows how they turn out. Its just the way things are, Crys. You’re mad at the sun for rising.”

“You were gonna be murdered, Max,” Crys said.

“We’re all gonna die,” Max said.

“What about them? What would have happened to them?” Max asked.

“You or Mary, whoever was left. Or else they’d enter the world a little early. I mean, they already have. They’re not here cuz I born ‘em.” Max saw Crys’ face getting close to understanding behind a cloud of troubled confusion.

“Where they from?” Crys looked over at the girls on the bed.

“Oh, they’re just the unwanted. Run away from foster homes, kids of users, orphans. The weakest.” The women looked at the girls for a moment longer, seeing their former selves among them.

"It's just life Crys, it's fine. There's hell and there's heaven and everybody's going to get a little or a lot more of one than they deserve. It's fine. Don't hold it against Mary," Max said.

"Mmm, I dunno," Crys stood and shook her head. This philosophy was much more disturbing than she had initially recognized. Understanding retreated under a cover of unfamiliar fog. Thoughtlessly Crys opened her wallet. She pulled out a twenty and then put it back. Then she took out everything she had and set it on the faux marble counter.

"I'll be seein' ya Max. Lay low, take care girl." Crys said absently as she walked out.

Crys drove around the city not hitting any particular landmarks. She just drove until a turn seemed right and then drove some more. Her thoughts came in fits and starts and then would fade into a relaxing nothingness. And her thoughts were more waves of feeling than thoughts. Her volatile nature and lack of nurturing left her without an emotional vocabulary. Without such tools she could never trod too far down the paths of self-analysis. She hated and loved Mary. She was disappointed in and trusted her completely. She was impressed and horrified by Mary's decisions. It was an uncomfortable place to be especially without the ability to parse it all out.

A well-worn tune of survival led her out of this discomfort, if only by giving her a simpler thing to chew on. Crys was a follower and would only lead in a vacuum. Even then she didn't really lead, but mostly floated about aimlessly. Like most people she preferred to bet on racehorses and not actually be one. Everyone is loyal until too many races end without success. Her thoughts now went to assessing Mary as a horse and if backing her was a wise stroke after all.

The city didn't much exist to her notice, but with the frequent turns she stayed within its decaying heart. The daylight wasted as she thought and didn't think in turns. But what finally caught her attention was the low-fuel light blinking on and gas indicator pointing directly at the red line.

*Shit.* There was certainly not enough gas to get back to Jean's and she had given all her money to Max. The city became much smaller. She looked now to see where she was. Papered store fronts and sidewalks dotted with huddles of homelessness brought to her the familiar anxious feeling of home. The gas indicator dropped lower still and now was pointing to the bottom edge of the red line.

She looked quickly for a safeish spot to park. Running out of gas on the side of the road not only meant being stranded but also being relieved of the burdens of car ownership in rapid succession. She found a well-lit parking lot and tried to balance distance from the store front with likelihood of being towed. This calculation landed her next to a rusty broken shopping cart corral under a bright streetlight. Another decision had been made: luminous protection for the car over a dark corner's protection for her criminality.

Crys slid over the armrest to the back seat and removed the box from its hidden location. She took out the only thing in her possession worth any money, the handgun. This she tucked a little too expertly in the waist of her jeans, replaced the box and exited the car into the fast-falling city night.

She walked purposely, as one must in such environments, but her eyes flicked over the faces of everyone in sight looking for the men of business, not the hopeless or the cattle drivers. After walking a mile the population grew a bit denser with its nearness to the Row. She

saw several potential candidates but was holding out for a familiar face. When one is forced into business by desperation fewer uncalculated risks are welcome. There were two or three people she knew would have an interest and could be trusted not to sour the deal with liberties.

A familiar face did catch her eye, but not one from her short list. A man with his upper lip split to a nostril. He had fed a ring through the hole in each corner of the flaps and this served to keep them from articulating too separately as they had in the Underneath. Crys thought the shiny brace becoming. She crossed the street to him. He saw her coming toward and turned to face her.

“One of the little whores,” he said amused by her impertinence in approaching him.

“I like the ring,” Crys said. Then, on an impulse, she closed the gap between them and without touching his lips with her own, fed her tongue through the hoop. With a measured graceful movement she eased her tongue up through the slit and curled it around the ring forming a little hook as she hinged her jaw up. She pulled his lip away gently from his face with the curve of her tongue. Then she let it go before it was too taut and heard the soft click of metal hit his teeth before returning to proper conversational distance.

“I have a thing to sell, you or the Mayor interested?” she asked before he had recovered. He composed himself with respectable rapidity, but Crys was quite proud of the flush that remained under his dirty cheeks. The color made him almost handsome.

“I don’t pay for what you sell,” he said, his pebble eyes fixed and slightly dilated.

“You do look the robber, but no. This-,” she said lifting her shirt enough to show the handle and then dropping the thin fabric over it. “I need to shift it.”

His eyes flicked to the gun and then back to her face.

“He said if I came across you or the other to invite you back,” One half of his lip curled, pulling via the ring at the other. “As a guest.”

“I don’t need a dinner party, I need some flow,” Crys said looking away and surveying the crowd.

“I’ll take it off you, if you come,” he said in a voice that brought her attention back. His awkward lisping voice was all self-control and calm now that he’d dropped the disgusted edge. Crys was surprised by the change, impulsive actions never consider consequences. There was a feeling of safety in this change of mood towards her. The change which she had catalyzed out of thin air. But a man’s interest can only give safety if his character and the appetites lean that way. Crys was pulled by instinct and the unseen tides of her feeling to the one without assessing the other.

How the fearful will flock behind anyone, so frightening are the open spaces. Gratefully they leap into the den of a lion just to escape the gentle rain. In this moment with swirling feelings toward Mary that refused to alight and a demon project that was certain to make her a cold and blue corpse, the Mayor and his kingdom sounded rather inviting. There was also this ugly creature before her, suddenly tamed and drained of his acrid demeanor. The sensation of having brought about such a change is as warming as brandy. So finally, everything was starting to smell like an escape hatch. One given by the heavens, an old boyfriend’s gun, and an empty tank of gas. All rivers flow down and out, and the down and out go with them.

“Okay,” she said squinting suspicion at him. She wasn’t so stupid as to not at least feign concern.

He tried not to smile by tucking his lower lip over his teeth. But then he blinked a little too quickly and gave himself away. He turned his back to her and cut through the crowd as if it didn't exist. Like the crowd was composed of objects and not persons. Crys followed closely to keep in his wake. The walk eased her troubles from her. For this brief moment, shielded by him and his body, she was not the one up against the world. All the people pushing around them with their directions and purposes did not matter at all. It didn't even get near her. The world broke on his chest and face, not hers. She felt a rest and rightness to that order of things. She drew as near she could, even touched her hand to his back lightly for a tender moment. Humans do err so when they fail to integrate reality into instinct.

They left the crowd by turning down a narrow alley between buildings. Church lifted a grate and disappeared down the opening. Crys followed. Very suddenly she was in the cruel twilight of the Underneath not quite aware of how her choices had led her there. The oppression of the damp, ungenerous light and the tight cement paths engulfed her. An instinct rose to fight against it, to run. But other instincts won out.

She stood still with her eyes riding waves of confusion, trying to feel her way to the most firm ground. However, she was interrupted a bit too prematurely for reason and sense to have its way, by Church's large hand under her coat and on her waist. His eyes caught hers and if riveting can be done on the steel track between looks it was here and now. Women can take the looks of control and lust and somehow creatively craft a visage strength and safety of it. No wonder they've been condemned as witches so many times over.

"This way," he directed her with pressure from his fingers and palm. He felt a fresh surge of desire at how pliable she proved.



On Crys' end, she had yielded so easily because her body wanted to. She lay back in the river's current and let it take her. There may come a time to swim, but why sacrifice the pleasures of effortless movement so soon?

Church had her lead out but directed her movements from her waist. He let her slow down so she would brush against him. He smelled her hair. Time and distance from the real world trickled away from them underfoot. The twilight was gone and blackness encircled. Church used no light. In the dark dullness of the trek his imagination grew thirsty and bold.

As gently as any limb of his was capable of he touched the side of her neck by the ear. She slowed and turned her head to let him. He ran his fingertips over the thin skin and narrowness that is a woman's neck. He felt the tendons and trachea so exposed, so weak. He began directing her from there, from his large hand wrapped around the back of her neck. She yielded to this too and responded quickly to any pressure.

They finally reached the Mayor in a low-lit chamber.

"What a pleasure. Welcome back," the Mayor said with a flat voice, not turning to look at her. Church stood in the shadows beyond the weak candlelight.

"What can I do for you?" he said, impatience already dripping.

"Looking for a buyer for this," she lifted her shirt to find the gun was not there. Church stepped forward and placed it on a small table.

"Is it clean?" the Mayor asked.

"Very, nothing on it," she answered.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"My ex had a contact at a manufacturer. Its clean. No serial even," she said.

