

The Private Sector



Review Copy

Leigh M. Lane

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Written by Leigh M. Lane

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John Irwin sat in his idling 2010 classic, cherry red Ford Mustang, waiting for the gas line to move. Dianne had done her best to convince him to sell the car while he still could, but he felt an inexplicable attachment to it. What was a gas-guzzling heap of metal to her was a priceless antique to him. He'd spent countless hours restoring it, and even had a small cache of replacement parts to keep it in good running condition. To put a monetary price on such a beautiful extension of the past would be sacrilege.

He glanced behind him as some impatient sap honked his horn.

“Wait your goddamn turn!” yelled someone else.

John switched on the radio, hoping one of his favorite stations had found its way back on the air. Classical music, especially the 1980s “big hair band era,” always seemed to sooth his soul. He moved from one preset station to the next, scowling as varying levels of static filled the cab. No one had the money to keep public radio on its feet, and that was a damn shame. Music—all art, really, with the exception of jingles, billboards, and product logos—was a novelty slowly phasing itself out, a release with nothing to replace it, an expression of beauty that would inevitably be lost in the times. He had a nice collection of files at home, but storing their portable drives in the car meant risking their theft, and they were far too precious for him to take that kind of chance.

Another long horn honk forced him back into the moment, and he realized he had a car-length to pull forward. He eased off the brake and offered a light exchange between the clutch and gas, the car rolling

forward and stopping when it nearly reached the bumper of the car ahead. It was a tiny thing compared to what he drove, a relatively new model that looked like it had been constructed out of tinfoil and plastic. He could probably drive his Mustang over it if he wanted. A good wind could likely blow it away. Modern, state-of-the-art piece of crap.

Another impatient honk.

He stretched out his open window. "Give it a rest!"

"Fuck you!"

A hot gust of wind hit the line, and John sat back in his seat. There had been a time when he could afford to run the air conditioning, but these days it wasn't worth the price. Fuel was just too expensive, and Dianne was on his ass enough about his insistence on driving to and from work. He glanced at the gauge. He was running on fumes. He tried the radio again. Nothing.

Shots rang out, three consecutive blasts from a semi-automatic. John shuddered, unsure where the alarmingly loud sound had come from, and he searched all around to discern how everyone else nearby was responding. Several people abandoned their places in line, while others held strong, unwilling to give in so easily. He considered his options, taking a long look at the gas gauge on his dashboard. He would be lucky if he had enough fuel to get him home.

Another two shots echoed.

John's heart raced, but he held his spot. Someone would call the police. He didn't have the level of coverage that would make a personal call worthwhile; moreover, he didn't have the roughly ten thousand-dollar co-pay that came with such a call. Even with the required insurance, the police were ridiculously expensive, and rarely did they resolve an issue in one paid visit.

The line moved forward several car-lengths, and he nearly stalled the engine in his shaky haste to keep his place. One driver managed to cut ahead of him despite his decent response time, but John let it go—with his luck, he'd wind up flipping off the guy with the gun. The line came to another standstill, and he put the car in neutral to rest his clutch foot.

He glanced up at one of several billboards littering the side of the road just ahead. On it, the close-up image of a child's bright, blue eyes seemed to stare directly at him, looming, watching. Written in two lines, one at the top and the other across the bottom was the caption: The next generation deserves a fighting chance. Fight the pandemics with true resistance. John fought the urge to shudder. He had seen some of the first-generation designer children, and there was a creepiness to their pale, blue eyes—nothing like the eyes captured in the billboard picture—that made them look inhuman. There was something about the overlap in genes, a necessary component John didn't quite understand but saw as a deal breaker. Dianne had expressed the desire to have one, but he'd used their finances as an excuse against it. Truth be told, he saw genetically engineering children as an atrocity against both God and man, and something in his gut told him that, despite promises of disease resistance and keener intelligence, nothing good would come from it.

The line inched forward a little more, and finally the gas station was within sight. The driver with the gun seemed to have been appeased by the small dent he had made by scaring off those who obviously could wait until another day, and John chuckled at the payoff of his brave decision to remain. He felt his body relax a little and he took a deep breath of hot summer air. No police officers came to investigate the gunshots, and luckily, none was needed.

The line inched forward, and John felt a new wave of relief wash

through him as he pulled the car into the station's lot. He chose the shortest of the four lines that branched off from the long one down the road, counting three cars ahead of him. The end to his two-hour wait was finally in sight. Just when he allowed a crack of a smile to raise one corner of his dry lips, the engine threatened to die.

His hands tightened on the steering wheel when he took another glance at the empty gas gauge. "Don't give up on me now, baby!"

The car in the front of the line pulled out, and he tapped on the gas to move one more car-length forward. He gave the top of the dashboard an affectionate pat. "Just another few minutes—you can do it."

He held his breath as the car shook with heart-wrenching spasms and began to sputter with all the drama of an animal suffering its final moments. He made the dangerous decision to switch off the ignition until both remaining cars ahead of him had been serviced.

The next car drove off. Someone only a few cars down honked a horn.

John turned, sticking his head out the window. "I'm out of gas! I'll move when it's my turn!"

One of the cars behind veered out of line and pulled up beside the car ahead. John cursed aloud as the driver began to parallel park into the empty space.

"You've got to be kidding me!" John honked his horn and turned the ignition. The engine struggled to turn over, the near-empty gas tank supplying just enough fumes to tease him into thinking it might actually start. It jumped and gasped a few times, but it became painfully obvious that the effort was futile. He hit the steering wheel as the jerk who had cut in successfully secured the gap between him and the only other car ahead.

He yanked on the parking brake, threw open the door, thrust himself out, and slammed the door behind him before storming up to the

perpetrator. “What’s the big idea?”

The other man, short but stocky, shrugged. “You snooze, you lose.”

“My car’s out of gas!”

“Should’ve thought about that before you waited an extra day to get in line.”

John held back the impulse to punch the man through his open window. Instead, he returned to his car, ensured the transmission was in neutral, released the parking brake, and rushed to the back end before it could roll into the car idling less than two feet behind it. He put his full weight into holding it in place, unsure whether he had the strength to roll it forward when the time came.

His earphone gave a light ring, followed by an electronic voice alerting him Dianne was on the other end of the line. To hit the answer button, he would have to release one hand from its steady hold against the back of the car, which he knew could possibly cost him another well-deserved place in line. He chose to ignore the call, assuming she had dialed him for nothing more than to nag about him being late. He allowed the call to go to voicemail, even though he knew he’d never hear the end of it when he got home.

The line moved forward, the piece of work who had cut ahead pulled up to the gas pump, and John struggled against the weight of his car combined with the slight upward slope. He inched it forward, but the intense summer heat quickly took its toll. He felt his muscles threaten to fail, his clothes quickly saturating with sweat, and he groaned when another call came through from Dianne. “It’s a bad time!” he growled.

Someone a few cars down honked.

The call went to voicemail.

John’s body shook from a dizzying combination of heat and fatigue.

Angst and streams of sweat stung his eyes, but he refused to give up. But then, just when he thought his body might give up the fight, another set of hands slapped against the metal beside his. He turned to find a stranger standing beside him. At first, he feared the man meant him ill will for stalling the line, but an overwhelming sense of relief replaced his uneasiness when he realized the man had come to help. Together, they pushed the car forward before anyone else could cut ahead.

With the Good Samaritan's help, he held the car at a steady standstill behind the fueling tinfoil box. "I appreciate your help. I don't know how I can repay you."

The man gave a humble shake of his head, looking down at his shoes as he arched his sturdy build against the car's weight. "If no one has it in him to do the right thing, then what future do we have as human beings?" He gave a brief glance at the billboard John had scrutinized only moments ago before shifting his attention back to his feet. "Too many people have lost sight of the really important things in life. Society is going to hell in a hand basket, but we don't have to let it go without a fight."

The tiny car ahead drove off, and the stranger helped John push his car into place beside the gas pump.

John hurried to pull the emergency brake then caught the man as he moved to return to his vehicle. "I'd like to thank you somehow, friend."

The man offered John his hand and they shook. "Name's George, George Huxley."

"Thank you, George."

George pulled a business card from his lapel. "Stop by my store sometime." He gave a nod toward John's car. "A connoisseur of fine vintage icons like yourself would undoubtedly appreciate my selection of wares."

Before John could say another word, George was gone, returned to his black 2020 Chevy.

John moved hesitantly to the pump, regretful he hadn't found better words to express his appreciation.

He shuddered as his earphone once again began to ring.

Dianne cursed under her breath as her call went to John's voicemail. "Where the hell are you?" She waited for the beep, and then continued, "We've got a situation here, and I really need you home. Please—just get here as soon as you can."

Tearfully, she hung up, pulled off her earphone, and threw it to the kitchen counter with a dramatic cry. She stared at the tiny plastic and metal device, which now lay in two distinct pieces, and the knot in her throat went tighter with the realization she had broken it. She gathered the two pieces and tried to reassemble them, but the plastic had cracked and the tiny speaker hung pathetically from the metal piece. "Cheap piece of crap!"

She jumped at another knock at the front door. Wiping the tears from her eyes, she struggled to compose herself. John had to know her persistence wouldn't be without reason. She wouldn't just call him repeatedly for the hell of it. She needed him here—now. The tragedy next door had her falling apart. The place was swarming with cops wearing Police Network logos on their blue, button-down shirts. Might they make a note of the fact that she too stayed home alone during the day? Another knock prompted a nervous jump. She looked out the peephole and took a deep breath at the sight of the policeman standing on the other side. She grasped the doorknob for a few long seconds before opening the door.

Her eyelids fluttered in an attempt to hold back a new set of tears, and

she offered the officer a strained smile. “Something else I can do for you?”

He was intimidating, towering over her with a gruff, chiseled face. His bulbous Adam’s apple shifted in a long bob as he cleared his throat. “Our records indicate you’re currently subscribed to Police One. I’m obliged to let you know, ma’am, that we’re offering a thirty-percent introductory discount for the first three months to subscribers of Police One or the People’s Police Services who switch providers by the end of the week.” He handed her a coupon.

She gave a thankful nod. “I’ll run it by my husband.”

“Is your husband home?”

“I’m expecting him any minute.” She flinched, knowing it was a lie, hoping he wouldn’t call her bluff.

The officer smiled. “That’s good. I’d hate to see some thug take advantage of you the way your poor neighbor was. She didn’t have a chance; of course, she had been a Police One subscriber. They offer sub-par police protection at best. Had the Smiths subscribed to the Police Network, we would have ensured that nothing like this would have happened. It’s tragic, really.”

Dianne struggled to catch her breath. “Is there anything else I can do for you, officer?”

He stood for a moment in obvious thought then shook his head. “We’ll be in touch, Mrs. Irwin.”

“I’m sure we will.” She closed the door before he could offer another sales pitch, her heart still racing from the news of the violent break-in next door. Mrs. Smith—Janet—had been a good neighbor. Just beyond the cusp of middle age, she had still held some of the fair features of her youth, obstructed only by a few fine lines merging as wrinkles and a single streak of grey hair claiming the left side of her wavy, brunette crown.

The news of her death hit Dianne hard.

Just yesterday, the two had met at her apartment for coffee, laughing over the brazen claims offered by the Freedom Party's new candidate for National CEO in this year's upcoming race, and they had confided in one another the hope that the Citizen's Party would find a new foothold in the wake of all the recent corporate scandals. The Freedom Party's sponsors had set them up. This much they both knew. What eluded them was the level of corruption to which the conservative group might be willing to sink to secure another victory.

"Let the Invisible Hand guide you," the top politicians said. "It will show you the way."

Janet's body had been brutally mutilated, her face left barely recognizable. Dianne had heard the horrified cries of the woman's husband through the thin walls when he'd arrived on scene. She would never forget that sound. Even now, it rang through her ears like a haunted earworm, bone chilling in its disturbing mesh of cadence and pitch.

She leaned against the door, praying no one else would knock, holding herself in a desperate hug, trembling hands grasping at her sides as if the gesture alone might spare her any further grief.

"Momma!"

Her glance shot to the hallway just beyond the entry, and she fought to calm her nerves. "Yes, sweetie?"

John Junior shuffled into the entry. The four-year-old had lovely short curls of golden hair, a stark contrast to his parents' dark brown tresses. He also had striking green eyes and a pout to his lips that could charm the Devil himself. He had a yellow security blanket slung over his left shoulder, and he dragged the bulk of it behind him as he moved. "What's wrong?"

Dianne lowered to one knee as the boy shambled closer. “Everything’s going to be all right. Everything’s fine, sweetheart.”

“Why are you crying, Momma?” The boy asked stuck his thumb in his mouth and tugged the blanket tightly into the crook of his neck.

“No reason.” She offered the boy a heartfelt hug, which he accepted graciously. “Silly adult stuff.”

“The policeman won’t come back and hurt us, will he?”

She shook her head, glancing down at the coupon she still clutched in one hand. “No, we’re safe. We’re absolutely safe. I promise.” Another tear defied her resolve, but she banished it with a quick swipe before the boy had a chance to see it.

“Was Mrs. Smith safe?” the little boy asked with a level of wisdom beyond his years.

Dianne worked to steady her shaky breaths. “Mrs. Smith was a good woman, but she wasn’t smart like we are. You have to be smart to stay safe, and your daddy and I are both very, very smart.”

He looked her in the eyes, as if to assess the truth in her words, and then he shrouded himself in the worn yellow blanket. “The policeman will be back.”

“Yes, he will.”

“He scares me, Momma.”

“Me too, sweetheart.”

“How do you know he won’t come in through the window and get us?”

Her hand crumpled around the flimsy coupon. “That’s what insurance is for, sweetie.”

John listened to Dianne's desperate message while he approached their apartment. He fumbled with the keys in his sudden panic, all sorts of terrible scenarios invading his thoughts. Might Junior have fallen and cracked open his skull? Had the Corporation for Financial Integrity once again accused her of selling her paintings on the black market and sent another message threatening to audit her for private transactions? Could her sister have finally taken that dreaded fatal overdose of serum?

He threw open the door as soon as he felt the key disengage the lock. "Dianne?"

She sat on the sofa holding her knees tightly to her chest, her face red and puffy from the tears still streaming down her cheeks.

He hurried to her. "What's wrong?"

"Janet, next door," she finally managed.

He felt a dizzying rush of relief while he sat down beside her. Although he knew the news couldn't be good, the realization that his family was still intact was enough to force him to suppress a giddy laugh.

"She's dead—murdered!" Dianne buried her face in her hands. Her body heaved with the escape of another long series of pained sobs.

"What happened?"

"The police said it was a robbery gone bad." She looked up at him, her face falling into a tight grimace. "But according to her husband, all they took was her wedding ring. Why would they go to all that trouble—slash her up like that with a butcher knife—just for a wedding ring? It

couldn't have been worth that much!"

He took her into his arms and allowed her to cry on his shoulder. "Where's Junior?"

"In his room, playing." She pushed away from him, scowling at his abrupt change of subject. "The Smiths have a hologram projector, a smart kitchen computer, and a state-of-the-art entertainment system. Why didn't they take those?"

John refused to admit the answer. "There could be a million different reasons. Maybe the robber just really liked her ring. You know how crazy people can get. You'll worry yourself sick if you try to over-analyze it."

"Don't patronize me!"

He turned away, afraid that any further attempts at defusing the moment might upset her even more.

"The Police Network got to the scene before Police One. Who called them? How did they know there was a crime scene to record? Why didn't the Smith's carrier cover it? I'll tell you why: no matter what anyone says, the provider wars are alive and well! They're picking off the competition's clients to make one another look bad!"

"Dianne—"

"One of their officers gave me a coupon for a discount on their transfer fees. I think we should consider using it."

He took a deep breath, his patience suddenly spent. "We've been over this. The Police Network is too expensive. Their monthly rates would eat up a quarter of my salary!"

"But what's a cheaper rate if they're killing off everyone who refuses to switch? Think about Junior! Think about me!"

"We can't afford it!"

"Janet's face was a bloody mess!"

“Dianne—”

“They gutted her with a butcher’s knife—a butcher’s knife from her own kitchen—and she bled out while they slashed her face to shreds! Her husband couldn’t even recognize her. He identified her by her clothes. Her clothes, John!”

John shook his head, struggling to find the right words to diffuse his wife’s mania. She was justified in her fears, but she definitely was not in the right state of mind to deal with any added stress.

“They kicked in her door without any of us noticing—or maybe they had a key? I didn’t hear a thing! According to one of the officers on the scene, she had been folding laundry when they struck. Shoved a pair of folded socks down her throat to keep her silent, then sliced her up head to toe and stole her wedding ring to make it look like a random robbery!”

“You’re being paranoid.” He tried to make the words sound convincing, but it was obvious the moment he finished his sentence that he’d merely come across as callous and belittling.

“Paranoid? I’m being paranoid?” She gave an incredulous laugh. “What will it take for you to see what’s really going on here? To come home to me in a pool of blood, face ripped to ribbons and guts hanging out?”

He shuddered at the thought.

“What do you think they’ll steal from our apartment to make it look genuine? My latest painting? A lock of my hair? Our son’s building blocks?” She stormed off toward the kitchen with a strange look of determination across her face. “Are you hungry? My appetite is shot, but I’m sure you and Junior are hungry.”

He followed her, his heart sinking as she rummaged frantically through the pantry.

“Dianne—”

“I’m sorry I haven’t started dinner yet. My mind’s been elsewhere.” She took a brief pause, just long enough to take a deep breath. “That new school called again, talked me into taking Junior for the grand tour tomorrow morning. I just don’t think I can make it, not now!”

“I’m sure they’ll understand.”

“They said—” She shook her head. “They said he doesn’t have a chance at any decent future unless we enroll him there.”

“Sweetheart—”

“They said staph has begun to run rampant at the cheaper schools.” She shoved a can of vegetables angrily back onto its shelf then turned to him. “Dinner’s going to be a little late tonight. I’m very sorry. Very, very, sorry. . .”

“Just try to calm down.”

“She was my friend. Why didn’t I hear anything? I was right on the other side of her wall. I should have heard something.”

“Maybe we should just order out.”

“It’s just so senseless. She didn’t deserve to die like that.”

Junior shuffled in, clinging tightly to his yellow blanket. “Momma?”

John rushed over to him. “Hey, buddy! You want to watch a movie while Mommy and Daddy talk?”

Junior sneaked past him. “Don’t cry, Momma. We got ’surance, remember?”

Dianne turned to him with a pitiful smile. “Yeah, I know, sweetie.”

John crossed to the two. “Who wants Mexanese take-out?” He gave John a playful nudge. “Tacos and noodles?”

The boy’s face lit up. “Sweet and sour tacos?”

“Only if you promise to go play or watch a movie until it gets here.”

“I promise!” He ran off with a giggle, dragging the blanket behind him.

John placed a gentle hand on Dianne’s shoulder. “How about you? Salsa-pork wontons?”

She sniffled, offering him a subtle nod.

“I know you and Janet were close. I’m really sorry.”

She pulled him close and clung to him as though she might lose him too if she were to let go. “That could have been me, John. If the killer had chosen just one door over, it would have been me. And Junior—” She grasped the back of his shirt as her hands tightened into two angry fists. “I think we really should consider changing to the Police Network.”

He sighed. “Let’s talk about it after dinner, after we’ve both had some time to think it over, okay?”

She nodded, albeit reluctantly. He coaxed her toward the kitchen table and pulled out a chair. She sat, folding her hands neatly in her lap. “So you’ll consider it?”

“I’ll consider it.” He tapped his earphone. “Call Juan Chiang’s Mexanese Restaurant.”

The delivery man was at their door within twenty minutes. John jumped to his feet, barely beating Junior to the door.

“Juan Chiang’s delivery?” asked the middle-aged man holding two burlap bags.

“You got here quick!” John handed over his credit card, which the man swiped through a small reader affixed to his belt.

He handed back the card and the bags of food before asking, “Will you be adding a tip tonight?”

John nodded. “Fifteen percent.”

The delivery man hit one of a handful of buttons on his card reader.
“Thank you, sir.”

“Sweet and sour tacos!” Junior cheered with an excited series of jumps.

“I know you’re a regular customer, sir, but it’s still my responsibility to tell you that you have three days to return the bags and containers without accruing a service charge.”

“Yes, thank you.”

The man gave a humble nod. “I’d hate to see you slapped with the ten dollars a day they charge. Just ridiculous if you ask me, but I’m only the delivery guy.”

“Of course.” John knew by the level of pretense that a sales pitch was coming, but he feigned ignorance while he moved to shut the door. He scowled impatiently when the man stopped him with a quick foot blocking the door’s path.

“While I have you, I was wondering if I might interest you in buying some stock in Dish-Corp. There’s no minimum purchase; you can buy one share or a hundred, and it’s all at a ridiculously low price.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m really not—”

“I’ve personally invested every penny of my savings into these stocks. Please believe me when I tell you, sir, that I wouldn’t sell a product I didn’t fully believe in.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m not interested.”

“I’m sure you know corporations are the way of the future, and soon all of the private satellite television companies will be bought out or rendered obsolete. This is your opportunity to get in on the ground floor of an important venture. For only two hundred dollars per share, I can practically guarantee you a hundred percent return.”

John shrugged. “I wish I had the money, but I don’t. I’m really sorry. Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

The delivery man had a defeated look on his face, but then suddenly showed a newfound sense of determination as he amended, “One hundred fifty per share? I can’t go any lower than that.”

“Nice try.” John gently pushed the man from the threshold and closed the door. He turned to Junior with a smile. “Go wash up, buddy.”

The boy hurried off to the bathroom while John carried the bags into the kitchen. Dianne watched with blank disinterest while John unpacked the plastic, leak-proof containers onto the kitchen table. There were chips, wontons, salsa, tacos, noodles, and fried rice. Mexanese was John’s favorite, with Slavitalian and Brit-Brazilian barbeque tying at a close second. Not much compared to the spicy tang of General Tso’s chimichangas with pepper-fried noodles and pico.

Dianne stared at the array of food as if it were a museum exhibit on twentieth- and twenty first-century barbarism.

John pulled three clean dishes from a nearby cupboard. “Do you want a spork or chopsticks?”

She continued to gape at the food for a moment then glanced at him with a look of utter confusion. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came.

“I know Junior will want to use a spork, but I’d prefer to go authentic and use the chopsticks,” John said as he set a plate in front of each of their chairs.

She blinked hard, eyebrows drawing together in deep thought. “Yes, that would be fine.”

“Which one?”

“Whatever.”

John nodded as if she had expressed a definitive decision. “Spork?”

She shrugged.

“Spork it is,” he said, struggling to hold his cheerful demeanor. He set metal sporks beside Junior and Dianne’s plates and a set of wooden chopsticks for himself. “I don’t know about you, but I’ve been craving their jalapeño chicken wontons for a couple of weeks now.”

She nodded with feigned enthusiasm.

Junior rushed to his seat, and his eyes went wide at the diverse array of food. He took a notable whiff of the sweet and tangy combinations that emanated as John pulled off their lids. “Yummy! My favorite!”

“Try her again, Jenny!” Greg began to fidget, his fingernails raking into his drug-stained arms. His overgrown mop of brown hair obscured his eyes, but still she could see the desperation etched across his blue-tinted face. Neither made much of an issue of the sickly color anymore. They’d grown accustomed to it. Moreover, despite the fact that it was one of the more benign side effects of the colloidal silver-based narcotic, it was irreversible. As a result, both addicts and recovering addicts alike shared their blight, forever branded by their transgressions. The recovered addicts’ movement fought to prohibit discrimination over discolored skin, although its success varied greatly between the lower and upper classes.

Jenny hung up for the third time in a row without leaving a message. “It’s going straight to voicemail. She must have her phone switched off.”

“Leave her a message, then! Tell her, sister to sister, that you need her, that you’re starving and need money for food.”

She scoffed. “Dianne’s not that naïve.”

“Who else can you call then, baby? There’s got to be someone!”

She shook her head. She had exhausted every other resource, stolen from everyone who might have held anything meaningful in their familial connection, and cut ties with everyone who might have had more than a few dollars in savings. Still, the cravings were unbearable, the need for another gram of silver serum overriding all sense of logic and consequence. Her mind reeled as she searched it for one last resource.

She felt her body go heavy as one last name came to mind.

“Dwayne.”

“Well, call him!”

“He’ll want more than money.”

Greg dug into his arms, thin streaks of blood going unnoticed as his nails made yet another desperate pass.

“And?”

Jenny felt her face form a tight grimace while she ordered her earphone to make the call. Dwayne had been an artifact from a previous life, a weasel she’d hoped to put behind her for good, but he had an insatiable appetite of which she knew she could take full advantage. The thought of letting him take her even once more sent a disgusted chill down her spine, but these were hard times and the serum didn’t come cheap. His only redeeming quality had been his unnaturally large guy-fly, which had only been a true asset when she had felt unusually kinky. On a typical day, a man like him was too much, and he’d had a particular hang-up over that. When it all came down to it, he was a self-conscious little boy in the body of an oversized man and hadn’t a clue about what it took to satisfy a woman.

Not that he cared.

The last time they’d been together, she’d just fallen into the midst of a particularly bad trip. The demons had emerged with extraordinary spite, tagging along with the two in bed and turning the encounter into a terrifying event. Dwayne had interpreted her screams as a cue to take her even harder, and when he had finally finished, he’d seemed amused by the sight of her scampering tearfully from the room, tearing the imaginary beasts from her naked, blue body.

The phone rang three times before he answered. She smiled as if the pretense might filter through. “Hey, Dwayne, it’s Jenny.”

A strange mesh of excitement and annoyance emanated through his voice. “Jenny! How ya been, true blue?”

“Okay. And you?”

“Fine, just fine.” He paused only briefly. “I never expected to hear from you again.”

“Well, you know how things go.”

He fell silent. Obviously, she had lost him. He had to know there would only be one reason she’d want to reconnect, her addiction far greater than any sense of self-worth or pride she’d left behind the last time she was there, and yet he held to his innocent silence.

“I was wondering if I could borrow a couple thousand bucks.”

“So, it’s about money, then?”

She struggled to keep from holding her breath. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

He took his time responding. “How so?”

“Any way you want, honey.”

His breath went heavy against the sensitive speaker. “I could use some company. I’ve been so lonely since you left.”

“You don’t have to be lonely tonight.”

He took only a moment to respond, clearly trying to seem as though he were holding out, yet too desperate to realize just how transparent he actually was. “How soon can you be here?”

“Give me ten minutes.”

“Can you wear those boots I like?”

“Anything for you, honey.” She hung up with a shudder.

Understanding the true nature of her visit and feeling spiteful over her blatant disregard for his fractured ego, the man ravaged her, leaving her

physically sore and mentally broken, but she left with her two thousand-dollar cash card. Two thousand dollars would supply her and Greg with enough serum to last at least a couple of days if they paced themselves, although she knew they'd likely blow the whole gram that night.

They both waited anxiously while Greg's connection set up the deal. He promised he'd be by within the hour, and they both kept a watchful eye on the wall display, counting the minutes tick by as if each might be their last.

Five . . . twenty . . . forty-five . . . sixty.

Jenny began to pace. "Where the hell is he?"

"He'll be here."

"He knows we got the money, right?"

"I said he'll be here!"

She fought the sudden onset of panic, fretting over the possibility of giving herself to that piece of shit for nothing. Her body ached for another fix, and she fought tears when she considered the very real likelihood that Greg's connection might not come through soon enough. Something was holding him up, and that something could very well keep him from delivering the goods until morning. Unexpected holdups came with the lifestyle, as painfully uncomfortable as they were, and any impatient calls to the dealer typically only resulted in further delays.

When a knock at the door broke the silence, she felt the weight of uncertainty immediately lift from her shoulders. "Thank God!"

Greg answered the door, leading in a hollow shell of a man. His connection wore all black, had shoulder-length, curly black hair, and sauntered in as though he were more important than he was. His skin was about as blue as it could get, giving the illusion that every inch of his body were starved for blood. Jenny offered him a seductive smile as he sat

across the coffee table from her.

“Just a gram?” asked the man.

“We only got two smacks,” Greg replied.

Jenny stared him down, crossing her legs as she shifted her skirt to reveal her shapely thighs. “Unless we can work something else out.”

The man raised a brow. He glanced over at Greg, who simply shrugged. He looked at his wrist display. “Maybe some other time. I’m on a tight schedule tonight.”

Jenny frowned.

Greg made the deal, trading the two thousand-dollar cash card for a gram of liquid serum, and then the dealer was gone. Still, they had enough of the treasured drug to get them at least through the next day or two, and Jenny immediately shifted her attention to the small cache that sat in the middle of the coffee table. She pulled a glass pipe from her purse rather than packing a dab up her nose, hoping to savor the first fragments of their score.

Greg seemed to have no objections, allowing her to take the tiny vial and pour a few drops through the small hole in her pipe. She rummaged through her purse for a lighter, finding it only after a short scare that she might have left it elsewhere.

She took the first hit, and her body relaxed immediately with the inhalation of silver smoke. She felt herself go limp against the sofa, feeling grateful for the moment but fully aware that it would only last a few minutes. Still, this was a potent batch. Fireworks exploded before her in her mind’s eye as the satisfying high filled every inch of her body. It was soothing and electrifying all at once, and a light moan escaped past her slightly parted lips as her eyelids fluttered in perfect pace with her racing heart. She heard the flick of the lighter and the bubbling of serum in

the pipe with Greg's long pull, and he coughed violently when he exhaled. A massive cloud enveloped her mind, and she ran into it, hoping that this time she might escape forever into its silver depths.

Music began to play, and she swayed her hips with its entrancing rhythm. Colors swirled all around her. She could see the notes, each claiming a different color, and she laughed at the unexpected sight as they spread out before her in time with a brilliant symphony she had never before heard. "Do you hear it?" she asked, barely able to speak.

"It's beautiful," Greg's voice echoed from some distant land.

Her mind took her to a world of color and wonder, one that held vague similarities to the room in which she and Greg sat. The air whirled in visible eddies, as though the room had become submerged somewhere deep in the ocean—or perhaps high into the atmosphere.

She felt her lungs slow, forcing her to make a conscious effort to keep them going. Everything around her spun for a moment when they seemed hesitant to heed her any longer, and she sucked in a heavy breath of air in a quick and panicked gasp. The clouds overtook the room, cool and invigorating, and the music reverberated through her body. As usual, the experience was nothing short of sublime.

She floated through the clouds, wondering if she had finally reached heaven, when the hell suddenly hit her. Tiny demons came from all directions, climbing her body like a swarm of insects, vomiting caustic waste on her skin and suffocating her with their presence. She scratched her arms in an attempt to relieve herself, but that only made it worse. The tiny creatures' laughs replaced the brilliant harmonies that had only a moment ago filled her spirit with hope and delight, and they crawled into her ears, nose, and mouth, so that she might not be able to reach them with her restless fingernails.

In every direction, all she could see was the silver smoke and more tiny demons flying like little bats, reaching, clinging to her body with their sharp talons. There was no stopping them. There were too many. She felt certain they would consume her, and she cried out with another attempt at scratching them away.

She knew this was the true reality, that all she perceived when she was sober was simply an illusion. If she couldn't fight them now, there was no telling what they would do her when the serum ran out. They poked and prodded, scurrying across every inch of her body and into every crevasse, stinging her with their little pitchforks and laughing in her head. They made her skin crawl and her thoughts cry for reprieve.

Soon . . . very soon.

She shrieked, wishing death might take her before she had to endure another moment of their torment; then, just as suddenly as they had come, they were gone. She found herself on the sofa, her body limp from the high, a light stream of drool dripping from the corner of her mouth. She turned to Greg, watching him stare straight ahead with childlike fascination, his pupils reduced to pinpoints and the pipe and lighter abandoned on his quivering lap.

The high left her, and she felt an overwhelming sense of relief that she was still alive. *Never again—I'm done with this shit!*

But only a moment later, she snatched the pipe and lighter from Greg's lap and took another hit.

Dianne tightly clutched Junior's hand while they exited the bus at the stop nearest to the Children's School of Corporate Management. The buildings were relatively new, built in the pseudo-marble, retro-dome style that had dominated the market over recent years. The campus was overwhelmingly large, prompting Dianne to head for the digital directory that stood just beyond the entrance. It was only ten a.m., but already the summer heat had taken over, broken only by the occasional arid breeze. After finding her position in relation to where she needed to go, she wiped the sweat from her brow and led Junior to the main office.

The building was air conditioned, which was refreshing at first but uncomfortably cold only a moment later. Dianne shivered, not altogether missing the irony in her decision not to bring a sweater.

She went to the information desk, where a young woman in expensive cubist clothes sat behind a solid granite desk projecting a 3D holographic map. "I have a ten o'clock appointment with Astrid Garner."

The receptionist straightened her stiff blouse and offered a superficial smile. "Second floor, office 204." She pointed to a nearby, automated stairwell.

Dianne gave the woman a thankful nod before coaxing Junior toward the spiral of rising stairs.

"Why are we here, Momma? I wanna go home."

"There's just someone I need to talk to. It won't take long."

The boy dragged himself to the stairs and down the hall, sighing and

huffing to express his disapproval.

She took him by the arm in a way that demanded eye contact. “I want you on your best behavior in this woman’s office. Understood?”

He nodded with his best sad yet obedient face.

She found office 204 closed, the silver-tempered Plexiglas window only offering a vague form moving on the other side. She knocked.

“Come.”

Dianne opened the door, peeking in before actually crossing the threshold. “I have a ten o’clock appointment with Astrid Garner.”

“That’s me.” The woman, stocky with pale skin and dark hair wrapped into a tight, flat bun, pointed to the empty chairs on the other side of her desk. Her clothing looked just as stiff and uncomfortable as the receptionist’s, with strange, obstructive cones of material cropping from her shoulders and elbows. ”Please have a seat.”

Dianne chose the closest of the three unusually tall, angled chairs, prompting Junior, marveling at the strange pieces that seemed more fitting for a gallery than an office, to sit in the next one over. He slumped defiantly.

Garner watched the boy, smiling when finally she made eye contact. “Do you know what this place is?”

He shrugged. “I don’t understand why we gotta go to so many schools when I won’t be old enough ’till I turn five.”

“That’s very astute of you, young man.”

He perked up. Obviously, he had no idea what she meant, but he could tell it was a compliment. “I can count to twenty without any help, and I know all my ABCs.”

“I’m sure you do.” Garner shifted her attention to Dianne. “I’m so glad you were able to make it. Your husband left a message that you were

ill.”