He lifted the weapon to inspect. While looking, he said, "Have your lot made any progress on the nuisance?"

Crys had to shuffle in her mind to find what he was talking about. In the gap he said, "Dead whores don't usually rise to the level of my notice but he is camping in lands that belong to me." He made a sharp noise as he breathed in and replaced the gun on the table. He paced a moment to finalize his decisions.

"I'll give you a grand for the gun and Church will assist with bringing about a successful outcome."

"I don't know if Mary and Jean..." Crys started.

"Jean knows how to play nice and get what she wants. But tell Mary if she kills him I'll cut off her pretty little head."

"And yours," he added, remembering how unprotective Mary was of her own skin.

"Why don't you just kill the guy next time he's down here?" Crys said.

"We both know that won't work. Jean's realm, Jean's problem. But I can be a good neighbor."

"Does Jean know?" Crys asked.

"No, you can surprise her," the Mayor grinned. "Church, take her to the surface, help their efforts in any way you can."

"Sir, I don't think the whores need any help. They seem competent enough," he thought of Mary in the tight pass.

The Mayor was suddenly very close to Church, speaking so softly into his ear that Crys couldn't hear. Church stood stock still. While he was talking the Mayor traced the outline of

Church's lips with the blade of a knife. It caught the candlelight becoming a sharp little flame in his hand. Church's eyes stuck to one spot in the darkness beyond the light. After a moment's whisperings the Mayor turned his back on him. Church's face resumed a soldier's vacant obedience. Crys fidgeted with the lint in her pocket. Seeing such an intimate threat made her feel like she had violated a privacy, that she shouldn't be there.

They arrived at Jean's place late that night. Crys went in and Church ducked under the trailer's skirt to sleep next to the earth.

"You brought back that fucking monster?" Mary was incensed. Without her hair she looked about as threatening as a cancer stricken 12-year-old boy. But between her voice and the bearing of lower teeth her message was conveyed.

"Where is it?" Mary asked.

"Sleeping under the trailer," Crys said, letting her body fall onto the couch. "You want him in here?" Crys asked, trying to irritate her.

"I'm worried about the goats. And whatever rodents live under the trailer," Mary said.

"Did you and Jean come up with something?" Crys said.

"No," Mary said.

"What the fuck do you mean, no?" Crys said. She had hoped if she ever returned to the little ranch that fruit would have grown.

"I mean no. It's a difficult situation."

"You mean you're afraid. You're afraid because he knows you now," Crys studied her face as she said it. Mary looked down in agreement.

“Jean says he won’t though. Because of the meat or whatever. What happened to ‘we’re slaves, we gotta do this, dying is fun’?” Crys added.

“You didn’t go into that room, that damn carving thing. I see him working on it when I shut my eyes.” Mary pushed her fingertips onto her shut eyelids.

“So, let’s end this. End it and be done.”

“I think I’d feel better if I just killed Church. What a fucker, I can’t believe you brought him here,” Mary said.

“Umm, no killing Church by the way. Did I not mention that? The Mayor said it won’t go down well for you if you do. Or me.”

“Accidents happen,” Mary said.

“There’s got to be something we can use him for. Seems like a useful kind of guy.”

There was something in her tone that snapped Mary from her homicidal fantasy.

“Crys? No. Hell no. That thing, really?”

“What?”

“I’m surprised you got out of there, honestly. You probably went to defect, didn’t you? And he sent you back?” Mary was so irritated it made her eyelids heavy. She scratched the side of her lip. Crys didn’t really know the answer. Mary returned to the most offensive bit.

“He’s not even fucking human, Crys,” Mary continued.

“He looks like a man to me,” Crys said.

“That should really alarm you. You’re like those people who eat chalk and say ‘well it looks like food to me’. It doesn’t matter if it looks like food or even if it tastes like food. Some part of you should know that it’s fucking chalk!” Mary was yelling.

"He's not chalk," Crys said.

"He's worse than chalk! Oh my god, idiot..." Mary let out an exasperated sigh and then gave up.

"Are you even sure he's here to help?" Mary asked.

"I don't know. That's what the Mayor said. And Church seems too annoyed to have darker purposes."

"All that thing has are dark purposes," Mary said. "Was it that backhand in the Underneath that did it for you? Or just him being so fucking ugly?"

"Jealous?" Crys said. Mary's face broke into a huge smile and hearty laugh.

"You want me to slap you around?" Mary said after she recovered.

"I like men, not boys," Crys answered. Mary felt the cold air on the bald spot.

"You like deformed animals, not men," Mary retorted.

"What you're talking about don't even exist. Not for us at least. Haven't you been rutted enough times to know what a man is?" Crys said thinking about it. "You ever even seen what you're talking about? And if you have seen it, he ain't seen you," she concluded, leaning back in her seat. The women relaxed a bit into the debate.

"I haven't seen a million dollars," said Mary turning pensive with knowing that she was right but that she was also going to lose the argument.

"You ain't talking about a million dollars, hun. A million dollar's just a whole pile of 100's. You're talking about a fucking unicorn," Crys laughed. Mary laughed too at her loss.

"Unicorns might be real," Mary said trying to give up the argument with a comical surrender.

“Oh, I bet they are,” Crys said, her face open and serious. She leaned forward, “No, I really do. I bet there are some. Out there. Somewhere. But unicorns only come to virgins. So, that leaves us out... unless you got a pretty convincing needle and thread,” the women’s laughter warmed the room.

“Still! You gotta find fancy in some monster from the underworld? Come on, talk about low.” Mary had to press her opinion even though her argument had failed.

“A general in the Underneath,” Crys corrected her with some misplaced pride.

“That fucker is sleeping with the rats under us. Right now. Probably got some cockroach nosing through that split lip of his as we speak. You just gonna tongue that later, huh?” Mary said, “And the Mayor doesn’t have generals, by the way. No one takes advice from their pets.”

“Like you haven’t done worse, Mare. Don’t be forgetting what you are just because you smell like a goat now.”

Crys then brought to memory some of Mary’s more interesting and less hygienic jobs. An easy comradery filled the room as Mary accepted the losses and laughed along with Crys at herself.

The cheery energy transitioned to peace as the women slowly reclined further and further to sleeping positions. The discussion had devolved into an insult game. The pair played at jousting wits while in the background familiarity and trust were reinforced. Some shots landed below the belt but the game was rapid fire and one could only lose by getting angry and failing to return a volley. It helped to clear the air. Finally, the atmosphere slowed to a stop. When Mary heard sleep’s deep and regular breathing from Crys she got up and locked the door.

## Chapter

The women stood in the kitchen as if the coffee pot were a hearth and discussed the situation.

“We don’t need him, Jean. Send him back,” Mary said in a low voice.

“Simeon and I are old friends. I cannot return the boy. It was a gesture of good will between our two worlds,” Jean said.

“Not hardly,” Mary said under her breath.

“Simeon? You mean Church?” Crys asked.

Jean’s face was gone in thought. Crys looked to Mary for an answer.

Mary shook her head and said, “the Mayor.”

“Oh. He’s a Simeon,” Crys liked to categorize people by their names. She had created a mental catalogue of personalities with their names as headings. She liked to ponder on the similarities of all the people she knew named David or Sam or Kate. It was effective and gave her some order to the world and the behaviors of the people therein. About as accurate as astrology though a bit more creative because the data base was all her own. She’d even expanded it to people with long names, people who went by nick-names, and those sad souls who have changed their name completely from that first gift at birth. The names common to the different cultures and races she was familiar with also had files and headings.

After a small pause to cross reference her knowledge of Simeons, she remembered his cloak of black and the invitation. His power and the dearly wished for promises of shelter she wrongly assumed it implied. Jean caught her dreamy thoughts on her face.

"You're too in the present. You think power that is always was." Jean filled her cup and walked back to the living room.

As she sat she said, "Can you not hear screams of the past when you look at a man like that? Hear the dead cries of the present?"

"She goes into heat when she looks at a man like that. Makes the ears unreliable," Mary said with a grin and a bounce of her eyebrows at Crys.

Crys rolled her eyes and then flipped her off with a subtle and low gesture in her lap. Mary gave a broad smile.

"Why are you friends with him?" Mary asked.

"We're associates, not friends," Jean replied.

"You said friends," Crys said.

"The blood gets hot when one remembers people as enemies. It's not good for your purpose," Jean said.

"You said associates, not enemies," Crys was getting confused.

"What happens when you pretend enemies are associates are friends?" Mary asked.

"He's not an enemy. Ha, we've got the deaf and the blind here. You two make a pair," Jean chuckled at them. "Get the boy some food, bring him in here."

"You mean Mary or Church?" Crys asked.

Mary stood and said in an immovable voice, "He is not coming in here."

"Be flex, you show your hand so willingly, girl," Jean said addressing Mary's tone.

"I have nothing to hide. That creature does not enter where I sleep." Her voice did not loosen.