“I’m fine now.”

Garner nodded her acknowledgement, clearly having endured her share of missed appointments due to unspecified illness. She opened a file on her computer, bringing up a transparent hologram over her desktop. “I see little John tested in the eighty-seventh percentile for his age group.”

Dianne nodded.

“Impressive. You do know he would simply slip through the cracks in one of the cheaper schools, never having the chance to realize his potential?”

“Momma, what’s potential?”

Dianne caught herself biting her lower lip. “Honestly, Ms. Garner, this school is a bit outside our price range. My profession is in the process of being phased out in the most recent wave of corporate takeovers, and my husband makes a modest income as a building inspector and night shift metal worker.”

The woman seemed strangely disturbed by the comment as if will alone might provide the funds necessary to ensure the boy’s future. Her face tightened momentarily into a frightening grimace before she locked eyes with Dianne. She forced a smile. “Do you know what separates the strong from the weak, Ms. Irwin?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Garner rose from her chair, towering over them. “The strong make sacrifices. They understand the importance of priority. They look not into the present, but toward the future. The weak—” She gave a light chuckle as if responding to an inside joke only she could hear. “The weak can’t perceive the importance of anything beyond their noses. They take their chances with sub-par schools that they know very well to be plagued with

disease and ignorance. They dwell on the past, never able to move forward. Which of those two people are you, Ms. Irwin?"

Dianne cleared her dry throat. "I only want what's best for my son. Do you offer any payment plans or subsidies?"

Garner leaned in close, placing her hands against the polished mahogany of her desk. "We have parents who subsist on beans and rice to make sure their children get the education they deserve. There are others who work more than two jobs because they know it's the right thing to do. There will come a time when the children of those unwilling to do whatever it takes to put them in the right school will mature to find their only options lie in sales and customer services. Polo shirts and nametags will be all they'll ever achieve, simply because their parents chose to live in the past and enroll them in a school that hasn't the capacity to grow their potential. Is that what you want for your son? A polo shirt and a nametag? Saying, 'Yes sir,' and 'Yes, ma'am' all day long, running the cashier counter or struggling to survive on a measly commission?"

"Of course not. What kind of a mother do you think I am?"

"If you're so hard up, you might as well enroll your boy in one of the vocational schools, where he can earn his tuition by sewing together leather shoes and piecing together assembly line commodities for ten hours a day. And don't forget about the rampage the newly mutated strep infection has carried out all across those awful, cheap excuses for schools. Why, just this last month, a few thousand children not much older than your little John were shipped off to the quarantine camps—" She caught Junior's attention and stared him down. "—never to see their mommies and daddies ever again."

Junior's lower lip began to quiver.

The woman turned back to Dianne with an intimidating glare. "I'm

sure you can see the importance in that.”

Dianne’s throat went tight. Her first impulse was to drag Junior out of the room to spare him any further torment, but the rational woman in her worked to postpone responding. She had encountered vultures like this before, and she knew better than to retreat while on the defensive.

Garner backed off, but only slightly. “Shall I put together a new enrollee file for little John?” She held her long, manicured fingers over the holographic touch-screen.

Dianne nodded. “Certainly. I’ll have to go over it all with my husband, of course, but we’ll get back to you very soon, I promise.”

The woman smiled. “We’ll need to process a small application fee of course, but that’s just what loving parents such as yourself, who only want the best for their children, know you must do to ensure your children’s futures. We are the very best, you know.”

Dianne nodded in a dramatic display. “I’m sure you are.”

“The receptionist downstairs doubles as our cash credit transfer operator. Once we’ve taken care of that one minor detail, our new student director, Ms. Anderson, will show you around campus.”

“Yes . . . that would be lovely.”

Garner moved to her door in three long, confident steps, and then she opened it and presented the hallway as though it were a game show prize. “After you.”

Dianne nodded while she took Junior’s hand. Garner followed her up the hall and down the stairs.

They stopped at a short line in front of the receptionist’s desk.

Garner leaned down to meet Junior’s nervous eyes. “You’re going to love it here.” She straightened, offering Dianne a tight-lipped smile. “Ms. Anderson will be with you momentarily.” She departed to the staircase,

glancing back at them once to ensure they held their place in line.

As soon as the woman was out of sight, Dianne hurried Junior out of the building.

“Momma—”

“Time to go home, sweetie. Don’t you want to go home?”

“Yes, but the woman said—”

“I know what she said. It’s time to go.”

“But—”

“It’s time to go!” She lifted him into her arms and hurried off campus. Only when she had reached the street-side bus stop did she let him down. She shouldn’t have come. She’d known the school was out of their price range; why she decided to make the appointment anyway was beyond her. Pride, maybe? Curiosity? The deluded hope that she might summon the courage to ask her parents for help with the tuition?

There were only a handful of other people waiting for the bus, but Ms. Garner’s threatening tone and pushy attitude had put Dianne in a mild state of paranoia, prompting her to keep her distance from the small crowd. She felt as though the woman might send someone to tail her, follow her home, and refuse to leave until she had signed the paperwork. She hated heavy-handed sales pitches to begin with, but they took on a new level of creepiness when they involved veiled threats over the safety and welfare of her son. There had been something about the woman that had screamed untrustworthy from the moment Dianne had entered the office, and she regretted ever having agreed to the appointment.

“Momma, what’s wrong?”

She forced a smile. “I’m fine, baby. I’ll feel better once we get home.”

He examined her face carefully, clearly not buying her response.

“I’ll make us some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches when we get back. Would you like that?”

He nodded, albeit with little enthusiasm.

“Then maybe you can color in your book while Momma paints?”

He turned at the sound of an approaching blue bus. She turned with him, noticing that a second, green bus—one from a rival company—was right behind it. The blue bus stopped short, leaving no room for the second to stop without holding up traffic. The green bus stopped anyway, and immediately horns began to honk as the lane came to a standstill.

The driver for the green bus set his parking brake and stormed out. He charged up to the blue bus’s door while exiting passengers filed out, slamming it open when the driver attempted to close it on him. Those still waiting to board backed away as the one driver pulled the other out by the scruff of his shirt and threw him to the ground.

“What the hell you think you’re doing?” asked the green bus driver.

The other gave a look of feigned ignorance. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!” He tried to stand, but the other man shoved him back down.

“I’ve had it with you people stealing my route times!”

“Back off! This is the route time they scheduled—”

The aggressor silenced his competition with a tight-fisted punch to the nose. Dianne tried to shield Junior’s view of the brawl that ensued, but with minimal success.

“Momma, that man’s nose is bleeding!”

She hushed him, lifting him again into her arms and putting ample distance between them and the fighting men.

“Teach you to take my business!”

“I’m gonna smash your teeth in!”

“I’ll have your ass on the curb before you get the chance!”

The remaining passengers in both buses crowded at the windows, watching in relative safety. From the looks on their faces, they knew they had a fifty-percent chance of having to leave the bus they were on and board the other in order to continue their ride—with the added burden of having to pay a second fee to do so.

Blood spattered the pavement with each new blow. One man threw a haymaker that knocked out a front tooth and sent it flying into the crowd. Spitting a mouthful of blood onto the pavement, the other man sent a back-fist into his rival’s nose. It caved with the crushing blow. The circle around them grew wider in response to the escalating violence within, not one onlooker willing to break the two men apart. There was no question that none of the police companies would be called; no one ever called over something as insignificant as a street fight.

It was over in less than a few minutes, although it felt like much longer. The driver for the green bus knocked out the other with an uppercut to the chin, and everyone stood motionless for a moment while the unconscious man dropped to the ground with a heavy smack. With a swipe of his shirt sleeve against his bloody chin, the victor returned to his bus, and those in the other began to file out.

Dianne moved to the back of the line that had formed along the curb, paid her fare, and found a seat. Nearly everyone, including the driver, seemed to go on about their business as though nothing had just taken place. Perhaps it was easier to pretend all was well, just as it was easier to brush aside Junior’s concern over the coercion they’d just fled at the school rather than face it and all of the messy questions that came along for the ride. After all, was there really any difference between an assault on the street and an assault on the mind? She stared blankly out the

window at the man lying alone and unconscious on the edge of the curb while the bus pushed forward and the traffic behind it continued once again.

John donned his hardhat on the way to the construction site. He'd cited this particular location at nearly every building phase, from improper foundation laying to corners blatantly cut in both materials and quality of labor. Half the construction workers who had put up the frame had been pulled from the debtors' prison, most of them accustomed to heavy labor but clueless about how to build anything to the Rex Inspection Group company code. As a result, not only did the builder suffer numerous violations, but also frequent thefts.

A handful of men stood outside wearing their debtors' prison uniforms and electronic tracking anklets. A few of them showed obvious signs of having prison kennel cough. Half the workers there had it, hacking and heaving miserably, their faces sweaty and pale, their condition just healthy enough to hold themselves upright and operate a drill.

John secured his mask, ensuring it was tight against his face as he passed the ailing workers and entered the novel structure. Most of it was underground, its designers having looked toward the future when they had drafted it. The project required a foundation that began ten stories deep, with a frame that could withstand the weight of the water pressure that accumulated throughout the rocky surface during the violent winter rains. These were the buildings of tomorrow, the designers asserted; someday, nearly every building would be underground, connected by a series of well-planned tunnels and shuttle services, so that the next generation might avoid the weather disasters of recent past. If only the builders would

do their job and build it correctly. . . Even among the less contemporary structures, structural integrity had proven to be a growing issue. Only a few weeks ago, a shopping center had collapsed, killing a few hundred people including dozens of young children. A couple of months before that, a relatively new commercial high-rise had buckled against the pressure of the Santa Ana winds. Luckily, that one had occurred in the middle of the night, when only a handful of janitors and late-shift workers were inside.

Today, John was there to ensure the builders had resolved past violations and to inspect the lift systems they had recently installed. He opted to use the stairwell to descend the multiple stories between him and the current level of construction, exiting to the sound of drills, hammers, and saws.

Readying his electronic tablet, he found Bradley, the project's supervisor, amidst the loud chaos of hammers, drills, and arc welders. Bradley was a short, fat man with a hot temper and a lazy attitude. He seemed to be on his lunch break every time John stopped by, and today was no exception. He'd given every excuse in the book when it came to code violations, and it was anybody's guess as to why the man still held his job after the number of offenses John had reported.

The man looked up from his sandwich as John approached and offered a contemptuous smile. He didn't bother finishing his bite before he said, "Mr. Irwin, how are you today?"

"Just fine." He glanced down at his tablet. "Hope you've finally gotten everything fixed and up to code. I really would hate to halt construction on this giant grave."

Clearly taken aback, Bradley blinked hard a few times, but the smile remained. "I see you haven't received the memo."

“Memo?”

He took another bite of his sandwich. “Construct-Corp is in the process of buying out the little business you work for, and our lawyers have assured us you won’t be a problem anymore.”

“A problem?”

Bradley’s smile faded, immediately replaced by a faux show of concern. “I’m sorry, John—are you having difficulty hearing me over all the noise?”

The possibility of Construct-Corp taking over the Rex Inspection Group was unsettling, but Bradley was not above lying to buy himself a little leniency. John searched his electronic database for any indication of a change in hands, but he found nothing. “I don’t see anything here about a corporate buy-out. Even if there was one, I don’t see how that would change anything. No matter who I answer to, building codes are building codes, and if you’re still violating them, I will shut you down.”

“We’ll see about that. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.” The man walked off, raising his hand to shoo John away when he tried to get in one final, authoritative word.

John decided not to follow him, instead staring dumbfounded while the man turned down a half-built corridor. The supervisor’s blatant disregard for the rules—for the public’s safety—had John’s body tense and his pulse racing, but it was the dismissal of the inspection itself that had John seething. He had to have been lying, hoping to get the inspection company off his back for a week or two. A corporate buy-out seemed unlikely, Rex Inspection’s owners having said just last week how much pride they had in the company and their employees. There had been talk of pay raises and promotions. Why say such things if they planned to sell the business?

Certain the apathetic supervisor had constructed an elaborate ruse, John went to inspect the structure's framework (which had failed miserably upon his last inspection) and check out the recently installed elevators. What he found was anything but encouraging, although it also was not the least bit surprising. The framework still came together with not nearly enough supports, and the supports it did have lacked the appropriate gauge screws and bolts, not to mention the flimsy metal reinforcements at the joints. One good storm would have the entire building collapsing in on itself. Considering that it would eventually serve as a massive apartment building, half of it underground and the other half enclosed beneath a series of solar panels and windmills, there were hundreds, if not a thousand or more, lives potentially at stake.

John tapped repeatedly on the tablet window, moving through a series of commands to order the building red-tagged. When he finished the final command, however, an error screen popped up. He tried again, but with the same result. Hoping it was just a temporary glitch in the system, he moved on to the elevators. He coaxed a lower-level worker to allow him access to the shaft, but when he peeked in to assess the cables and brakes, a racing elevator car came barreling down. His eyes shot upward at the squeaky pulley's thunderous clatter (which would have been nearly silent had it been installed and lubricated correctly), and he lunged backward, stumbling to the floor just in time to spare himself a quick but messy end.

He stayed where he'd landed, dizzy and breathless, too stunned to move for a minute or so. When the initial shock waned, he shuffled back to the open elevator shaft to assess the cause of the car's sudden drop. His hands shook violently while he pulled a flashlight from his belt, switched it on, and then peered in as far as he could without putting himself at additional risk. He suspected foul play, but he couldn't see far enough up

or down the shaft to view the broken cable. It easily could have been a coincidental accident, but given Bradley's obvious desperation to silence him, attempted murder seemed much more likely. Unwilling to look any deeper, he backed away from it and opted simply to mark the incident as yet another safety violation.

On his tablet, he scrolled down to the elevator checklist and made a note of the dropped car. He attempted to save the note, only to receive another error message. He cursed under his breath and returned to the stairwell. His tablet might be suffering "technical errors," and the supervisor might have even spoken the truth about a corporate buy-out, but he wasn't going to leave without photos of the wrecked elevator car.

Bradley waited for him at the bottom underground floor. "Find anything interesting?"

John brushed past him without saying a word, although the scowl on his face said more than he might have expressed vocally. He viewed the elevator compartment through the open door, mindful of the supervisor's position behind him. The ceiling had caved to a certain extent, and the car's bottom two feet had crumpled like a crushed can. The control panel on the inside by the doorway now hung there by its wires, a few of which sparked in random intervals. He readied his minicam and took pictures of every detail.

"You're wasting your time, John."

"We'll let my supervisor be the judge of that."

"Of course."

John turned to find the man leaning against the outside emergency panel with a self-satisfied grin. He closed his fist around the minicam, feeling certain he would have to fight him for it before he left.

"You're lucky that didn't hit you. What an unfortunate accident that

would have been.”

“Right.”

“Accidents like these happen all the time, you know. It’s all part of the job.” He knocked on John’s hardhat as if it were a door. “That’s why we all wear the appropriate safety gear.”

John stepped back, doing his best to hide his intimidation. “I will be reporting your violations, and I will be back to ensure you’re doing your job to correct the issues. I suggest you keep that in mind as you proceed with your project.”

Bradley nodded. “Sure thing. Be careful on your way out. I’d hate to see you fall down the stairwell or drive over a blasting site.”

He thought not to justify the threat with any response at all then opted to reply, “I’ll be back, and I won’t be alone.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

John left, wasting no time ascending the stairwell. He passed a handful of Bradley’s most intimidating workers, all of them from the debtors’ prison. They followed him all the way down. He didn’t feel safe until he had entered his car and locked himself in. When he moved to start the engine, however, he paused. What might Bradley have meant about driving over a blasting site? How hard would it have been for one of the workers to have wired a bomb to go off with the first spark of his car’s ignition? Would Bradley have allowed him to leave so easily with so much photographic evidence against him if he didn’t have some kind of back-up plan in place?

He sat in indecision for some time, beads of sweat forming all across his face and neck and slowly saturating his shirt. He loosened his tie, the hot, stale air growing more suffocating the longer he waited. His body tensed when a couple of construction workers advanced toward him. One

of them held an oversized wrench, slapping it threateningly into his open palm, while the other carried a nail gun as if it were a semiautomatic rifle. Both stared John down while they stepped slowly toward his car.

With no other option, knowing there would be no way to outrun the two brutes, John held his breath and turned the ignition. To his surprise and relief, the engine started without incident. He took a moment to catch his breath before peeling out of the small parking lot and racing down the desolate road. He glanced into the rearview mirror every few seconds to ensure no one followed, and only after he had cleared the road leading out and turned onto the highway was he able to relax.

He felt determined he would not allow anyone to intimidate him out of doing his job. He had never turned his back on a violation, and that wasn't about to change now. He was charged with ensuring the public's safety, and he took that seriously. How Bradley and those like him could feel justified in using inferior materials and inappropriate practices was beyond him. Didn't people take pride in their work anymore? Was the bottom line all that mattered? How many more buildings needed to collapse before those calling the shots saw the necessity of a few more spools of red tape? Were checks and balances truly a thing of the past?

No, he would see that the man got what was coming to him. He would see that the project was shut down until someone with healthier values could take over. That was his job, and he'd be damned if anyone got in his way.

He tried the radio in the hope that one of his stations had finally summoned the funding to return to the air. He turned the dial slowly to ensure he caught every frequency.

Static, static, and more static.

He realized he was pushing a hundred miles per hour and eased off

the accelerator. He glanced around for a patrol officer, grateful to find none in range.

The last thing he needed was another five thousand-dollar ticket for speeding.

Nothing seemed immediately amiss when he returned to the office, and when he approached his supervisor about the error messages he'd received on his tablet and the construction supervisors' claims that Rex Inspections had been bought out, the man assured him he had nothing to worry over. Still, there was an air of uncertainty all around him, leaving him no choice but to suspect more was going on than anyone there was willing to admit. He reluctantly handed over his tablet when his supervisor requested it for repairs, and he felt the heavy punch of injustice hit him at full force when the man disregarded his attempt to show him the pictures he'd taken at the construction site.

He left the office with his minicam before his supervisor could confiscate that as well, returning to his cubicle with a newfound sense of defeat. Had corporations actually accrued so much power that they could even buy off building code violations? And if so, what did that mean for the integrity of all that was to come? Would the world his son grew up in be one of rock-bottom standards, inferior business ethics, and buildings constructed with all the durability of a cracker box? Or, perhaps, might the bureaucracy of the historical corporation, the corporate bureaucracy everyone had fought so hard to dissolve only a few generations ago, prove to be the salvation of the future?

Dianne carried a burlap sales bag marked “Commu-Com Cellular Service” in one hand and Junior’s hand in the other while the elevator brought them to their floor. When the doors slid open, she looked in both directions down the hall, her paranoia over the meeting having not yet fully abated.

“Oh, just perfect,” she muttered when she spotted Jenny pacing frantically in front of her apartment door.

“It’s Auntie Jenny!” Junior blurted out before Dianne had a chance to duck back into the elevator for a stealthy retreat.

Jenny spotted them, immediately perking up. She looked a mess, her hair unwashed and her skin an even darker shade of silver-blue than Dianne had remembered. Gauging by her purple nose and puffy face, it was obvious she had been crying.

Knowing she had no alternative but to face her sister, Dianne led Junior up the hall.

Jenny welcomed Dianne with a decayed smile. “Thank God you’re finally home!”

Dianne did her best to play stupid. “What brings you to this side of town?”

“Can’t a girl drop in on her sister? I tried your phone all morning, but it kept going straight to voicemail.” She eyed the “Commu-Com Cellular Service” bag. “Guess your phone wasn’t working.”

“I had to get a new one.” She fidgeted with her keys, hesitating to unlock the door in hopes that she might be able to dismiss her sister before

entering the apartment. “I’m sorry, Jen, but now’s not a good time.”

An exaggerated look of horror struck Jenny’s gaunt face. “I was hoping you might help me out.” She fell into a pathetic whimper. “Greg and I haven’t eaten for two days, and we’re behind on half our bills—”

“I don’t have any money.”

“But we’re starving and our power’s going to get turned off if we don’t pay the bill today. I don’t know who else to turn to.”

“Have you tried Mom and Dad?”

“They aren’t talking to me right now.”

Dianne shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you. I wish I could help you out, but we’re struggling to make ends meet ourselves right now.”

Junior tugged on her hand. “What’s ‘struggling to make ends meet,’ Momma?”

“Nothing for you to worry about, sweetie.”

Jenny began to tremble violently. “Please, Dianne—”

“I’m really sorry, but I’ve had a hell of a morning and I’ve got work to do.”

Jenny leaned her back against the wall with a heavy sob and slid down to the floor. She tugged at her ragged hair and tore at her arms, screaming and wailing with frenzied abandon. “You can’t leave me like this! If you’ve got any trace of a conscience left, you won’t do this to me!”

Dianne ignored the tantrum, taking it as her cue to enter the apartment.

“Momma—”

“Auntie Jenny is very sick right now, but she’ll be okay.”

Just as she nearly had the door shut behind her, Jenny lunged to block it with her arm. She gave a dramatic cry when the door jammed it against the threshold. “You can’t just leave me like this! Please, Di—”

Dianne turned to Junior. "I need you to go to your room."

"But—"

"Now!"

His lip quivering and his eyes filled with confusion, he turned and ran to his room.

Dianne held the door, refusing to allow Jenny to pry it open. "I can't have you around my son when you're like this!"

"Like what?"

"You know exactly like what!"

Jenny lunged her shoulder against the door, kicking at the hallway carpeting for leverage. She screamed and growled. "You bitch!"

Dianne allowed just enough slack for Jenny to remove her pinned arm. "You need to leave!"

"Think you're better than me, with your nice apartment and your stupid art! How's that selling these days, by the way? Been forced to start selling on the black market yet?" She snickered indignantly. "Yeah, I've heard how important your line of work has become. Who's the family embarrassment now? Who's the bigger thorn in Mom's side? I'd rather be blue right now than covered in paint!"

Dianne forced Jenny's arm from the doorway with her shin and shut the door. She immediately engaged the deadbolt and the chain, then leaned against it while she caught her breath. Seeing her sister in such a state used to be enough to bring her to tears, but not anymore. The Jenny she'd known and loved was long gone, replaced by some kind of demon that had slowly taken hold of her psyche over the course of the past few years.

Dianne had given her money in the past, only to learn it had all gone up in smoke over the course of a day or two, and she had invited her into the apartment to offer a good meal, only to find silver picture frames,

media data files, and ceramic knick-knacks missing upon Jenny's departure. There was no trusting a serum addict, their lives ever revolving around securing their next high. Such was the cycle created by designer, black-market drugs. There were plenty of other drugs available through licensed retailers, legal drugs that businesses could regulate and tax, but according to Jenny, none even remotely compared to the serum.

"It's like witnessing heaven and hell, staring in the face of God and Satan, all at once," Jenny had said in an attempt to describe the high. "It holds the meaning of life and death. It's the most amazing experience you could ever imagine. You can't make me live without it. I can't live without it."

Dianne thought about the beautiful young woman her sister had once been and the desperate, raving monster she now was, and she could only shake her head. It was a travesty, but she had mourned the loss long ago.

She jumped with an abrupt start as Jenny began to body-slam the door.

"Dianne! Please help me!"

"Go away!"

"Not until you let me talk to you!" She hit the door hard enough to shake it, but the deadbolt held it closed.

"I'm going to call the police!"

"Thought you didn't have any money!"

"I'm willing to chance the debt!"

"You wouldn't!"

"Try me!"

Jenny stopped hitting the door, but Dianne could hear that she was still there. She knew she had no choice but to turn her away, although it was disheartening to hear the poor girl continue to sob and beg.

Junior shuffled in from his room, stopping just as he reached the end of the short hall. He still had that same confused, hurt look on his face, and he now had his yellow blanket hanging over his shoulder and a thumb in his mouth.

“Honey, I told you to stay in your room.”

“Why? Will Auntie Jenny make me sick?”

Jenny continued to sob on the other side of the door.

After a moment of thought, Dianne nodded. “Yes, she’d make all of us sick if we let her. It’s not her fault, and we still love her, but we have to protect ourselves. Understand?”

Junior nodded although his expression remained the same.

“Sick my ass!” Jenny yelled with another slam against the door.

Torn between reinforcing the door with her body and consoling her confused son, Dianne crossed to the end of the hall where he continued to stand holding his blanket tight against his chest.

“Will she have to go to the quar-tine camp?” he asked, his voice going high-pitched with increasing uncertainty.

“I don’t know, baby.” She knelt down to meet him at eye level. “You want that sandwich?”

He shrugged.

“Come on.” She led him into the kitchen and lifted him onto a chair at the table.

Jenny began to pound on the door with a heavy fist, but Dianne pretended not to hear.

She pulled the bread from the cupboard along with the peanut butter and berry jelly product from the refrigerator and rushed through the motions of making two sandwiches. She cut the crusts off one before setting it on a plastic plate and adding some imitation corn chips. She did

her best to look unaffected by Jenny's continued attempts at the door while she brought both sandwiches to the table.

Junior nibbled at his chips.

Dianne ate her sandwich, hoping Junior would follow her lead.

“Open the fucking door!”

Junior looked at Dianne, leaving the rest of his lunch untouched.

She continued to eat her sandwich. “Eat up.”

He took a solitary bite from his sandwich and chewed it slowly. He forced it down before asking, “Does being sick make her yell and scream?”

Dianne nodded.

“Can't anybody help her?”

“Don't worry about Auntie Jenny. You need to eat your lunch.”

“But she's crying, Momma!”

“That's because sometimes it hurts to be sick.” She took another bite of her sandwich with her best show of disinterested composure.

He stared down at his sandwich.

“Everything will be okay.”

Jenny slammed against the door once more, causing both Dianne and Junior to jump. “Let me in, bitch!”

He shifted his chips around the plate. “You promise?”

Dianne took a deep breath. “I promise.”

Jenny seemed to give up by the time they had finished eating, only to start back up again a few minutes later. Dianne knew the trick well; Jenny had used it on her before to lull her into opening the door to check the hall, ready to spring all the while, barging past her as soon as she had the deadbolt disengaged. Checking the peephole was pointless. Jenny knew to stoop low enough to keep from being seen. Had the apartment been in a

more upscale neighborhood, Dianne would have had access to video feed from the hallway, but such amenities were just beyond their price range.

Dianne directed Junior into the tiny spare bedroom she'd converted into an art studio, pretending not to hear the continuing commotion. She set him up at the drawing desk with crayons and a coloring book while she resumed work on an oil painting she'd started the previous day. It was a surrealist piece set in an elongated room with exaggerated angles, long, black and white tiles stretching across the floor, and mottled grey walls. There was a mouse hole in the wall on the left, with a tiny, yellow cat crouched horrified, hair on end, in front of it. To the right of the cat, looking ready to pounce, was an enormous rat with bright pink eyes, dark grey fur, and a pale, hairless tail. The rat wore a collar with a tag, while the cat had a distinctly feral, unkempt appearance.

She had already finished most of the picture, focusing today on the fine details such as the stitching on the rat's collar, the silver sheen to its fur, cracks in the tile, and the reflective glare in both of the animals' eyes. John had questioned her choice in subject matter, saying no one would pay good money for a painting of a rat, and she had defended the piece vehemently. It was the concept people would be drawn to, she explained, the reversal of roles being a symbol of a world in upheaval.

What she didn't tell him was that it was a personal statement, one that spoke volumes about a world so backwards that even art—the very essence of human expression—was in the process of losing all value.

Deep down, she knew it would be her last professional piece.

The black-clad group of four killed the engines of their sand cruisers when they reached a row of hedges bordering the laboratory's landscaped perimeter. It was dark out, but the heat of the day still lingered like a desert breeze. All four wore long sleeves, pants, ski masks, and gloves to camouflage themselves against the nighttime backdrop. Each carried a black backpack. The added weight only seemed to intensify the sweaty discomfort brought about by the rest of their heavy attire, but their thoughts remained focused on the task at hand.

Alex, the oldest of the group, led the others to the chain-link fence just beyond the hedges. In his early thirties, Alex was well accomplished for his age. He spent his days as an accountant and investor and his nights leading the jaded and the impressionable on missions he insisted were for the greater good of the nation. They followed him without question, the confidence he exuded being enough to convince them he had some kind of master plan. Tonight's would entail taking out one of several designer labs, a personal agenda he had convinced the group to agree upon as a priority. His excitement grew as they advanced toward the property. He turned to the tall, lanky young man to his right. "Get the electrical system, Norm."

Norman, the egghead of the group, hurried ahead with a small black box that had two wires protruding from one side, one red and one black, each ending with a small copper clip. He kneeled beside the fence, carefully attached the clips, the red one first followed by the black, then

flipped a tiny switch. The fence glowed with purple plasma for a few seconds, the crackle of unbound electricity rushing across the chain-link before fading into the darkness. He turned to Alex and gave a nod.

Alex pulled a pair of bolt cutters from his backpack and snapped open a vertical slit in the fence. He carefully watched his antique digital watch—perfect for hands-free time-telling—and waited for the display to shift to exactly twelve forty-five. The seconds seemed to slow, the minutes dragging as if to spite him, but the specified time finally came. A rush of adrenaline filled him as he turned back to the fence. He pulled the two jagged sides far enough apart for each of them to slip through comfortably then waved the others through before going himself.

Despite the late hour, several lights still peeked through their shaded windows. Knowing even a large and powerful corporation like Future Tech wouldn't allow such costly wastefulness as leaving on lights in vacated rooms, Alex understood the potential death toll and saw it as a necessary evil. He gritted his teeth when Sandra, the only female in the group, voiced her sudden concerns.

“You said there weren't going to be any people inside!”

He hushed her, bringing her close. “I'm sure it's just the janitors, four or five people tops.”

“But they haven't done anything wrong! Maybe we should come back later.”

He gave her a peck on the forehead in an attempt to mask his impatience. “There is no later. Once someone detects Norm's scrambler and the hole we cut in the fence, the security around this place will make it impossible for us to get this close again.”

“He's right,” Norman said softly.

“It just doesn't seem right!”

Alex paused their advance to kneel in front of her, staring into her eyes while he took her by the shoulders. “What isn’t right is what these people are doing to our next generation. They’re trying to redefine humanity, sweetheart. Designer children will be the plague of the future unless we do something about it now. Those scientists are playing God, doing everything we stand against. We can’t let them get away with it, and if it comes at the cost of a few innocent lives, so be it. Understand?”

She nodded, blinking hard. She didn’t say another word as they continued forward, but by the sound of her intermittent sniffing, Alex could tell she was crying. He decided it best not to address it; pushing the issue would only pour gasoline onto the flames. Luckily, no one else opted to say anything in his place.

With no cover to hide behind, the four scurried close to the ground, watching carefully for the guards they knew circled the building’s five-story walls. They had Tasers and zip-ties should a mistake in timing land them in one of the guards’ paths, but at least for the moment, the vicinity appeared to be clear. Still, all four kept vigilant, knowing the situation could go from smooth to rocky in a matter of seconds. They dashed the final few yards to the closest wall, where they sat in the relative safety of its dark umbra.

Sandra’s sniffing grew louder and more frequent when Alex tugged open her backpack’s zipper and pulled out the first of several blocks of C-4. He handed it to Norman, who pressed the putty against the wall, affixing it in place before connecting it to the blasting cap.

Norman patted the wall, their sign that the device was ready for detonation, and Alex led them to the next designated blasting spot. They had planned each step long before, using schematics Norman had attained by hacking into their corporate database. Taking down the entire building

required two sets explosives on each of the four outer walls. To avoid unnecessary conflict, which always created the potential for injury or loss, the timing had to be precise. They had less than a minute to set and arm each device, and with each wall they turned, chances grew of their being caught due to a guard noticing the explosives they'd already set.

Sandra became more visibly distressed with each wall they finished, and Alex's concern grew with every device they planted. He couldn't afford the repercussions of a hysterical girl holding them up, and he made the silent decision that, should she break down before they cleared the property, he would need to do whatever it took to silence her. She knew better than to give up their identities or whereabouts in the case of an interrogation, but left in the right hands, she'd be easy to break. She would buckle under the pressure, and for that reason alone, he'd have to put her down if she lost her bearings.

He liked the girl. She'd been an asset more than once on previous missions, and he knew she both loved and admired him. This one was the big test, however. This one would show whether she had what it took to sacrifice a few lives for the benefit of an entire race.

She looked as though she might fail as they turned their last two corners. She began to hyperventilate when Norman completed the final device. Her body shook profusely, and she clearly struggled to remain quiet enough to avoid detection. She paused when it came time for their retreat, and Alex took her by the hand to coax her gently away from the building.

The group hurried back to the hole in the fence, freezing when they found a security guard investigating the small crime scene. He spoke freely, his earphone evidently connected to one of his colleagues.

“Yeah, they cut through about three feet of chain-link.” He knelt

down, observing the box Norman had devised to scramble the alarm system and deactivate the electric field. “I’m going to need an investigative team. These guys are pros. We’ll need a complete sweep of the perimeter, as well as a thorough check of the building.” He turned, jumping with a start when he spotted the group.

“Code five, sector two! Repeat: Code five, sector two!”

Alex aimed the Taser, pulling the trigger as soon as the red laser hit the man’s chest. The man cried out as the electric shock streamed through his body, seizing his muscles and sending him convulsing to the ground. Alex kept the stream going while he turned to Norman. “Hit the detonator.”

Norman already had the hand-held remote ready, and with a quick flip of a switch, a series of explosions blasted through the building’s ground floor. The earth rumbled, reverberating through their bodies, and the entire property lit up as bright as day. A dark cloud emerged from the ensuing flames, rising high into the sky where it expanded into an ominous shroud that blocked out the stars and rained embers and ash.

Alex continued to shock the security guard, grinning when the man’s bladder released, his teeth grinding into one another and his body flopping against the ground like a freshly caught flounder.

“You’re going to kill him!” Sandra cried.

Alex held the trigger in place. “He’s a liability.”

“He doesn’t know what any of us look like!”

“He’s seen enough.”

The security guard grabbed the lawn with both fists, his eyes wide. He began to foam at the mouth.

“He hasn’t seen anything!” Sandra snatched the Taser gun, ceasing the assault.

Alex's other two lackeys immediately advanced upon the man, one securing his arms behind his back and the other securing his wrists with a zip-tie.

"Tie him to the fence," Alex ordered.

The two men paused.

"But when I release the scrambler cables—" Norman tried.

"Just do it!"

The two men did as directed, looping another zip-tie through the first and securing it to the fence.