“You should have something to hide. Such blatant fear,” Jean turned her head and then drove a piercing look right at Mary, “hide it.”

“He’s filth. He’ll ruin the air and I won’t be able to sleep.”

“You don’t sleep anyway,” Crys said.

Mary took a small but firm step forward, “He doesn’t come in.”

Jean stood to dress, “Drive your fear where it can do something useful. Crys, take the boy some food.”

The morning light, bright and hopeful, made Church look worse than he had in the darkness of the Underneath. His skin and eyes seemed to recoil from the sun. He spent most of the day avoiding the directness of it, working in scraps of shade or the shed. He submitted to Jean’s direction without thought or feeling because he’d been instructed to behave as such. But he was ill-fit for labor. There was a clumsiness that stemmed from a detachment to the things around him. The innate connection of man to earth had been severed, at least with this stratum of earth. A man who’s found himself, no matter how dark and deep he ends up, will become rigid with the conclusion and quit looking.

The word came down from Jean that the demon would be at work that night.

“I know he’s breaking their laws. He shouldn’t be acting so out of order. But because he’s rogue, they need to deal with him not us. We’ll have to tell hell. Tell them to come get him. He’s disrupting the order of things and needs to be put back by his own.”

“How are we going to do that?” Mary asked.

“Not here. No, not here.” Jean said.

“But how?”

"I don't want to do it, it's not my place. But this needs to stop."

"Have you worked with hell before?" Mary asked slowly.

Crys added in a pacing cadence, "it seems like a thing to not do. Just, you know, as things to do go."

"They'll come get him. He's driving against their purpose," Jean said.

"Really? Seems like pain and suffering and killing is sorta in that lane," Mary said.

"True, but he's doing it. Their lane is to get people to do it to each other. Not be the actors themselves," Jean answered. She looked at the young women's confused and wary faces. "There's order in evil. There's order in all things."

"We're not really meant to go there though, right? We're not meant to understand that side of things, right?" Crys asked, bumping up against an unseen internal hedge.

"Needs must," Jean said, her face turning to steal.

"But how are you going to get them to come? To take notice?" Mary asked.

"I'll have to communicate without offering an invitation, which will be tricky," Jean said.

"Do they listen to those?" Mary asked.

"Let's hope," Jean said and then looked at Mary whose eyes were squinted and downcast. "He won't recognize you. Don't worry. I need you to get a thing. Out in the desert. Crys, make sure the boy doesn't eat one of my goats. Keep him working. We'll leave for the city when we get back, a couple hours maybe. Come."

## Chapter

“What is it?” Mary asked, nearly having to yell over the force of the afternoon gales. Jean didn’t feel like answering. She felt that communication should never be forced if nature was making it difficult. They hiked to the southwest for about 45 minutes before they were close enough to the mountain range for the wind to lose strength. The great imposition of the rocky bald edifice tamed the blaring wind down to a gentle breeze. Jean finally answered her.

“There’s a relic. I think we’re gonna need it,” Jean said.

They entered a canyon and walked on for another 15 minutes. Jean stopped at the top of a 100-foot splash of loose shale that fell down the side of a steep hill into a ravine’s dry bed. Jean indicated for Mary to descend.

She kept her body at a controlled 45-degree angle with one hand extended to the loose rubble. A sort of half gazelle run half controlled fall, she skied down the rocks. The action’s loud noise perforated the calm desert, offending both Jean and Mary. But it couldn’t be helped. Little avalanches of rock and dust spilled down and up from her point of contact with the fluid terrain. Jean waited, watching from her vantage atop the hill a pair of hawks hunt. They glided with their muscled shoulders in wide tilted circles, following the track of a lazy unseen spiral.

When the noise died down Mary looked up to her. Jean squatted and pointed to a clutch of boulders some 20 feet further down the ravine. Turned her back to begin and was halted by the loud knuckled click of snapping fingers. She looked back. Jean held one hand out before her clenched in a fist to indicate the largest of the boulders. Then with her other hand held flat she made a quick motion that ended under the fist. Then she pointed again to the crop of boulders. Mary nodded understanding.

The 20 feet ahead required an all-fours style of scrambling. These dormant ravine beds never have an even surface or a path meant for footed life. The narrowness and steep sides of the chasm made it a perfect for flash floods. But that was only during the monsoon season, Mary thought. And it was the monsoon season, she realized right after. A further need for haste. She kept her eyes to the ground between the rocks, hyper alert for any indication of moisture.

Jean squatted again, her fingers bent backwards and trust in the sand as a third point of stability. She split her attention between Mary and the hawks and a dark chute of clouds sitting to the south. They generally moved north and east. But the real danger would come from an unseen storm, high on the eastern plateaus and beyond the view of this canyon. And even if she could see it, some of the most violently dark and heavy looking clouds only carried enough rain to shine up the rocks and whet the dormant thirsts of the desert shrubs. But still, Jean saw no virtue in ill-placed hope and chance. The time of year was unfortunate as well. In the winter this would be of no concern. The only warnings of danger she would have would be through sound and feel. The rush of water, a sudden silence of the birds, a tremor in the ground under her fingertips, and those would only give but seconds of lead. She snapped her fingers again and Mary looked back. Then she snapped them twice in quick succession and flicked the back of her hand to communicate urgency to the girl below.

Mary reached the boulders and scaled the largest to get a view of where exactly she was meant to enter. There it was. On the down-stream side she could see a shadow that did not conform to the expected lay of earth underneath. She hopped over the rough rock and grabbed a thorny stick from a dead bush. As she extended the stick through the opening, a familiar

threat greeted it coldly. A rattlesnake was calling this bit of ground hers. But Mary surmised that the creature must be old or sick because as she continued extending the stick the rattle's cadence did not increase in vigor or pace. Mary moved to get a view of the thing. It lay coiled and majestic in a narrow blade of sunlight that fed through the juxtaposed boulders. Mary heard Jean snapping again, though now she was out of sight.

Haste need not make one rash. Here, far tucked away at a great distance from man and his environments, Mary could feel haste's gift of precision. She withdrew and silently discarded the stick opting instead for a different one. One with a slight hook at the end. Knowing there was only one chance and failure meant great inconvenience and possibly death, at least great pain, Mary thought only of what she was going to do and not how to do it or what could go wrong. She thought of what to do not in a hopeful way but with a tight certitude and expectation of her body to execute. Her body knew how to articulate in this world better than she. This was the idea behind scrambling too, not to think about where her feet and hands should go but just to move and expect some part of her brain to take care of that for her. It was this free fall into action which could always be counted on to refresh and relax her mind. The rush of trusting her body and nature to dance together, and the pleasure when it worked out. Which was never a guarantee.

With a gentle motion she slipped the hook of the stick under and as far down the snake as its sun loosened coils would allow. Then when the fanged skull snapped an attack, Mary flung it over her shoulder. If one could reverse the positions of pole vaulter and ground, it looked like that. The dead shells of its rattle brushed her cheek as it went. Jean saw the hawks

descend. Usually, predators are paid more by patience than sheer aggression. A wise hunter leaves room for luck. The size and placement of said room is often an art of its own.

Could have gone a bit more to the side, Mary thought in a quick critique touching the spot on her cheek where it had grazed. Jean whistled a low and slow reminder of urgency, but it wasn't sharp and quick like a warning. Mary dropped down to where the snake had laid, hoping against hope that the old queen had been alone.

While her eyes adjusted to the shadows she listened for any threats. No rattles, no heavy mammalian breathing, just the soft afternoon bird calls echoing down the rocks to her. Once her pupils claimed the needed aperture, she had a look around. The enclosure was rather shallow and there was no indication that it fed to any subterranean channel. Mary gave a short sigh of relief. Then over on the farthest side from her she saw the long straight lines of a man-made shape sticking out from the sandy, rocky ground. A metal box with heavy studs arranged in lines across the top sat partially submerged in the earth. Mary approached it and gave a tug at the lid. A smell of moist sand greeted her efforts and at first she was confused by thinking they were related. But then the danger of the situation fell upon her: flash flood.

The thought of abandoning her purpose was distasteful. But because her eyes weren't helping her much in the low light she had to understand the box's latching mechanism by touch, and quickly. She felt all around the top for a ridge indicating the lid. When there was nothing she dug a bit around the sides until she found it. The lid took up about half of the box. The whole enclave now had the wet fresh smell of water in a desert. Mary heard Jean give a staccato whistle of danger.

Luckily, Mary discovered latch was rather simple. It merely needed to be slid to the side and unhooked. She did this and the hinges gave way despite a grainy protest. The moist smell was now a small stream. Mary had just registered the pooling of cool mountain waters beneath her when a great crash shook her senses.

She was protected from the first slam of flood water by the enclosure. Thankfully the boulders had survived many of these over millennia of their lives in the middle of this ravine. They held strong and unyielding, shielding Mary from the great force. But now the waters rushed in through every gap between the slabs of rock. A couple seconds after the first wave, the water suddenly increased in volume. A massive deluge seen only in this ravine a few times a century rolled over the boulders and encapsulated Mary within.