"Please let me go!" the man pleaded. "I won't say anything! I promise!"

His words fell on deaf ears. The group filed out as Alex wired shut the three-foot cut as best as he could to obscure the damage, and then Norman released the scrambler's clips, black first followed by red. The electric charge once again surged through the chain-link, and the guard screamed and convulsed as it struck through his limbs and sizzled into the ground just below him. His hair singed. Black streaks burned across his skin, erratic and branched like lightning bolts. The whites of his eyes went red. He went silent, yet his body continued to twitch and jump with the current. The air smelled of scorched skin and death.

Sandra backed away, tripping over her own feet and gasping to catch her breath. She tried to say something, but only a horrified whimper emerged.

Alex grabbed her by the arm and yanked her from the scene. "Come on. We gotta go."

She shook her head although she allowed him to coax her away. She turned back, viewed the carnage, and suddenly burst into a hysterical fit of tears and moaning cries. "You . . . we killed him!"

“A message to anyone else who wants to get in our way, sweetheart.”

She broke free, still moving with them toward the sand cruisers, but at a distance from the rest of them. She pulled off the ski mask and turned it into a makeshift handkerchief. The look on her face revealed a troublesome mesh of disbelief and judgment, and Alex knew he'd have to work on her sense of business ethics if she wanted to continue living and working with him.

She hesitated when they reached the sand cruisers, eyeing the others with a newfound look of horror. She refused to make eye contact with any of them. She stood, trembling and bawling like a child while the others started their motors.

Alex felt his patience run thin, although for her sake, he attempted to remain cordial. He patted her leather seat. “Come on. Time to go.”

“I don't . . . I don't. . .” Her words trailed off into an unidentifiable whimper. She looked ready to collapse.

“Get your ass on the goddamn seat!”

Something in her appeared to snap and she immediately obeyed.

Alex took the lead, his vehicle kicking a small shower of sand in its wake. The group sped across the adjacent lots then turned down a dirt road, disappearing from the scene just as sirens began to scream in the distance.

Everything seemed darker, as though a heavy cloud had set upon their ramshackle apartment, blocking out any trace of sunlight that might otherwise have made the dim room tolerable. Jenny leaned against one arm of the sofa, Greg on the other. Neither had said a word for some time, and it was better that way. Her last comment had landed her with a black eye, which she now nursed with a chemical ice pack. There had been a hint of truth in her words when she'd begged Dianne for money, regardless of where she had planned on spending it. The electricity had indeed been cut, and the room's fans stood motionless. Nonetheless, a violent chill ran across her sweaty body, forcing her body to shiver and her teeth to chatter.

She had tried Dwayne several times, but he wasn't answering his phone. She had suggested Greg offer up her body to his connection, telling him he could do anything he wanted to her as long as he brought another gram with him. Greg had tried, but the man replied that he was in the business for cash, not cheap tricks from a burned out serum whore.

"You wanna offer her on the side as a tip, I won't complain," the man had added. "There are some things my girl just isn't willing to do, if you know what I'm saying."

"Just stop by and give us each a hit or two from your stash, then," Greg had tried. "Jenny's a good girl. She'll take anything."

The man hadn't gone for it, blaming his tight schedule and the mounting bills he needed to pay in order to keep himself out of debtors' prison.

They had called everyone they knew. Jenny had even tried going to her sister's apartment to beg for whatever she might be willing to give. Dianne had claimed to have nothing to share, which Jenny knew was an outright lie. No one had an apartment like that one without a respectable income, and no one with a respectable income was without some kind of savings. There had to be a safe in the wall, hidden behind one of those fancy paintings of hers. There was no doubt in her mind her sister was holding out.

She cried silently, afraid to set Greg off again. Whereas withdrawals made her despondent and gravely depressed, they always left him in a foul, angry mood. The physical and emotional discomfort had every muscle in her body painfully tense. Her mind felt like a jumbled mess. In every direction she looked, the darkness prevailed. Tremors turned even the simplest of tasks into a concerted effort.

Time passed at a hellish pace, the muscle spasms escalating by the hour. She tried tucking her knees up against her chest and wrapping her arms around her legs. She tried straightening her body against the sofa's lumpy cushions. She tried getting up and shuffling around the room, which did nothing to alleviate her distress and served as an unexpected annoyance to Greg.

“Will you stop pacing?” he finally snapped.

She froze where she stood, hugging her body and scratching her arms. She looked down. “I'm sorry.”

“Get me a glass of water.”

She moved to the kitchenette, found a glass that might pass for clean, and filled it from the tap. She watched the ground while she returned to the sofa and handed it to him.

He guzzled the glass and handed it back.

She took it, but continued to stand by the sofa. She felt frozen, immobilized by the hell that tore through her body and dulled her senses.

His face went tight and he stared her down as though she had just committed some unforgivable atrocity. She jumped when he yelled, “Take it back into the kitchen! What do we live in, a pig’s sty?”

She looked around the filthy apartment but kept her thoughts to herself. Instead, she returned to the kitchenette with the glass. She stopped just short of the sink, either unable or unwilling to take another step. She glanced down at her hand and the glass in its unsteady grasp, the sight suddenly strangely foreign to her. Was that her hand . . . so sickly discolored with jagged fingernails and dry, cracked knuckles? Did she recognize the glass? She looked down, assessing her threadbare clothes and worn canvas shoes. She knew who she was and where she stood, and yet she felt so completely detached from both that she had to question whether any of it was actually real.

Maybe she was dreaming. Maybe this was all nothing more than a terrible nightmare.

The glass slipped from her hand, and it seemed to move in slow motion as it fell to the linoleum floor and shattered at her feet. She stared at the shards, at the tiny slivers of light that reflected from the open window and contrasted so prominently against the shadows otherwise dominating the room.

“What the hell?” Greg yelled.

“I just dropped the glass. I’ll clean up the mess.”

He heaved an annoyed sigh. “If you miss a piece and I end up stepping on it, I swear I’ll knock your teeth in!”

She knelt beside the small spread of shards and began to gather them in her left hand, starting with the larger pieces and progressing to the

smaller ones, her right hand working clumsily to keep from slicing her fingers. She moved to the trash to dispose of them, dropping all but one large shard. She held it up to get a closer look at its razor sharp edges. She tested it against the side of her left arm and watched the thin stream of blood trickle down. She contemplated a quick slash across her wrist and her throat grew tight. It was a tempting thought, one she had considered many times before but hadn't had the guts to follow through to the end.

The end . . . what did that mean? Could her suffering be so easily expunged, or might her death only mark the beginning? She had seen visions of hell. She couldn't say for sure whether they were as real as they seemed, but the mere possibility of it was enough to make her think twice about her ideations.

She dropped the remaining shard into the trashcan and swept up the rest of the pieces.

“What the hell is taking you so long?”

“I'm done.” She dragged her feet back to the sofa and returned to his side.

He began to fidget. “I can't stand this!” He jumped to his feet and she braced herself for another blow to the face. Instead, he stormed to the door.

“Where are you going?”

He left without answering, slamming the door shut behind him.

She stayed where she was for a few minutes, terrified he might charge back in any second. When it was evident he would be gone for a while, she scrambled to the pipe to see if there was any residue they had failed to scrape out in their previous attempts.

She pulled a short length of wire from its hiding spot beneath the cushion and ran it against every surface she could reach. She stared with

an elated gasp when it emerged with a trace of the silvery goop. Smoking that minute amount would be a waste, especially as dry as it was, so she ran the wire directly up one of her nostrils and eagerly snorted the droplet. The dose was minimal, but her muscles relaxed and the pain immediately subsided. Her emotions dulled and her mind calmed. She rested against the back of the sofa and stared up at the ceiling with a relieved sigh.

“Thank God!”

She thought about her previous suicidal fantasies, suddenly grateful she had not followed through. Still, images of the linoleum pooled with her blood overtook her thoughts. She shuddered, willing them away and struggling to replace them with thoughts of happier times. She really did need to visit Dianne for reasons other than money. She missed her sister. She barely knew her nephew, who would be turning five soon. This month? Next month? She knew his birthday landed sometime during the mid to late summer. She hoped she hadn't missed it.

The serum's metallic base sifted through her sinuses, creating a post-nasal drip that tasted like blood. She had grown to like the taste. It was the taste of peace, the promise of at least a few consecutive minutes of tranquility. Her eyelids fluttered as it hit her full-force. The high that came from snorting the serum didn't last quite as long as that which came from smoking it, and it wasn't nearly as intense, but it was pure bliss compared to the withdrawals she had endured over the past twenty-four hours. Greg couldn't scrape a hit as efficiently as she could, so there was no possibility he would suspect her of attempting to squeeze one last drop from their last stash. It was hers to enjoy, hers and hers alone. Just to be safe, she put away the pipe and stashed the wire after licking it clean. He would never be the wiser.

The world faded into a dreamy semblance of reality. The apartment

was bright, white, and spotless. She sat on an antique sofa and marveled at the lovely pictures of her family decorating the whitewashed walls. The heavenly clouds rolled in, but just ever so slightly. She could still make out the room through the haze. The clouds' cool droplets tickled her legs, and she lowered herself to the floor to roll in it, reveling in the temporary break from the relentless summer heat. She breathed it in, the moist air refreshing her lungs and permeating her body. She felt reenergized and renewed. Nothing in the sober world could compare.

Just as quickly as it had come, the high began to wane. The cool mist transformed to fire, the fresh air turned into brimstone, and the sense of calm she had felt only a moment ago became angst and regret. Her lungs grew heavy and she labored to breathe. She staggered back onto the torn, ratty sofa to escape the flames, fighting a new onslaught of tears.

Where the hell was Greg? How could he leave her like that? Why wasn't he ever there for her when she needed him the most?

She cried aloud, clinging to the upholstered pillows, fearful that she might lose her faculties. "Greg!" she cried, her voice echoing through the abyss that now threatened to swallow her.

She struggled to catch her breath, wiping away her tears lest the demons see her weakness.

"Greg!"

Darkness filled the room and the demons came. They played with her bleeding nose and poked at her dry eyes. They violated her body and prodded her with their pitchforks. They crawled over her skin, giving her no choice but to scratch them away, and they scurried through her hair like vermin. She tried to shake them off and pry them from their hiding spots, but they clung to her with supernatural strength.

She rushed to the bathroom, braving the fiery carpet, and turned on

the cold shower. She tore at her clothes while she attempted to rinse the demons away, and they laughed a thousand tiny, evil laughs, some crawling into her ears for the added effect. She doused her head, her body shaking beneath the harsh spray, and she scrubbed herself head to toe with the sliver of soap from the side dish. Try as she might, however, she could not rid herself of the tiny menaces. They scurried up her nose and between her legs, pinching and poking, filling her mouth and lodging in her throat when she cried out.

She slapped at them and attempted to cough them free, which only invited more torment. She dropped down into the tub screaming and writhing, tearing at her flesh with hysterical fury.

Then suddenly they were gone.

She looked around with both relief and embarrassment, realizing they had never been there to begin with. Her arms and legs bled from self-inflicted wounds, chunks of blue flesh stuck beneath her fingernails, her body shaking in the cold water.

She turned off the shower and snatched a towel that lay on the floor beside the tub. The summer heat slowly took over as she dried her ravaged body. She turned to the mirror and stared into her eyes. “You can’t keep doing this to yourself!”

She analyzed her face, taking note of the sunken cheeks and serum-stained skin. Dark circles ran beneath puffy eyes. Her frame had become skeletal. Her addiction was consuming her from the inside out.

And yet a craving for more suddenly took hold of her thoughts.

She needed it.

Desperately.

Dianne clutched her portfolio bag tightly against her body, fighting the heavy knot tightening in her throat. She'd known this time would come, had prepared herself, or so she had thought. She struggled to hold her composure, teetering on the brink of tears, the realization hitting with such intensity that she felt as though she might crumple to the floor.

The consignment store's manager, a well-dressed woman with her bleach-blond hair twisted into a tight bun, watched Dianne from across the sales counter with genuine concern. "I really wish I could help you," she repeated for the third or fourth time. "I really do."

Dianne shook her head, still unwilling to accept the fact that her profession had finally become obsolete. It wasn't that anyone had deemed aesthetics or home décor specifically immoral or illegal; current rhetoric had simply brought the masses to the conclusion that art was a waste of precious resources and therefore decadent and distasteful. As a result, the public demand for paintings such as hers had waned rapidly and steadily into oblivion.

"I'm very sorry, Mrs. Irwin."

She grasped the bag even tighter, as though it too might disappear if she didn't hold it close. "Couldn't you just put it on display anyway, just on the off chance someone might want it?"

The manager paused for a moment, biting her lower lip. She leaned forward, resting both palms of her hands against the polished countertop. "I wish I could, but I'm afraid it would be bad for business. I'm sure you

can understand my position. The owner of this place would have my head on a stick. It's not easy keeping a small business open these days, you know, with all the warehouse Mart stores popping up everywhere.”

Dianne looked down, a sudden swell of shame forcing the tears finally to come. Not only had the demand for her work been expunged, it was bad for business. She gazed at the faux-leather bag. It was almond in color, with a simple metal clasp. Plain and simple. Humble. Modest. To think that what rested inside it now only appealed to the pretentious and the tacky was enough to make her stomach turn.

“I really wish I could help. I really do.”

Leaving the store in a daze, Dianne moved just beyond the stoop while she worked to collect her thoughts. She felt like a lost child, watching the crowds of pedestrians pass by. Suddenly, they felt intimidating, so frightening she felt frozen in her tracks. If only they knew what she carried in her bag. What would they think of her? What would they say?

She felt her face go flush when a middle-aged man glanced at her bag in passing. She wondered if he made a guess at what she had hidden there. She looked in all directions, feeling more self-conscious by the second. People were looking at her, judging her. She didn't belong there with them. They knew this. She could tell by the looks of contempt on their faces. She wiped away her tears, knowing they would only serve to attract even more onlookers.

She tried to appear as though she had a sense of purpose when she began toward the bus stop. She took small, quick steps, her tight throat causing her to feel winded and dizzy by the effort. The thought of getting home, where it was safe and quiet, brought on an impatient panic, which was only further exasperated by the knowledge that she still had to stop by

her parents' house to pick up Junior. They lived on the other side of town, which was an inconvenience on the best of days. The urge to flee made the task seem overwhelming, and she struggled to make sense of the crushing horror that the typically mundane detour now aroused from deep within her.

Luckily, the bus was on schedule and there were no conflicts. The bus was moderately full, but she was able to find a seat in the back where few people would feel inclined to watch her every nervous move. The air inside was stuffy and stale, and it felt heavy against her lungs. It was as though all of the other passengers were somehow stealing the oxygen from the compartment, leaving next to none for her. The urge to cry hit again, and she wept as quietly as she could, staring down at her bag in an effort to avoid eye contact with anyone sitting nearby.

The bus seemed especially slow that day. A rush of relief hit her when it finally reached her stop, and she hurried up the aisle and through the open door. The walk to her parents' house was only two blocks away, but the trek still felt tediously long. The blocks seemed to stretch for miles, the end nowhere in sight until she was directly upon it. She feigned a calm smile as she ascended the inclined walkway.

Her mother, Emma, answered. She was about an inch shorter than Dianne, dressed in a tea-length dress, her salt-and-pepper hair pulled back with ivory combs. The fine lines on her middle-aged face deepened with an immediate frown. "Are you alright, dear?"

Dianne shrugged as she entered. "Looks like I'm going to have to find another job."

"I tried to offer you some sensible direction back when you were a stubborn teenager intent on avoiding a real job. You only brought this on yourself, you know. I told you the gallery exhibits wouldn't last—but did

you listen to me? Of course not.”

Dianne fought back a new wave of tears. “I knew I could count on you to dump a pile of salt on my wound.”

“I’ve always only wanted the best for you and your sister. You know that.”

Dianne brushed past her to the living room, the chilled air from her parents’ expensive central cooling system freezing her sweaty skin. Junior sat in front of a massive flat-screen television, watching cartoons. Her heart sank a little more when she saw all of the paintings had been removed from the walls. One of them had been a lovely meadow scene she had given her parents last Christmas. She didn’t have it in her to ask whether it too had joined the massive recycling heaps that were the recent rage among the upper classes.

She crossed the room to Junior. “Time to go, kiddo.”

Junior turned to her, but remained seated. “Can we go after Star Rangers is over? We don’t get this channel at home.”

Dianne looked at the clock as if the time might make a difference. “We really need to go.”

Emma came in behind her. “Stay for a cup of tea. My order of chamomile-mint came in just today.”

“Please, Momma?”

Dianne let out a deep sigh. “Sure. Watch your show—but the television turns off when this show is over.” She followed Emma to the kitchen and sat down at the breakfast table while she started the tea.

“Have you talked to your sister lately?”

“Yes, actually. She came by a couple of days ago with one of her typical sob stories.”

“I hope you didn’t give her anything.”

“I’m not an idiot, Mother.”

“Well, you did take up painting as a profession, dear.”

Dianne rolled her eyes.

“Your father might be able to get you in at Par-Corp. I’m sure he could find something for you to do despite your limited education. You can type, can’t you?”

“I did earn a graduate degree, you know. Before all of this, I had plans to become a high school art instructor.”

“You might as well have attended a clown college with plans on training circus freaks. I told you something like this would happen, but you never listen!”

Dianne felt her body go tight. She considered searching her mind for another snide retort, but opted to hold her tongue lest she only prolong the subject. She watched Emma remove the porcelain kettle from the quick-hot pad and pour two cups.

“I’ll make sure to say something to your father when he gets home tonight. I don’t want to see both of my daughters prison bound.” She set the cups on the table and sat down. “You two both seem to think you’re entitled to a hand-out. Well, let me tell you right now that your father and I expect you to earn your way out of the holes you’ve dug for yourselves. And don’t count on any inheritance. Every penny we leave behind will go to the Freedom Party—because they’ll put it to good use.”

Dianne tried the tea.

“So have you given any thought to little Johnny’s birthday plans?”

“I think all we’ll be able to afford this year is the cake.” She held the teacup in front of her as if it might shield her from any additional humiliation.

“Your father and I would be happy to host the party here.”

Dianne took another sip. "I'll run it by John."

"It wouldn't be any trouble, and we could get him a couple of presents and a nice cake. Little Johnny only turns five once, you know."

"Yes, I'm fully aware of that, Mother."

"And I feel so bad you won't be able to afford presents. Why don't you let me take that painting off your hands? Some friends of Father and I are going to another anti-waste gala in a couple of days, and we really could put it to good use."

Dianne thought to stand, yell a few choice words, and leave, and yet she sat silently in her seat. The knot in her throat returned. Her palms began to sweat. Tears threatened to force their way out. She held them back, unwilling to give Emma the satisfaction.

"Name your price."

She felt dizzy with emotion as she replied, "Are you suggesting I sell it to you black market?"

"Absolutely not! I'm suggesting you gift it to me and I give you some money to help you out." She scoffed. "Black market!"

Dianne looked down at her bag, considering the deal. It pained her to think it would never rest against anyone's wall, instead thrown into a massive recycle heap like a piece of trash. Each of her paintings held a tiny piece of her soul, the love and care she put into them making each special and unique. It was hard enough selling them, but the thought of parting with one only for it to become a mockery for the purpose of a ridiculous status symbol such as a waste gala was downright painful.

"May I see it?"

She glanced back sharply. "I think I'll keep it."

"Oh." Emma finished her tea. "That's a shame."

Junior barreled in, his eyes lit up with excitement. "Momma, can I

have a Gamer Co. 3D Action Pack for my birthday?” He nearly slammed into Dianne, stopping abruptly beside her.

“A what?”

“A Gamer Co. 3D Action Pack—like on the commercial!”

The room seemed to shrink as she watched the anticipation build across his face. “We’ll see, sweetie.”

“And I want a Creamy Cream ice cream cake!”

“Those are some high-end items,” Dianne’s mother said, turning her back to the two and walking her cup to the sink.

Dianne gave Junior a kiss. “Go finish watching your show. We’ll talk about it later.”

He extended his arms and pretended to be a flying plane darting out of the room.

The knot in her throat feeling as though it were expanding down into the pit of her stomach, she opened her bag and removed the painting. She set it on the table, studying it thoughtfully as Emma returned to the table.

“What on Earth is that supposed to be? You painted a rat?”

Dianne shook her head, knowing it would be meaningless to try to explain the symbolism behind the picture. “It’s just a painting. How much are you willing to pay for it?”

“You mean how much am I willing to give you, should you decide to give your painting to me, dear.”

“Right, whatever.”

She crossed her arms. “How much cash credit do you need?”

The sun slowly dipped into the horizon, its waning light playing against a single cloud that hovered just overhead in a display of neon pinks and oranges. The colors gave way to the shadows of twilight, and darkness began to enshroud the eastern sky. Still, the heat permeated through the dusty air, vapors rising from the ground as if it were one giant grill. The breeze had subsided mid-day, leaving behind nothing but stagnation.

John leaned against the hood of his car, stealing a few minutes of quiet solitude in the desert outskirts before beginning the drive home. He had a night shift this evening at his other job working the steel press, and Dianne had expected him home for dinner nearly a half hour ago. The day had worn him down, however, and he needed to decompress before facing the ongoing trials of home life. She had called him earlier during his lunch break, babbling about the social injustice being waged against fine art and how much she hated her mother. He'd tuned out most of it, too preoccupied with his own hardships to take on anymore of hers.

He'd broken down and bought a five-pack of green cigarettes at the drug store, a selfish move given the expense, but one he justified with the onslaught of demands life had recently dealt him. "The world's going to hell," he said before taking a heavy drag and sucking it deep into his lungs. He watched the sweet smoke dissipate with his slow exhale, easing some of the tension that had been building in his back and neck. He had considered buying a six-pack of beer instead of the cigarettes, and he leaned even further back, glad he had chosen the latter. Dianne had a

problem with all forms of drugs, and the remnant of a green cigarette buzz was easier to hide than that of a drunken stupor. The last thing he needed was another lecture on coming home intoxicated.

He needed to relax.

The company had given its official announcement of the corporate buyout in a memo, one including a list of changes that would have a profound effect on nearly every employee there. His position remained as a mere formality, corporate policy replacing personal experience in structural safety and building code. He would still be expected to visit construction sites, but his tablet and checklist were things of the past. Reports were to consist of simple statements on progress, meaningless busy work only a company as big as his firm's buyer could afford. "Corporate," the new, faceless overseer, expected him to work rather as a liaison between contract holder and building manager, focusing on speed of construction rather than integrity.

The changes had hit him harder than most. He'd taken pride in his job, knowing he worked to ensure the safety of countless people, and he had been damn good at it. Some of the other inspectors he worked alongside with welcomed the change. Simply put, it was less work for the same amount of pay.

"This isn't going to be good," John had commented to one of them during their short break.

The coworker, Rich, a young man who had only worked there for two years, didn't look at all concerned. "You worry too much."

"I've already seen the corners they're willing to cut. It's enough to make me sick to my stomach."

"Corporate isn't gonna let them build anything that could get 'em sued. A company doesn't get that big on lawsuits."

John frowned. “It does if it skimps everywhere else. I’m telling you, I have a bad feeling about all of this.”

“If they’re willing to pay you to shoot the shit all day with their construction managers, I say roll with it.” He pointed to a camera in the far ceiling corner, one so small John hadn’t noticed it. “Just be grateful you still have a job. You’re not gonna find anything better in today’s economy. You’re the only guy I know willing to get stressed out over a decrease in responsibilities. Relax!” He gave John a pat on the shoulder and made a swift but smooth exit.

John stared up at the camera for at least a minute or two, feeling hot and sick. He finally turned away when his earphone alerted him of Dianne’s call.

Relax . . . seemed nearly an impossible concept these days. He wondered if the care and pride he’d had in his work might now be the very thing that would put his job in jeopardy. He knew better than to voice any further concerns. Hopefully, he hadn’t already gone too far by expressing them in the break room.

Roll with it . . . far from his mantra, but at this point, he didn’t have much of a choice.

“Fuck ’em all,” he muttered before he smoked the cigarette down to the butt and crushed it beneath his heavy work boots.

Darkness descended across the sky. He watched the stars emerge, one by one, while he waited for his buzz to wane. His earphone alerted him that Dianne was attempting to call again, and he ignored it.

As soon as it went to voicemail, she tried yet again. He answered it with a frustrated huff. “Hi, honey. I’m on my way right now.”

“Where the hell have you been? Dinner’s getting cold, and I think there’s a dead rat somewhere in the kitchen or the living room! Junior’s

freaking out over the smell and I can't find the damned thing!"

"Sorry about that. There was construction. Road construction. I had to take a detour."

"Well, where are you now?"

"On my way," he grumbled before hanging up. He shuffled to the driver's seat and started the car, not looking forward to the added drama he was certain awaited him just past his front door. His shoulders began to tense back up, the weight of the day suddenly pulling against him even heavier than before. He pulled a U-turn and sped toward the dark horizon.

He turned on the radio to the familiar sound of static and turned the dial, glancing down every few seconds to check for his favorite stations. There hadn't been anything good on for a while, but he still had to try. It was such a shame.

John's eyes held to the dial for a few extra seconds when, much to his surprise, the static fell silent. It wasn't music, but rather a talk radio show that featured talking heads covering current events. It was better than nothing. He shifted his focus back on the road just in time to see a young woman standing just yards in front of him. His tires smoked, the smell of burned rubber filling the air, and the brakes screeched as he spun off the road.

Shaky and bewildered, he held his foot to the brake pedal even after the car had come to a halt. The car sputtered and died with a release of the clutch, and he tightly gripped the wheel as if the unnecessary action might somehow calm his unsteady nerves. He turned, relieved to see he had not hit the woman.

She ran up to the car and peeked through the open passenger window. She was a pretty blonde with a thin, curvy build, dressed in moderately conservative slacks and a white blouse. John could tell she had been

crying. “Thank God! I was beginning to think no one else was out here!”

“What were you doing in the middle of the goddamn road?” he yelled, his mind still spinning.

“I thought you’d see me from farther away. I really need a ride.”

“You have a hell of a way of asking for one, sweetheart!” He stomped down the clutch and started the engine.

“Please—my boyfriend left me out here. We had a fight, and the bastard kicked me out of the car! It’s at least a few miles to the nearest bus stop, and I’ve already got blisters on my feet!” Her lip quivered and she let out a light whimper.

“I’m running late as it is. I—”

“Just drop me off anywhere on your way and I’ll take the bus from there. Please, you’ve got to help me!”

He shifted into first gear. “Fine. Get in.”

She threw open the door and hopped into the seat. “Thank you so much! I’ll find some way to repay you.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He pulled back onto the road, grateful nothing had snapped in the spin.

“Really, I mean it. You have no idea how scared and lonely I was out there.”

“I can imagine.” He turned up the radio volume in hopes of discouraging any further conversation.

An authoritative male voice cut in over the wind rushing through the windows. “—say the explosion was the work of a domestic terrorist group that has targeted two other, similar facilities over the past month. While investigators have no leads at this time, Future Tech and affiliated research labs have hired extra police protection with the hope of catching the perpetrators before they strike again. This message has been brought to

you by the Police Network, the best choice for home and business protection. Call now to switch from your current provider for a twenty percent discount on your first three months. One-year contract required.”

John switched off the radio with a groan.

The young woman seemed to take the move as an invitation to resume chatting. “I’m Samantha—and I’m typically more composed than I am right now. I can’t believe he just left me out here!”

“Hmm.”

“Well, it’s over now! The jerk doesn’t deserve me!”

He offered a polite nod.

“Nice ride. Don’t see many cars like this anymore. Did you restore it yourself?”

“Actually, I did.”

“What’s your name?”

He glanced over, entranced for a moment by the way her long hair flung through the wind. He turned to the road, half-expecting to find another hysterical woman standing in his path. “John.”

“Pleased to meet you, John.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What were you doing way out here? Work somewhere in the desert?”

“I was just looking for some peace and quiet before I went home,” he said, hoping she’d take the hint.

“It is peaceful out here.”

“Usually.”

She giggled. “I guess I kind of ruined that for you, huh? I’m really sorry about standing in the middle of the road like that.”

“Yeah.” He shrank in his seat when his earphone alerted him that

Dianne was calling him yet again. “Speak of the devil.” He glanced over. “Quiet. My wife would kill me if she found out I picked anyone up.”

She zipped her fingers across her mouth and feigned the turning and tossing of a tiny key.

He accepted the call. “I told you I’m—”

“Where the hell are you?”

“There was another detour.” He cringed, knowing she wasn’t going to buy that line again.

“You’ve got to do better than that. Why are you lying?”

“I’m not!”

“Sure. Whatever.”

“I’ll be home soon. We can talk then. I’m trying to concentrate on the road!”

“Why are you copping an attitude? What are you really doing? Tell me where the hell you are—and be straight with me—or so help me, I won’t be home when you finally do get here!”

A pang of indignant rage began to creep over him. “Is that right?”

“Junior and I will spend the night at my parents’ house!”

“Now who’s the goddamn liar!” He hung up before she could say another word. He glanced over at Samantha. “Sorry you had to hear that.”

She shrugged. “It was a lot more civil than the argument I had tonight.”

The phone beeped with another call from Dianne. He ignored it. She called again, and then again. He ripped the phone from his ear, tossed it into the glove compartment, and slammed it shut.

“You smoke my brand,” Samantha said.

“Huh?”

She pointed to the glove compartment. “The cigarettes. They’re the

same brand I smoke.”

“Oh . . . yeah. I don’t smoke very often. Wife thinks it’s a nasty habit.”

“Your wife sounds like a piece of work.”

“She can be.” He slowed the car when it reached the first crossroad and pulled to the curb. “Can you find your way from here?”

She nodded. “Thanks.” She got out, but leaned through the window after she shut the door. She pulled a business card from her purse and handed it over. “I telecommute, so this is my private line. If you ever need to book a vacation . . . or if you just want to talk . . . or get a drink or a smoke or something, give me a call.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Then don’t call.” She flashed a smile before heading down the sidewalk.

He looked at the card, which indicated she was a travel agent for Express-Co Flights and Cruises. He flicked it against his free hand a few times, then opted to tuck it away in the glove compartment beside his still-beeping phone.

Jenny picked at the sores on her arms while she waited for the bus to reach her stop. Greg had stolen a few high-end items from a nearby electronics store, and now it was her turn to finish the job. She had a burlap bag at her feet, and tucked in with the items was what they referred to as a “store lot receipt.” The scheme was simple, although it also required a decent amount of skill and tact to pull off. One of them would scour the lot surrounding the store for discarded cash credit receipts. It was common for people to drop them or toss them into the nearby trashcan, and unless a receipt had markings from being stepped on or covered in trash, it was easy enough to track down the listed items by UPC.

Greg had carried the burlap bag in his shirt, removing it when no one seemed to be watching and filling it with the items on the receipt: a Smart-Voice earphone, A Compu-Corp electronic tablet, and a ream of white paper. He’d retreated to the men’s room, removed the security devices, and pretended to be a paid customer who happened to take a pit stop before approaching the register. It was a scam they had performed numerous times, although they limited themselves to once or twice a month to reduce suspicion. This last time, however, a loss prevention officer had approached him while he’d attempted to return the items for cash credit. The man had caught Greg on camera and threatened to use force unless he refused to surrender himself peacefully.

On impulse, Greg had punched the officer squarely in the solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him before snatching the bag and darting

out. A manager had given chase, but Greg had managed to outrun him. He knew they'd be watching, waiting for him to make another attempt at the return, so he sent Jenny with the hope that she might have better luck. Defrauding stores always made her nervous, but when the withdrawals threatened to suck her down into that seemingly endless pit of despair, she was willing to do anything to get her hands on another gram—and the payoff from this particular collection of items could keep her high for at least a week.

She felt her stomach begin to twist into knots when she saw her bus stop up ahead. It felt as though everyone sitting nearby stared at her. Was it because she was the only person there with serum skin, or did they sense her nervousness? She steadied her breath and rubbed her sweaty hands together. She hated this part, the anticipation of getting in and out without giving herself away. She had never been caught, although Greg had a couple of times, once since they had started dating. They hadn't had the money to pay his fines and court fees, so the judge had sentenced him to five months of hard labor to work it off. Jenny had prostituted herself in order to get by until he was released, and when he finally came home, he brought scabies and head lice with him. Ridding themselves of the vermin had been a task in itself, and they ended up burning all of their clothes and furniture before they were able to eradicate them for good.

The bus rolled to a stop and Jenny made her way to the door. She paused, noticing a rally being held between her and the electronics storefront, and considered the added security that might have come with it.

“Getting off?” the bus driver snapped.

Ignoring him, she analyzed the scene for another several seconds before deciding to go ahead with the plan.

Perhaps she might even use the crowd to her advantage. She stepped

off the bus and slowly approached the mass of people surrounding a man standing on a wooden crate. She joined the audience with feigned interest, searching for the extra officers. Sure enough, there were two policemen overlooking the small event, both standing on the crowd's periphery.

The man on the crate was good looking and charismatic. By his fine-tailored clothing, Jenny could tell he had money. He gripped the onlookers with his every word, and curiosity over the power he commanded held her for a moment in the crowd. She studied the spellbound faces on either side of her while the man spoke.

“The system is broken, my friends,” he began. “Every one of you is merely a tragedy away from debtors’ prison! What good is insurance—health, police, fire—when you cannot afford the deductibles? What good are public services when they’re based only on private interests? What good is the free market, when massive corporations are becoming the only ones able to afford to stay in business?”

The crowd cheered and the officers looked ready for a riot.

The man continued, “There was a time, many years ago, when personal liberty came first in this country. Sadly, most of us don’t even know what that means anymore. If our founding fathers could see us today, they would be overwhelmed with grief. This is not the America of yesteryear; it is the soiled remains of a vision gone terribly wrong!”

The crowd cheered again, but he did not pause.

“The private sector has stolen the people’s liberty. It has put a price tag on our basic rights. How many of you know that children used to attend primary and secondary school for free? How many of you read about tax-paid public services in your history books? That’s right—there was once a time when people could call the police without worrying about insurance or co-pays.” His voice began to grow louder with each

successive sentence. “There was a time when people could count on firefighters to put out fires instead of setting them for profit. There was a time when commerce truly was free, when you could sell your neighbor your used sofa without being arrested for bypassing the second-hand sales companies, when entrepreneurs didn’t have to pay off their corporate counterparts, when everyone had an equal chance at living the American Dream!”

The crowd roared.

“Make no mistake, my friends: we’ve happened across one another here today for a reason. There are no coincidences. You are meant to be a part of the solution. Your voice will be the voice of change. Together, we’ll take back our liberty!”

The officers began to inch their way through, looking even more ready to strike. Jenny took that as her cue to leave. She made a show of disinterest and walked off, her nerves once again getting the better of her when she reached the electronics store entrance. She stared through the entry, hoping to catch sight of a cashier who looked especially tired or apathetic. The automatic sliding glass doors opened; she shivered with a blast of air conditioning. She thought about Greg, how disappointed in her he would be if she returned home empty-handed, and she thought about having to endure an entire afternoon and evening without a fix. There was no real choice in the matter.

She did her best to look confident and worry-free as she strode to the credit cashier counter nearest to the exit. The young man slouched with his arms crossed, and he had a flat, bored look on his face while he glanced at the clock with obvious disdain. He stood upright when she approached his counter.

His greeting was dull and rehearsed. “Good afternoon. Thank you for

shopping at Mac's Electronic Warehouse. How may I help you?"

She set the bag on the counter and dug out the receipt. "I need to return these." She smiled nervously.

He pulled the items from the bag and looked at the receipt. "I need a manager to return merchandise over five thousand dollars." He hit the com button on the collar of his polo shirt and called over the loud speaker: "Manager to counter one, manager to counter one."

She clasped her hands together to hide the fact that they had begun to shake. "You should be able to do your own returns regardless of the price. What's the matter—don't they don't trust you?" She laughed as if she had made a joke.

He didn't look amused. "Store policy."

She watched the manager emerge from his office and join the cashier behind the counter. "A return?"

"You must be psychic," Jenny said with another nervous laugh.

He looked over the items. "I'm going to have to pull a cash card from the safe. That is, of course, unless you want store credit."

She shook her head. "No, I'd prefer a cash card."

"No problem. Just give me a couple of minutes to run the transfer."

He returned to his office and shut the door behind him.

"Shouldn't be long," the cashier said, his tone suddenly becoming suspiciously friendly.

The knot in her stomach gave way to nausea, something within the far reaches of her gut telling her the jig was up. Her anxiety grew with every passing minute, her chest going so tight she felt as though she might pass out. She did her best to look calm, but she knew she was doing an increasingly poor job at it. She pretended to scratch her forehead while she wiped away a bead of sweat. Had she been profiled for her blue skin, or

did they know more than they were letting on? Maybe she was just being paranoid? She thought to run, but her desperation held her there. She couldn't afford to err on the side of caution.

Finally, the manager emerged, just in time to meet a policeman at the entrance. He whispered something to the man, and then they both turned to Jenny.

Her first impulse was to run, but they blocked the door. She took off in the other direction, hoping to come across a fire exit. The officer gave chase. She began to cry, a desperate, helpless feeling taking hold when his nearing footsteps let her know he was bridging the gap between them. Just as she spotted the fire exit, the officer grabbed her by the shoulder and took her to the floor. She screamed, doing her best to fight him off, but he had her in cuffs in a matter of seconds.

“I didn't do anything!”

She resisted as he steered her toward the entrance, falling limp and forcing him to drag her as dead weight. “The manager has you on tape with the guy who stole all that stuff. He says you two have ripped off this store before.”

“It wasn't me!”

“Save it for the judge.”

She felt sick and dizzy, the aisles spinning all around her. The reality of her arrest hit like a kick in the chest, and suddenly the only issue of importance became finding a way to take back her freedom. “Please don't take me in! I can't afford the fees!”

“But you can afford the serum alright. Cheer up. This is probably the best thing that could happen to you.”

She tried leaning her heels into the floor, but the surface was too slick for her to slow their pace. “Please—I don't want to go to jail!”

He scoffed. “Who does?”

Employees and customers alike watched the officer escort her out. She glanced up only briefly then hung her head while she passed the registers and exited the store, the officer’s grip tight around her bony, scabby arm.

As soon as they stepped outside, she saw that the rally had spun out of control. It seemed Freedom Party extremists had crashed the party, some of them attacking individuals from the crowd while others paraded around the melee with signs that read, “Fascist pigs,” “Income taxes died for a reason,” “Only socialists support government-run programs and income tax,” and “Save our schools—keep the government’s nose out of the private sector!”

The officer locked Jenny in the back of his car before stopping by the rally in attempt to pick up a few extra cash credits by helping to contain the crowd. He spoke for a moment to the distraught storeowner, threw his hands into the air, and returned to the car. He slammed the door with an animalistic growl. “Cheapskate!”

He stomped down on the accelerator and the car veered off down the street.

The precinct was hot and crowded, and the air in Jenny’s cell was intolerably stagnant. She shared the fully enclosed room with three other women, all of whom looked at least as blue and sickly as her, if not worse. One of them stayed on the bench in the far corner, crying and rocking while she babbled incoherently. The two others sat together on the floor, one of them braiding the other’s long, auburn hair. Jenny paced, chewing her fingernails.

The uniform the intake officers had forced her to wear was made out

of a stiff, itchy material, and the elastic waistband puckered against her skin in a way that made her feel as though something were pinching her from all angles. Her body craved more serum and her mind craved the high, and she could tell that the girl in the corner was also in a state of acute withdrawal. She knew that would be her in a day if she couldn't find a way to get another fix. Already, the panic of sobriety had begun to take hold.

She turned to the sound of the heavy door being unlocked. A tall, robust female officer stepped in, holding the door open just wide enough to accommodate her stocky frame. "Jennifer Emerson?"

Jenny met her at the door. "That's me."

"You can make your phone call now." She allowed Jenny out of the cell, slammed and locked the reinforced door, then led her to a room that had several old-fashioned telephones lined up along a wall. "You only get one call, so make it count."

Jenny thought about calling Greg, knowing he had to be worried, but she reconsidered with the realization that he would not have the means to pay for her release. Instead, she opted to call her parents, hoping she might beg her way out.

Emma answered. "Hello?"

"Mom, it's me. I'm in serious trouble."

"What on earth did you do now?"

"Got popped for shoplifting—"

"Unbelievable!"

"—but I didn't do anything! Greg told me to return a few things to the electronics store. I didn't know they were stolen!"

"Sure you didn't!"

"Mom, you have to believe me!"

“I don’t have to do anything! If you want to act like a junkie, you have to pay the consequences of being a junkie. I can’t help you.”

“Is Dad there?”

“No, your father’s at work. Remember what that is—work? It’s what respectable people do to earn a living.”

“Mom—”

“I need to go. I’m so disgusted with you I could vomit!”

“Please—”

The line went dead. Jenny hung up and quietly allowed the officer to return her to her cell. Her eyes welled up in anticipation of the hell that was to come.

Not even the inviting aroma of Dianne's homemade stroganoff was able to rid the kitchen of the still-unidentified stench. She had doused the living room with air freshener, and John had searched every inch of both rooms, unable to locate the source. They'd encountered a dead rat before, and the smell was unmistakable, but rodents hadn't been a noticeable problem ever since the super had employed a new pest control company to rid the building of them. Dianne hoped they hadn't found a new entry point and begun to nest in the walls. If they had, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find them without tearing up half of the apartment.

John had arrived home late again, but not nearly as late as he had the night before. She'd made him sleep on the sofa for that—and for lying to her. The reek of green cigarettes had emanated from his hair and clothes, and she had identified immediately the physical signs that he had gotten stoned. He'd tried to deny it at first, but came clean after only a short interrogation.

She had dinner on the table at promptly six o'clock, although eating was difficult given the nauseating smell. All three picked at their food despite stroganoff being a family favorite. Dianne's lost appetite was compounded by nervousness over starting her new job in the morning. Her father had come through, finding her a position as a file clerk. It was menial work at best, offering her none of the creative freedom she craved, but it would supplement John's income enough to keep the bills paid while allowing them to enroll Junior in school without any added financial

hardship.

Junior set down his spork with a scowl. “Can I go play?”

“You need to eat a little more,” Dianne said, although she too felt like abandoning her meal. She took a massive bite to offer him a positive example.

“Just don’t breathe in through your nose,” John said, his voice obscured as if he had a cold. “Can’t taste much of the stroganoff, but at least the smell won’t interfere.”

Junior took another bite, looking not at all pleased with the suggestion. “Why can’t you make it go away?”

“I’ll check around the apartment one more time after dinner, buddy, but I don’t think I’m going to find anything.”

Dianne forced down another bite. “It won’t last forever, sweetie.”

Junior looked ready to cry.

John pushed away his plate and stood. “That’s it—we’re eating out.”

“Can we afford it?”

He shrugged. “We can try that new warehouse store that has the fast food outlets, the Food-Mart. I hear they have very reasonable prices.”

Junior clasped his hands together, staring her down. “Please, Momma?”

She sat back, throwing her napkin onto her plate. “Just give me a few minutes to put away the leftovers.”

All three were ready to go in less than ten minutes, and they hurried through the front door as if escaping something far worse than an offensive smell. Junior ran up and down the hallway while John locked the door, and Dianne stormed after him to steer him toward the elevator.

She froze, however, when she passed Mr. Smith’s door. She sniffed, then leaned closer to the door and sniffed again. She turned to John,

feeling faint. “I don’t think we’re dealing with a dead rat.”

The responsibility of calling and paying a police company in circumstances such as a suspected dead body in an apartment building fell solely on the super’s shoulders, although part of the cost would find itself divided among the residents’ rent statements over the next few months. Dianne had taken Junior to her parents’ house to shield him from the event, leaving John behind as a witness. The police would want to question him since he was the one who had contacted the super, and investigators would likely be in and out for the better part of the night.

The reek of death flooded into the hallway as soon as the super opened the door. John staggered back, fighting his gag reflex, when it hit him. It made his eyes water and his body go weak. The living room light had been left on, and the apartment was immaculate save the bodily wastes lying below Mr. Smith’s hanging body. He had devised a noose out of a leather belt, which he’d attached to a ceiling fan. Somehow, it had held his weight after he’d kicked away the stepping stool and strangled to his death.

An officer carried a suicide note, now in a protective plastic baggie, to John and the super, who stood together just outside the door. “Can either of you make any sense of this?”

John and the super both studied the handwritten document, which read:

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we-
Of many far wiser than we-

And neither the angels in heaven above,
Nor the demons down under the sea,
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.
For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling- my darling- my life and my bride,
In the sepulcher there by the sea,
In her tomb by the sounding sea.

Both men stared at the lines, perplexed. Had this served as Mr. Smith's suicide note? John read it a second time, but still he had no idea what Mr. Smith could have meant by it.

An older woman whom John hadn't known but he'd seen having coffee with Mrs. Smith and Dianne stepped beyond the rest of the group of onlookers. She read over John's shoulder before turning confidently to the officer. "Poe."

The officer's brows drew together, his face riddled with confusion. "Poe?"

"He was a nineteenth-century poet and storyteller. Carl and Janet were both avid readers. This is the ending of her favorite poem. She'd read it to me many times."

"Do you know what it means?"

The old woman nodded. "It's about love so strong it defies even death." She looked down with a sigh. "The narrator sleeps each night at

his deceased soul mate's tomb, waiting for his own death to reunite them." She began to weep, retreating to her husband standing in the crowd, who took her into his arms and held her close.

The officer followed her for further questioning, but she was too upset to offer any additional insight and he quickly gave up on her. He returned to John and the super, glancing down at the list of questions that remained on his electronic tablet.

"How well did you know the deceased?" he asked both of them.

"No better than I knew any of the other tenants here," replied the super.

John turned to the grieving woman, then back at the officer. "My wife had been friends with Mrs. Smith. They used to take turns going over to one another's apartments for coffee. Neither of us really knew Mr. Smith. I know he worked long hours for an electronics manufacturer."

The officer inputted John's answer. "Do you know the company's name?"

John shook his head.

"Did he seem like the kind of guy who might take his own life?"

"I don't know. Like I said, I didn't really know him."

He turned to the super. "What kind of tenants were the Smiths?"

The super shrugged. "Quiet, never any problems, paid their rent on time. The place was always very tidy when I went in to do repairs."

"And how often was that?"

"Well, they had a leaky faucet a few months ago. They needed new flooring last year. Just typical maintenance."

"And was there something specifically wrong with the flooring? Any blood?"

The super shook his head, taken aback. "Blood? No . . . they'd had a

toilet back up and the linoleum was molding and starting to peel.”

The officer nodded while he took his notes.

“Why would there be any blood?”

The officer looked up from his tablet. “You never know what skeletons a seemingly nice couple might be harboring in their closet. I’m just covering all my bases. Standard procedure.”

“They were good people!” the crying woman shouted from her spot in the small crowd.

The officer ignored her, instead shifting his attention back to John. “And you were the one to discover the body?”

John suddenly felt like he had been immersed in the bright, white heat of a spotlight. “We could smell him from our apartment. We’d assumed it was a dead—”

“What made you suspect the Smiths’ apartment was the source?”

John gave the man a frustrated stare while he repeated, “We’d assumed it was a dead rat, but we couldn’t find anything in our apartment. This evening, we realized the smell was even worse out here in the hall and called the super when we knocked and no one answered.”

“So you weren’t actually the one to discover him?”

“No, the deadbolt lock was engaged, and only the super has the keys, so I immediately called him over.”

The super took a step backward when the officer turned again to him.

“You’re the only one who could have locked the door from the outside?” the officer asked.

“Yes, but—”

“Can you think of any reason anyone might have wanted both the Smiths dead?”

He shook his head, looking just as nervous as John had been a

moment ago.

The officer turned to John just long enough to hand him a business card and a discount flyer for his company's services. "Call me if anything else comes to mind."

John took the card and hurried from the scene, hoping he might clear the elevator to the parking garage before the officer found a reason to call him back. He called Dianne as soon as the elevator doors finished closing.

She answered with an irritated huff. "Hi, John."

"Is something wrong?"

"My parents are at it again."

He felt his body tense. Witnessing those two argue was tantamount to having one's teeth drilled without Novocain—not only was it painful, but there never seemed to be any end to it in sight. Emma's voice had a way of transforming into an unnaturally high-pitched shriek, and Herald always responded with just the right words to wind her up even tighter. They didn't care who bore witness to it, and inevitably they would badger him and Dianne into picking sides.

"John, you still there?"

"Yeah . . . I'm here." He cringed at the sound of Emma screeching something in the background. "Where's Junior?"

"I stuck him upstairs in one the guest rooms with a television. He's starting to get cranky, but for now the cartoon channel is keeping him out of the line of fire."

"The line of fire?" No sooner had he finished his question when the sound of something shattering through the speaker forced a pained wince. So, it was one of those nights. . . The thought alone of joining that chaos caused him to break out in a new layer of sweat. The craving for a cigarette hit him, and he decided it best to calm himself with a smoke

before he left.

“Is it safe to come home yet?”

He cleared his throat. “Well . . . they still haven’t removed the body, if that’s what you’re asking.” He covered his earphone to obscure the elevator bell ringing to announce it had reached to garage. He stepped out and began toward his car.

“Well, can you at least come and pick us up? I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

John had been through this scenario enough times to know it was never that simple. One of two situations would inevitably unfold. The first possibility would entail driving across town and honking the horn several times to let them know he was there, and then Emma would eventually burst out through the front door, charging up to him and screaming about his not having the decency to come to the door. In the other, he would go to the front door in the hope of immediately disengaging Dianne and Junior from the mayhem, only to find—through a combination of Herald’s ineptness, Emma’s passive-aggressive mind games, and Dianne’s futile attempts at diffusing the situation—he himself pulled in and trapped there for a tedious and lengthy period of time. Not even the best of escape artists would be able to find an out when sucked into one of their shamelessly heated fights.

“John?”

He cleared his throat. “They’re not letting anyone leave. It’s just a mess here. I’ll come and get you two as soon as I can.”

John could hear Dianne’s mother screaming into the earphone, “You agree with me, right? It’d serve Jenny right to spend a few months on a goddamned work crew! Right? Am I right?”

“I’m on the phone, Mother!” In her anger, Dianne’s voice became

frighteningly similar to Emma's.

John's body reacted to the shrill sound by breaking into a heavy sweat. He wondered if Emma had always been so short-tempered and antipathetic, and the thought of Dianne ever evolving into such a hateful banshee nearly sent him into a state of panic. They'd both changed, for better and for worse, over the six years they'd been together, and while Dianne remained kind-hearted and moral, she had grown increasingly neurotic and clingy. A slippery slope of dysfunction sent a sudden, desperate impulse to end the call and organize his thoughts.

Her voice quavered when she shifted her focus back to him. "Just get here as soon as you can, okay?"

"I'll call you when I'm on my way." He hung up and got into his car, where he sat for a few minutes, frozen in contemplation.

He opened the glove compartment for a cigarette then searched for his lighter. Dianne's screaming voice continued to echo through his thoughts, prompting a disturbed shudder. Still reeling from the chaos upstairs, he hadn't yet decided how long he would need to decompress, but he knew he needed to distance himself from all immediate stressors if he was going to survive this evening's night shift. Dianne was just going to have to wait, and to hell with her if she had a problem with it. He found the lighter and took a deep, relieved breath with his first drag.

The unexpected shock of his earphone beeping—alerting him to a call back from Dianne, caused him to drop his cigarette. He sprang upward, groping for the unlit end and cursing aloud at the sight of the small burn hole it left behind on the seat. He made no attempt to hold back his frustration when he answered. "What now?"

"I was just calling to see if you wanted to eat here so we don't have to grab a bite on our way home. Mother has a casserole in the oven. It's

almost done, but we can wait for you if you want.” The din of screams and shouts continued in the background.

“I’ve lost my appetite.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Anything else?”

She sighed. “No.”

“I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

“Okay.” This time, she hung up on him.

He took a few consecutive drags and closed his eyes for a long, contemplative moment. He started the engine and tried the radio. Nothing. He checked the time . . . only an hour and a half before his night shift. He pulled Samantha’s business card from the open glove compartment and took a few more drags while he studied it.

He questioned himself while he dialed her number, even tried talking himself into hanging up before the call connected, and yet he remained on the line, his heart pounding in guilt-ridden anticipation.

Sandra sipped leisurely at a glass of red wine while she tossed a green salad in balsamic vinaigrette. Alex had the television on in the living room, and although she could hear it from where she was, he seemed to feel the need to offer her a running commentary while the story on their most recent feat aired.

Future Tech released this video footage of the terrorists earlier today. .

“They released the video of us running around in our masks—and now we’re apparently terrorists! Ha!”

The company is offering a five hundred thousand-dollar reward for any information leading to the group’s arrest. . .

“Hear that, Sandy? They’ve got a half-mill on our heads!”

She rolled her eyes, unable to share in his amusement. “Yeah, I can hear the anchor.” For a moment, she contemplated calling them in herself, but reconsidered when she could not come up with a scenario that didn’t involve her own arrest. No one would believe her if she tried to explain herself. No one would want to entertain the possibility that she stayed with Alex and his group only because she felt she had no other option. She had no one else, and living with a fanatical activist was better than rotting on the streets.

He’d begun talking about pushing to even more extreme measures, growing increasingly fixated with the political involvement in large corporations like Future Tech. The Freedom Party incumbent candidate for National CEO owned a particularly large share of stock in the

company and was a prominent supporter of eugenics and similar scientific atrocities that Alex described as crimes against humanity.

Alex found the prospect of recruiting volunteers for suicide missions to be particularly exciting. Sandra had been blatantly vocal about her disapproval of such ventures, and she had succeeded in at least postponing his approaching the group about it. The closer they got to the National CEO debates, however, the more often he wanted to talk about it. Each time he brought it up, she asked which of his loyal followers he would be willing to sacrifice in order to accomplish such a feat. He never could give a straight answer, although he did express the impact it would have on the political climate. If someone felt so strongly against the direction the Freedom Party had taken to be willing to die for it, he reasoned, perhaps the masses would reconsider their loyalties.

Talk about it had been disturbing to say the very least, but it was that final piece to his character she needed in order to see him for the madman he was.

Alex had been her knight in shining armor when he had plucked her from the streets. He had offered her a warm bed, a wardrobe filled with clean clothes, and a state-of-the-art kitchen packed with food. It had all seemed too good to be true, a dream from which she would inevitably wake, so when his true nature rose to the surface, she wasn't at all surprised. All the same, she resented him for pulling her into his twisted crusade, although she did not have it in her to leave him over it. She couldn't possibly return to the streets, where the only means of survival were either disgusting or degrading. The only shelter in town had closed when donations had become too scarce, although she had preferred the streets because the shelter typically harbored lice and other parasites. She never would have imagined herself in such a place before fate had thrown

her in headfirst.

No one ever plans to become homeless.

She had once stood firmly on her own two feet, working as a waitress for a privately owned, high-traffic café. The money hadn't been phenomenal, but it had paid the bills. She'd enjoyed interacting with the customers, many of whom were regulars, and her boss had been a lighthearted, elderly woman who had opened the restaurant out of a true passion for good, healthy, affordable food.

All of that had fallen suddenly to the wayside when a snowboarding accident had landed her in the hospital. She had broken her arm and two ribs, one of which had punctured a lung. She had been up to date on her health insurance, but the deductible had been far from within her means. No sooner had she left the hospital had a collections agent come to take her to debtors' prison. The judge in charge of her case, cold and unmoved by her hard-luck story, had sentenced her to six months of hard labor.

Her assignment had placed her on a landfill crew, where she spent twelve hours each day digging through, sorting, and hauling trash into various dump trucks that would relocate it to a hollowed-out mountain. Once cleared, the dump would serve as a corporate construction site and the crews reassigned to digging foundations and welding metal beams. The smell had been nauseating, the winter work conditions unforgiving, and the fifty-pound bags of trash she had to drag all day put her back in relentless spasms. Breakfast and dinner, which were served directly before and after the daily details, had consisted invariably of a soybean and potato mash. Drug-resistant staph, which caused massive boils and sepsis, had found its way through her crew, sending nearly half the workers to the quarantine camp before it had run its course. Suicide had taken several others. She had considered taking her life many times, the end to her six-

month hell feeling so far beyond reach she had felt certain she wouldn't survive.

The six months finally did come to pass, however, and the immediate joys of freedom soon gave way to the long-term horrors of homelessness. She returned to civilization to find her job filled, her apartment rented to someone else, and all of her earthly possessions gone. She owned only the clothing in which she had been arrested, her shelter consisted of commercial doorway eaves and alleyways, and she ate only what she could scavenge. She bathed herself in public bathroom sinks, washing her hair with hand soap and combing it with her fingers. She interacted with the rest of civilization only to beg for enough money to buy a fresh meal, although few people proved willing to offer any charity.

Her days became a constant struggle to avoid quarantine-bound illnesses and the homeless capture squads. The sweatshop working conditions were only a small step up from the prison camps; unlike a prison camp sentence, however, no one ever left the sweatshops. It was society's punishment for those who were foolish enough to slip through the cracks, for those careless enough to expect others to pull them out of destitution through socialistic handouts. It helped to reduce corporate spending, which kept prices down for paying consumers. More importantly, it kept the homeless populations to a minimum—at least in theory.

Just when she had resigned herself to the possibility that she would grow old and die either on the streets or in a sweatshop, Alex had come to the rescue. She'd seen him approach from across the street, and her first impression was one of confidence and power, definitely the type of person who could give up a few cash credits to help a starving young woman. She searched the immediate area for any police presence, a return to the prison

work crews ever present in her mind. The last thing she needed was an arrest for pan-handling.

They'd made eye contact as soon as he had reached the curb, but she'd waited for him to near her corner before approaching him for a spare cash credit or two.

"Is there something keeping you from getting a job?" he'd asked.

"Would you hire someone who came into an interview looking like this?"

He'd taken a long look at her dirty, threadbare attire and unkempt hair before replying, "You don't have anything better to wear?"

"This is all I've got. Please, I'm really hungry. Can you help me out?"

"Well, I have a firm rule not to hand out credit. Too many junkies and alcoholics out here, and I refuse to feed anyone's addiction."

"Do I look drunk or high to you?"

He'd paused, his eyes fixed on hers in contemplation. "Tell you what: I'm on my way to the Golden Tiger for lunch and could use some company. Do you like stir-fry?"

At first, she'd thought the offer a sick joke. The Golden Tiger was one of the most expensive restaurants in town, the gourmet Mexanese cuisine well outside most people's budgets. She'd never been inside, and she'd never met anyone who had. "Are you serious?"

"If it's food you want, not drug money, you'll come."

She'd followed silently behind him, too shocked to say anything else. When they had reached the restaurant, an overwhelming sense of inadequacy fell over her. She'd looked down at her ragged clothing, knowing the dress code would prompt the host to turn her away upon first glance, and she'd hesitated at the door.

"Is something wrong?"

She'd motioned to her clothes, fighting the urge to cry.

"My parents are good friends with the owners. I'm sure I can convince them to make an exception."

Sure enough, he'd convinced the host, with whom he was on a first name basis, to allow him to sneak her to a table in the back of the dining room. They had received looks from nearly every table they passed, but their server had done her best to pretend not to notice Sandra's unsuitable appearance.

Alex had lavished her with fine wine, decadent food, and compassionate company. When they had finished dining, he set his cloth napkin over his plate before leaning forward. "I've been looking for a housekeeper, someone to cook my meals and do my laundry. Would you like the job?"

Her body had gone weak, the possibility of an income—any income—rendering her dizzy with excitement. "You're offering me work?"

"I can give you a room and a decent wage. You'll be on a probationary period for three months, during which time I reserve the right to turn you away without notice should the arrangement not work out."

She'd burst into tears, unable to hold them back any longer. Still, she'd questioned his motives and kept her guard while en route to her new home, praying she hadn't just fallen into the trap of a sadist or serial killer who hunted homeless women.

His house was more lavish than anything she had ever seen, and his demands were fair and few. She had watched her back constantly at first, waiting for him to turn on her, but it seemed his intentions were pure enough. Within a few weeks, however, she'd graduated from housekeeper to lover, and before she knew it, she was an active player in his personal

war against what he called “the evils of technology and right-wing political extremism.” He had a way of talking people into nearly anything, making them see reason in his cause amidst his various plans despite any differing personal values. She had gone with him willingly to Future Tech, seeing the importance and purpose to the campaign, but had felt overwhelmed with guilt afterward for the part she’d played in it.

There was no turning back at this point. She’d seen too much, and her participation in this most recent operation had ensured she wouldn’t dare betray him. He knew her experience in the debtors’ prison would deter her from taking any chances that might land her in the criminal penitentiary, and she resented him for using that against her. She wasn’t an especially smart woman, but she wasn’t stupid either.

“Come in here for a minute!” he yelled. “You have to see this!”

She wiped her hands with the dishtowel as she made her way into the living room. She froze at the sight on the enormous television anchored to the wall. A recording played footage from a security camera facing the laboratory. She could just make out their four shadows hurrying from the scene.

The anchor continued: Unfortunately, the security guards did not detect the breach until it was too late and were unable to clear the building before the explosives reduced the structure to rubble. I must warn you, what you are about to see is disturbing. Parental discretion is advised.

The camera shook with the first explosion, which blew away the building’s right side. Through a few of the lit windows, Sandra could see a handful of desperate people attempting to escape. The second explosion caused a cloud of smoke and debris to flow from the back of the building. The third explosion went off, taking out the left side, and then the fourth disabled the camera with a horrifying rumble.

In all, seventy-three people were killed in the explosion. Again, Future Tech, in coordination with the Police Network, is offering a five hundred thousand-dollar reward for any information leading to the perpetrators' arrests. . .

Her throat suddenly felt so tight she thought she might smother. Tears formed in her eyes and quickly spilled down her face.

Alex slapped his thigh with a laugh that made her shudder. "We've got them scared now!"

She returned to the kitchen in a horrified daze, feeling almost as though she had become detached from her body. The world felt foreign, her own thoughts a jumbled, nonsensical mass. She glanced down at the counter, her unsteady hand clasping around the grip of the sharp steel knife she had used to dice the onion and tomato.

She wondered what he would do if she came up behind him with the knife behind her back, what his response would be if she attempted to attack him by surprise. Would she stand a chance, or would she only injure herself in an attempt to slice his throat? The possible scenarios played through her mind, her apprehension growing the longer she thought about it. She moved the blade to her wrist, daring herself to slash it instead.

"Sandy, where'd you go?" he called out.

As though the sound of his voice snapped her out of one spell and initiated a new one, she set down the knife. "I'm finishing dinner."

"Did you see the recording?"

The image replayed in her mind's eye, the people running for the windows staring out at her. She blinked hard. "Yeah . . . saw it."

"Crazy, huh?"

She worked to steady her voice. "Yeah . . . crazy."

Dianne yawned, too tired to feel anything more than apprehension about her first day working at her father's firm. She never slept well at her parents' house, especially when they were up half the night arguing. John had called after Junior had fallen asleep, and by that point, she was so livid she told him he could take his ride home and shove it. There was no way the police would have held him up that long, and he had sounded thoroughly stoned. She had tried to call him on it, but he'd refused to admit any wrongdoing. She had no idea how she was going to deal with him that evening, and the sense of helplessness his sudden lying brought about made her feel not only hurt, but also resentful.

The only positive aspect to having slept over was her ability to bypass the morning bus ride. Her mother had agreed to watch Junior while she was at work, but that meant twice as long of a commute both to and from home. This morning, her father would drive her, leaving early enough to stop by her apartment so she could change into more office-appropriate attire.

She felt as though she were sleepwalking when she joined him in the garage and climbed into his brand new, factory-direct car. It was tiny and extremely fuel efficient, but it had a punch that could blow John's ancient gas-guzzler out of the water.

Her father smelled of aftershave and dry-cleaned linen, a combination of scents that brought her back to her childhood—the sporadic happy moments when he would take her and Jenny away from that cold museum

of a house and lavish them with ice cream, movies at the theater, and warm spring afternoons at the park.

The memories brought a smile to her face. “Thanks for the ride.”

“It’s no bother. I think it’s great you’ll be joining me at Par-Corp.”

She nodded, although her heart wasn’t in it.

“Sorry about last night. You know how your mother can get.”

“Yeah.”

“I know you didn’t want to get involved, and I don’t blame you for retreating to your room, but I’d be interested to hear your take on the matter.”

She let out a long sigh. “I don’t really know what I think. At least Jenny won’t be able to get high all day if she’s stuck on a work crew.”

“I’ve been looking into treatment centers. There’s one not too far from here that specializes in serum cases. If we could get her the help she needs, maybe she could finally turn her life around.”

“Yeah, good luck with that.”

“I think we should stage an intervention. We could do it this weekend after Junior’s birthday party, while we have the whole family together.”

“And what about the kids? I definitely wouldn’t want them there for something like that.”

“We can set them up with his new toys in one of the upstairs guest rooms, or maybe we can find something for them to do outside. They’ll be fine.”

She refrained from offering an immediate response; the sentiment was a good one, but it was also likely to result in a tiresome, miserable failure. A few days at a work camp wasn’t going to straighten her head enough to make her receptive to anything anyone had to offer her besides a fistful of money to buy more drugs.

“Just think about it. Maybe this is the opportunity we’ve needed. Maybe she’ll be ready this time.”

“Maybe.”

They didn’t talk much during the rest of the drive and, although it was much quicker than a bus ride, it felt infinitely longer. She didn’t want to argue with him. His heart was in the right place. Just the same, he didn’t know Jenny as well as she did. He had no idea what a hardcore junkie was capable of when desperate for a fix.

The tension began to wane when they reached her apartment building. She hurried in, promising to be quick. She rushed through the halls, doing her best to ignore the police tape strapped across the neighboring door.

She wasn’t surprised to find the apartment empty, even if it was earlier than John’s typical departure time. She assumed, given his lack of culinary skills, that he’d leave early so he could stop by the diner for eggs and toast on the way to his day job. However, when she entered the bedroom to a perfectly made bed and no dirty clothes on the floor, she knew something was wrong. She dialed his phone. He did not pick up.

Fearful that something may have gone terribly wrong last night, she left a message: “John, it’s me. Call me back.”

The floor beneath her suddenly felt unsteady, and she sat on the foot of the bed to catch her bearings. She did her best not to assume the worst—whatever it might be—but she couldn’t help but panic. Should she call her father? Tell him she couldn’t go? No, she couldn’t do that, not with all that was at stake. Junior would be starting school soon, and she couldn’t afford to lose the only job she’d find given her limited skill set. She made her way to the bathroom and splashed some cold water on her face. It didn’t do much to calm her nerves, but it did pull her somewhat out of her daze. She rummaged through the closet and found a blouse and

long skirt, ever mindful of the clock.

By the time she returned to the car, she had cloaked herself in a comfortable cocoon of denial and was able to feign excitement over her first day on the job. Her father gave an impatient frown when she entered the car, but his mood visibly lightened when she apologized for taking so long. “I wanted to look my best,” she told him, and he silently nodded his approval.

Neither spoke during the drive to Par-Tech, and Dianne was grateful for the silence. Her body went tense once more when they entered the parking lot. She hid it well, forcing a smile for her father when he pulled into his parking spot and killed the engine.

“Ready?” he asked.

She nodded.

As an executive, he had a reserved parking spot near the front door. They crossed a small courtyard, passing an elegant lotus fountain that offered in its backslash a fleeting moment of cool mist. The high rise overlooking them was modern and clean, with gold-tinted windows and marble pillars framing the French doors. The entry was warm but not overwhelmingly so, and the offices shared a comfortable level of air conditioning. Herald gave her the short tour before leading her to the file room.

His office was on the ground floor, at nearly the end of a long, black and white tiled hallway. He invited her in for a moment while he dropped off his briefcase. “If you have any questions or problems, I’m here most of the day. I also have my business line on me at all times during working hours, so if you really need to get a hold of me and I’m not in, you can reach me that way.”

She nodded, although she was too distracted to hear most of what he

said. The question of John's whereabouts returned to the forefront of her mind. Where the hell had he been all night? Might one of the officers investigating Mr. Smith's death have detained him for some ridiculous reason? All they needed was an unwarranted detainment fee to add to their expenses. Even more, even a day or two of lost wages would make the difference between their eating balanced meals versus cabbage soup for the rest of the week.

"The file room is downstairs," her father said, his voice calling her attention while he waited in the doorway.

She followed him out, further down the hall, and to the stairwell. Old fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, a couple of them flickering defiantly against the rest, making the stuffy, cramped passage feel indistinctly ominous. She kept close behind him, feeling increasingly insecure and anxious over what lay behind the door ahead.

He opened it, standing in the threshold and extending it enough to allow her passage. "Here we are."