The sound deafened her. But before it was too late, she gave the inside of the box a quick swipe with her hand clawed. She caught a chain of delicate links, but didn't hardly notice it. She only gripped the thing as tightly as she could and tried to make her way back to the opening of the enclosure.

Freezing mountain water was shoving its way in with a massive force. It was not possible for her to fight this current. There was no way to get out. As the water filled Mary took deep fast breaths to stretch her lungs and prepare for a gamble against nature. The water filled to her chest. In another blink she was under. The water moved as a single rushing thought, thankfully though, broken from the main idea outside her slight bubble of protection beneath the great slabs of rock. She braced herself against it with one open hand gripping and the other a fist on the ceiling. The current within the enclosure gained strength and she shoved her foot

into a crevice an anchor. Death by bludgeoning on the rocks was the only thing that awaited her if she lost her position and the water has its way.

The holds were tight for some short seconds. But then she felt her grip slipping away. In a quick movement she moved the chain from the useless fist to her mouth. With that hand free to grasp another hold she was able to withstand the rushing waters. Once the zenith of force had passed it was only a couple quick seconds before the chamber was empty of water except for a weak trickle at the bottom. Mary hung upside down by her wedged foot for a moment, her shoulders resting on the wet sand but her hips still aloft. She spit out the chain and heaved some reviving breaths. Her ankle articulated and rotated seemingly on its own for all her thoughts were on air and breathing. Her wet foot slipped out of the wedged shoe and her hips fell the last two inches or so to the saturated sand. After a few more breaths she hopped up and dislodged the shoe from the crevice, then scooped down to retrieve the chain without looking.

Mary returned to the daylight and had a tricky go of scaling back up and out of the ravine now that everything was slippery. The surfaces of the rocks shined the desert sun back at her like shards of glass. It was much more difficult to traverse. When she reached the small plateau where she'd parted from Jean she found the old woman squatting still. Mary sat down heavily, tossed the chain in front of Jean and then laid back in the dry dust to sun her wet clothes.

"What took so long? I said be fast," Jean said with only a small edge of disapproval in her tone.



“There was a rattler. It took a minute,” Mary said, her eyes closed and face full of copper afternoon light. Jean flicked an eyebrow, unimpressed by the excuse.

“I saw you playin’ with the snake,” Jean said picking up the chain. Mary opened her eyes a thin slit to look at Jean and then decided to ignore it.

“What’s the thing?” Mary asked. This was the most pleasurable moment she’d had in years. She lay in the full embrace of physical exhaustion and success. Not only that, but the sun baking her and her wet clothes. Peace and pleasure always crystalize under these conditions. She wanted to sleep. She wanted Jean to leave her there to sleep away the sunlight in the dust.

“This,” started Jean, lifting the chain and standing to let it hang to its full length, “has a name that won’t be said. At least by me.”

“It is yours?” Mary asked.

“It belongs to my line.”

“Why is it half buried in a ravine way the hell out here?” Mary asked, but only a small fraction of her was actually interested. The balance of her mind lulled along the path between rest and sleep.

“It is an evil thing. It should not be used but cannot be destroyed.” She let the links gather loosely in a pile on the palm of her hand.

Mary’s interest gathered and kidnapped her from rest. She brought her weight to an elbow and squinted past the sun to see Jean’s face.

“An evil thing?” Mary said.

“Mmm,” Jean nodded. “It’s a bind,” She lowered her seat to the edge of a rock.

“Usually the dark ones, demons, can leave a body at will. They can move. This binds them in. They can’t leave the host at all, even after death they are shackled to the bones. Until foolishness or time remove the chain. You can also use it to transfer them from one body to another. And they can’t kill their host while bound.”

“We’re gonna use that?” Mary asked as child nervous about confirming the obvious.

“We are.” Jean closed her hand around the pile of fine links.

Crys and Church were working in one of the sheds when they got back from the ravine. Crys was talking and heaving muck gracefully while Church avoided the sunlight and handled the shovel poorly.

That evening they landed in the parking lot of a small manufacturing center. After the convenient discovery of an unlocked back door, the foursome slipped into a large warehouse containing all the tools and materials needed to produce something. Machines breathed hard puffed jets of air. Different system lights blinked in the dark sleeping unproductive atmosphere. The whole place felt like an ICU without the people. The quartet wound their way noiselessly through the paths between the great bodies of the machines. Some performed unsupervised nocturnal operations. The hinges of robotic arms lurched with graceless mathematical precision. A couple were fully alive and working in the low red emergency light. Mary felt the inhumanness and was bothered by the precise groping unseeing work. There was sympathy for the machines working conditions, which she pushed away as confused folly. But her mind had trouble with and found foreign this lifeless work. She didn’t like it, especially in the dark.

Machines that breathed and blinked and worked in the night yet didn't have life. Mary's mind was too simple for the complex creations of man. To her the feeling was much like being in a dead zoo where the animals still moved but without the sad beauty of creatures yearning to be free.

Mary had never seen Jean off the ranch. Always Mary or someone else was sent as emissary to the outside world. But Jean had some stealth to her and seemed quite at ease in the foreign environment. Although Mary knew the old woman had lived a life before the goats it had seemed highly implausible until this moment. Her tall, wide frame moved silently through the warehouse and led them up a set of stairs to a small room which overlooked the whole production floor.

"Why would he bring anyone here?" Crys asked once they had settled for the vigil.

Jean, who was not tolerant of ill-formed questions, ignored it.

Mary said, "No interruptions, maybe he knows the place. It's creepy as hell, so the vibe fits him."

"It's not creepy," Crys gazed down at all the machines in awe. She spent the waiting time trying to guess what each one did. The whole place was quite beautiful to her. It smelt like work and industry and creativity. The machines all seemed like fascinating and complicated toys. She looked at them all like a child seeing a Ferris wheel or a crane for the first time. The marvel of machinery and the mighty creations of mankind sparked admiration and pride at her species accomplishments within her. The game of wondering at machine's purpose cooled the tense unknown that lay before her in the night.

Again, Jean had just known where the demon would be that night. But this was the first time she had come out with them. She played with the delicate chain letting it drop link by link into one palm and then the other. She stared forward at the wall. Mary wondered if she had fallen asleep with her eyes open or was in some kind of trance. Mary watched the chain's perfect measured descent into each palm in turn.

As soon as they had entered the building Church left their immediate company, prompted by a whisper from Jean. Mary felt dis-ease at him lurking somewhere unseen but was also pleased at him being out of her line of sight.

Mary looked at Jean until the old woman's attention broke from the wall. Mary lifted her eyebrows and lowered her head to ask what the plan was. Jean scratched the side of her mouth and then flicked her fingers for the two women to come nearer. Mary kicked the sole of Crys' shoe to get her attention from the machines.

"We'll wait to see where he settles. He likes his time. Then I'll let you know what to do," Jean said in a heavy low whisper. Crys' lips tightened to an irritated line at the low level of information. Mary leaned back and rested her head on a wall.

The night wore on with what felt like the length of two. The windowless static nature of the dark production floor aided this lengthening of the dim hours. Jean kept them both awake, as drowsiness pours into the young with stagnation.

Mary thought she heard it but wasn't quite sure, the heavy steel back door scraping its rubber lip on a floormat. She confirmed it with a glance to Jean and Crys who were both rising to their knees. Then the light slurring voice of a drunken girl and the low purring of a sober man fluttered as a trapped butterfly through the great quiet room.

The production floor did have straight aisles between the various stations and equipment. But the man led the poor woman in forced labyrinthian paths amongst the machines. The points of her high heels scraped and drug like the hooves of a wounded calf. The man thought it was fun that they follow like this when confused or weak or tired. And this was all play for him, well - research and play. He let her run into things, bang her shins, clip her shoulder. But in her drunken stupor she accepted his chidings at her clumsiness and tried to follow all the better. He toyed with her. Now aiding in the mishaps with slight shoves or the abrupt removal of a supportive arm. The girl stopped laughing. The teeth of his wide smile caught red and moist the dim emergency light. She was nearly crying from confusion that obedience and trust were not saving her from pain. That this manly low calm voice saying so many nice things could not protect her from herself and her own clumsiness. It unraveled her patterns of the world and not slowly, but in great jerking uneven rips. In her disordered discomfort he stifled a laugh. Mary nearly cracked a tooth from her biting down so hard on her rage. As any spectating mouse would be at watching the cat in his game. Her brow tilted her forehead heavily, her eyes glaring up through the weight. She spun her knife and looked to Jean who tilted her head with the jaw leading to one side. Mary forced a silent breath out measuring its pressure the whole way down.

The game went on below. The girl was whimpering now while the man still led her around his maze. Then suddenly he seemed to tire of the sport. He jerked her now to a back corner. Under some steel shelving there was an open space about the height of a person. He pulled her under and sat her down. She did not fight, as children and lambs often don't.