She stepped tentatively into the massive file room. The same eerie fluorescent lighting oversaw what appeared to be a maze of unfiled flash drive bins and cold, metal filing cabinets. At least the basement level was naturally cool, a refreshing contrast from the stairway that led down to it. Only a handful of people were down there, one of whom took immediate notice of Dianne and met her just beyond the door.

She was only slightly older than Dianne, and was very visibly pregnant. She moved with a stiff back and awkward legs, hobbling against the weight of her enormous belly. "You must be Dianne," she said, offering a smile and a handshake. "I'm Becky. Welcome aboard."

Dianne shook her hand, doing her best to look happy to be there.

"Becky's the downstairs supervisor," her father chimed in. "She'll

show you the ropes.”

Dianne gave him a grateful nod.

He glanced over to Becky. “Take good care of my girl.”

“Will do, sir.”

He backed out and Dianne watched the door shut. She turned to Becky, feeling lost and alone in her father’s sudden absence.

“How long have you been a licensed filer?” Becky asked, clearly searching for an icebreaker.

“I just got my license,” Dianne said, feeling even more conscious about walking into an entry-level job in her late twenties.

“No worries. We’re all in this together, like a team. You’ll love it here.” Becky led her to the nearest bin and grabbed a random flash drive. “The job is simple. You want to match the filing letters and the first two numbers to the file cabinet.” She showed Dianne the back of the flash drive, where the code PR-7325 was clearly etched. “See, so we’re going to file this one in the PR-73 cabinet.”

She led Dianne to a cabinet marked PR-51-PR-99. The second drawer down was labeled 64-85, and Becky pointed to the numbers before drawing it open. Inside were several rectangular, plastic plates standing upright in fitted grooves, each plate containing a spread of numbered, molded pockets. She pulled the plate with pockets numbered 7300-7350 then pointed out the pocket labeled 7325. She put the flash drive in the pocket and snapped it into place. “It’s that simple.”

The job looked undeniably easy, but also overwhelmingly menial. The thought of repeating such a task for eight hours broken up by just one half-hour break felt nearly as overwhelming as the thought of sustaining her family on cabbage and broth. “That’s it?”

“That’s it. Pick a bin and get started. Stick with one bin until it’s

empty, and then pick another one.”

“Any bin?”

“Any bin.”

Dianne watched the woman waddle back to the bin she had been working on before the interruption, and then she turned to the one closest to her. Inside lay hundreds, if not thousands, of tiny, labeled flash drives. Finishing even one bin felt like an impossible task, and yet dozens of them lined the aisles. She turned with a start when an errand boy entered with yet another, setting it at the end of the aisle before silently retreating.

Dianne reached into the nearest bin and pulled her first flash drive, read the code, and began to negotiate the rows upon rows of file cabinets.

The lunch bell rang at one o'clock. Dianne watched as Becky and the handful of other workers filed toward the door. She followed, grateful for the break but astonished that only a mere four hours had passed. When she used to lose herself in her painting, the hours would fly by. It had been hard work, but it had not been tedious. This was an altogether different experience. It felt good to sit, and the relaxed environment in the break room was warm and welcoming.

Dianne hadn't thought as far ahead as lunch, and she was too unsure of current finances to use her credit card in the sandwich vending machine. Becky had misinterpreted her apprehensions as fears over the food's freshness and had assured her the sandwiches came in fresh every morning, the vending unit refrigerated. Dianne responded by pretending not to be hungry.

Becky saw straight through the fib and bought two sandwiches. She set one in front of Dianne. “I accidentally got two, silly me. Do you like chicken salad?”

Dianne nodded thankfully.

Becky sat down beside her and the two began to eat. The sandwich was a little soggy, but flavorful and, as Becky had promised, freshly made that morning.

“When are you due?” Dianne asked, trying to make idle conversation.

“A little over five weeks.”

“Is this your first?”

“Second. We saved up so we could have a designer baby.”

Dianne couldn't hide her surprise. “Oh?”

“Our daughter, Carlie, has cystic fibrosis. She'll likely live a decent lifespan due to medical advances, but her quality of life is just . . . well, it's just awful.”

“I'm very sorry.”

Becky waved a hand, as if to dispel the sentiment. “My husband and I wanted another baby, but the doctors told us chances were high that our next child would be born just as sick.” She patted her stomach with a broad smile. “Little Joey is genetically flawless. He'll be strong and healthy. He'll be resistant to nearly all of the diseases that have destroyed so many lives. He'll be perfect. And as an added bonus, we were able to get our baby license directly through Future Tech without jumping through nearly as many hoops as we had to for Carlie's—and it was at a ridiculously cheaper price than a standard baby license. The procedure itself wasn't cheap, but it will all be worth it in the long run.”

Dianne did her best to hide her envy. She and John had discussed the possibility of having a designer child, but he'd been adamantly against it. The price aside, he couldn't stand the icy-blue color of their eyes. He thought it made them look inhuman, he'd told her. The words of a true technophobe. He wouldn't even let her buy in a video phone or a 3D

television. They were “unnecessary wastes of money.” She didn’t see it that way, but she also didn’t bring home enough money to have any real say in the matter.

“It’ll definitely be worth it,” Becky said.

“How long did it take you to save up for him?”

Becky’s smile faded. “We sold our home and moved in with my in-laws. But it was worth it. It was absolutely worth it. We needed help with Carlie, anyway. We just couldn’t do it all alone.”

Dianne gave a sympathetic nod.

Becky took a deep breath, her expression shifting from pained to inquisitive. “Our new hires are usually quite a few years younger than you. Did you lose your job in a corporate buy-out?”

“Not exactly.”

“There’s no shame in it. No one here’s going to judge you.”

Dianne lowered her sandwich. “I was an artist. A painter.”

Becky looked surprised, but equally awed. “A painter? I’m so sorry.”

Dianne shrugged.

“What did you paint?”

“Mostly surrealist pieces, but I also did some still life.”

Becky leaned in close. “I think that whole anti-art movement is just ridiculous. Just ridiculous.”

Dianne felt as though she had just teamed with an unexpected ally. She studied the woman’s face to ensure she hadn’t made the comment in jest. “Really?”

Becky nodded. “My husband and I refuse to buy into all that nonsense. What is the waste in a square of canvas when half the people in our country are still abusing air conditioning and buying new clothes every other week? Just ridiculous.”

Dianne thought about her parents, how quick they were to discard even the paintings she had given to them as personal gifts, while they thought nothing of cooling their home to near freezing during the summer and heating it to short sleeve temperatures throughout the winter. It was as hypocritical as it was upsetting. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Becky raised a brow. “You don’t happen to have any unsold work still stored away, do you?”

It was nearly six-thirty when Dianne stepped through the front door and kicked off her uncomfortable, high-heeled dress shoes. She had caught a ride with her father to her parents' house, where she picked up Junior then rode the bus back home. It was going to be a tedious routine, tacking on two hours to what already felt like a long workday, but it also gave her an unexpected feeling of accomplishment. It was refreshing to know exactly how much money she had earned for the day, and that not even a minute of work would go unpaid. Being an artist had its own rewards, but there was something to be said about the security of earning a regular paycheck.

Even more, Becky had connections to various divisions of the black market, and the promise of continuing her painting career on the side (and under the table) offered Dianne a sense of excitement she hadn't felt for some time. Yes, the activity would be illegal, but that suddenly became a part of the allure. There was something attractive about sidestepping an institution that would just as soon eliminate an entire class of worker.

Artists were a rare breed to begin with, able to produce something out of nothing, and perhaps that was one of the driving factors behind their abolishment. In a free market system that constantly struggled to keep its grip firmly in place over the people, art was indeed a threat. Although it was forbidden to sell anything outside a regulated business setting and independent contractors of all kinds were not allowed to go into business for themselves, it was just as easy for them to go into business through the black market as it was for illegal drug dealers to sell their wares through

the same route. It was a means of sustainable income that could bypass regulated standards, which was unacceptable both socially and legally. The Corporation for Financial Integrity had instigated a shift from paper money to cash credit a couple of decades ago, and it had been a worthy attempt at thwarting underground business. The idea had worked better in theory than it had in application, however, as the widespread use of pre-paid cards thoroughly undermined the endeavor.

She couldn't wait to start work on her next painting. She had no idea what it would be, but she already knew the piece would be exceptional. It would be a statement against a system that had grown as corrupt as it had become standardized. It would be the perfect marriage of form and content, a meaningful slice of civil disobedience that promised to restore both her livelihood and her dignity.

John was waiting for her when she arrived. He had a look to his face she couldn't quite identify, something that lay between the ranks of guilt and frustration. She sent Junior to his room to play then invited John to sit in the kitchen while she worked to salvage the leftover stroganoff from the previous night.

“Why didn't you answer my calls?” she asked with her back to him.

He cleared his throat. “You called? My phone must be on the fritz. You know how quickly electronics start glitching out these days. Definitely not built to last.”

Without warning, she snapped, “Call John,” then glanced back at him when his phone began to beep. “Seems to be working just fine now.”

He discarded the call with a spiteful glare.

“How long did the police detain you last night?”

“Late, very late. They didn't leave until well after I called you, and they called me back for questioning a few times after I had thought they

were through with me.”

The hot sting of his deception tore through her, prompting her to ask, “Did they take anyone down to the station for further questioning?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

She glared into his eyes with a deep breath. “Where were you after your shift last night?”

He sat upright, visibly taken aback. “Here. Home.”

She looked down, closed her eyes for a moment to summon the strength, and then leered at him once more. “No, you weren’t.”

“How would you know? You weren’t here!” He abruptly stood in an overcompensation of defensive anger. “The cops grilled me for hours. Hours! And you have the nerve to accuse me of being somewhere else? How dare you!”

“John, I know you weren’t home last night.”

“So, what, are you accusing me of having an affair?”

She stepped back, blinking hard, her breath lost to her for a moment from the unexpected response.

“I can’t believe you’d even go there! What kind of man do you think I am? After all I’ve sacrificed for this family, you think I’d betray you like that?” His face grew red, his eyes wide with anger, and his chest rose and fell with impassioned fury. “Is that what you think?”

She studied him for a moment, his body language saying far more than his words of denial could. She struggled to hold her composure. “Did I say that’s what I thought?”

He stared, dumbfounded, caught in his own tangled web.

“Are you going to tell me what the hell is going on?” she finally asked.

“I don’t have to take this!” he yelled, storming out.

She followed, watching helplessly while he fished his keys from his pocket and went for the front door. “Where are you going?”

“Out!”

“John—”

“I’ll be back once I’ve had time to cool off! Don’t try calling me!” He tore his phone from his ear and threw it at her. “I won’t be taking any calls!” He stomped out, slamming the door behind him.

She thought to chase after him, but stood motionless instead, knowing it would only end up adding more fuel to the fire. There was no doubt he was acting out of guilt, but the possibility that he was actually having an affair was too painful to consider. Sniffing and wiping the tears from her eyes, she returned to the kitchen and finished reheating the stroganoff.

When she turned to call Junior to the table, she was surprised to find him standing in the doorway cradling his security blanket and sucking his thumb.

“Come sit and eat,” she said as calmly as she could.

Obediently, he shuffled to the table. “Where did Daddy go?”

She set down their two plates and sat. “He had some things to do. Eat your dinner.”

He took one large bite then picked at his noodles, shifting his food around on his plate.

She struggled to eat as well, doing her best to hide her growing angst. Each bite seemed to hold less flavor than the last, until she forced down what was left as if it were a painful chore. She cleared her plate and rinsed it in the sink, then leaned against the counter with folded arms. “Eat up.”

He took another bite with a heavy sulk, and then pushed the plate aside with a scowl. “I’m full.”

Too tired to argue, she sent him to take a bath, hoping to entice him

with a mountain of bubbles and toys. He went without a fight, and she retreated to her studio to mix colors and contemplate how she might fill one of her last empty canvases.

She began to apply paint without any further forethought, hoping an image might come together on its own accord. It had happened before, and the muses seemed to come at their strongest when she worked under the strain of unchecked emotion. She added layer upon layer, paying no attention to the time normally needed to allow one layer to dry before the next. They blended into one other, creating a mishmash of shapeless colors, and she nearly abandoned the work when she considered the mess slowly growing before her. Then, suddenly, the image appeared before her as if a picture developing from antique camera film.

Although obscure, the illustration was as clear as could be. Hidden in plain sight was a depiction of a hummingbird drinking nectar from a flower. Its wings were a discernible blur, and the flower exposed itself to the bird in a way that was artfully sensual. Swatches of color filled the background, offering the illusion of a vast field of wildflowers spread behind the subjects, and there seemed a connection between them that words alone wouldn't have been able to depict.

She focused on the foreground, defining the unanticipated lovers and giving them highlights, shadow, and depth. They reminded her of the closeness she had once felt with John. They still loved one another, but not with the innocent abandon they'd shared before the grim realities of life had begun to tear away at their bonds. They hadn't been prepared for the difficulties that came with raising a young child in a staggering economy, nor had either accrued enough individual life experience to understand the give and take required to survive as a functioning team.

The union between the hummingbird and the flower forced her lips

into a bittersweet smile. Hope, she decided; this painting's title would be Hope.

“Momma?”

She turned to find Junior standing in the hallway, dripping wet and covered in bubbles.

“The water was getting cold.”

She met him where he stood and directed him back into the bathroom, where she grabbed a towel from the cupboard and wrapped it around him. She gave the bundled child a tight squeeze and a peck on the forehead. “Dry off while I lay out your pajamas.” She went down the hall to his bedroom, halting with a hushed gasp when she turned on the light. In the middle of the room lay scattered sheets of scratch paper he had obviously stolen from her studio. Drawn in crayon were pictures of angry faces. A couple of them were shades of pale green, and they had the letter X replacing each of their eyes.

She gathered the pictures before pulling clean pajamas and underwear from his dresser. She startled when she turned to the door to find Junior, cloaked in his towel, waiting for her.

“You drew some very . . . detailed pictures.” She turned the pictures of the angry faces toward him. “Who is this?”

He looked down. “I don't know. Just some people.”

She thought about the numerous arguments he'd likely overheard and realized the drawings were of her, John, and her parents. “You draw faces very well. Maybe you'll grow up to be an artist just like me, eh?”

He shrugged.

She shuffled to the green-faced images and showed them to him. “Who are these pictures of?”

He looked up, looking reserved and ashamed. “Other people.”

“Anyone I know? It’s okay. You can tell me.”

“Those are Mr. Smith and Mrs. Smith,” he said hesitantly.

“What’s wrong with their eyes, sweetie? And why are they green?”

“Because they’re dead, Momma.”

She bridged the short gap between them and knelt to address him at eye level. “Do you know what that means?”

He nodded. “It means they went to sleep and they’re not never gonna wake up, and they’ll go into holes in the ground where the bugs’ll eat them up.”

She struggled to summon the breath to ask, “Who told you that, sweetie?”

“Grandma.”

“Is that so?”

He nodded. “Why do they stay asleep?”

“Well, that’s just what happens when people get old. They just get too tired to stay awake anymore.”

Intense fear struck his eyes. “Are you and Daddy old?”

She pulled him close and held him in a tight embrace. “No, sweetie.”

“Are Grandma and Grandpa old?”

She shook her head. “Don’t you worry about that. We’re all going to be around for a long time. I promise.” She helped him dry off and directed him to his pajamas. “Time to get ready for bed. Get dressed and brush your teeth, and then find your tablet and pick out a book for us to read.”

He began to put on his pajamas, but paused long enough to ask, “Do they get to dream forever?”

“Who?”

“Mr. Smith and Mrs. Smith. Since they never wake up, do they just dream forever and ever?”

Dianne nodded, being as subtle as she could about wiping her eyes before he could see her tears. “Yes, sweetie. They dream wonderful, happy dreams. Very happy dreams.”

The late summer heat had driven all of the children inside despite their initial enthusiasm over the giant bounce-house Emma and Herald had rented for the day. Junior got his ice cream cake and Gamer Co. 3D Action Pack, as well as alphabet building blocks, a toy fire truck, a couple of jigsaw puzzles, and a short stack of gift cards. Most of his guests were distant cousins or children of close family friends.

As expected, it wasn't too long before Junior and his guests began to fight over the 3D Action Pack, a video game system built specifically for televisions equipped with 3D capabilities (which meant it would have to remain at his grandparents' house). The system had come with a short menu of games already installed, each of which called for four or fewer players. None of the children seemed to feel they were getting their fair turn, and the tug-of-war battles over the limited game controllers began.

Junior ran crying to Dianne when another little boy shoved him away and stole his controller. "Momma! They won't let me play!"

Dianne looked around for John, hoping to delegate the mediation to him, but he seemed to have disappeared for the moment. It had been one thing after another ever since they had arrived, her patience already spent, and the situation proved to become even more tiring when the party ended and the intervention was scheduled to begin. She stormed into the living room and placed herself in the center of the continuing scuffles. "If you can't get along, I'm turning it off!"

"But I haven't even had a turn!" moped one little boy.

"I only got to play for a minute!" whined another.

“But it’s my game and I just barely started!” cried Junior.

“The birthday boy gets to play first,” Dianne said, snatching a controller from the nearest child and handing it over. “You each get ten minutes. Watch the clock. You all know how to count by ten. If I hear another peep from this room, the game turns off.”

As she left the living room, there was a heavy knock at the door. The closest adult to the entry hall, she opted to answer it.

A man and a woman, both dressed in white robes with golden cords, stood on the porch. “Good afternoon,” said the man.

Dianne took personal issue with proselytizers, having left her parents’ church more than ten years ago due to growing ideological differences. She’d found it ridiculous that the church had begun to offer varying “afterlife packages,” all of which guaranteed certain levels of heavenly bliss for a sliding scale of fees. The cheapest promised a bypass from hell but no direct passage through the pearly gates, while the most expensive ensured a place in God’s own private garden, described as a re-creation of Eden where souls could spend the rest of eternity playing and resting in the warmth of God’s light.

The offers had been enough to tear her from her faith, her disgust over the idea that sinners might buy their way out of hell being enough to make her question every aspect to the dogma she’d been raised to believe as indisputable truth.

“Now’s not a good time,” she said with an attempt to slam the door on them.

The man blocked the door with a quick, firm hand. “We only ask for only a minute or two.”

She shook her head. “I’m not interested.”

The woman attempted to hand her a pamphlet. “We at the

Congregation of Angels acknowledge the one true path, and it is our sworn duty to make at least an attempt to save your soul.”

Dianne refused the pamphlet.

“Other churches might make promises, but ours delivers,” the woman continued. “We’re backed by True Union-Corp, one of the largest corporations in the country, so you can trust that our motives are pure. We don’t want your money. We don’t want your assets. We don’t—”

“Tell it to the neighbors,” Dianne said with another attempt at shutting the door.

“We’re nothing like Relig-Us or the Heaven Society. Only fire and brimstone await their congregations, the self-serving blasphemers. We follow only the original scriptures of millennia past, all eighty-two books—the true, unblemished word of God.”

“I’m sure you’re very special, but today’s my son’s birthday party and—”

“Oh, fortuitous blessings! How old is your son?” asked the woman.

“Five—and as you can imagine, I have my hands full with—”

“Has he been baptized yet?” asked the woman.

“No, but—”

The woman clasped her hands together. “Wonderful! Then his soul might still be saved! If you’d like, we can arrange an appointment right now.” She pulled an electronic tablet from her bag and pulled up a menu. “We have baptism packages starting as low as twenty-two hundred in cash credit, and that includes a fitted robe and a copy of the Classic American Bible.”

“What part of ‘I’m not interested’ do you people not understand?” Dianne leaned against the door, surprised that the man stubbornly held it open.

“Do you want to condemn your son to hell’s fiery pits, screaming in agony for all eternity, tortured by demons while he swims through scorching lava and chokes on brimstone?” asked the man. “It will be you he blames, you who knowingly paved the burning bricks of his fate, you who could have spared him such never-ending torment with one simple, relatively inexpensive blessing!”

“You can take your blessing and shove it!” she yelled, lunging into the door and driving it shut. She engaged the deadbolt while the couple began to knock once more. They tried the doorbell—relentlessly.

Herald met Dianne in the entry hall. “Aren’t you going to answer it?”

She shook her head. “Missionaries.”

He moved her out of the way and opened the door.

The couple on the porch seemed surprised at the new face.

“Hi! We’re from the Congregation of Angels, and we’d like to—”

“Here. I’ll donate a hundred.” He pulled a credit card from his back pocket and offered it to one of the missionaries, who immediately swiped it through a hand-held device.

The missionary handed back the card. “Bless you, sir!”

“Now, go!” He shut the door, slapped his hands together as if to knock away a layer of invisible dirt, and led Dianne out of the entry. “That’s how it’s done around here.”

“They didn’t deserve a donation.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve got to pick your battles when you live in a high-end community.” He stopped her before they reached the kitchen, where the adults had gathered to drink liqueur-spiked coffee. “Speaking of, do you think you could coax the kids back into the bouncy-house? I’m just about to leave to pick up your sister, and it would be best if we had them cleared out before she got here.”

“It’s sweltering out there. Can’t you pick her up later?”

“Your mother might change her mind later. If you can’t get them to go out back, you’re going to have to start sending them home.”

Dianne nodded. “I’ll do what I can.”

He gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “That’s my girl!”

After going back and forth with Dianne for far too long, the children left in heated protest, half of them bursting into tears over not having their turn at playing the video game. They didn’t want to leave, but they didn’t want to go outside either. Dianne opted to enforce the former, sending them home with generous slices of ice cream cake and party favor bags and thanking their parents for the jigsaw puzzles and toys. Junior didn’t seem bothered that his party had been cut short; he was happy to have the game to himself and two remaining relatives, but then threw a tantrum when Dianne told the three that they needed to take a break from the game and play outside.

“But it’s my birthday!”

She ushered them toward the sliding back door despite their angry objections. “Just for a little while, and then you can come back in and play your games.”

“But it’s hot outside!”

“I’ll have Grandma turn on the sprinklers for a little while. Would you like that?”

Their pouts turned into cheers and they went outside without another complaint.

Dianne returned to the kitchen, joining anxious family and friends. “Mother, the kids want to play in the sprinklers to cool off.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake! Do you have any idea how much it costs to turn those blasted things on?”

“Just for a few minutes?”

Emma grumbled something incomprehensible under her breath and went out to change the sprinkler timer.

Dianne made sure Emma was out of range before she turned to address the rest of the group. Among them were her aunts and uncles, her one surviving grandfather, and a couple of close family friends. She turned to her Aunt Erna, whose gentle, patient nature was a strong contrast to Emma’s willful and abrasive character. “If Mother starts getting hostile, you’re the only one here who will be able to convince her to leave.”

Erna nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

John emerged from the backyard smelling of green cigarette smoke, his eyes glazed over and his demeanor far too relaxed.

Dianne pulled him aside. “What the hell are you doing?”

He shook his head. “What? I was just getting some fresh air.”

“You’re not fooling anybody!”

“Can we talk about this later?”

She threw her hands into the air and stormed back into the heart of the group. She found her coffee cup on the counter and gave it one last heavy splash of liqueur before hiding all of the alcohol in the cupboard beneath the sink. She took a massive swig before dialing her father.

He picked up immediately. “Dianne? Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine. Where are you?”

“I’m pulling into the work camp’s parking lot right now. Tell everyone to get ready.”

Emma hurried back in looking more flustered than usual. “I’m going to the safe now, so if anyone else has a purse or jewelry to hide away, now’s the time. I won’t be held responsible for any missing valuables or what-not once that little thief gets here.”

Jenny wiped the sweat from her face with the front of her shirt. Everyone who had been there long enough had told her that the smell eventually became imperceptible, but it had yet to show any signs of fading. She worked alongside convicts from the debtors' prison and other nonviolent offenders, people from all walks of life who had either fallen on hard times or made one too many mistakes. She had found a few friends among them, people she could relate with in her withdrawal and animosity over her incarceration.

Already, one of them had succeeded in killing herself by ingesting the very trash she was being forced to sort and haul. Her death had been a visibly excruciating one, the screams and writhing moans she exhibited while the lengths of plastic blocked and tore her intestinal tract enough to make even the most distressed of withdrawal sufferers think twice about following her lead. The guards had ignored her cries, dismissing her as just another junkie missing her fix, just as they'd ignored Jenny when her body had cried for more serum.

Although the first day had been the hardest, with the chills and vomiting, it hadn't gotten much easier from there. The depression was crippling, and all that kept her from crumbling into the trash piles and becoming immobilized in her despair were the guards' whips and the hot isolation shack. She had encountered both in her new-arrival insolence, and both were a taste of hell she never wanted to experience again. The week-old welts on her back and arms still stung as if the whip had just struck them, and just the memory of her few hours in that dark, stifling enclosure was enough to keep her in check. She obeyed the guards' every order without question, and she worked as quietly and effectively as she could.

Still, she worked through the constant blur of tears, her nose endlessly running and her emotions holding her in a state of disoriented apprehension. Already, she had begun to question her wasted years and all that had pushed her to this point. Was any high worth such a horrific low? Was this perhaps the wake-up call she needed to wipe the slate clean and reform her way of life? Not much was clear, but she did know she never wanted to return to this place once she had worked off her societal debt.

If that meant getting clean, so be it.

There were others at the work site who didn't seem the least bit bothered by being there. Their noses had acclimated to the stench. The guards' punishments only hardened them further at each bend, and they took turns stashing the makings for methane bongs, literally getting high off the fumes of human feces in the dark corners of their sleeping quarters. Even being the hardcore addict she was, Jenny saw the practice as an altogether inimitable level of stupid. Those were the lost causes, the ones who had been incarcerated too many times to know how to live any other way. She was not anything like them, and she vowed never to fall so deep into her own personal chasm to allow that to change.

"Emerson, inmate number 5420927," one of the guards yelled. "Inmate number 5420927—Jennifer Emerson."

She stopped to turn. "What the hell did I do now?" Her jaw clenched and her sore, tired muscles went painfully tight. She dropped her bag and stepped carefully through the unsteady field of trash to address the guard. "Yes, sir?"

"Your fine's been paid. You're free to go."

His words took a moment to sink in, and she stared at the man in her confusion while she worked to process what he'd said. "My fine? Paid?"

He handed her an electronic pass to the administration building—the

only way in or out of the razor wire-fenced compound. “Drop this into the lock slot then punch in the last four digits of your Social Citizen number. The administrators inside will walk you through the exit procedures.”

She crossed to the building in a strange daze, unsure how Greg could have collected the funds necessary for her release. She wondered if he would have a supply of serum with him and planned her response to the temptation.

Could she possibly convince him to quit with her? Would she be strong enough to resist the high if he offered her a hit?

She turned back to the mounds of trash, forcing herself one last look at the nightmare she vowed never to place herself in again, eyeing the inmates working like little ants moving as much as they could carry from one location to the next. No, she would be strong. She would do whatever it took to rise above the poor excuse of a life she had fallen into. Getting completely clean would be difficult, but she had gone too far to start over now.

She entered the building, the shock of the air conditioning against her sweat-drenched skin causing her body to shiver and her teeth to chatter. She wrapped her arms around herself while she made her way to the processing desk.

The woman sitting there looked as though she had not moved in years, her fat, pale form nearly motionless as she cleared her handheld computer screen. “Name?”

“Jennifer Emerson.”

The woman tapped a few commands onto her screen, and a virtual keypad emerged in front of Jenny on her end of the desk. “Enter your Social.”

Jenny inputted the number then flinched back when the keypad

vanished with a quick flash. She turned to a loud buzz as a nearby door clicked open.

“Your clothes are waiting for you in the changing room, along with a powder bath and delousing agent. Any personal effects that you might have had on you will be available at the checkout counter beyond the changing room. Good luck on the outside, miss.”

Jenny nodded her thanks and hurried to change into her own, dry clothes, looking forward to putting this terrible chapter behind her. For the first time in years, her life was looking up.

Jenny froze when she saw her father sitting patiently in the waiting area. “Daddy?”

He stood, a pained look taking over his face when he spotted her.

“You paid my fine?”

He nodded. “On one condition: I want you to come home with me.”

She couldn’t hide her surprise. The last time she’d seen her mother, the old bag had told her never to set foot on her property again. “You and Mom want me to stay with you?”

“We’ll talk about that when we get home.” He led her out, through the parking lot, and to his car. He unlocked her door first and closed her in before going around to his side. “How are you holding up?” he asked while he started the engine.

“Tired,” she said, hiding the fact that she was still in the midst of terrible withdrawal. It felt good to sit, even if it was in her dad’s tiny sports car. She wanted to ask what prompted him to change his mind about bailing her out—and how he’d convinced her mother to agree to it. She kept her questions to herself, however, too afraid to face the answers quite yet. She’d soak in her freedom for a while first. That one week had taken more out of her than she’d thought possible, and after all she’d endured, she deserved a soft bed, an air conditioned room, and a few good meals before going on her way.

She noticed the extra cars out front as soon as they neared the house. When her dad pulled into the garage and paused for a moment before

cutting the engine and closing the electronic door, she knew something was up. She turned apprehensively to him. “What’s going on?”

“Little Johnny just turned five,” he said, although it was obvious he was giving her only a part of the story. “The whole family came to celebrate.”

“Dianne’s inside?”

He nodded.

She stayed in her seat even after he’d exited and closed his door, unsure if she could face anyone else, let alone the bulk of her extended family. She suddenly wished more than anything she could have just one hit, just enough to put her mind at ease and stave off the guilt for a while.

“Come on, Jenny.”

Feeling nervous enough to cry, she stepped out of the car and took another moment to steady her nerves. She followed him inside, mortified when he led her to the living room and she saw everyone turn at once.

“Have a seat,” he said, offering her a plush chair.

She sat. “Where’s Johnny?”

“Playing outside,” Dianne answered, her voice grave.

“I should wish him a happy birthday.” Jenny moved to stand, but her father coaxed her back into the seat.

He remained standing at her side. “Let’s all have a little chat first.”

The weight of everyone focused solely on her was nearly too much to bear. She surveyed the room, noting the same expression on each of their faces. “What’s going on?”

Her father put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “We all think it’s high time you got your life in order, and we’d like to help you with that.”

Her eyes made another pass around the room.

“That’s what all this is about? Addressing what a fuck-up I’ve been?”

Dianne stood, nervously unfolding a piece of paper. She began to read: “Jenny, I know our relationship has been strained these past couple of years, and I’m willing to take responsibility for the part I’ve played in that. The fact of the matter, though, is that the drugs have taken their toll. As much as I’ve missed you, I’ve also been afraid.” She began to choke up. “I’ve been afraid of being lied to. I’ve been afraid of being stolen from. I’ve been afraid of my son being around someone who’s high all the time.” She glanced over at John, who scowled back. She looked back down at her letter. “I want my sister back, the fun, happy young woman I used to know. We’ve all pitched in to pay for you to go to a treatment facility. Please say you’ll go.” She returned to her seat, shaking and crying.

Jenny turned back to her father. “You sprang me just so you could lock me up somewhere else?”

“No one’s going to lock you up anywhere, Jenny.” He reached over to a nearby shelf, where he retrieved an electronic tablet. He tapped the screen and began to read. “My beautiful precious daughter, when I learned you had fallen victim to the silver serum, my heart broke. I hoped you’d find the strength within yourself to break free. Over time, I realized I was just as helpless to help you as you were to help yourself . . . but I never gave up my faith in you, and I never stopped loving you.”

“Dad—”

“I want to see you succeed, to be the strong, independent woman I’ve always known you could be. Please say you’ll go to treatment, so you can reclaim your life and start moving forward.”

She shook her head, her mind clouding with anger and confusion. “You all think you can bully me into going somewhere I don’t want to go? You think you can force me into a decision that should be mine alone?”

Fuck you!”

“That stuff will kill you if you don’t stop now,” her Aunt Erna said calmly.

Jenny sprang back out of her chair, pushing her father aside when he tried to direct her back into the seat. “How long have you been planning this?”

“Jenny, sweetie—”

“Don’t sweetie me, Dad! I don’t appreciate you all sneaking behind my back, planning my next moves like I was a baby!”

“Let’s just talk,” he tried.

She considered his words, her thoughts falling apart when her mother stood with her tablet.

The woman’s lips were tight, her face more angry than concerned, and she was visibly drunk. She looked down at the tablet for a few seconds, shook her head, and set it aside. She stared Jenny down as if she had just committed an unforgiveable crime. “You’ve been a thorn in this family’s side ever since you started seeing that junkie loser. You stole tens of thousands of dollars from me before I finally turned you away for good, and you drove everyone else away by stealing from them as well. You’ve lied, you’ve manipulated, and you’ve destroyed everything meaningful in your life!”

Erna jumped from her seat and moved between them. “Emma, I think you and I should go cool off. Why don’t we check on the kids?”

Emma moved her sister aside, teetering for a few seconds before she continued, “Just look at you. Look at what you’ve done to yourself—branded for life! This is your one shot. If you don’t take it, we’re through for good!”

Emma’s other sister joined Erna. “Let’s take a short break to collect

our thoughts.”

“Don’t bother,” Jenny said, putting enough distance between herself and everyone else in the room to make her break. “You can all go to hell as far as I’m concerned.” She turned to her father. “Thanks for nothing, Dad.” She rushed out, making a quick exit through the front door before anyone could stop her.

She wept furiously as she ran from the house, ignoring the family members who had followed her out and now called to her from the porch. The last thing she needed was anyone’s judgment. They didn’t know her, and they had no clue how hard it was to live in her skin. Caught between her sister’s storybook life and her mother’s ceaseless condemnation, how could she not have turned to drugs?

“Fuck getting sober!” she yelled loudly enough for everyone to hear.

She had no money on her and the police had confiscated her phone, so she had no choice but to walk back to her apartment. She prayed Greg would be home. She prayed even harder that he had enough serum on him to make her forget about her family for good. Her heart sped in sudden anticipation of the high.

That alone was enough to keep her going through the unforgiving, late summer heat, across town, across her tiny world.

“Can’t you just stay for dinner? We haven’t eaten as a family all week,” Dianne tried. “I made fried chicken just for you.”

“I wish I could, but I’ve got a real mess on my hands at the new underground building job. You wouldn’t believe the violations they’re trying to get away with. Can you believe that? The infrastructure of the future, and they’re building it to last a decade or two at best.”

“Why don’t you tell me all about it over dinner? I’m sure you can spare twenty minutes to eat, especially with all the overtime you’ve been working.”