Once he had chosen a spot, Jean was on her feet instantly and descended the stairs with the women following in file. She flicked both her wrists to fan them out which they did with synchronous speed.

Mary was poised for whatever was coming but a voice hollow and deep rung inside her mind. *Mary. You didn't think I wouldn't know you, did you?* He breathed in. The sound was between a rasp and a growl. Mary stopped short feeling violated, his words raping the sovereignty of her mind. *You smell like rotting flesh now, my dear, instead of rotting earth. You all smell something of rot. I can hardly stand it I like it so much.* Then he stepped into the vision of her mind, into the black room she kept free and blank during activities in the world of reality. He took up the whole room, cloven feet clicking on an invisible floor. His monstrous beauty overtook her. The red and black scales slid over his muscled frame like a fluid armor. They shined, polished with deep iridescent hues. She was mesmerized for a moment by the strange and complex shape of inhuman evil. Because he was in her mind she felt him as well. She felt his ignorance and curiosity and unmoored intelligence. He lifted to a fuller stature as he felt her feeling him. *We have dealings, Mary. You and I.*

Just then Jean lifted her arm and Church turned on the room's blindingly sterilizing fluorescent lights. The man looked up, his face contorted like an animal's. The girl screamed. Jean shot him in the leg but it also clipped the girl's arm which made her scream all the more. The man got up and began to run as if there were no gun wound though the meat of his thigh. Jean shot again and missed. Energy from pure adrenaline and demonic strength fueled his sprint to the exit. Church stepped out from a corner and punched him in the stomach. The combined and opposite forces of Church's strength and the man's forward momentum doubled

him over Church's arm. Church and his forked lip recovered what minimal loss in balance he had suffered and punched the man in the back of the head as he was dropping to the ground. The victory lit something in Church. A raw brutality that was his sole outlet for emotion. The man slumped to the floor unconscious, and Church continued to pummel him on the back of the head. Church was lost on the waves of violent bliss.

"Enough," Jean said as she neared. Immediately following the command, an unseen force slammed Church into the wall behind him. His arms hit the hard surface outstretched. His fingers tightened as if pulled by electricity. Crys and Mary thought Jean had done it with her command. Jean knew she hadn't.

Jean knelt to check the fallen man's pulse. He was still alive.

"He'll keep till we get back," Jean said.

They put him in the trunk of the car. Mary wondered why the chain was still in Jean's pocket.

They spilled into the car, assuming the same positions from the outset: Crys driving, Church the front passenger, Jean behind him, and Mary next to her. The new cargo was alive but asleep and quiet in the rear.

"How do you know where he's going to be? How do you know where he's been?" Church asked with a new and relaxed looseness of tone.

Jean had avoided or ignored this question many times. But this time, to Crys' and Mary's great surprise, she said, "The wind tells me."

Church set his teeth and looked out the window. Again with a casual air, "Now why would the wind do that?"

“The ocean beats him. She whips him with a mad fury and he runs, crying and shoving and pushing across the desert. He tells on the ocean. He tells on everyone if you’ll listen.”

Church squinted his gaze across the navy-blue expanse of land that surrounded them. The city was finally at their backs. The stars were starting to dim and the eastern mountains were beginning their black silhouette.

“Why does the ocean beat him?” Mary asked.

“She’s wroth. She hates herself and from it has lent to be cruel. But I’m sure the wind is annoying. He does sinper so.”

There was a pause. Jean leaned back in her seat. Then for the first time ever she gave more information than was asked.

“God created her early in the week and she was alone moving across the earth. Then the land came and her great roaming energies were divided and it brought her some peace. The animals came and she delighted in their life. In their simple short existences. The brief breath they took on the earth and then returned to it. Then God told her of man and woman. He told her to help them, if it was her desire, but that a time would come when she would be called on to quiet their breath and still their hearts and return them all to the earth. Then she saw them, man and woman and their children. She fell in love and doted on them whenever they neared her shores or ventured on her face. Her young heart brought them in without reservation and took joy in their joys and sorrowed in their sorrows. Time passed and her love only grew. Now there were a great many men and women and children. And she gave them her abundance and taught them of bravery and acceptance, her two only lessons really. Hey, mind if I lift one, Crys?” Jean reached out to the crushed box of cigarettes in the cup holder. The dawn was



coming. Crys nodded as if Jean needn't ever ask, wishing she'd just taken them instead of interrupting the story.

Jean inhaled to the bottom of her lungs before continuing.

"God came to her and said it was time. It was time to bathe the earth and still the hearts of men. She had forgotten this duty in the eons that had passed. Now the memory of it stirred while she looked inside her heart. 'I cannot' she said bowing her face from God. 'You must. And you will' he said to her. 'I will not' she said."

Jean turned to assess the blood line of the coming sun building on the horizon. She let the smoke fall from her parted lips.

"God went from her. And she steeled herself to disobey her creator for the love in her heart. The rains began. At first it was easy, she spilled the excess water into uninhabited lands. She built up the frozen poles. But the rains kept coming. And the people were frightened. She felt their fear in her heart. The blackened sky turned her grey with misery. Then there was nowhere else to put all the excess water. She used her might to hold it in. She heaved it in great mountain ranges of waves across her expanse. She build it up higher and higher using all her might to deny gravity its due. Still the rains came down on her. She cried to God, 'Please, no, please don't make me do this.' A whisper, 'You must. It is part of your creation' fell across her watery mountain peaked face. She screamed, she howled, if she'd had teeth she'd of broken them all."

"And then, the moment came when she could no longer hold the waters back. A great and merciful tidal wave crushed the dwellings of man. She swallowed their screams. She felt the grasp of the mothers' tighten on their little children against death and then loosen in her

depths. Of course, she had caused death before. But never like this. Never had she dreamed of this scale of massacre. When everyone went slack the rains stopped. God showed her the boat he'd been protecting and the few inside. But her heart had been cleaved in two. All her strength and power drained away. She set the boat down gently as she receded to her deepest valley to cry and try to forget what she'd done."

They were all looking without seeing through the windows to the colorful dawn. Their minds crafting differently the sorrows of the blue ocean. Jean's graveled voice had slowed to the even drum beat of the ancient story tellers. She flicked the finished cigarette out the window while her other hand snaked into her pocket.

"Well, she couldn't hate God because He created her so she hated herself with a deep rage. And when the wind passed over her face she beat him for daring to touch her. He couldn't not, he cried, it was the measure of his creation. But she didn't care. Every creation will have pain as part of its measure she told him. So he runs and cries away from her across this desert here." She elongated the chain and mouthed some unheard words.

"You tell the story well, old woman. How did you get to hear it?" Church said in absent contemplation out the window.

"One day I listened and he told me," she said slowly. In a quick movement Jean looped the chain around Church's neck and pressed the ending links together with her thumbs. The inside of the car became a frantic unpredicted natural disaster. Once he felt it he slammed himself forward and was stopped by an invisible wall, like when a dog bolts forgetting the length of chain tied to him. Crys jerked the wheel in surprise and then regained control. He screamed and howled unearthly sounds. The demon tried to rise up out of Church's body. Mary

could see even with her natural eyes the black and red scales lifting up and wrenching against the chain. He pressed against it so hard it looked as though he would cut himself on it. But even against his force the chain lay slack. Church's deep yells of pain could be heard under and around the demonic ragings. The chain lay as a flimsy necklace even after Jean released it from her grip.

The car was filled with a metallic voice, a voice that used neither air nor human throat. It sounded like pins or nails or metal teeth scraping out the shapes of words. Jean lifted her hand and pulled the fingers gently closed while saying, "No," in a calm firm way. Mary saw the demon's tongue stretch long with a twist by an invisible force. Then ripped out of his mouth past the daggered rows of teeth on his open hinged jaws. The tissue tore unevenly and a black blood like smoke spilled from the wound. The tongue spasmed like a newly freed tail of a lizard then disappeared from the air. The fanged jaws snapped shut.

"Peace, creature. We'll soon have you where you belong," Jean said, her authority filling the car. Whether from that or just an acceptance of the new situation the howling raucous subsided into loud heaving breaths plunged through the nostrils. Mary couldn't see the demon anymore, he had retreated back into Church.

"What just happened?" Crys said. Her eyes were wide as hoops and her eyebrows nearly touched her hair line.

"Just drive. He's bond," Jean said.

"In Church? How you gonna get him out of there?"

"Not now. His ears are pricked about a half inch from your thoughts. We'll talk about it at home."

Silence fell on the car except for Church's hard shallow breathing. The new day finally broke over the eastward mountains. Crys looked over at him in the new spilling light. He was on the thin outer edge of humanity. Where the diseased and deformed lie unwelcomed and unrecognized. Dark blue veins snaked pulsing under all exposed skin. They branched into claw-like deltas at his temples and cheeks, down his neck. The skin around his eyes darkened to near death. The area around his irises became bloodshot from internal struggle. Aside from the panting and pulsing Church sat stock still, his hands on his thighs, looking ahead down the road.

The man in the trunk kicked against the back seats. The thuds reminded everyone of the decoy cargo that needed to be shifted.

"Pull over," Jean said.

The car slowed over a graveled rumble strip. As soon as it stopped Mary and Crys exited. They hesitated and looked at each other upon reaching the back of the vehicle. The man was in a rage and beating his body against every surface rocking the car with force. Crys held a crowbar she had retrieved from under the back seat. Mary fingered a butterfly knife with her left and put her right on the latch of the trunk. Then she flicked her chin for Crys to stand out of immediate sight. Crys backed up a couple small steps. She raised the crowbar a quarter of the way.

Mary suddenly had a different thought. She lowered the knife and knocked on the trunk, yelling, "Is someone in there? Hey, are you okay?"

His bound fists banged an excited reply from inside. She grasped the latch and released it. The man lay gagged and blinded by the morning light. The sun's sharp beams haloed around

Mary's face and washed out her features, deifying the girl. She pounced on the disorientation with a calm concerned voice.

"Are you alright? I was walking and I heard you banging in there. Oh my God, are you okay?" With a smooth low motion she cut the ties on his ankles. He was lulled by the rapidly mixed cocktail of panic, light, beauty, and freedom.

"Just wait, I'll call the police," Mary said. Though her voice and the blinding morning had lured him away from fighting, he suddenly realized his legs were free. The frenzy of escape caught up with him again and leapt from the car. Mary and Crys watched him a moment as he sprinted, still bound at the wrists, down the middle of the two-lane highway. It wasn't quite a sprint, he limped and hobbled for the gunshot wound in his thigh. But the amount of energy he put in would have definitely made it a sprint otherwise. He yelled an indiscernible muffle through the gag. Mary shut the trunk and the women returned to their seats.

They drove on without any speech, Church being quite the ugly elephant in the room. But Crys' thoughts turned to the man limping with a hole in his thigh and blood soaked pantleg down the highway. She felt like she should feel bad but had trouble coaxing the emotion. A cold hatred will long linger on the visage responsible for evil acts. Even though the hobbled man had in no way played the cruel games of the previous night, he still looked the part. Demonic possession can lead to most unfortunate and unfair levels of guilt by association. Crys spent much more thought on this injustice than the other two. But she assuaged the feeling by telling herself if he stayed to the road someone would find the poor man.

Mary, on the other hand, thought she had shown great kindness and creativity by not killing him. Her conscious rested unencumbered by her deeds.

Being in the car with Church took some steeling of the nerves. He was more grotesque than when they'd gotten out. Never is one so aware of a small space than when forced to share it with evil. The skin between the pulsing navy blue veins was now a fleshy dark grey. His eyes were thoroughly shot through so there wasn't much white left. Mary had a deep instinctive urge to drive a stake through his heart or decapitate him. The mere fact that he panted and blinked and lived was grating and screaming against every sense of natural order she knew. With all this welling inside she looked at Jean who was busy squinting into the horizon. Mary screamed in her mind for Jean to look at her. But the old woman merely tracked her eyes down to the seat between them and tightened her lips, merely acknowledging Mary's distress. Mary gave a slight huff, sat on her hands, and looked out the window.

When they arrived back at the ranch the morning felt much longer spent than in actuality. The sun was nowhere near its summit. They all got out of the car as soon as Crys shifted into park and enjoyed the familiar ranch air away from the monster.

The three dogs ran up and licked their grateful greetings, until they caught a whiff of what was in the car still. Hackles raised in a quick flick of growls and snarls fiercer than Mary'd ever seen them react to any earthly predator.

"Heal," Jean commanded. The dogs sat, dying inside for the compliance. Still their shoulders raised and wise eyes remained unmoved from the car.

Jean handed something heavy and metal to Mary and then turned to walk toward the trailer. "Come," she commanded. "Always, Slow, Liver, come." They reluctantly followed her, obviously pained at being forced to neglect their duty. "Put him in the slaughter shed," Jean

said over her shoulder to the women. Mary looked at an old padlock with its little key stuck in its bottom resting cold in her hand.

Mary and Crys looked at each other. Then they watched Jean walk away and up the porch steps, the dogs at her heels. Crys sniffed and put her hands on her hips.

“How the fuck...” Crys said quietly to Mary. She wouldn’t have looked any different if Jean had told them to eat the car.

“How?” Mary called out to Jean. She was closing the front door behind herself and the dogs.

“Lead him by the chain, ladies,” she said. “Lead him by the chain,” she repeated and the door shut.

Mary and Crys looked at each other again and then leaned down to peer through the window at Church.

“Can’t we just leave him there? Look,” Crys tossed her arm to indicate, “he’s happy in there.”

Mary grimaced, pulling down her lower lip and touching the bridge of her nose with a finger.

“Yeah, he’s happy there,” Crys reaffirmed leaning down again to see him. His panting breathing had not altered at all, his chest bounced with each in and out. But the color palate of Church’s face was really the most disturbing, hues of rot and decay spider webbed over with straining veins. But actually, maybe it was the jerky movements of his eyes. His brown irises nearly black from a gaping aperture, the whites now solidly red like a glass marble full of blood. “Ugh,” she gave a shudder.

"Come on," Mary said.

"I'm a bit sick of all this 'come on' crap," Crys said rooting her legs.

"Don't you want to work with goats? This is the, ummm, price." Mary said absently while approaching the passenger side door. Crys strained her eyes at her but Mary didn't notice.

"Come on, help me out," Mary said.

"Fine. I'm not fuckin' touching the chain though. That's all you, your leadership-ness," and she gave a little bow and kicked some sand into the tire.

"Whatever, just get the door," Mary said.

"Oh, you can't get the door?" Crys said, her fear blooming quickly to rebellion.

"Will you shut the fuck up and just help? Get the door and stand behind it. Give him a slam with it if he starts anything. And I'll have both hands free. I think the quicker I get hold of that chain the better. I mean he didn't fight in the car or anything. So, it should be okay," Mary said trying to use logic to comfort herself. Her face was nothing but doubt. However, she put faith in her reasoning and went forward.

"He did fight in the car," Crys corrected.

"Just at the beginning and he couldn't get past the chain anyway," Mary countered.

"You're thinking that makes a difference?" Crys asked.

"Yes," Mary said in a doubtful elongated way. "Yes, I think that makes a difference," she said now more confidently to convince herself. She flicked her eyes over to Crys to see if she was ready. She had some internal fight leaking out all over her face. Mary was annoyed.



“Look, we have to do it. So it doesn’t really matter. Relax. It’ll be fine.” Mary softened her face and gave a lopsided grin of encouragement. Crys had no other choice but to lean on her confidence. She put her hand on the door handle.

“Okay?” Crys said.

“Kay,” and Mary nodded.

Crys lifted the handle. As soon as the creature heard the click an awful scream went forth.

Crys had hesitated for the noise. “Open it,” Mary told her, “Quick.”

The conjoined metal and man screams seemed to fill the desert. But Mary reached out through the petrifying volume and took hold of the slack chain. She pulled him out of the car surprised but how little effort was needed to move the combined man and demon. She even let go with her thumb. Just her fingertips laid under the delicate links could move him. Mary led him toward the shed.

Church and the demon were encased together in some invisible cage. They could not harm her and they couldn’t get out. His legs were also forced to walk alongside her own. If she let her fingers drop from contact with the chain he would remain where she left him. He would wrench and pull against it sometimes but remain all the same.

Crys and Mary were amazed at the powerful artifact, though Crys still did not want to touch it. When they arrived at the shed Mary lowered him to a kneeling position in the loose hay that blanketed the floor. In a stall facing a very distressed lame goat protested meekly the new resident. It retreated to a mucky farthest corner.

“We just leave him?” Crys asked.

"I mean, he's not going anywhere," Mary said. "You can stay if you want," she added.

Mary had her hand on the slatted door when a low sound that gave her pause. She and Crys looked back at Church who was unmoved from Mary's placement. The chain hung delicately over his shoulders. He was growling in a very low tone. Crys stepped back toward him and leaned down, but not very close.

"Church? Are you in there?" she asked.

He opened his mouth slowly. The lower jaw descending first as far as it would go and then hinging his head back next to make his mouth seem impossibly wide. It pulled the flesh of his bifurcated lip taut against the hooped piercing. His eyes were closed and the Mary and Crys stood transfixed by the inner mouth spectacle of soft wet tissue and teeth. It opened wider still defying the limits of a human face. The metal ring ripped through one of the fleshy flaps of lip. Then he yelled out and slammed his mouth closed with such force that Mary thought he could have broken the bone. He gathered something in his mouth, rolling it around for a moment. Then he spat a bloody chunk of inner cheek in Crys' face.

She recoiled and fell back when the spray and hot wad hit her.

"Fucking witches," Church growled at them as they backed out of the shed.