His face flushed. “The guys in the office . . . they’re bringing in takeout so we can eat while we’re discussing the direction we need to take on this monster.”

She followed him to the door. “John, wait.”

“Gotta go.” He gave her a peck on the cheek and hurried out.

She stood, stunned, her throat going tight at the slam of the door. “You forgot your briefcase. . .”

There was no more denying it. There was someone else. She’d tried to give him the benefit of the doubt at first, but his excuses had grown more elaborate by the day. He’d started with the assertion that he had picked up a few extra hours on his night shift, and then he began to claim car trouble. Next had come a story about a coworker having fallen ill with cancer, which prompted him to stop by the hospital for an hour or so every couple of days. He’d only slept in their bed a few nights over the past week.

Although she suspected the worst, she feared confronting him, certain he'd leave for good as soon as she had pulled the truth from him. Junior had become even more clingy, throwing regular tantrums and refusing to part with his security blanket. He'd even refused to eat dinner a few times, determined to wait for John before starting—even when that meant going hungry. Obviously, the boy was more perceptive than either of them had realized.

She checked John's clothing often for evidence, driven by an uncontrollable impulse to catch him in his lies, and her mind had become a constant flood of thoughts and images that only threw her deeper into her obsession. She had developed terrible insomnia and opted to fill the lonely evening hours painting instead of lying restlessly awake in bed. She'd secured a few sales through Becky, who had more connections in the black market than Dianne wanted to know about. Still, buyers were willing to pay good money for her art, more than the consignment store had ever been able to offer. She even had a few requests for specific scenes and themes. Her current work was for a single male who wanted a painting of the city streets. She based the design on her view from the studio window, capturing the brownstone across the way and the lamp-lit street below. She used mostly cool colors, accenting them with hints of red on the bricks and yellow emanating from the lamps.

She took a break to study the details on the bricks and the mortar holding them in place, turning off the studio lights to get a better look. The building stood beside an alley that led away from hers, which she could only see about halfway down. She had already painted that part, but she hadn't yet gotten it quite right. She compared the angles to those created by the vanishing point she had set for the painting, considering the adjustments she would need to make.

The late night hour had rendered the street quiet and nearly free of activity, which made it easier for her to absorb the scene. Swarms of tiny insects buzzed around the streetlamps, their numbers falling in and out of view as they moved in and out of the direct light. She made a mental note to include them in her depiction. A rough looking alley cat crossed the street, sprayed the wall and howled for a moment in search of females, then skittered away at the sight of a man hurrying up the sidewalk.

The man wore a trench coat with the collars turned upward to mask his face, and a wide-brimmed hat obscured the upper part of his face. He looked around and over his shoulder while he walked. He carried something in one hand, but Dianne could not tell what it was until he stopped at the brownstone she had been studying, checked the address, and flicked a lighter. She backed a step from the window when she realized he held a Molotov cocktail. He looked around once more while he lit the fuse, and then he launched it through a downstairs window.

Dianne watched helplessly as the flame exploded inside and fire erupted through the broken window. The arsonist ran into the alley, was out of sight for only a minute, and then emerged wearing a firefighter's uniform.

He stood at the edge of the sidewalk while sirens began to blare in the distance. Flashing red lights swept through the street with the fire truck's arrival, and the arsonist joined his colleagues when they began to fight the growing inferno. Dianne backed completely away from the window, terrified that someone might see her despite her standing in a dark room. The thought of being caught as a witness to the crime brought about a sudden sense of paranoia, and even from her distance and the barriers between them, she feared someone would hear her loud, panicked breaths.

She retreated to the hallway and hid against the wall, then leaned back

for support, dizziness giving way to a fear of passing out. She'd heard stories of corrupt firemen starting their own fires when business was slow, but this was the first time she had actually witnessed it. She wished she had the money saved to be able to call a police officer and file a report, and she even considered shouldering the debt in the name of all that was right and good in the world, but thoughts of what might become of Junior should she fall into criminal debt held her back. John had proven himself thoroughly unreliable, and it was unlikely her father would be willing to bail out two daughters in as many months, even if she happened to have been arrested for a noble cause.

“Momma—look!”

“Junior, no!” She darted into his room, where she found him peeking behind his closed curtains. She pulled him from the window and swept him into her arms. “You’re supposed to be in bed.”

He tried to squirm from her hold. “I wanna see!”

“We need to stay away from the windows.”

“But Momma—”

“It’s too dangerous, sweetie.” She quickly searched for a reason he might be capable of appreciating. “The fire could trigger an explosion, and if we’re up against the windows, we could get hurt.”

“Can we watch from my bed, then?”

She shook her head. “It’s just too dangerous.”

He whined for a few seconds, resisting her attempt to hold him close then resting his head against her chest with a defeated cry. His hair smelled of the shampoo she’d used earlier that night to wash his short hair, and it was soft against her lips when she kissed his head. She cringed at the sight of red lights strobing rhythmically through the cracks between the closed curtains.

“Let’s try to go back to sleep.” She rested him against a pillow and squeezed beside him, unwilling to sleep alone one more night. It took over an hour of tossing and fidgeting before he fell back to sleep, but eventually his body relaxed and his breaths became slow and deep. She hoped the security of having a body beside her might help her to sleep as well, but she lay awake, her mind racing.

The fire truck drove away, its red lights shutting off shortly after Junior fell asleep. Dianne waited a short while before creeping out of the bed, up the hall, and back into the studio to the uncovered window. The damage was even more extensive than she had expected. Soot covered half the building, and all of the windows on the lower two levels had been broken out. A few families stood out front, staring and sobbing, husbands comforting wives and parents cradling horrified children.

She longed for John to be at her side, even if they weren’t on the best of terms, the loneliness stabbing through her taut chest. Did he ever miss her while he lay in her rival’s bed? Whose face did he see when he dreamed at night? Would they ever dream together, of each other, ever again?

Or was it really over for good?

It was a dark day.

The late summer cloud cover had rolled in and blanketed every inch of the sky, and it had begun to rain off and on. It offered a break from the intense mid-day heat that typically developed well into the late summer evenings, although the humidity balanced the exchange and therefore offered little consolation. Junior hated that he had to go out on a day like this one, much less with his grouchy grandmother. Despite the rain, the streets were as crowded as usual, the ratio of pedestrians and bus riders to private vehicle drivers just as great. Junior clung to his grandmother's hand, afraid of losing her in the swarm of people. She walked too quickly, having grown impatient in keeping pace with his tiny legs.

She'd had to park her car in a paid lot two blocks away from the elementary school, as the on-campus lot had been filled to capacity. This enraged her, and even at his young age, Junior understood the woman's propensity to take her anger out on anyone unfortunate enough to be around her at the time. She yanked on his arm every ten or twenty steps, pulling him through the crowd as though he were a puppy resisting the tug of its leash.

Up ahead, the crowd spilled out into the street, stalling traffic—both on foot and on the road. A small group of campaigners for the Citizen's Party held hand-painted signs, while one of them shouted through a megaphone. The young man was clean cut and wore a dress shirt and black tie. Sweat drenched his shirt and ran down the sides of his face,

obviously fueled by the heat of passion in his words.

“It is a time for change!” The words echoed over the crowd. “When election time comes around, make your voice heard! This country needs a new CEO, someone who will fight for the rights of all Americans, not just those of the rich!”

The majority of the crowd cheered.

“Good lord,” grumbled Junior’s grandmother as she stopped to assess the best route around the standstill. She pulled him into the street, yanking him back when a couple of motorists opted to plow through the edge of the crowd. “Idiots!”

“Who’s idiots?” Junior asked, genuinely confused.

“Not who’s—who are. Don’t your parents teach you anything? And it’s everyone here!” She motioned to the group surrounding the campaigners. “Those people are what we call fascist communists,” she replied, yelling the latter two words with a suggestive glance over her shoulder.

“What’s a fashus communion-ist?”

She pulled him back to the sidewalk as soon as they cleared the crowd, only to weave through the continuing mass of pedestrians. “Well, they’re the stupid, mindless little people who believe in going back to a mixed-market system.”

“What’s that?”

“That’s the absurd practice of taxing the hard-working people to death so they can give handouts to the lazy poor.”

He struggled to make sense of the distinction. “What makes them lazy-poor?”

“Don’t ask me. I don’t know what makes them do what they do. Maybe they were dropped on their heads when they were babies, or maybe

their parents weren't strict enough with them, which is why your mother ended up the way she is. Your grandfather is a pushover, always has been, utterly ineffective when it comes to following through with anything important.”

He had no idea what she was rambling about beyond the fact that she was somehow insulting both his momma and grandpa. He opted not to press for anything further, hoping it was his grandmother's mood—and not her true feelings—that caused her to say such hurtful things.

Her affect shifted immediately when they approached the school. “What a big boy you are, registering for your first year of elementary school! Are you excited?”

He shrugged.

“Oh, you should be very excited. This is the beginning of the rest of your life, Johnny.”

Again, he had no idea what she was trying to tell him and didn't feel like asking for clarification. He tried to slow their pace when they neared the campus gate. “The lady at the fancy school said lots of kids get sick here and have to go away somewhere and never see their mommies and daddies ever again.”

“That's just silly!”

He stopped altogether, turning into dead weight when they reached the gate. On one side, a woman stood handing out home-printed pamphlets warning against her assumed dangers of immunizations. “Know the facts! Vaccines cause autism, schizophrenia, and toddler-tummy! They want your kids to get sick—that's how they make their money!” On the other side, a man and woman showcased their adolescent designer child, the poor girl shrugging in visible shame over being put on display. Behind them was a freestanding sign advertising Future-Tech.

Junior stared at the little girl, unsure what to think of her strangely pale blue eyes. He wondered if perhaps she carried the illness the scary woman had told them about, and if it had somehow stripped away her eye color. She glanced back at him, so he knew she could see, and she didn't look feverish or congested. Just the same, he did not want to go near her.

His grandmother had a completely different reaction to the girl. She dragged him alongside her then leaned down to offer the strange girl a smile. "Well, look at you. Look at those eyes, just so pretty." She straightened to address what appeared to be the girl's parents. "How much did she set you back? Does she ever get sick? I've been trying to talk my hard-headed daughter into getting her next done through Future-Tech."

The parents both smiled tolerantly. "She caught a cold once, but it only had her down for a day," said the mother.

The girl sneezed and rubbed her nose, giving everyone pause.

"She does get allergies sometimes," the mother added almost apologetically.

"The prices have gone down quite a bit since we paid for our Daniella. They've really perfected their science and have sped up their production rates," said the father. He offered a professionally printed pamphlet. "Give this to your daughter. You won't regret it."

Junior tried to tug her backward. "Grandma, I wanna go home."

She filed the pamphlet into her purse. "Thank you both so much, and the best of luck with that lovely girl of yours."

The girl looked down and began to study her shiny dress shoes.

"Grandma!"

"Oh, be patient, Johnny!" She led him through the gate, ignoring both his pleas to turn back and the anti-vaccine woman spouting off all sorts of diseases, mental conditions, and meaningless statistics like a maniac.

He fought her all the way into the administration building and to the registration office, where he dropped himself to the floor and began to scream and cry. She tried to pull him back to his feet, but he kicked and flailed. “They’re gonna make me sick! The lady said so!”

She pointed toward the secretary seated at the front desk. “See that woman? She thinks you’re a spoiled little brat! Do you want to prove her right?”

He ignored her.

The secretary rose from the desk and walked around to their side. She kneeled beside Junior. “Hey. It’s okay. I know how scary it can be starting school, but the teachers here are real nice.”

He looked up at her smiling face. She had pretty, red lips and perfectly white teeth, and there was something about her voice that was soothing and kind. “The lady said I’d get sick if I went here and they’d have to take me away forever.”

“That lady was lying,” said the secretary in the same sweet voice. “This is a good school. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

He let her help him to his feet.

“Thank you so much, dear. He got that stubborn streak from his mother, and sometimes I just don’t know what to do with him.”

“He seems like a sensible enough little boy.” The secretary leaned down so she was again at eye level with him. “What’s your name?”

“Junior.”

“Jonathan Irwin,” his grandmother corrected.

“Well, Junior, let’s get you signed up for school.” The woman pointed to an office just down the hall. “There is a lovely woman in office 3C, just to the right there, who will help you and your grandma get you all ready to go.”

“Thank you, dear,” his grandmother said, her voice dripping ice. She led Junior down the hall and into the registrar’s office.

His worries eased more the longer he was there, the registrar being just as pleasant as the secretary. She showed them where his classroom was going to be and led them through the old but functional playground. The rain had left it wet and muddy, so he couldn’t try out the swings or climb up the clubhouse that led to the tall, shiny slide, but the woman promised him he’d get a chance to play there every day once school started. By the time they had completed the tour, he actually felt excited. He skipped alongside his grandmother, who now worked to keep up with him, and he waited patiently while she finished his paperwork and prepaid the four thousand dollars it would cost for his first quarter attendance.

When they left, the crazy anti-vaccine woman was gone and a representative from the Children’s School of Corporate Management stood in her place.

He stopped them as they passed through the gate. “You’re not going to send him here, are you?” he asked Junior’s grandmother.

“His parents already owe me enough money.”

“You do know this school has the highest rates of drug-resistant whooping cough and strep, don’t you?”

“The bad diseases?” Junior asked, feeling the onset of panic once again taking hold.

The man nodded with a solemn face.

“How awful, scaring little kids like that!” his grandmother said. “Johnny, don’t you listen to him. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.” She led him away, only for a young woman to stop them a few steps away.

“New student?” she asked.

“Just signed up and paid his tuition,” his grandmother replied, and Junior could tell she was ready for another spat.

The woman pulled a lollypop from a wicker basket hanging from the crook of her arm. “Welcome!” She moved to hand him the candy, but stopped short. “Only if Grandma says it’s okay.”

He turned to her. “Can I?”

“May I?”

He sighed. “May I?”

She gave a reluctant nod and the woman handed it over. He unwrapped it and immediately began to suck on it. Cherry, his favorite.

“Say thank you, Johnny.”

“Thank you.”

The woman nodded and smiled while they walked off. Junior turned to wave goodbye, surprised to see she had joined the man from the fancy school and had begun chatting with him as if the two were good friends. They both looked at him at the same time in a way that made him shiver despite the warm, humid air, and he clenched his grandmother’s hand a little tighter.

The smell of garlic and tomatoes permeated the air, and the food was so flavorful and rich that John wished he had the room left to finish the last few bites of his cheese ravioli. The Grectalian restaurant was arguably one of the best of its kind, offering a candlelit ambiance and an aromatic Mediterranean cuisine that drew in diners from all across town. Samantha still worked on her vermicelli with hummus pesto and clams, the look on her face telling him she had begun to face the same dilemma.

She gazed up at him, her fine features accentuated by the flickering candlelight. She finished her second glass of white wine and offered a tipsy smile. “You’ve been awfully quiet tonight.”

He shrugged. “I had a frustratingly long day at work.”

“Oh?”

“These new building projects they’re having us ‘inspect’ are just insane. The materials are cheap, the labor unskilled, and the designs are like nothing I’ve ever seen before.” He leaned in close and lowered his voice. “Supposedly, the Southern Hemisphere has been slammed with winter storms so violent that half its infrastructure has been destroyed. Australia, most of Africa, and several South American countries are just decimated.”

Her face scrunched in disbelief. “I haven’t seen anything like that on the news.”

“Info-Corp is keeping it under wraps right now because its executive officers are afraid people might panic.”

“Right.”

“Evidently, climate change has finally hit that critical point and all the building companies want in on what they’re calling ‘a complete reformation of the country.’ They’re moving everything indoors . . . the streets, the houses, the farms, the cities—everything.”

She chuckled. “Yeah? So why haven’t I seen any of this reformation?”

“They’re building it all in the desert so they can keep it a secret for now. Thing is, since they need enough of it finished for refugees to rent once the storms come through, they’re doing a rush job and nothing’s getting done right. It’ll need to be in constant repair, and I don’t know who’s going to want to work out in the ice storms and hurricanes. I swear I’m going to go grey over this mess.”

“You poor thing,” she said with disinterest. She reached across the table and took his left hand, pausing momentarily at the sight of the wedding band he still refused to take off. She gave a fiendish grin. “I think I have an idea of what might help. Let’s get out of here.”

The sudden excitement of her implied proposition had him paying the outrageous bill without even looking at the balance, and he escorted her to his car with sudden impatience. He had no real emotional attachment to the woman, as much as they had in common, but their physical attachment was profound. Just in the short time they’d been seeing one another, she’d managed to reel him in, taking hold of his emotions through a physical drive he’d considered long dead. She could do things in bed that left him breathless, her slim, agile body astoundingly energetic and voracious. The guilt of seeing a woman on the side, of lying so blatantly to Dianne, had a power of its own, but it only served to drive the wedge ever deeper between them.

When he went to turn right out of the parking lot, she grabbed his hand on the wheel.

“Take a left.”

He refrained from turning at all, taken aback that she had somewhere other than her apartment in mind. “What’s left?”

“A surprise. You’ll love it.”

He turned, trying to imagine where she might possibly want to direct him. He jumped to the rash conclusion that she wanted to make love in the desert beneath the darkening sky and decided not to question her again. He loved how unpredictable she could be, and there was no doubt she had something thoroughly satisfying in mind.

Strangely, she directed him through the suburban streets instead of into the desert, and when she had him pull over in line with dozens of other cars in front of a house blaring with contemporary music, he couldn’t hide his disappointment.

“What’s this?”

She opened her door and stepped out. “A party. What’s it look like?”

“I was kind of hoping for a relaxing night back at your place.”

“You need to have some fun. We can relax later.” She slammed the door and waited for him on the curb.

His lips went tight and he let out a frustrated breath through his nose while he exited the car. He walked alongside her up the paved path, wishing she’d at least the decency to see if he was in the mood for a party.

The music’s volume went from blaring to ear piercing as a young man wearing nothing but boxer shorts opened the door. His face lit up at the sight of them. “Sam—you made it!”

They exchanged light pecks on one another’s cheeks before he stepped back and gestured for John and her to enter. John stood hesitantly

on the “welcome” mat.

She glanced back at him with a hint of annoyance. “You coming?”

He took another look at the half-clad host, his gut telling him to leave, but when she took his hand and coaxed him in, he couldn’t resist. He hadn’t needed to enter the house to know the extent of illegal activity going on within, even though he had only heard about these types of gatherings before now. It came as no surprise when he walked into a room of people in varying levels of undress.

A naked couple snorted some kind of white powder at a table across the room. A wet bar displayed numerous kinds of beer, wine, and liquor, as well as fish bowls filled with an assortment of drugs, both legal and illicit. A cloud of smoke lingered overhead, a sickening combination of tobacco, marijuana, and silver serum so thick that John could feel the beginnings of a contact high. The music slowed and distorted, drumming through his body as though emanating from it. His surroundings took on an ethereal glow, although he felt disturbingly detached from everything that went on around him. It was like he was wading through a half-conscious dream, one that threatened to swallow him should he remain.

The living room was in disarray, with people stretched across the black, leather furniture and matching shag carpet. Couples and small groups kissed, fondled, and prodded one another without any visible worry over who might witness their actions. The music grew increasingly thunderous and abhorrent.

John leaned in close to Samantha’s ear. “I think we should leave.”

“Lighten up, John. We’re here to have fun.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were into this kind of thing?”

She leaned even closer to reply. “Does it matter?”

“I thought we had a . . . thing going on.”

“We do. That doesn’t mean we can’t spice things up every now and then.” She gave him a quick but passionate kiss before crossing to the wet bar and serving herself a highball of vodka and tonic.

He watched, too dumbfounded to move. In a neighborhood comprised strictly of houses, it was possible that someone nearby might have the means and desire to call the police. If that were to occur, everyone there would be arrested for swinging. The laws were strict. Sex without the appropriate license was strictly forbidden—and such licenses were typically only approved for married couples. Hell, he was breaking the law just by stepping out on his wife, and if Samantha were to get pregnant, he’d be done for. Arrested and gone.

It had been one thing to break the law in the privacy of her apartment; this, though, was flaunting it.

Samantha returned to his side, looking strangely amused by his discomfort. “There’s a pool and spa out back, bedrooms down the hall, and plenty of goodies. Try to enjoy yourself.”

He shook his head. “I’m not really comfortable with this.”

She took a heavy swig of her drink then handed it to him. “You want to start with a threesome? Pick any woman here. If you’re shy, we can find a room until you’re warmed up.”

“A threesome? With another woman?”

“Yeah. You’ll love it.” She removed her shirt and tossed it aside along with her bra. “Unless you want another man. That’d be hot.”

“Another man?”

“What? Wifey never gave you a finger or two before?”

He could feel the color leaving his face. He swallowed a mouthful of her drink before handing it back. “I’d really like to leave now. Please, I think we should go.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t be a prude.”

She turned away, tore off the rest of her clothing, and kissed the nearest man. She glanced back at John while she crawled on top of the stranger and caressed his exposed body with her own.

John flinched at a sudden tap on his shoulder. He turned to find a naked, blue-skinned blonde.

“Wanna take a dip in the hot tub?”

“No, I was just . . . was just—”

“Let me help with those pants.” She had his belt unbuckled before he had time to react and had him by the zipper when he pulled away.

“I’ve got to go.” He fixed his pants and fastened his belt while he hurried to the door. He turned one last time to Samantha, who offered a mock kiss, which she blew at him through the air. He saw an apparition of it fly across the room to him, the contact high taking on a level that was both exhilarating and frightening. Appalled, he ran out.

His ears rang from the loud music even after he had the door closed behind him, and his heart pounded while he sat in his car struggling to make sense of Samantha’s sudden turn. The ground took on the illusion of moving water swirling and swaying around his ankles. It was cool, a welcome contrast to the muggy evening air. As refreshing as it was, he made a hasty retreat to his car. A part of him believed it was real and wanted to drop down and douse himself in the shallow hallucination. It wasn’t real, though, and the better part of him knew that. He locked the doors and sat in the driver’s seat, waiting for the world to right itself.

His thoughts drifted back to Samantha while an unsettling darkness settled over him like an enormous shroud. Little bugs crawled across the windshield, laughing at his stupidity. Just when he’d thought he knew her, she had to throw him with something so unexpected, so obscene, that he

had no choice but to question his perception of her leading to that point. How many other men had she misled? Might that have been one of the factors that had led her to being abandoned in the desert by her ex?

“Bitch,” he muttered. The shroud dissipated and the bugs dissolved into the windshield. He waited, watching for further evidence of his light intoxication, and decided he was sober enough to drive. He peeled out and sped off.

He didn't get far before the whirlwind of thoughts spinning through his mind began to slow and settle. Up to this point, his time with Samantha, albeit short, had been idyllic. He'd thought she was special, that she was different. She had been nothing more than an illusion, an escape, a fantasy.

Still, she'd awakened something in him, a piece of him he'd written off as long dead. She'd pulled him out of his rut, shown him the same kind of carefree passion he'd felt when he and Dianne had first dated. He'd miss the excitement she had aroused in him, both physically and emotionally, and already he mourned the loss. There was no going back to her, though, not after this.

He thought about all he'd put Dianne through in his quest for a nonexistent, manufactured slice of happiness. While he had been reaching for that brass ring, she had been at home, striving to keep their child in yet another illusion of normalcy. He wondered if she had been able to maintain any greater success in her endeavors than he had.

Was it possible to salvage the wreck of a relationship he'd left them with, or was it too late to mend what he had broken? There was no question he had failed in his devotion to her. Was there any turning back? Had he left her with any room for forgiveness?

Could he forgive himself?

“Please don’t start with me, Mother.” Dianne focused on her painting, now nearly finished, while doing her best to deflect the woman’s newest attempt at getting under her skin. Even over the phone, her words carried the power to make Dianne feel as though she were being stared down upon by a towering giant preparing to flatten her underfoot like a scurrying bug.

“Dianne, you know I only want what’s best for you. If you don’t want my advice, just say so and I’ll drop the subject.”

“I don’t want your advice!”

“See, that’s your problem. You think you’ve got it all figured out while everything all around you is going to h-e-double-hockey-sticks. If you want to save your marriage, you’ve got to do something drastic.”

“Whatever.”

“Don’t you whatever me. You know I’m right.”

“Fine, I’m an idiot and my life is going to hell. Is that what you want to hear, Mother? There’s nothing left to save, okay?”

“Well, not with that attitude. You know what I think. . .”

Tuning Emma out for the moment, Dianne stepped back from her easel to view the canvas from a short distance, searching for imperfections or missed shadows and highlights that still needed work. The hints of contrasting colors had worked well, giving the painting that extra edge it needed, and the details had a level of added depth and dimension that truly made it feel like a slice of life captured in a single moment in time.

Junior shuffled in and tugged on her shirt. His voice was hoarse when

he said, “Momma, can I have some water? I hafta put out the fire.”

She sniffed for evidence of smoke then decided the fire was imaginary. She covered her phone. “Are you going to make a mess?”

He shook his head. “Please, Momma—it’s burning!”

“There’s a cup on the counter. You can fill it from the tap in the bathroom. Don’t make a mess.”

He hurried off with a nod.

“Are you listening to a word I’m saying, Dianne?”

“Yes, I’m listening.”

“Well, then how are you going to support yourself if he leaves?”

“I’ll manage.”

“Oh, be realistic! You can’t possibly earn enough as a filer to support both you and little Johnny. Your father and I might be able to take you in for a while, but eventually you’ll need to figure out a long-term solution.”

Dianne thought about the sense of isolation she felt even after only a short period of coping with John’s absence. She’d sensed his distance, even seduced him a couple of weeks ago. The sex had been amazing, passionate and intense. He’d seemed to enjoy it just as much as she had, which only confused her more when it proved not to make any difference. She was on her own, and she did indeed need to look ahead to a future without him. As impossible of a feat as that seemed, she had no choice in the matter. She needed to think about herself and Junior. She needed to find a way to continue on and give her son the life he deserved, regardless of the circumstances.

“I worry about you, Dianne.”

“Mother—”

“I worry a lot.”

Dianne turned to the sound of someone knocking. “I’ve got to go.

Someone's at my door.”

“Just think about what I said.”

“Sure thing. Love you. Bye.” She hung up before her mother could get in another word, and then she set aside her palate and brushes and wiped her hands with her smock on the way to the door.

She gasped at the sight of Jenny through the peephole. She looked especially haggard, and her body twitched as though an electrical current were running through her.

Jenny pounded on the door with the palm of her hand, glaring at the glass lens as though she could see through it. “Open up, Dianne. I know you're in there.”

Dianne shrank back. “What do you want?”

“Your help. I've given a lot of thought to what you and everyone else in the family had to say, and I'm ready to change. You're right. We've grown distant, and that's all my fault. Please open the door so we can talk.”

Dianne held her breath, a painful dichotomy of hope and distrust flooding through her.

Junior met her at the door. He had a runny nose and an irritable look on his face. He gestured to his throat, the sign he seemed adamant on relaying altogether eluding her. “Momma—”

She hushed him as quickly as she could.

“You're the only person who can help me, the only one I trust,” Jenny said, her voice cracking. “I can't go on like this anymore. I want to go to rehab.”

Dianne turned to Junior. “Go to your room and close the door.”

“But—”

“Go!”

He turned with a whimper and ran, slamming the door behind him as soon as he reached his room.

Dianne turned back to the door. “Junior’s here. How can I be sure you won’t start a scene?”

“You think I’d ever let anything bad happen to my favorite nephew?”

“Your only nephew.”

Jenny forced a laugh. “Still my favorite. You know I love that little guy, even if I haven’t always been the best at showing it.”

Dianne could feel her defenses weaken. Despite herself, she gave Jenny the ‘in’ she needed. “Promise you’ll behave?”

“Pinky swear.”

She struggled with the decision for a moment then unlocked the door.

It burst open, throwing her back, before she even had a chance to turn the doorknob. Jenny and Greg both stormed inside.

“Where’s the cash credit?” Jenny demanded.

“What cash credit?”

“The credit everyone set aside to lock me up in rehab! Where is it?”

Dianne frantically shook her head. “I don’t know! It’s not here!”

Greg slammed her to the ground, dropping on top of her and holding her by the hair. “You’re lying!”

“I swear! Jenny, please don’t do this!”

Jenny found Dianne’s purse and rummaged through it for a minute before pulling out a credit card. “Is it here?”

“I have maybe twenty cash credits to my name, Jenny. Take it, for whatever good it’ll do you.”

Jenny pocketed the card then stood over her sister while Greg held her down. “Call Mom. Tell her to bring the cash card here—now.”

“What makes you think she’ll listen?”

“She might if you’re the one calling. Sure as hell isn’t going to listen to me.”

Dianne struggled against Greg’s firm grip. “Let me go!”

Junior cracked open his door and peeked out. “Momma?”

“Go! Run out and get help!” Dianne cried out as Greg slammed her head into the floor.

Jenny hurried toward the hall. “No need to run from Auntie Jenny. Come here, buddy.”

Dianne continued to struggle, but to no avail. “Run into the bathroom and lock the door! Quick!”

He scurried out before Jenny reached his door, closed himself in the bathroom, and engaged the lock right before she slammed into it.

Jenny pounded against it. “Open the door, buddy.”

“Don’t listen to her!”

“Come on. You can open the door for your Auntie Jenny.”

“Stay where you are, Junior. Don’t you dare open that door!” Dianne wailed as Greg punched her in the side of the head.

Jenny stormed back over to her. “Call Mom!”

“Go to hell!”

Jenny threw her booted foot into Dianne’s side. “Call her!”

Dianne closed her eyes and turned away.

“This can be easy or hard—your choice. Either way, I’m getting my credit.”

Dianne ignored her.

Jenny tore at her own hair, pacing with an angry cry. “Make her call, Greg!”

He twisted back to her like a dog snapping furiously at its rival. “Take a walk, Jen. Let me have a private chat with sis.”

Jenny walked out with an angry huff and slammed the door.

“Just go,” Dianne tried. “We can pretend none of this happened. We all go our separate ways and no one does anything they can’t take back.”

His hand went to her throat. “How about you pretend I’m going to snap your neck if you don’t do what I say?”

She grabbed him by the crotch of his pants and gave a tight, angry twist, catching him by surprise and pushing him off her. She scrambled to her feet, ran to her studio, and closed the door. There was no lock, so she held the doorknob as tightly as she could and leaned against the door with the full weight of her body.

He twisted at the knob and slammed into the door. “I’m gonna kill you, bitch!”

“Leave now or I’m calling the police!”

“I thought you didn’t know where the goddamn credit was!”

“I’ll find a way to pay the bill! Get the hell out or I’m making the call!”

She screamed as he forced open the door. She hit her phone to start the call, but he ripped it from her ear and threw it aside.

“Make your call, bitch. Yeah, you make it now!” He shoved her backward, nearly throwing her back off her feet.

She staggered to remain upright.

He shoved her again and she fell back. He lunged forward and she kicked him in the stomach. Instead of recoiling her foot, however, she found it caught in his grip. His wide eyes focused on hers, he thrust her leg against the floor and snapped her ankle with a quick, angry stomp of his boot.

She screamed, her other senses failing as the pain shot through her body. Hot tears rushed from her eyes and her limbs began to shake.

“How about you get that credit to me and Jen now?”

She struggled to breathe let alone speak. Her eyes shifted in and out of focus, and she squinted to find a blurred vision of him standing over her.

He knelt down beside her. “Just tell them to drop the card off here. You don’t need to say nothing else. All you gotta do is make one call and I go away.” He held up a finger. “Just one call.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but couldn’t manage anything beyond cries and moans.

He reached for the phone and brought it to her face.

“Call whoever’s got the money or I’ll bash your head in!”

She worked to catch her breath then leaned into her phone. “Call . . .” she began, whimpering when again she began to hyperventilate.

“Say it!”

“Call . . .” she gasped for another horrified breath. “Call the police!”

He crushed the phone in his grip before punching her in the jaw.

Certain the next blow would be her last, she closed her eyes and waited. There was no defense, no recourse. It was over. This was the end.

To her surprise, he stood and began to survey the room. “Your sis says you’re a painter. You paint this here?”

She cried and shivered, refusing to answer.

“How much is this one worth?”

She shook her head.

He pulled it from the easel and held it in front of her. “What can I get for this one?”

“Nothing!” she cried, summoning up the breath to add, “You’re wasting your time!”

He flung it into the wall, and the still-wet paint left a smudgy

impression against it before dropping to the floor. “What else you got?”

“Nothing!”

“Maybe your little boy will tell me.” He began for the door, but she grabbed his legs with a hateful cry. He tripped, stumbled forward, then turned and kicked her in the back.

The force of the blow knocked the wind out of her, and she lay gasping for breath. She watched helplessly while he snatched a paperweight from her desk and stood over her with a look of deadly anger.

“I’m going to ask you one last time, and then things are gonna get serious,” he said, jaw tightly clenched. “You got anything—anything—of value in this place?”

She shook her head.

He eyed her wedding band. “Give me the ring.”

She clasped her right hand over her left. “Please don’t—”

“You can give it to me, or I can pull it off your dead fucking hand!”

Jenny peeked in. “Don’t kill her, Greg!”

He paused, blinking hard. “I told you to take a walk.”

“Just take the ring and let’s go!”

Dianne let him take the ring, watching Jenny watch her. “I never thought even you could stoop this low. No one in the family is ever going to bail you out again after this. You’re on your own.”

Jenny knelt beside Greg. “You’re not gonna say jack shit about this to anyone.”

Dianne laughed. “You really are crazy.”

“And you’re just stupid.” Jenny ripped the paperweight from Greg’s grasp, pinned Dianne’s left hand to the floor, palm-down, and slammed the heavy mass into her knuckles.

Dianne screamed, her sight going dim as all sound faded away with

the loud crack of multiple bones. Without pause, Jenny moved to her other hand and crushed it as well. The pain was immobilizing. The room began to spin. She couldn't tell up from down. The sharp, hot sting pulsing through her fingers felt as though it coursed through every inch of her body.

“Let's see you go for help now, bitch,” Jenny's voice echoed from some unidentifiable place too far away for Dianne's senses to grasp.

“Let her try. It'll be the last mistake she ever makes.” Greg's voice echoed from a place even further than Jenny's.

She heard them rummage through the apartment, her mind laboring to comprehend the sounds of drawers opening and items being flung to the floor. Her assailants continued to exchange idle chat, but she could no longer understand what they were saying.

She tried to orient herself in the room, but a terrifying sense of dissociation had taken hold and she couldn't even place her own limbs in relation to her body, let alone her body in relation to the room. She heard a heavy slam from what she could only presume was the front door.

She made an attempt to sit up, only for pain and nauseating dizziness to take over and hold her where she lay. She could feel her mind slipping even further, her thoughts growing distant, and she cried out for Junior.

She tried to make out his blurry face when he ran in and dropped to her side. “Momma, what's wrong?”

“Junior?” She struggled to piece together the right words with which to instruct him to get help, but the best she could do was repeat his name.

He said something else, but the words fell into a dark, empty vacuum as her writhing body went numb and the world around her went silent and dark.

Pungent silver smoke filled the dimly lit room. It was lovely, the smoke. It rose from the pipe in magnificent ribbons that swirled and dissipated into the rolling fog above. Jenny decided it was a miniature depiction of existence at its most intimate level. The rising smoke, ever expanding and becoming one with the air, was the soul disseminating into the heavens. The shimmering cloud above was God.

And God was beautiful.

Greg had taken on the appearance of an angel, with a halo of silver light emanating from his shoulders and head and enormous white wings doming over him. The serum he'd snorted before they had smoked this last bowl formed a sheen beneath his nostrils, a metallic silver shadow that accentuated his rosy-purple nose. He laughed at something unseen to her, barely able to catch his breath.

It was strange, a blue, silver-winged angel so hysterically amused. The more he laughed, the more distorted his face began to appear, and his wings thrashed about in his enjoyment. He leapt from the plush, white sofa and began to fly around the room. Jenny watched in envy. His massive wingspan sent a mild current of cool air past her, and she closed her eyes to enjoy the short break from the otherwise relentless heat.

The wind subsided, and she opened her eyes to the unexpected sight of Greg once again at her side. He stopped laughing, and instead stared blankly ahead with a worried look. His face glistened with heavy sweat.

Her own surroundings were beginning to fall to the darker side of the high, the side that always came with the inevitable crash. Greg's wings

disintegrated into a pile of ash, and the silver glow around his head had transformed into a dull, grey aura that slowly faded into the dreary, lifeless room. She caught a whiff of brimstone and began to search for signs that hell was on its way.

Greg shook his head in tic-like twitches. “They made it faster . . . just can’t keep up!”

As his eyes grew wide, Jenny could see the dark emptiness taking hold. The color had given way to his growing pupils, and deep within them, she could see an endless chasm that threatened to suck them both in.

The heat became overwhelming. She wanted to run from it, but there was no escape. Soon, the demons would come. Soon, the hellfire would engulf them both.

“Where they’re going, nobody knows!” Greg cried out, sniffing as another dribble of silver ran from his nose. He licked it when it reached his lips. He shook his head. “What do I do? What do I do?”

Jenny found the pipe amidst the hot, red slab of stone in front of her just in time to save it from the lava. She snatched it and the lighter and climbed onto the sofa’s arm to keep from getting burned. She wasn’t ready to face the demons quite yet, and there was only one way to remedy that.

She flicked the lighter and ran the flame beneath the glass bulb at the end of the pipe, watching it shimmer with smoke, and then she breathed in the massive hit. She felt her limbs relax with the long exhale, watching the serum’s soul rise into a new cloud of God hovering beneath the ceiling. The lava faded into a cool, blue river, and the sofa became a raft that bobbed along the current. “Babe,” she said, nearly floating to his end of the raft to hand him the hot pipe.

He didn’t take it immediately, eyeing the offering with heavy suspicion. “You’re one of them, aren’t you?”

“One of who, babe?”

“Slowing me down, slowing me down . . . just keep on slowing, while they keep getting faster. I’m going, going, going. See me going.”

“Take another hit. It’ll straighten you up.”

He accepted the pipe, giving her another uncertain stare before breathing in another dose. He calmed and gave her a weak smile, unaware in his newfound bliss of the burn forming on his hand where he clutched the pipe.

“Better?”

He nodded.

Cool, fluffy clouds rolled through the room, obscuring the river before completely replacing it. Music permeated the walls, breaking them down and blowing them away. Through the surrounding mist, Jenny could see a forest of clear crystal unfold all around. Greg appeared to see it too, so taken by its beauty he took yet another hit. The smoke seeped from his limp body and he dropped the pipe into the clouds below. He laughed in short, quick spasms, his eyes rolling madly in their sockets.

Another breeze cooled the room, and a melody of chimes emanated from the forest. It grew louder and fuller, transforming into a crystalline symphony that was as overwhelming as it was profound.

“Beautiful, so very beautiful,” she felt compelled to say while the tears rolled down her cheeks. “Do you hear it?”

He continued to laugh and twitch.

No, he couldn’t. Obviously, he couldn’t. The music was intended for her ears only, a divine gift, personal and secret.

She hushed herself in fear of spoiling it. Yes, it was just for her. She giggled at the novelty, and little fairies emerged from behind the crystals to giggle with her. They fluttered overhead, leaving glittery trails of fairy

dust in their wakes. The air shimmered, and the sound of little bells joined in the crystal's ethereal music.

She'd had no idea a simple wedding band and a few other odds and ends from Dianne's apartment could have bought so much happiness. They were set for at least a week, maybe longer. She couldn't feel bad about it. Dianne really had brought it on herself. No question, she had orchestrated the intervention. She always had to be the better sister, the nobler one, the golden child. It had always been that way. In reality, she was nothing more than a hypocrite, just like everyone else in the family. Someone needed to kick her off her high horse, and no one was more fitting for the job than Jenny. To think Dianne had held such a valuable treasure for so long was awe inspiring. No doubt, she and John could afford a replacement, and then she would hold yet another fund for another rainy day.

It was perfect. Everything was perfect.

She leaned over to kiss Greg, but he was unresponsive, lost in a different world. Enjoying the separate, secret kingdom of her own, she rested her head on his chest, reveling in the music, wishing it might never end.

The music did finally begin to fade, however, and the forest gave way to familiar walls. Little demons replaced the fairies, fire replaced the clouds, and moans of the damned replaced the music. The demons joined hands and danced circles around her, closing in a little more with each pass. The walls moved in time, pulsating and breathing, and the heavy beat hammered through her ears. She covered them to drown out the sound, but to no avail.

The lava flooded in, spitting and boiling, and the demons climbed onto the dingy, worn sofa and advanced on her and Greg both. Even more

emerged from the lava, swarming onto the couple like an army of giant ants. She scrambled onto the back of the sofa, slapping them off, but there were too many of them. They scurried beneath her clothes and tangled themselves in her hair. They bit and clawed, stabbing at her eyes and ears with their pitchforks. The more she fought, the more horrifically they tormented her. She screamed and they screamed back in mischievous spite.

“Greg, do something!”

He ignored her, trapped in his own torment.

She reached down and nudged him, and he moaned, wetting himself.

“Help me get them off!” she sobbed.

His head bobbed, his eyes staring into the dark nothingness above them, and then the demons rolled him off the side of the sofa and into the fiery depths below.

She leaned over to search for him, but all she could see was the flow of lava and the demons that continued to rise from it. They tore tiny bites from her skin and wedged their pitchforks beneath her fingernails. They chewed on her nose and ripped out locks of her hair. They screamed into her ears and scratched evil symbols across her arms. She kicked and tore at them, but even more came. The lava continued to rise, scorching her legs.

She shrieked when the tiny, red devils lunged and tugged, knocking her into the burning river. She tried to scream as her skin melted and her hair singed away, but the lava rushed into her mouth and down her throat. Her eyes fused shut and her ears filled with the burning sludge, so that the only remaining sensation was the excruciating feel of her body smoldering while she swam through the hellish fire.

She brushed up against Greg and grabbed his arm. She held tight

while the burning tide whisked them both away. It towed them through the tiny apartment, ceaselessly burning, until they slammed into the bed. Blinded, deaf, and mute, she felt her way to the mattress, dragging Greg behind her. Exhausted and shaking in her anguish, she collapsed with him at her side.

John walked down the sidewalk to the beat of a heart monitor. A feeling of guilt weighed him down, although its source eluded him for the moment. A vaguely familiar painting lay beside a garbage can awaiting pickup, and his thoughts shifted to an odd sense of concern over his wife's whereabouts. Where was she? Were they supposed to meet somewhere? He approached a thicket of tea roses growing through a white picket fence and opted to pluck a branch. Dianne had always loved roses. He brought the branch to his nose to sniff the three tiny, connected roses. The scent of bleach was overpowering. He took a moment to study the strange-smelling flowers, struggling to make sense of the discrepancy. A voice filtered through an invisible loud speaker in the sky: Dr. Cooper, calling Dr. Cooper to the nurses' station. Dr. Yeats, please report to the ICU . . . Dr. Yeats. John stumbled over a crack in the cement and flew forward.

He woke with a start, nearly falling out of his hard, plastic seat. It only took a moment to orient himself. He was in the hospital at Dianne's bedside. It had been a long night, and he had nodded off in his vigil.

The left side of her head, including the outer edge of her eye and part of her cheek and jaw, were still in the process of forming bruises. Even in their early stage, however, they looked terribly painful. Her right ankle was immobilized in a cast, and both her hands were in an array of splints and bandages. A steady mix of saline and morphine dripped into a vein in her left forearm.

He scooted closer and rested his head on the hard mattress by her hip.

“I should’ve been there. Will you ever forgive me?”

She stirred, but didn’t open her eyes. “John?”

“It’s me. I’m here.”

Her eyes blinked open while she strained to focus on his mournful face. “Where am I? Where’s Junior? Is he okay?”

Another heavy pang hit him and he did his best to offer a hopeful, positive face. “He’s here, in another room.

When you’re a little better, maybe they’ll let you see him.”

Recollection of the full event seemed to hit her and she tried to sit up. She brought her hands to her face and stared at the swollen, bandaged mass of fingers and flesh. Her lips went tight. “Look what they did!”

“Who, sweetheart? Who did this to you?”

She shook her head. She spoke with a slight slur when she continued, “Why did I open the door for her? I should’ve known better! Stupid, stupid!” Bitter tears ran from the corners of her eyes past her temples, soaking into either side of her plush pillow.

He cringed as a quick flash of the scene he’d come home to invaded his thoughts. Save the bathroom, every room in the apartment had been tossed, every drawer emptied, every cupboard and cabinet torn apart. Whoever had been there had taken every item that had held any possible value. All of his good suits and shoes were gone, as were the few pieces of jewelry Dianne had kept on their bedroom dresser. Their silverware had been taken, as had much of the nonperishable food in the kitchen. Dianne’s paints remained intact, although the painting she’d been working on had been smeared beyond recognition when it had left its colorful impression on the studio wall.

He’d found Dianne crying and mumbling incoherently, Junior at her side. When Junior had spotted him, he’d looked up with a snuffle and said

very simply, “Momma won’t get up.”

Without a thought about the price, he’d called an ambulance and had her transported to the nearest hospital. Neither she nor Junior were forthcoming about the intruder’s identity, Dianne too deep in shock and Junior too traumatized by whatever had taken place.

“Did anyone stop them?” Dianne asked, pushing through the obvious fog in which the morphine had engulfed her.

“Who? Tell me who it was and I’ll make sure they answer for what they did.”

“I can’t tell you. Jenny, she’ll kill me if I . . . no, I can’t say.”

He patted her leg. “That’s okay. Don’t worry about it. Just focus on healing.”

She took another look at her hands. “How will I paint now? If I can’t paint . . . how will I do what. . . ? You’re through with me, and I sure as hell can’t . . . for Junior on my own. Who am I then? I’m nobody, nothing.”

“Things will get better. I promise.”

“You can’t promise that. Can’t promise . . . anything. No promises. Not anymore.”

He looked into her eyes, waiting for her to look back. When finally she did, he said, “I’ve been a rotten husband, made some terrible mistakes. I’ll understand if you hate me for it. But if you’d be willing to give me another chance, I’d like to make it up to you. Things can’t end like this. We can’t end like this.”

Her eyelids clenched shut, forcing out even heavier streams of tears. When they opened, she studied his face with both desperation and contempt. “I don’t know . . . what right now. I’m not even . . . what I’m supposed to feel. My thoughts . . . spinning through a blender.”

He considered how he might react were their roles reversed. He'd probably tell her to have a nice life and fall off the grid. What he'd done to her was inexcusable, and he could only hope she might offer him a show of forgiveness he knew he didn't deserve. He promised himself he'd never take her for granted again if only she gave him a chance to prove it.

"What should I . . . do you know . . . it's all just so. . ." She shook her head and began to sob.

"You're a better person than I am," he told her, fighting tears of his own. "That's one of the reasons I married you. Can we just . . . start over? I couldn't bear to lose you."

She shook her head, writhing and growling. "Took my wedding ring. Tried to stop them, but they broke. . ." She took another horrified glance at her hands. "Look what they did!"

"I'll get you a new one."

"It won't be the same!"

"We can renew our vows with it."

"Our vows?"

He nodded. "We'll drive past the desert, to the ocean, and we'll hold each other's hands on a cliff overlooking the beach. We'll do it at sunset, so we can watch all the colors when the sun sinks into the sea, and Junior can be our ring bearer." He rubbed his cheek against his shoulder as a tear threatened its way out.

"Sounds perfect." She turned away, continuing to cry.

"It will be."

"No." She sniffled, staring up at the ceiling rather than turning back to him. "Nothing's perfect. Nothing. Don't you see?"

He stood. "Just think about it. I love you. Please know that."

She was unresponsive when he left the room. He stopped just beyond

the threshold, breaking down in the hallway, summoning all of his collective strength to keep from driving a fist through the wall. He straightened, pulling himself together, and crossed to the adjacent wing on the other side of the floor.

The ICU.

He slapped on his sero-negative badge and made his way to the door to the pediatric room. On it was a sign that warned, drug-immune strep—biohazard suit required. The door was locked, but a reinforced window allowed John to peek in. Junior lay on a bed alongside several others, coughing and sniffing while they watched cartoons play on a widescreen television affixed to the wall. No one noticed the onlooker. They were far too preoccupied with their burning throats and the task of redirecting their attention to the animated dancing cat on the wall.

John could only hope the staff members were making the boy as comfortable as possible, although he knew life would never be the same. Even if he survived the infection, he would be a carrier for life, suffering intermittent flares and posing a potential threat to the rest of the population. He would ultimately be sent to a quarantine camp, where he would live out his days with a family equally as sick, overseen by doctors and nurses clad in plastic suits, never to return to society.

John turned away, unable to face the repercussions of his absence any longer. He lumbered back up the hall, his thoughts in a daze, when an administrative nurse stepped into his path. He went still, his eyes prying the nurse for her purpose in stopping him.

“The doctors want to know when you’ll be able to start payment on the bills,” she said with a sickeningly saccharine tone.

“I’m working on it.”

“We have a few tests we need to run before your wife goes into

surgery for the bone pins.” She handed him an electronic notepad containing a medical consent form.

He signed it, handed it back, then brushed past the woman and instructed his phone to call Bill’s Auto Sales.

A receptionist answered on the third ring. “Thank you for calling Bill’s Auto Sales, where the customer always comes first. How may I direct your call?”

“It’s John Irwin. I dropped off a vintage Mustang this morning for appraisal and would like to know if your people are ready yet to make a deal.”

“Just one moment, sir.” With a click, elevator music fed into John’s ear, interrupted every minute or so with the recorded message, We value your patronage. Please stay on the line, and our next representative will be with you as soon as possible.

John found a seat in the hallway and staggered backward into it. The fluorescent lights flickered overhead. The smell of bleach was nauseating. Nurses and doctors rushed back and forth. Someone cried out from a nearby room. No one he knew, nothing to pull him from his chair.

Thank you for your patronage. . .

The fluorescent lights grew blinding. The smell of bleach burned through his nose and singed his lungs. He labored to breathe. A familiar song played, but for some reason, it seemed altogether foreign.

Please stay on the line, and our next representative will be with you as soon as possible. . .

The hallway warped and stretched on either side. The lights flickered as though threatening to burn out all at once. The unfamiliar familiar song played on.

He stared blankly when he caught sight of a man shuffling up the hall.

The face was familiar, but John couldn't place it. The man glanced up, a hint of recollection adding a new layer of seriousness to his tired eyes.

He approached John, his eyebrows drawing together. "Do I know you?"

John searched his mind, the music playing through his earphone breaking his concentration. "You do look familiar."

The man snapped his fingers, his expression shifting. "The gas station. A couple months back. You had that lovely Mustang."

John nodded, the bits of memory falling into place. "You helped me push it up to the pump." He offered the man his hand, and they shook. "I'm sorry . . . I don't remember your name."

"George." He gave a thoughtful pause. "John, right?"

"Good memory."

George shrugged. "My grandfather's name was John."

John's body went tight when the car dealer's representative came on the line. "Is this Mr. Irwin?"

"Yes, this is he." He gave George an apologetic nod, raising a hand. "I'm sorry. I need to take this call."

George loomed nearby, pacing nervously and watching the other end of the hall.

"Mr. Irwin, we've finished our appraisal, and I think the best we can do for you right now would be seven hundred thousand."

John sucked in a deep, heavy breath. "It's got to be worth twice that much. Do you know how long it took me to restore it? It's a classic, maybe one of a few hundred in drivable condition."

"Yes, we understand that. Unfortunately, with gas prices these days, there just isn't the demand for older cars."

"But what about collectors? There's a market for classic cars; I know

there's a market."

"Seven hundred thousand is our offer. Take it or leave it, Mr. Irwin."

John shook his head, his thoughts muddled in anger and desperation. Dianne would end up in debtors' prison if he didn't find some way to foot the bill, but the thought of being robbed blind in the process was nearly enough to make him vomit. "I'll get back to you," he managed to say before hanging up. "Damn it!"

George held his distance. "Selling your car?"

He nodded, struggling to keep from losing himself in a fit of despair.

"High medical deductible?"

"Yeah." John fought to hold his composure. "My wife . . . and my son. . ."

"I have a collector who's been looking for a vintage Mustang. I'd be willing to put down whatever you need to cover your expenses and cut my commission to ten percent."

The offer seemed too good to be true, although George looked sincere. "You don't even know me. Why would you do that?"

"I know how it goes." The pained look returned to George's face. "My father's in the ICU. Cancer. Pancreatic. The people here are taking me for every dollar they can; half the procedures they're telling me are necessary fall outside his insurance plan. Luckily, I've got the money to spend. You look like an honest man, John. I'd like to help you out if I can."

John felt his face flush and his eyes well up. "I don't know what to say."

George gave him a pat on the shoulder, showing equal difficulty in keeping his emotions in check. "A simple 'thank you' will do."

Thoughts spinning, words minced into meaningless letters.
 John crying . . . why's he crying? Why's he here?
 Why am I here? Where am I?

White walls. Bugs on the ceiling. Drip, drip, drrrrr-ip into my arm.

Where'd John go? Will he be back? Was he ever really here to begin with?

My hands! Jenny. Quiet! Don't say a word. Next time, next time it'll be my skull instead of my fingers. Dear God, my hands!

Junior. Where's Junior? Nobody knows. See him soon. Heal. For now, just heal.

Where am I? How did I get here?

What's going on?

Why am I crying?

Jenny woke to the faint sound of birds chirping outside her covered window, yet she lay motionless for some time, too tired to move. A nagging desire to smoke or snort another hit pulled at her from the other direction, tempting her with the anticipation of beauty and release, regardless of the price that followed, and after contemplating through a long span of indecision, she forced herself to sit up.

She turned to Greg, who lay awkwardly at her side. She gave him a light nudge. “Babe?”

He did not respond.

She nudged a little harder. “Hey, wake up.” She noticed a strange consistency to his body, stiff yet spongy, and in that same moment, she realized how cold he was. “Greg, you sick?”

She tried again to rouse him, but he would not move. She crawled over him and slapped his pale face. “Greg, get up.” His body remained silent and still. Dried blood and serum were caked beneath his nose and around his mouth. She crouched down, the grim reality hitting her when his body continued to lie motionless.

“Babe?” She felt for a pulse, her own beginning to race when she couldn’t find any signs of life in his icy throat.

A light cry escaped her. “Greg?” She shook him violently. “Greg?”

She scuttled off his body, tripping over her own feet when she hit the floor. She cried and gasped, still clinging to a hint of denial despite the evidence beside her. She only got a few paces from the bed before she crumpled to the floor. How could he leave her like this? How could he be

so selfish?

She struggled to catch her breath, the distraught moans thrusting from her trembling body feeling like spasms from which she might never recover. She felt the words pass through her lips, “Greg, no, Greg, no, Greg. . .” although she no longer consciously spoke.

The sensation of his cold skin against her fingertips flew to the forefront of her mind. Still, she questioned her judgment. Maybe he was just sleeping. Perhaps she had done something last night that had upset him, and now he was ignoring her as a punishment. She staggered to her feet, considered returning to his side to make another attempt at waking him, then decided it best to take in a good dose of serum first.

She made her way to the living room and found the pipe on the floor in front of the sofa. As luck would have it, a hefty chunk of half-smoked serum waited in the clear, bulbous end. She found the lighter and heated the drug, watching the shimmer of smoke collect inside. When she felt satisfied that an adequate hit swirled within, she brought her lips to the open end and breathed it in.

The relief hit immediately. Greg couldn’t possibly be dead. He knew how to handle his high. He knew better than to take too much. He’d been the one to teach her the limits. He couldn’t possibly have overdosed.

No, that was impossible.

Still, she felt hesitant to return to the bedroom. What if he really was dead? How would she possibly cope? She stared at the doorway, daring herself. One way or another, she needed to know.

She moved, one slow step after the next. She saw the cheaply carpeted floor through the growing mist of clouds. She saw the edge of their queen-sized bed while it transformed into a sailboat. His feet beneath the sheets morphed into the mast of the sail. What had happened to his

face? So distorted. Pale and bloated.

No, that definitely wasn't her Greg. The body had become an inanimate object, something far from human. Nothing of him was left there, so when the sailboat drifted off, she gave no farewell. It carried the empty shell to the horizon and beyond, and so she left the vacant bedroom to chance a second hit.

There was still plenty in the pipe. She felt it appropriate to smoke it until the bulb was dry. Another one for Greg, and then another one after that. Maybe she would slip from this world and meet him wherever he happened to reside in the next. Heaven or hell . . . no matter, it would be tolerable as long as he was there waiting.

She felt her body go limp, sinking into the sofa like wax melting over the edge of a candle. An overwhelming sense of peace filled her. This would be a fitting end. This was how it was meant to be.

She thought about Greg's lonely body and decided to chase the sailboat so she could lie down beside him. She crawled through the clouds, but there was no sign of him. She returned to the living room, but he was not there, either. She went to the front door, deciding she would need to search further than the bedroom if she was going to find him. She summoned the strength to open the front door and swim out into the street.

The sunlight outside was bright, almost blinding, and she shielded her eyes while the current became a narrow river that carried her down the street. "I'm coming for you, Greg!" she cried. "I'm coming!"

Colors shined all around her, rainbows and glitter and all the beauty she could imagine awaited. Fairies flew overhead, tweeting like birds. Flowers along the banks turned to face her, smiling in the glistening light. Elves and gnomes hopped alongside, keeping up with her pace and urging her on.

“Keep it together until you find him,” they chanted. “Then you can rest.”

She searched in all directions, but he was nowhere in sight. It had only made sense that the current would take her where it had taken him, and yet it did not. She searched all along the river and the banks on either side. There were mermaids and cherubs, fairies and unicorns, but Greg was nowhere in sight.

He was gone.

Upon that realization, the river flooded over with a wave of lava. Steam hissed all around, and try as she might, she could not outswim the red, hot surge rushing toward her. She took a deep breath and ducked beneath the water’s surface, kicking and stroking with the last of her energy. The water around her began to boil and the demons surrounded her. She tried to surface for another breath, but they clung to her limbs and weighted her down.

The last of her air escaped her lungs and her body went still with the sudden onslaught of heat. The lava became one with the water, and the resulting rocky mire engulfed her. It clung to her skin and burned as it hardened. She felt certain this would be what finally killed her, and yet she continued to inch along. How she continued to move was a mystery even to her.

She could not breathe. She could not see. She could not rise above the molten current.

The demons rode along with her, stabbing and biting, weighing her down ever further, so that she had to question whether somehow the earth itself had swallowed her and she might sink until there was nowhere else to go. Was this hell? The serum’s highs and lows aside, had the eternal agony finally claimed her? Would this torment continue forever? Was this

the punishment for all of the mistakes her addiction had driven her to make?

She prayed that something—or someone—might lift her from the depths, that this wasn't the end. Who could find her, though? Who could possibly reach her?

“Miss?” a man's voice bubbled through the hot, liquid layers.

She kicked and reached, hoping whoever was there was near enough to reach back. She couldn't call out, but she didn't need to. A gentle hand found her and pulled her to the safety of a marble staircase. In an instant, the lava was gone, leaving behind only the foggy confusion that always came at the end of a serum trip.

She took a deep breath, the air hot but not searing. She opened her eyes, finding a well-dressed young man beside her. He looked familiar, but she couldn't place him. “Are you an angel?”

“Me? An angel?” He laughed.

She surveyed the manicured yard before her and the colossal house to her back. There was a lush, green lawn, flowers of all different colors, and tall hedges that blocked out all view of the distant neighboring yards. The marble beneath her was white with ribbons of gold and black, and it felt cool to the touch. “Where am I?”

“You've been running back and forth through my yard for the last twenty minutes. It seems you've been under the influence of some kind of drug.” He paused to weigh the severity of her blue skin. “Serum maybe?”

She shied back from him. “You don't know what you're talking about!” She stood, but the cold reality she had been trying to escape hit her, dropping her back to the steps. Greg was gone, dead, and there wasn't anything she could do about it. His cold, lifeless body lay alone in that dark hovel they'd called home, and it would rot there until someone found

it. Gone . . . the only person who had loved her for who she was. Lost to one too many hits. Leaving her utterly alone. She began to sob uncontrollably.

“Hey, don’t cry.”

“I’ve got no one left. Oh, God, why couldn’t I have died along with him?”

Her words seemed to touch him in an unexpected way, and he reached his hand out to her. “Come inside. We’ll get you a shower and something to eat.”

She shook her head. “I should be dead.”

“But you’re alive. Maybe it’s for a reason. Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Hesitant but charmed by his warm smile, she took his hand and allowed him to lead her inside. He opened the door and sweet, cool air flowed over her. The entry was adorned with expensive tile and crystal light fixtures. The living room had a television nearly as large as the wall, luxurious furniture, and bowls of nuts and fruits on the coffee table.

“Make yourself at home.”

She rushed to the food and sank her teeth into a crisp, ripe apple. It was sweet and juicy, each bite more flavorful than the last. She hadn’t had fruit so fresh since she had been a child living in her parents’ oversized house.

He sat beside her, leisurely grabbing a small handful of nuts and popping a few into his mouth. “What’s your name?”

“Jenny.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Jenny. I’m Alex.”

Sandra came in from an adjacent hallway, barefoot, clad in a bathrobe, and towel-drying her hair. She froze when she spotted Jenny.

“Who’s this?”

Alex stood. “Sandy, meet Jenny; Jenny, meet my girlfriend, Sandy.”

The two women glared at one another with equal levels of suspicion and jealousy.

“Jenny just happened to land on our doorstep in need of our help,” he continued. “I think we might be able to come to an agreement in which we are of mutual assistance to one another.”

“Is that right?” Sandra’s eyes became daggers as she stared down at Jenny with a hateful scowl. “And I suppose she’ll be staying with us?”

“Do you have a problem with that?”

Sandra turned away, suddenly too preoccupied with her hair to offer an answer. She hurried back down the hall on heavy, angry feet that created loud thumps against the smooth, hardwood floor.

Jenny considered the comment and, based on Sandra’s body language, assumed the man alluded to possible sexual favors. Did it matter? The guy was loaded. If she played her cards right, she might be able to take him for a small fortune. She could be set for months, maybe years. That would be worth whatever price he asked. She’d done worse. But then, what was it all without Greg at her side?

She shrugged and returned to the fruit bowl for another helping.

The woman at the fancy school had warned them. Why hadn't they listened? All the other kids with him in that tiny, boring room had also signed up at the old school. Every one of them had pleaded for release into their parents' custody, but it didn't matter how much they cried or begged. The people in the white suits had decided that they were dangerous to the rest of society, that everyone they came in contact with might become their disease's next victims.

Junior had seen firsthand how dangerous it was. While most of the children there merely suffered from coughs, sniffles, and sore throats, Henry, Keith, Lauren, and Jeremy S. had become so sick they couldn't eat or drink without throwing up and soon couldn't get up from their beds without dropping to the floor. They'd had fevers so high they became delirious and sweated through their pajamas and sheets. They had cried and writhed in their beds until, one by one, they had gone silent and still. The people in the white suits had taken them away, and yet the smell of death—the same smell that had seeped into his apartment after Mr. Smith had died—still lingered.

The room had a disinfected feel to it, despite the worn linoleum floor and the cracks in the walls that turned into scary shapes in the dark. Every surface in there was white, save the large television affixed to the wall. The television played cartoons all day, turning on a short while before breakfast and back off at bedtime. Junior had asked if he could send for his Gamer Co. 3D Action Pack, and the people in the white, plastic suits had told him if he were allowed to bring in his toys, they would have to

allow all the other kids to bring in theirs too, and the room simply wasn't large enough to accommodate the clutter. They did assure him, however, that all of his belongings would be waiting for him in his new home.

His new home . . . there was such an uncertain and scary sound to that. Still, it didn't yet carry any true meaning to him. It wouldn't until he actually got there. He hadn't even had the time to digest the fact that he would probably never see his parents again. There was an unreal quality to it that allowed him to hold onto the hope that this was all just a terrible dream and he would wake up in his bedroom to the smell of his momma's paints and the sound of his parents getting ready for work. It was calming to believe the lie, even though the reality of it hit him regularly, prompting him to curl up on his bed and cry it off. The other children seemed to shift through similar cycles, and more often than not, one child's breakdown set off a chain reaction of terrified cries and angry screams throughout the room.

There would be no goodbyes; the people in the white suits said it only made things harder. Junior would have given up anything to see both his parents one more time, no matter how hard it would have been to watch them go. It seemed so unfair. He didn't even know if his momma was okay. She was the reason they had gone to the hospital to begin with. Only when he had begun to complain about the fire in his throat had the doctors rushed him off for testing and, soon thereafter, locked him away in the sick kids' room.

They told him his throat would burn for the rest of his life, although there would be times when he felt otherwise well and times when he felt achy and feverish. Still, he would live, even if life as he knew it would never be the same.

When the time came for the transport, the people had set up a plastic tunnel through the hallway that led all the way to the bus, the inside of which was also covered in a layer plastic. A woman in a white suit sat at the wheel. She ignored Junior and all of the other children, steering away from the parking lot as soon as the plastic tunnel was detached from the door. It was almost as if they weren't even there. She didn't say a word during the entire drive, even when some of the kids got rowdy and others cried for her to stop and let them out. She had a blank look on her face, one Junior couldn't read. Was she angry or sad? Either way, she looked unhappy.

The quar-tine camp was surrounded by two sets of tall, wrought-iron fences that looked like the prison bars he'd seen in some of his cartoons. At the top of the fences were layers upon layers of razor wire, making escape impossible. Guards stood on both sides of each of the electronic gates, and they didn't open the second until the first had closed.

The bus moved through the heart of the small community, passing a shopping center and a park before stopping at a tall building. Two people, a man and a woman, waited for them. Obviously, they were also sick because neither had a protective suit. The woman wore a long black skirt and a white blouse, and she had her black hair twisted into a massive bun on the top of her head. The man wore slacks and a white dress shirt, and he wore a beard that didn't quite match his short, auburn hair.

The door opened and the woman climbed in. "I want you to form a single-file line and follow me."

The children obediently formed a line and followed her out of the bus and into the tall building. The man followed at the end of the line, likely to ensure no one attempted to run off or return to the bus.

The inside of the building had freshly painted cream and blue walls

with pictures of flowers and animals along the bottom half. The children followed the woman into a large room where two rows of seats faced a podium. The man closed the door behind him and stood in front of it while the woman moved behind it to organize a short stack of paperwork.

“Find a seat,” the woman ordered in a gentle but firm voice.

Junior sat in the front row, feeling so nervous about being there he thought he might throw up. A couple of the other children whimpered, but everyone gave the woman their full attention.

“I know you’re all pretty scared right now, so I’m going to do my best to get you through the re-homing process as quickly and easily as possible.” The woman paused for a moment and smiled. “We have families that want to love you and give you good, happy lives here. Your clothes and toys are already waiting for you in your new homes, and as soon as we get each of you checked in, you’ll be able to go to them.”

The woman explained they would be issuing identification cards and needed to file some paperwork, and in the meantime, she would need to confirm their names, birthdates, and class grades. She was pleasant enough during her short speech, although that didn’t make it any less grueling. Junior sat through it as patiently as possible, although not everyone was so well behaved. Patrick, a freckle-faced boy who’d had a bed beside his, began to whine and talk back, and the man escorted him, crying and protesting, to a stool in the back corner of the room. Cindy, the youngest survivor among them, also put up a fuss, but went still as soon as the woman threatened to have the man send her to the other back corner.

By the time the introduction was over, Junior didn’t know whether to be relieved or even more anxious. He looked down at his newly issued card, unable to read most of it but able to identify his name listed at the top. It had a bar code at the bottom, and somehow they had secured a

picture of his face to print with all of the other numbers and words that were meaningless to him.

The man let in a group of adults, who stood by while the woman called the children one by one, checked their cards, and matched them with their foster parents. Junior felt dizzy and weak when she called his name. He turned to the sight of a young couple smiling and crying, the woman opening her arms and reaching for him. He didn't want to hug her, but he also didn't want to hurt her feelings, so he let the woman embrace him.

She kissed his head and held him tight. "He's perfect, just perfect!" She finally let him go, kneeling to meet him at eye level. "We had a little boy who was about your age."

Junior studied the woman's kind eyes while he asked, "You don't have him anymore?"

She shook her head. Her hand went to her throat while she cleared it. He could tell by the look on her face that hers hurt as badly as his did. The people at the hospital had told him he'd eventually get used to the terrible burning, which became much worse when he swallowed, but he couldn't see how. At times, it felt like more than he could bear.

The sad look in both of his new parents' eyes reminded him of the look he'd seen in his momma's when the neighbor lady had died. He thought to ask what had happened to their son, but decided it best not to pry any further.

"So, do you go by Jonathan, Johnny, or John?" asked the man.