Crys nearly fell out of the shed in a burst and Mary quickly followed. Some type of much needed relief washed over her after clicking the heavy padlock into place. She started chuckling. Crys had taken off her shirt to mop the blood from her face and hair.

"What's so funny?" Crys asked in a muffled way behind the balled and bloody shirt.

"I don't really know, it's just all a mess," Mary said.

"How was he able to talk?" Crys asked.

"I think because you talked to him first. Or maybe because Jean's not here? Or maybe because it was Church's voice and throat and not the demon's? I don't really know," Mary said.

The bloody shirt hung low from Crys' loose grip as they walked on back to the trailer. Mary was squinting at the ground trying to work through her thoughts.

"Are we witches?" Crys asked, looking at Mary. Mary thought for a couple seconds.

"No? I'm not. Maybe Jean is," Mary answered.

"If Jean is then we probably are, right?" Crys said.

"No. What does it matter anyway?" Mary said.

"Well, I'm not a witch," Crys said decidedly.

"I know, I'm not either," Mary said.

"Jean probably is," Crys said again. The long night was creating undependable circles of their thoughts.

"I don't know, but who cares what we are anyway? Or what Jean is? We just do things in the world, like everyone else. And remember, he's smarter than us but he's not human. He can't understand us, he doesn't know what we are."

"And don't talk to him," Mary added after looking down for a couple moments, glaring a suspicious sideways glance to Crys.

"What are we going to do about Church?" Crys said. They were pulling themselves with the last dregs of effort up the bowed porch steps using the rarely touched rail as a belay.

"I think the change suits him," Mary said. Crys became suddenly very worried for her general from the Underneath.

A hot breakfast of oatmeal, jarred peaches, maple syrup, coffee and raw goat milk waited for them when they entered the trailer. Jean had changed clothes and was readying herself to tend to the herd. Mary dropped the padlock key on the counter. The dogs, unaccustomed to being in the home, left very little room for humanity between their excited movements and size. Mary sat and was swarmed by canine affection.

After noticing the key, Jean opened the front door. "Get out, git!" she said with a swoop of her sunbaked arm. They gave Mary a final lick and return to protecting their herd.

"Alright, eat up. I'll do the feeding, you girls get some sleep. We'll take care of our guest tomorrow," Jean said sitting in her chair with a cup of coffee.

"Let's just do it now," Mary said between bites.

"There's a bit to prepare and the work of the day comes first," Jean answered.

"How we gonna do it?" Crys was already on her second bowl. "Church going to be okay?"

"He isn't my concern. He's just living prison now. Maybe he lives, I don't follow the futures of such men."

"I want him to live. He didn't do any of this stuff. He should live," Crys was pouring in a foundationless concern. It flowed more easily and with more imagination that way.

"I don't know, child. But my purpose is to stop the killer. Not save a man whose sins have led him to live in the dark."

"But he's not. And maybe it's not bad things he done but bad things that's been done to him that sent him down there," Crys argued.

“Most men won’t let themselves be victim very long unless great measures are taken. They live closer to their rage, and that pours into whatever distorted view they’ve adopted of vengeance or justice. Survival is not their greatest instinct. They’ll start acting in the world as soon as manhood first meets them. Even earlier for some. Making something useful out of the animal inside of men has always been a task. Anyway,” Jean sighed at herself for having got off track in her tiredness. She didn’t like to say things they wouldn’t understand, “Don’t think of them as women. They’re not.”

Crys found Jean’s ideas hard to follow. Mary was dozing in and out of the speech, the workings of broken men did not capture her interest. When it concluded, Mary got up to put away her dish.

“I’m just saying he hasn’t done anything,” Crys continued as Mary walked in front of her. Mary lifted an eyebrow. Crys rephrased, “He hasn’t killed anyone.” Mary lifted both eyebrows. Crys tried again, “He’s not who we’re after.”

“That may be. But he’s serving a rather important purpose right now,” Jean was growing tired of the conversation. Crys’ lack of comprehension was making it all feel like a waste of time. The empty cold cup in Jean’s hand reminded her of the day’s work.

“We’ll see what happens,” Jean said, exhaustion making her nicer. She stood and walked out to tend her herd.

All of them were finally able to rest in the peace of knowing that no one would die that night. No little girl or frightened young woman was going to die from that creature’s hand so long as it sat bond in the shed. Mary was okay to let him sit there for eternity. Or throw him in the ravine. Jean said that would bring a curse, that him being there already was a curse and

could not be long endured. But rest first, she said, clear heads and a new day before doing anything else. By the afternoon all the women were asleep. The evening chores were dispensed of quickly. Then cold cans of beans for dinner. Everyone was asleep again before dusk had finished bathing the sky.

## Chapter

“What did you do?” Mary said upon awakening and seeing Crys’ face. The morning was still black and Jean snored lightly in the other room. Mary had been stirred by Crys’ pacing.

“I...I...I didn’t know!” Crys said clutching with desperation for breaths. Mary was up. She grabbed Crys by the shoulders, her eyes wild.

“What did you do?!” Mary shook her. There was a loud animal noise coming from outside. Like a goat was being eaten alive.

“I didn’t know! He tricked me! He tricked me, I didn’t know! I just went to take him some food. And then he said, he said, ” Crys collapsed on the couch, rocking herself. “I’m sorry, Mare. I’m sorry.” But Mary was already out the door and gone. Crys wrapped her blood covered arms over her head. She slowly tucked her knees under her chin. She sobbed and rocked herself.

Mary rushed toward the shed. In the circle of the big barn’s flood lights lay the three dogs, dead. They all wore feathered collars of blood. Their tongues unanimated pink ribbons in the dust. She ran to the noise in the shed.

The door was swung wide open and bounced with a terrible rhythmic thudding from inside. The padlock dangled purposelessly from the latch. A small electric lantern lay

overturned in the corner, slanting and distorting the shadows. Church was gone. The sick goat screamed and bleat in pain while running itself into a perpendicular wooden support beam over and over again. Blood ran from its eyes with the repeated the force. It had broken off a horn. The bones of its face were dented in some places. The thing cried through its frantic effort to beat itself to death. But there in the low light, wrapped about the goat's neck, the delicate chain winked at her as it ran forward for another hit.

Mary was disturbed in her soul by the suffering creature. She tried to approach it, to calm it, but it would not cease. Cold tears ran down her hot cheeks. The crying animal unlocked her own pain and she sat, amongst the cacophony, not knowing what to do. Each successive self-inflicted bludgeon drove her deeper and deeper within herself. Her last thought on the surface was that she ought to find a gun and release the poor thing.

*Mary, Mary,* sung a metal rasp, *Do you remember me? I remember you.* Black greasy smoke spilled out of his mouth as he knelt to lick the floor of her mind. She tried to back up but there was a wall behind her, immovable and firm. Far and away she heard the thumping and crying of the goat, weaker now as it neared death. She watched the demon, muscles riveted to her bones by fear. He lifted his lipless fanged face with a graceful arch, smelling her deeply.

*Oh what a place, I do want to be here.* Then he threw his great body down on his back, rolling and arching as much skin as he could on the cool floor of her mind. It was like a house cat finding a strip of sun in the kitchen.

*I'll stop, Mary. If you give me this.* He looked up at her with his slitted bulging eyes. Mary could still hear the goat crying in gasps near yet also far away from her. Why? She thought, Why did Church just sit but he's killing the goat? She forgot that he was in her mind.

*I'm not killing the goat. You think so low of me? They can stand us, the animals. Only very occasionally will they host. They've no knowledge of good or evil. So, they kill themselves.*

He felt her interest. And pulled himself into a crouch like a massive spider trying to look nonthreatening. *I can teach you many things, Mary. Many things man doesn't know. Secrets, mysteries.* He said it slowly, feeling for her to be tempted. She was not, her throat widened with tension. His offer of confidence and knowledge showed how little he'd learned in his centuries on earth. But she did have her own thought. One merely wished in shapes and feelings not yet whittled and filleted by words. She wanted to be as the goat, to hold him within her until a quick death and then keep all safe from him, bound to her bones for eternity. He was pleased at the unexpected opportunity.

*You can, my love.* She gave a reflexive dry heave at the second half, stomach acid pulling up a burn to her tonsils. He flicked his eyes down, worrying that he'd ruined it. But his intelligence didn't fail him.

*You can. You can save them all, Mary.* Her jaw loosened, her eyes doled with hope for half a second. He flexed a ripple of excitement across the muscles of his back. He leapt, for the iron was hot.

*Before the goat dies, wrap the chain once around its horn and trice around your neck. If it dies before, I will be free and our earthly dance can continue. Their simple innocent bones cannot hold us, no sins of the fathers you see... I do love you chasing me, Mary. I like that game very much. But I know you feel for the pretty girls. I do, too. Let's stop me together.* On the last word he stretched out his massive muscled arm toward her, laying down on the ground to get nearer in a motion he thought looked submissive. The arm clawed across the floor, the needled



talons clicking until it was right beneath her, his body completely prostrate. His breathing growled.