Junior ignored him.

"Jack, maybe?" the man tried.

He crossed his arms with an angry pout. "Junior—because I got my *daddy's* name."

The couple exchanged glances. The man turned back to him with a contrived smile. “Well, Junior, what do you say we go home?”

He didn’t want to go anywhere with these people. He’d always learned it wasn’t safe to go off with strangers. Now suddenly he had no choice in the matter. His parents’ faces came to mind, and he began wailing, “I want my momma and daddy!”

“Calm down, little guy,” said the man. “It’s all going to be okay.”

“Momma!” he screamed. “Where’s my momma?” He threw himself to the floor. It was hard and cold and smelled as if it had been recently polished with pine cleaner. He growled and kicked, refusing to let the couple get close enough to lift him from the spot.

The woman knelt as closely beside him as she could without falling victim to one of his aimless and frantic blows. “I don’t ever want to replace your mom. I can tell you love her very much.”

“I want my momma!”

The woman’s words grew shaky and unsure. “But if you’ll give me a chance, I’d like to show you how much love I have to share with a sweet little boy like you. We can bake cookies and sing songs and play all sorts of games. We have pictures of your parents on the wall in your bedroom—and you’re going to love that room. It has a bunk bed and all your favorite toys, and we even got you some new ones. There’s all sorts of kids your age in our neighborhood for you to make friends with, and I’ll learn how to cook all your favorite foods.”

“Just give us a chance, Junior,” the man chimed in.

He continued to scream, kicking into the air and keeping everyone at a distance. There was no way these people were going to take him away. Not ever.

Never to see his momma and daddy ever again. . .

He kicked and flailed whenever anyone tried to move in. No, he would not go so easily. He'd make them see, make them see what they were doing to him, make them see just how much pain it brought him to be separated from his parents. He gave a sharp glance at the woman, a new type of pain hitting him when he saw that she too was crying. But why was she crying? What he making her cry?

How could his resistance possibly affect her so intensely?

She cupped her mouth in her hands and collapsed to her knees, sobbing.

The tantrum began to exhaust him, and he went still but continued to lie defiantly on the tiled floor. He stared at the ceiling, drowning out the woman's cries with his own.

"My poor, sweet boy. . ." whispered the woman.

His cries waned into weak whimpers, and he turned to her with desperate, lonely eyes.

"Let's go home," she said, offering him her hand. "Please just give us a chance. Just a chance."

He glanced at her hand, which she held toward him.

"Please. . ."

He took it with angry reluctance, allowed her to help him to his feet, and let her lead him away.

Jenny screamed, certain she didn't have it in her to endure another minute of the withdrawal. "Just kill me!"

Alex sat at her side, exhibiting a level of patience she hadn't known existed.

Her blood boiled, the sensation of thousands of tiny insects burrowing through her skin made her scratch herself raw, and her mind spun so fast she couldn't keep up with her own thoughts. There was no surviving this, not again. She'd barely gotten through it in her short stay at the work camp. No, she couldn't survive this feeling again. Not now. Not alone. She strained her eyes to focus on the strange man sitting at her bedside. "Please just kill me. Make it quick. I can't do this!"

"Yes, you can."

She cried aloud, clenching the sheets beneath her. "My body's on fire! I can't take it anymore!"

"You can and you will."

Gravity seemed to defy her for a moment as she rose above the bed. A moment later, she realized she was in Alex's arms. He was carrying her somewhere.

"Please, make it stop! If you won't kill me, get me a gram of serum—just one gram. I'll make it last!"

"I'm not killing you and I'm not getting you any serum, Jenny."

She struggled to pull herself from his grip. "No—you can't do this to me!"

"You're going to be just fine."

She screamed again while he set her beneath a lukewarm shower. She sat against the hard tile, the water beating down on her, and she found it surprisingly calming. Her tears combined with the downpour, her fight draining away with the water spiraling beneath her. She watched the shallow pool circle down the drain, taking part of the fire with it. For the first time in hours, she felt as though she could breathe.

She turned to see Alex sitting beside her, his expensive clothes soaked. He didn't seem to care. His focus was on her and nowhere else.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, fighting another onslaught of tears.

He smiled, ignoring the water rushing down his face. "Because I know you came to my doorstep for a reason. Everything happens for a reason. There are no coincidences."

His words sparked a vague memory that had been looming in the back of her mind, and she focused for a moment on his face. She'd seen him before. Yes, he was the man she'd seen speaking outside the electronics store on the day she'd gotten herself arrested.

There are no coincidences.

She turned away, her body going from intolerably hot to freezing in an instant. She shivered and her teeth chattered.

He saw her distress and reached up to warm the water. "You don't believe me?"

She shrugged. "I don't know what I believe anymore."

He took her chin in a gentle hand and turned her to face him. "Have you ever believed in something so strongly you'd be willing to do anything to see it through?"

She shook her head.

"Well, I have. I do. I believe any one of us is capable of making a

difference. We have the power to dictate our future. We just have to believe.”

“Believe in what?”

“In ourselves.” He kissed her softly on the lips.

She pulled away. If it was sex he wanted, he’d have to wait until the withdrawals had taken her last breath. Couldn’t he see how miserable she was?

He leaned his back against the tile wall, taking one of her hands in his. ”You’re going to get through this, and then you’re going to take fate by the horns and claim what’s yours. You’ll see.”

She focused on the feel of the warm water against her back, the sensation of it trickling over her face and down her hair, the rush of it pooling where she sat and finding its way to the drain. He took her hand in his, and she felt another onslaught of emotion take over.

“Don’t cry.”

She shook her head, unable to respond.

“Let me help you.”

She stared at the draining water in awed silence.

“Will you let me try? Jenny?”

She closed her eyes, a new set of tears merging with the water running down her cheeks. “What do you want from me?”

His hand moved to her shoulder, which he gently caressed. “Faith. I just want your faith. Can you give me that much?”

There are no coincidences. Maybe, just maybe, that was true. What were the chances that she would end up, of all places, at his doorstep? She could have wandered anywhere. Might fate have driven her there?

“You have to put your trust somewhere, Jenny. Trust me.”

Something about Alex’s voice was soothing and convincing. He had a

gift with words that melted Jenny's will and replaced it with his own. She felt at peace in his arms. For that moment, her cravings abated. Her skin stopped crawling. Her body relaxed.

He held her until the hot water ran out, and then he wrapped her in a plush towel. "I'll have Sandy find you a change of clothes."

She watched him leave, holding the towel tightly around her, stunned by the show of kindness. She felt convinced she'd never before encountered a man quite like him. If ever there was a saint, it was Alex. Maybe she would stick around for a while, after all. He didn't seem to have any real attachment to Sandra. If there were a chance she might steal him away, it would be stupid for her not to try. Besides his kindness and gentle nature, he was one hell of a meal ticket. He had a charming smile and a nice build, not at all a bad catch. The two of them would make a handsome couple.

She paused at the door when she heard Sandra's angry voice.

"I'm not giving that bitch any more of my clothes! She's already puked on my favorite shorts, and I'm not giving up another one of my bras!"

"Sandy, please try to be more reasonable about this. She's our guest, and—"

"Are you fucking her?"

"What? No, of course not!"

"The way you've been doting on her, you could've fooled me."

"Don't you trust me?" he said before his voice became too faint for Jenny to hear.

She quietly opened the door and stepped into the hall, but the conversation had fallen to a whisper and she couldn't make out what either was saying. Both went silent when she found them in the living room.

“Jenny . . . Sandy was just going to pick out something for you to wear.” He glanced at Sandra, who left for the master bedroom with visible disdain.

Jenny remained at the edge of the hallway, trying to decipher Alex’s body language. Why had they gone quiet? What had they been talking about?

“How are you feeling?”

She shrugged, suddenly becoming aware of the ravaging effects of her withdrawals. The sensations hit her even stronger than before, and she felt like she might come out of her skin if she had to endure the agony any longer. “It’s getting really bad again,” she managed to say despite her contracting lungs.

“You’ll get through this.”

“Maybe another shower will help.”

He nodded. “We’ll get you another shower as soon as there’s more hot water.”

“How long will that be?”

“Not long. Just try to relax.”

She shambled to the sofa and sat, tugging at her wet hair. Everything else seemed to phase out for a few long seconds, her eyes and ears fading while her physical discomfort sharply increased. She screamed, but she only heard the tail end of it. When the world materialized before her once more, Sandra stood before her with a handful of clothes.

“Try not to ruin these ones, will ya?” Sandra said with an angry throw.

When the clothes hit her, they felt like a barrage of rocks and forced from her a horrified cry.

“And will you get off the damn couch? You’re getting it wet.”

“Lay off,” Alex said.

Jenny abruptly stood, allowing both the towel and the dry clothes to drop to the carpet. She brushed past Sandra, looked Alex in the eyes, and then went into the kitchen. This would end now. She wasn't meant to survive this; she could feel it deep within her. Alex was an amazing man and the prospect of taking him as her own was enticing, but her next lover was meant to be Death.

Her body trembled while she went for a knife from the butcher block. She turned to the sound of Alex's soft voice.

“If you kill yourself now, your entire life will have been a waste. You don't want that, do you?”

“If she gets blood all over the kitchen floor, I'm not cleaning it up!” Sandra growled from the doorway.

Jenny fought the impulse to rush past him and slit Sandra's throat before turning the knife on herself. The woman had been nothing but a whining, jealous nag from the moment she had arrived.

“Let's talk about this,” Alex said in a calm yet convincing voice while he inched himself closer.

“Why do you care if I live or die?” She moved the blade to her wrist, determined slash it open with one quick, clean swipe. She braced herself for it, and yet she gave pause.

He placed a gentle hand over her grip on the knife.

“You're better than this. Don't give up on me now, not when we're so close.”

“No . . . I should be dead.”

“But you're not.”

The impulse to finish herself continued to hit her, but indecision kept her from following through. Did she really want to die? Was there any part

of her that wanted to live?

“You’ve been given a second chance. Don’t throw it away. Not now.”

She offered little resistance when he slipped the knife from her hand, and then she sobbed quietly as he took her in his arms and held her close.

“I wonder what he’s doing right now, at this very minute,” Dianne said as she sat in the center of her studio and stared at what remained of her painting. John had cleaned the smears of paint on the wall as well as he could, but his scrubbing had merely turned small smears into larger swatches. His attempt to cover the wall with a new coat of whitewash had been only marginally successful, as though the colors had taken on lives of their own and forced their way through the attempted cover solely to mock the anguished couple. The painting itself had proven just as unsalvageable, with only hints left of the picture Dianne had so carefully layered being perceivable amongst the mess. She had worked so hard on it, and it disgusted her to see it in such a state. Still, she couldn’t bring herself to part with the piece. It was a painful reminder of the disregard all social classes now espoused—and a necessary reality check. Art for art’s sake was a thing of the past, as was every other important aspect to both her life and her identity.

Her lost role as mother packed a much heavier blow than the loss of her profession. The fact that she had lost both in such close proximity seemed to hold some sort of dark irony she had yet to grasp. With it came a level of emotional pain she had not previously known could exist. Junior had been her first priority from the day she’d given birth to him. He’d been her inspiration, her strength. Now, all he could ever be to her was a memory. Already, she had to concentrate in order to remember the exact sound of his voice. His face, still etched clearly in her mind, would someday grow just as foreign, and the emptiness that thought generated

within her was crushing. She buried her face in bandaged hands.

John attempted to hug her. “You need to stop torturing yourself.”

“I wonder if he’s scared or sad.” She twisted out of his arms. “You don’t think he’s angry with us, do you?”

“He’s safe, and that’s all that matters now.”

“When my hands have healed, I’m going to paint a picture of him. We could put it up in the living room. What do you think?”

John’s phone beeped, and he answered it immediately. “Hello? . . . Yes, this is he.” He glanced back at Dianne before pacing into the hallway. “You must be mistaken. . . Well, this is the first I’m hearing about it, and I was the one who signed her release forms.” He crossed back and forth in front of the door, his body looking increasingly tense. “I’m going to have to confirm that with the hospital before I do anything. . . Yes, thank you. Goodbye.” He returned to the room, his face tight with concern.

“Who was that?”

He shook his head. “Nothing . . . just a clerical mistake, I’m sure. I’ll get it straightened out.”

“What kind of mistake?”

His words became weak and nearly breathless, and she could tell he was holding back something important. “You know how it goes; the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing. Nothing to worry about.”

He was a terrible liar, always had been. Whatever he was keeping from her, it had to be bad. The worst-case scenario came to mind, jolting her so hard she nearly felt as though it had knocked the wind out of her. “That wasn’t about Junior, was it?”

“I promise it wasn’t about Junior.”

She wanted to press the issue, but she was too emotionally exhausted to make the effort. Instead, she redirected her attention to her splints and

bandages. “My hands hurt so bad. I can’t believe the doctors would switch my pain meds like that! How can anybody be so cruel?”

He looked like he was going to say something, only to shrug and look away.

She felt herself begin to fall even deeper into her pit of misery and regret. “What do you think Junior’s doing right now?”

He sighed, looked around the room as if studying something important, and then shook his head.

“Why didn’t either of us catch it from him? We’d all still be together if all three of us had gotten sick.”

“Dianne—”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this! I’ve always been a good person—a good wife, a good mother, a good daughter—and somehow I always wind up with the crap end of it all! Why?”

“You can’t keep beating yourself up!”

“Don’t you dare tell me how to feel, John. Don’t you dare say a damned thing about it, not when you stood right in line when it came time to pour the last round of salt on my wounds.”

“I was just trying to—”

“Do you have any idea what you put me through with that little fling of yours? Do you think you can just sweep that under the rug with a couple weeks of ass kissing? Do you think you can fix something like that with an apology and a little extra work around the house?”

“Of course not.”

“Then keep your goddamn pep talks to yourself.” She stared him down, daring him to add another layer of sugar-coating to his clueless, self-absorbed denial.

The room went painfully silent. Dianne shifted her attention back to

the ruined painting. The throbbing in her hands seemed to intensify with her grief. No tears came, though; she was too angry for tears. She turned with great surprise to find the heavy streams instead rushing down John's cheeks. Never in all their years together had she seen the man cry, and the sight of it stirred in her a whole new level of heartache.

He glanced toward her, and their eyes met.

"I really do love you."

She nodded and turned away.

"I wish I could take it back, all of it, but I can't. I can't take back the grief I've caused you, or the lies I told, or the nights you had to spend alone. I can't take back not being there for you or not being here to protect you when the apartment was robbed. I can't take back any of it, and that kills me. I'm doing my best here. I don't know what else I can do. And it tears me up inside that—" He paused with a feeble cry, his lips trembling. His hands closed into tight, shaky fists. "It tears me up that our boy's gone. I don't know how I would be able to get through this if I lost you too."

She sucked in a deep breath, struggling to hold her composure. Finally, she replied, "If we ever have another baby, I think we should do it through Future Tech and send him to the Children's School of Corporate Management. No more chances. I couldn't bear to lose another child like this ever again."

He let out an exasperated sigh. "Could we discuss that some other time?"

Neither said a word for several minutes. She drew Junior's image in her mind, what he might look like captured in oil on canvas. She thought about the shading techniques she would use and how she might mix the colors in order to capture the highlights in his eyes. She turned to John,

troubled by the look of puzzled contemplation across his face and how much it reminded her of Junior whenever something had worried him.

“I miss him, John.”

“I miss him too.”

“I don’t think we have nearly enough pictures of him. Why didn’t we take more pictures?”

He cleared his throat and wiped away his tears. “Let’s get out of here for a while. I could use the fresh air, and I’m sure you could too. How about we take a walk down to the Mexanese restaurant?”

“I think we should keep his room just the way it is. That way, we can go in there to remember him exactly how he was when he left us. I can make a life-sized painting of him, and we can hang it over his bed. I’m sorry, did you say something?”

“Let’s go for a walk. It’ll be good for both of us.”

Still, she barely heard him, her thoughts too distant. She looked around the room before her eyes locked back onto the ruined painting. “Yes, I’m definitely going to paint him once my hands have healed.”

Jenny waited the better part of a half-hour shuffling through the line for a stall in the public restroom, which was immaculate and free of graffiti. The flowery scent of liquid hand soap permeated the air, and the soft light given off by the lovely silver fixtures made to look like candelabra affixed to the walls gave the tiled room a rustic and relaxed feel. She wore one of Sandra's dress suits, the wool in her skirt itchy and her pressed blouse stiff and uncomfortably warm. Sandra had done her hair and make-up, dulling the telling hue to her skin as much as possible with a heavy layer of foundation and powder. A forged press pass dangled from her breast pocket. By the time the transformation had been complete, Sandra had made her look like she actually belonged in the stuffy building.

Inside the stall, Jenny assembled the simple device, an act Alex had made her practice numerous times to ensure everything went as planned. There were only three pieces, which she had hidden in tactful places under her skirt to avoid detection in the entrance search, and they came together quickly and easily. She went over her line while she worked. She was going to get at least something in her life right.

She would make Alex proud.

That wasn't to say she was entirely without reservation. Over the past couple of weeks, he'd helped her to gain newfound value in her life. Free from the serum, she saw the world with a level of clarity she hadn't known in years. The only demon she now had to contend with was the regret that she had not reclaimed herself sooner. She'd seen so little of the world,

experienced only a fraction of her aspirations of years past, and there was much yet she might have done if only she had the chance.

But she'd run out of chances. There was no other place for her now. She teetered at the edge of the last of her burned bridges, and the view beneath was all she had left. Alex had shown her that her destiny lay in the abyss below; by diving over the edge, she could change everything.

She hadn't known him long, but he had been a gracious host. He had also been surprisingly consoling when the newscast had reported on the discovery of Greg's body and the confiscation of their unused serum. Authorities hired by Greg's family declared Jenny wanted for questioning. The apprehension that engulfed her when she thought about those factors combined had pushed her to her breaking point, one in which suicide was once more her only option.

Alex had helped her to see things differently. He'd told her she had a higher purpose, and she knew he was right. He was a wise man, a visionary.

She would not let him down.

A sea of people filled the auditorium, and a din of voices reverberated throughout. Emma and Herald, both dressed in their best attire, sat on the Freedom Party's side. A friend had been able to get them third-row tickets, and if it hadn't been for the favor, they might have opted to pass on the event. It felt good to switch up their routine. So much hardship had imposed itself upon them as of late, with little Johnny being taken away and Dianne refusing their calls, and it was nice to be able at least to support another four years of truth and order.

They had stopped by a pre-debate martini party, a short event that offered their exclusive group a chance to loosen up before suffering the opponent's ill-conceived ideas that ultimately called for depriving the rich of the lifestyle they deserved. Neither got drunk, but both had consumed enough vodka to make them self-satisfied and giddy. In their elevated state, they took turns glancing over at the Citizen's Party audience, which sat on the left side of the auditorium, and had fun exchanging comments on the groups' collectively less expensive attire.

"Look over there—that one looks like she's dressed for Sunday mass!" said Emma.

"And that man in the aisle seat—his suit looks like it was tailored by a monkey, poor thing," added Herald.

"A tacky mess!"

"An embarrassment to their entire political party."

"Even for them," Emma agreed with a laugh.

Everyone went quiet when the lights dimmed and the stage lit up. An

announcer spoke through the loud speakers: Ladies and gentlemen, your National CEO candidates, incumbent CEO Walter Mead and his opponent, State Manager Douglas White! Applause rolled through the audience. Emma and Herald stood and clapped as the National CEO strolled to his lectern and stood mere feet away. On his suit were patches representing corporate sponsors, the largest of which being Future Tech. The Citizen's Party candidate was not nearly as well dressed, and his sponsor patches advertised smaller companies such as the Police Network and Acme Fire Company.

"Thank you all for coming," National CEO Mead said, prompting everyone to cut their applause and sit. "I'd like to begin this debate by offering my opponent the first question."

State Manager White gave a humble bow. "Thank you, Mr. CEO." He wasted no time, taking only a second to glance at his notes. "I would like to know how, should you be elected for another term, you intend on remedying the growing divide between the upper and lower classes."

"Well, I'm among those who believe the class divide will remedy itself. If we place our faith in the Invisible Hand, it will guide us to prosperity. The rich encourage the poor by example to work harder, that they too might afford luxuries like televisions, better insurance policies, and yearly vacations. A lack of tenacity is the only obstacle, and those who fail to succeed do so because they simply lack the drive."

Emma and Herald applauded with their side of the audience. "So eloquently stated," she said into his ear.

"He could have been a bit more tactful, but he's got the right idea," he whispered back.

She responded with a light chuckle.

"I'd like to know your thoughts on the matter," added the National

CEO with a wry grin to his still-clapping supporters.

The State Manager straightened his tie. “I believe we’ve seen the private sector go as far as it can take us. It is time for a new strategy. It’s time we reintegrated a mixed system so that those currently struggling under the weight of outrageous insurance prices and unchecked social service costs can have the same chances as everyone else. As it stands, the class divide can only grow.”

The Citizen’s Party audience clapped and nodded.

“Then I assume you would initiate an aggressive taxing plan, effectively robbing the rich to give to the poor?” Mead interjected.

“Absolutely not. Yes, I believe in bringing back taxes and public services, but it’s far from robbery. In the past, our country flourished under a mixed system. Everyone paid their fair share, and everyone had their fair chance to climb the ladder of opportunity. Under our current system, there’s little room for the lower classes to rise above their current stations.”

“That’s absolutely ridiculous. If you’ll read your history books, you’ll see that Americans protested taxes at every turn, striving for a pure and private system in which the cream would invariably rise to the top. The Boston Tea Party of the eighteenth century is a prime example, as are the nearly nonstop wave of depressions that persisted for hundreds of years afterward.”

More cheers rose from the Freedom Party.

“Actually, if you want to be accurate—”

“Supporting Robin Hood Economics is tantamount to supporting communism. Are you a communist, State Manager White?”

“Of course not! I’m merely suggesting—”

“You’re suggesting we return to a system that nearly destroyed this

country, and I intend to do everything in my power to see that doesn't happen!" As he finished his sentence, he slammed a tight fist against the wooden surface before him for added emphasis.

The Freedom Party audience offered him a standing ovation.

"If I may," White tried, his words proving ineffective in silencing the crowd. "I still have the floor."

"Let the man speak," Mead said, and the audience began to quiet. "Let him tell us all about the hordes of poor people waiting for someone to give them a handout. Let him ramble on about the homeless rate and how the 'less fortunate' can't afford to feed their families. Let him tell you that it's all your fault because—heaven forbid—you worked hard and saved your money!"

The audience roared.

White did his best to speak over the din. "So you would blame the poor for being poor? You would rather assume they choose to go hungry or that they enjoy living one tragedy or illness away from losing their homes? You actually believe that owning multiple estates or an excess of cars and amenities is more important than ensuring the least well off can afford to put food on their tables? Where is the liberty in that? How American is that?"

"People, do you want a National CEO who thinks it's okay to question the American way? Are you going to support a politician who encourages people to rock the boat every time they don't agree with a policy? The Citizen's Party does not work for us—it works for the degenerates of society, the free thinkers who don't know how to stay in their place. Mark my words; if my opponent somehow slithers his way into office, jobs will be lost, insurance will be rendered useless, and our education system will fail."

White tried to speak over the cheers and applause, but his words only melted into the clamor. Suddenly, chaos filled the stage and screams came from all directions as a half-dozen Secret Service agents dropped from the gunfire of unseen snipers and an infiltrator wearing a press pass advanced upon the National CEO.

Emma and Herald both gasped. Emma squinted for a better view. *Jenny?* It couldn't be. She studied the infiltrator's features, the reality of it all hitting her long after she had confirmed the face.

"Is that—" Herald began.

"It is," Emma interjected. Yes, it was her, although she'd obscured her blue skin with a heavy layer of makeup and disguised herself in formal attire. What was she doing there? Emma stood when she saw the device strapped to Jenny's body. "Bomb!"

Jenny cried out, "For liberty and justice for all!" as she rammed into the National CEO, sending him with her into the screaming audience.

The two seemed to fall in slow motion. Everyone nearby began to scatter, but they too moved as though working against the dragging force of time. A few tried to help the National CEO flee or tear the bomb from Jenny's body. Some dived behind their seats. All of their efforts were futile.

"Jenny, no!" Emma shouted. "Someone stop her!"

Jenny looked up, made eye contact with her mother with a surprised smile, and then braced for the end.

The blinding flash hit Emma's eyes right before the massive shock wave hit her body, and then she, the National CEO, and nearly every person on their side of the auditorium were no more.

He labored his mind to find a way to tell her, terrified she might do something rash in her fragile state. She was already teetering on the lip of a mental cliff, and every little stressor—even tiny issues she normally wouldn't have batted an eye over—now threatened to send her over the edge. She sat bare-footed in the living room in pajamas she'd worn for nearly a week straight, her face tired and troubled.

Telling her would be hard enough, but having to admit he'd kept something so important to himself for days was terrifying. How could he possibly explain he'd been waiting for the right time? Was there a right time? How exactly would she react? His gut told him that the shock of even the greatest news in the world might cause her to lose herself in a sea of what ifs and deeper regret.

He struggled enough to hold himself together. While he knew that deep within him lay the strength to do so, he worried terribly for her. It was painful to see her in such a state. She paced through the apartment, crying and cursing, complaining that they didn't have nearly enough pictures of their son on the walls. She sent him out repeatedly for new picture frames and photo albums, but he never seemed to come home with enough. She had become irritable and short-tempered. She hardly ate. She obsessed over what could have been if she had made just one or two different choices. She hadn't spoken with her mother since her hospital stay, the woman's sharp words over Junior's sudden illness being too much for her to bear.

He knew he couldn't postpone the news forever. It would only be a matter of time before she figured it out for herself. Still, he couldn't yet bring himself to tell her. He had no doubt that another bombshell would mean the end of her.

When her phone beeped and she insisted on answering it, he could only stand idly by and hope whoever called had no extra weight to add to her burden. He watched while her eyes went wide, her face went pale, and a bandaged hand went to her trembling mouth. She stared straight ahead as she hung up, and he braced himself, certain he knew what the call had been about.

"It can't be," she said, the stunned look across her face giving way to confusion then morphing a moment later into pure grief.

"Honey, I really wanted to be the one to tell you," he tried. "Why don't you sit down?"

"You knew about this? How long have you known?" she asked, bursting into tears.

"They ran the tests before you went into surgery, but I didn't even find out myself until just the other day, when the licensing agency called. I was going to say something, but you've had such a hard time and I knew having another baby was the last thing you needed on your mind—"

She blinked hard, her head jerking in disbelief. "Another baby?"

The realization that the news now consuming her had nothing to do with her being pregnant caught him off-guard, and he too suddenly felt pale and weak. "That wasn't the baby licensing agency?"

"No." She staggered to the nearest chair. "No, it wasn't the baby licensing agency."

"Then who was it?"

"It was the coroner and funeral home company. They want to know

when we can make our first payment.”

The blow of her words sent him reeling backward in a dizzying whirlwind of shock and emotion. “Oh, no. Oh, God, no . . . Junior?”

She shook her head. “Not Junior.”

The relief hit him just as intensely, but he needed to sit just the same. “Who?”

She looked down. “My mother . . . my father . . . my sister. . .”

He forced himself from his chair, lurched over to her, and knelt down in front of her. “Dianne, I’m so sorry. What happened?”

She shook her head. “It’s got to be someone’s idea of a sick joke. Why haven’t we seen anything in the news?” She instructed her phone to call her mother, only to hang up to the sound of a disconnect message. Her eyes met his, and her words were barely comprehensible when she amended, “No, it’s not a joke. Nope, not a joke at all.”

“What happened?”

“It’s all so convoluted. It just doesn’t make any sense.”

“Dianne, what happened?”

She stood and began to pace in a manic fury, her sobbing words blending into one another. “We need to go to the payment office. I’m the only next of kin. There are autopsies to pay for and arrangements to be finalized. We should pick up some more picture frames while we’re out.”

“Sweetheart?”

She turned to him and snapped, “What?”

He placed a hand on her shoulder. “Why don’t you just take a few minutes to sit and calm down?”

She shook her head and brushed him aside. “So much to do. They scheduled an appointment for us next week with my parents’ attorney to see if they’d made any arrangements for their closing bills. Damn—I can’t

remember what day she told me. We can ask when we get to the payment office. They'll know. I'm sure they'll know. We should go. Am I presentable?"

He eyed her knotted hair and unwashed, wrinkled pajamas. "You're just fine, sweetheart, just fine."

They had a late afternoon appointment with the attorney, and Dianne had let John wash her hair and dress her in a suit fit for the occasion. She hadn't even allowed him to help her get cleaned up for the funeral. No one had questioned her rattled appearance. Who wouldn't fall apart at the news of three family members dying together in such a terrible way—with one of them being the responsible party? Although she still grieved, she had begun to force herself to eat for the baby and had actually begun to pull herself from the past, now and then, so she might focus on the present and sometimes even look toward the future.

Still, she'd endured so much loss, all within such a short span of time. Even now, it was surreal, like a nightmare tricking her mind into a dark and endless chasm. Her thoughts often spiraled down into it, into the void of nothingness below. Given Jenny's heavy serum addiction, Dianne had long prepared herself for the possibility of Jenny's premature death, but that hadn't made it any easier to process. Compounded with the sudden and wholly unexpected loss of both of her parents, the news had felt like a dagger to the chest. On top of it all, the National CEO's intelligence office had questions, expressing their suspicion that Dianne also might have been involved somehow. They'd interrogated her, and even searched the apartment for evidence connecting her to the bombing, leaving her paranoid and hyper-vigilant long after they'd quietly backed off.

The hardest part had been the short estrangement she'd had with her mother before she'd died. It had been her choice not to speak with the

woman, and she regretted not mending their relationship while she had the chance. She hadn't always been the most pleasant person in the world, but she was still her mother. It was unfortunate that the clarity of hindsight often came too late to make any difference. Putting off the important and difficult tasks till tomorrow was a good way to postpone the inevitable—the arguments, the bittersweet resolutions, the work that came behind all rocky relationships—until tomorrow was no longer an option. Reality could be a real bitch that way. It was a tough lesson, one Dianne was determined not to take in vain.

Her relationship with John was a prime example. There were many times in which her first impulse was to take the low road and send him packing. Forgiveness was not an easy path, and yet she feared the possible regrets that might ensue were she to give up on their marriage so easily. They'd both taken each other for granted in their own ways. Maybe their shared loss was precisely what they needed to change that. She still harbored an agonizing amount of anger and resentment over the affair, and sometimes she found herself snapping at him for the most diminutive of faults in an unexpected displacement of emotion. She wondered if perhaps her mother had once been a warm and generous soul, her temperament slowly chiseled into its hard, sharp form by a similar series of hardships.

The attorney's office was in the nice area of the business district, near the building where Dianne's father had worked. It had a lovely mahogany desk positioned over an area rug that centered the large room and accented the rest of the furniture. The attorney wore a plain suit with a black tie. He had black ribbon pinned to his lapel, which marked his regards to the nation's continued mourning. He made no attempt at pleasantries, rather offering his condolences and politely asking John and Dianne to sit in the expensive leather seats facing his desk.

He looked over the electronic file. “So, I’m sure you’re already aware that your parents named you the sole inheritor of their estate, so let’s just—”

She sat forward in her chair. “The sole inheritor?”

He looked up from the file. “You seem surprised.”

She either laughed or cried; not even she could determine which one it was. Perhaps it was both. “Surprised would be an understatement.”

He cleared his throat and looked over the rest of the file. “Well, they left you their house, their vehicles, and their savings account. Here.” He slid the tablet across the desk, pointing at the list of assets they had left. She had never before seen so many zeros on a bank statement.

“They left all of that to me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She swallowed past the heavy knot in her throat and wiped away her tears with her shoulder. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The rest of the appointment seemed a strange and distant dream. There would be neighborhood association transfer fees, as well as a substantial bill from the attorney, but those would still leave them with a decent nest egg. The thought of living so comfortably while so many other people continued to struggle stirred a heavy but fleeting sense of guilt, one she quickly justified away with a mental list of hardships neither she nor John deserved. They no longer would have to worry about going into criminal debt over all the time off they both had taken as a result of her injuries and Junior’s move to the quarantine camp. They would be able to afford good food and the best insurance. They would even have the means now to send their child to the School of Corporate Management, where he would be safer from the pandemics and guaranteed a career with a decent

wage.

The lawyer retrieved the tablet and tapped in a few new commands. “I realize this must be a lot for you to take in all at once.”

Dianne nodded. “We. . .” She took a deep breath. “We’ve lost so much and. . .” Her words dropped off into the rift that had begun to swallow the rest of her thoughts. It didn’t matter. For the first time in far too long, her tears came from a place of joy rather than despair. She fell into the comfort of John’s arm wrapping around her and leaned her head against his shoulder.

“I see your file has been updated recently to add a new baby license,” said the lawyer while he eyed the electronic tablet for any forgotten details. “Congratulations.”

Dianne nodded.

“Do you have a name picked out?”

She smiled, wiping away another rush of tears. “Joanna, if it’s a girl. George, if it’s a boy.”

The lawyer stood and offered John a closing handshake. “Well the best of luck to you.”

The couple left the office in a daze, the news still settling against all of the adversity they had suffered. The world was still far from perfect, but they walked away with the promise of a new beginning, one free of the hardship to which they had grown too accustomed. They still had wounds to heal and obstacles to overcome but now maybe, just maybe, they had a fighting chance.

“We’ll be able to afford that new wedding ring,” John said, gently gripping a bandaged hand.

She smiled. “I want a diamond this time, a big one like my mother had.”

He turned to her with a surprised face. “If that’s what you want, but don’t you think we should—”

“And I want to move into the house. We can host dinner parties and fundraisers and anti-waste galas. Won’t that be fun?”

“Oh?”

She nodded, beaming. “Do you feel like catching some Mexican on our way home? The baby’s craving sweet and sour tacos.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Leigh M. Lane has been writing for over twenty years. She has ten published novels and dozens of published short stories divided between different genre-specific pseudonyms. She is married to editor Thomas B. Lane, Jr. and currently resides in the outskirts of Sin City.

Her traditional Gothic horror novel, *Finding Poe*, was a 2013 EPIC Awards finalist in horror. Her other novels include *World-Mart*, a tribute to Orwell, Serling, and Vonnegut, and the dark allegorical tale, *Myths of Gods*.

For more about Leigh M. Lane and her works, visit her website at www.cerebralwriter.com.