*But quick, my dear, you have but moments to decide. For the goat is nearly dead.*

Then he was gone and Mary was returned fully to the shed. The goat lay on the straw, blood dripping around its mouth which still moved, crying without sound. A black shiny hoof twitched and lifted, trying feebly to help bring about a speedier death. Mary rushed to kneel next to it and without thinking unwound the chain.

## Chapter

“Oh you stupid girl,” Jean said to Crys upon hearing the story the next morning. Crys had rocked herself until the early threads of morning had roused Jean. She rushed back to her room cursing herself for sleeping so soundly. Crys’ mind was crushed for shame at what she had done. And what’s worse, Church had run the second he was free.

Jean quickly dressed and went out to the shed. The whole grisly scene lay before her. Often a static picture can speak to a chronology of events better words. The dead dogs, the beaten goat, Mary kneeling, her head hanging loosely to a side bouncing from the force of shallow pants. The little chain wrapped round her neck three times.

“God damn it!” Jean slammed her hand into the door frame and stormed out of the shed. Crys stood watching behind a crack in the trailer’s door.

Jean looked in her direction on her way to the barn. “Bury the dogs, don’t go near the shed,” she commanded without stopping. Crys rallied for the work, though sorrowful a task it was. She caught a glimpse of Mary through the narrowly opened shed door each of the six

times she passed. And every time, the sight of Mary's blue veined face made the dogs' limp bodies all the heavier.

Inside her mind Mary writhed like a summer insect skewered through the middle while still alive, kicking against its Styrofoam display in vain. This was different from when he'd just been an abrupt guest in her mind, violating her sovereignty but for minutes. Now she had no control, there was nowhere to go. She was caged in the back of her mind with no access whatsoever to her own body or its functions, like a pilot chained to the cabin door. He couldn't access the body either because of the chain, but had more control than she. She could feel herself breathing in a strange way, feel her flesh recoiling constantly at the lifeless evil occupation. Her body wanted to die, but couldn't. The urge was made all the stronger by his incessant speech. She ignored him for some time at the beginning, promised herself to never speak to the creature. She had won, he was imprisoned in her and would be for all of time. If she couldn't destroy him, this was the least she could do for her fellows. No more dead girls. No more mind crumbling mistakes. Game over.

But constancy was never her strong suit. And his simpering metallic purring's grated across her soul. Metallic nails on a metallic chalkboard set her teeth on edge and finally she could hold her tongue no more.

"Enough! You have lost. Accept your shame and shut the fuck up," Mary said.

"Oh, I thought maybe I'd rocked you to sleep, my dear. Are we very sure that I've lost?"

"You're done. You're stuck. Jean will never let you out. And you will rot here with my bones for an eternity."

“Such a sweet rule following temperament, Mary. Even if that were my plight, it would not cause me sorrow. It’s like you’ve learned of gravity and now can’t conceive of an airplane. What an obedient little mind you have. Well, I’ve found it rather universal amongst your kind.” A flicker of concern tripped through the glass floor of her mind.

“There it is,” proud of her, he opened his fanged jaws, attempting to smile without lips. “Oh Mary, I do like you. And we haven’t even started playing. But I’ll tell you some things before we start, because you’ve impressed me,” his tongue flicked, tasting her fear. “I have access to all of you now. Everything. Every memory, every thought. I’m going to rip apart your mind, you’ll have no idea who or what you are by the time we’re done, Mary. And rip is the wrong word. I’m going to dissect you, Mary. Slowly and orderly I’m going to disassemble your mind. Everything will be tested for strength and pliability. It’s just research, Mary, don’t take it personally. You will feel a level of pain that your body would not be able to survive without me holding it all together. Think of yourself as a pioneer, Mary. Very few women have been where you’re about to go. I love you, I want to understand you. I’m going to. You’ll be famous where I’m from. I was sent to gather this information and you will supply it. Let’s begin, my dear. Sadly, I may only be able to keep you alive for a few years. But it’ll be enough.” Then he stood and jumped, shattering the invisible black floor he’d been standing on and plunging deep within her psyche.

She felt him under the dirt, rummaging hungrily for something tasty to start with. She saw her father with his hand raised; her mother lifeless on the bathroom floor; her brother and sister huddled, crying; the little girls at Max’s with blood in their underwear. The rapid fire was

crippling. Her throat choked and suddenly she noticed her physical body had quit panting for a moment.

“Oh, let’s not do that,” the demon said, gently pushing her away and back. Then he returned under, flinging up the memory of her first trick. She quickly swallowed the old suppressed feelings and slowly moved out again to the black pocket where she had stopped her panting.

“You’ve got some good stuff in here, Mary. You’re making it hard for me to pick,” he tossed up another. She was on her back, a knife flicking open the side of her inner labia. She let the fear and pain bathe her, helping churn it to a zenith quickly so she could get back. She found the breathing again and this time, under her control, mimicked the panting.

Another now, Max screaming under him and her frozen to stop it.

“Oh I like this one, let’s play with this one. Aww, it’s when we met. I know you won but, memories are fickle things. We can shift it, see what’s gonna make you tick.” He had crafted a wrought iron spiral staircase to ascend back to her. The fresh memory shone vibrant in his claws. Mary felt him coming. And pulled on every lever she could find in the black pocket of her breathing. Her arms moved, they shook and she felt the air move the hairs on them. Then she blinked her eyes and her face was back to her. Then, feeling his hooves click on the iron, she took hold of the polished black spiral staircase’s rails in her mind and collapsed them tight around him. He bellowed against it, pushing with all his might. But she merely tightened the iron bars further around him like pulling a thread tight, binding the creature within. She raised her physical arms to her neck, groping for the end of the chain, pulling at the middle to loosen it. Crys saw from the yard and rushed in.

“Don’t touch it! Don’t touch me!” Mary heard herself scream. Crys backed herself all the way to a wall, palms flat against it. Mary found the end of the chain. The demon was bursting out, the curved tight iron bars were snapping like rubber bands. She whipped the chain around to unwind it, once, twice. After the third pass she clutched the whole length of it between her two palms.

“Mary!” all of his hell bound rage filled her, blinding every sense. Then she took him, his visage, his voice, his threats and shoved it all down her arms and into the chain itself. It grew hot and red with the transfer. When she felt his last thread of existence leave her, she opened her hands and dropped the chain.

Then she fell back physically and mentally. This part always annoyed her. Her mind faded away to a forced black sleep to recover from the battle. But her last thoughts refused some ideas, victory equals sleep equals peace. These things knitted a blanket over her as she felt the baking sun in the dust of a canyon high above a ravine.

Jean carried Mary back to the trailer and set her down on the couch. She took off the girl’s shoes and draped the blanket from her own bed over Mary. Jean and Crys then went to retrieve the box from the ravine to house the chain. They scooped it with a shovel from the place Mary had left it and dumped both it and some hay and dust into the box all together. Then Jean closed the lid, breaking the bits of exposed nest off the sides with the weight of the lid.

The pair hiked far into the desert with shovels hinging against their clavicles.

“Why’d you do it?” Jean asked when the ranch had been long swallowed by the horizon.

“He tricked me,” Crys said.

"That's not what I asked. Why did you do it?"

"You must know." Crys answered.

"I want to know if you know." They walked a ways and gravity felt stronger to Crys. It was hard to lift her feet enough for them to not drag.

"I thought it was right. I thought it was better. I wanted to believe him."

"I can see how that gets a knife around one of my dogs, but all three?"

"It was easier after the first one. I didn't think or feel after that. And they trusted me."

Jean started digging and Crys helped. It was arduous to break the hard crust that protected the earth from the sun. Crys' sweat dripped off her nose and chin and into her eyes. Jean stopped to watch her, leaned on her shovel. But Crys was away behind her lax lips and white teeth. Shoveling and shoveling, not feeling the stinging sweat in her eyes. A blood blister burst on her palm and the red dyed heavily the ravines in the old shovel's wooden handle. Crys dug a couple hours away before Jean told her to stop.

Jean handed the box down to her at the bottom of the hole and Crys hopped out with a single bound.

"I'll go after this," Crys said scraping the hole's contents back into itself.

"No, dear. There's much more to do," Jean said. The shovel slipped and Crys noticed the blood. Gravity on the walk back to the ranch was much quieter.

Mary was sitting in front of the barn. Three new puppies were chasing grasshoppers around her.

"What do you think, Jean?" Mary called as they neared.

“Ugly, Tired, and let’s call that one with the dumb look Hopeless.” Jean pointed to each as she christened them.

“Maybe Hope for short?” Mary asked.

“Hop for short. Don’t want to confuse the dumb thing.” Jean said.

“Well, then its name should be Hopless. Not Hopeless.” Crys said.

“Hopless it is. I need you women to go have a look around a place tonight, late. But first chores,” Jean smiled walking away.

The good people of society will always look after their own. But here, on these broken bottom eaves where innocence lasts but a tattered blink, here live the last saints forged from the damned.