

**R J LAW**

**THE GIRL OF  
FLESH  
AND BONE**

**THE GIRL  
OF FLESH  
AND BONE**

Book 2 of  
The Claire Foley  
Thriller series

By RJ Law

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# CHAPTER 1

The sun burned high and small in its place above the park, where people celebrated the budding spring with pale skin and light jackets. Where the grass had greened, children ran about, while parents gave chase, despite aching backs and grinding knees. Above in the shallow treetops, birds had gathered at last, their subtle songs light and tentative, as if they lived in doubt of their warming reality.

Below all the gentle cooing, Alfred sat straight upon a park bench, his crooked fingers tracing the roughened edges of a photograph, eyes wet behind his glasses. As the wind kicked up around him, he ran a thumb over the image of his granddaughter, sweet and young, all dimples and curls. He considered the details. The beauty. The innocence. The potential. Most of that a memory now. But, the latter? Who could predict a person's potential?

"I'm so sorry," said a voice from the side.

Alfred stared at the photo without blinking, while a great lumbering dog snorted his ankles.

"Douglas!" said the voice. "Come here!"

Alfred caressed his photograph, while a woman yanked Douglas back by his leash.

"I'm so sorry," the woman said.

Alfred wept.

"Oh, my goodness, are you alright? Do you need help?"

Alfred turned his head and looked at the woman with a scrunched-up face.

"No," he whispered. "No, I'm quite fine, thank you."

He forced a trembling smile, and the woman attempted to reciprocate.

“Are you sure?”

Alfred nodded.

“Oh, yes. I’m fine. Thank you, though.”

The woman stood up and saw that Douglas was eating another dog’s feces.

“No! Douglas!”

She yanked Douglas away and bent down to scold his face. Then, the two went away, leaving Alfred alone with his thoughts.

Alfred watched the two of them cross the greening grass and disappear over a hill. Then, he turned his head toward the photograph and gave a tremendous sigh.

Another light breeze swelled around him, chilling away the spring sun, as if it were the cold ghost of winter, stubbornly awake amid a ripening world of color and scent. With the breeze came a voice.

“Alfred,” it said.

The old man looked up and squinted through his glasses.

“Hello,” he said dryly.

A thin, sickly woman looked down at him, her face neither cruel nor kind.

“May I?” she asked.

“Please,” he said, as he scooted across the bench to make room.

The woman sat and placed a small brown bag over her lap, her posture poor, jaw skin sagging.

“Thank, you for coming,” she said.

Alfred stared away at a pair of young boys clumsily kicking an old soccer ball.

“Alfred?”

He continued watching the boys, his eyebrows furrowed up, as if he longed to be little again.

“Alfred, are you ok?”

As if to intentionally dismantle his nostalgia, one of the boys took a great swipe at the ball and dug a chunk of skin from the leg of the other, who collapsed in a screaming fit. As the boy’s mother raced forth to treat the boy, the old man snapped to.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, of course.”

The woman looked at him with concern.

“I know this is hard for you,” she said. “I’m very sorry to ask it.”

Alfred caressed the photograph and frowned.

“Yes,” he whispered.

They sat in silence for a while, the air growing colder as the afternoon waned.

“Alfred,” the woman said gently. “Can you find her or not?”

Alfred pursed his lips.

“Yes,” he said. “I have it here.”

He slipped his hand into his coat pocket and withdrew an envelope. The woman’s eyes grew wide, as if he held a passport to another better world. She cleared her throat and inched closer.

“Please, Alfred,” she said. “Give it to me.”

The old man looked at his hand and blinked, as if he’d forgotten its contents already.

“Yes,” he said. “I brought it for you.”

The woman leaned closer and reached across his lap, snatching the envelope in a sudden and swift movement.

“I’m sorry, Alfred,” she said, as she slipped the envelope into her bag. “But you understand, don’t you?”

Alfred looked at the photograph and nodded.

“Yes. I understand.”

He stood up like a very old man and looked around the park. Across the way, the tired mother herded her children back to their car, while the wind tickled the leaves overhead.

“You know,” said Alfred, as he looked at the woman’s face for the first time. “I once believed you could be who you wanted in this life. But, that was just another lie like everything else.” He lowered his chin, so his eyes peered over his glasses. “There are no guarantees with her. You should know that. This could go very badly for you.”

The woman shrugged.

“I have no choice. You understand, don’t you?”

Alfred looked at the photo and then slid it into his coat pocket.

“Yes,” he said. “I understand.”

He turned and walked away, his hands in his pockets, footsteps slow and choppy. As he reached the edge of a little grassy knoll, he turned back and saw that the park bench now sat empty.

He rubbed the back of his neck and looked up at the sky, as if to regard the master, high away in his celestial nest. He closed his eyes and slipped a hand back into his pocket to caress the picture once more. Then, he turned away and walked back to the bus top.



## CHAPTER 2

Claire stood in the high away parts of the parking garage, her eyes studying the streets, where people rushed about, their skirts and ties whipping around like little flags in the wind. She scanned their faces, one to the next, none peculiar, save for one man, who appeared to be drunk or insane.

She watched this man scuttle about for a while, the crowd of people parting around him, as if he were a light fixture, inconveniently secured to the street. And as they did, he shook his fist and scolded them for not seeing the truth of things, whatever that was to him.

At last, Claire saw the woman with the red umbrella and, along with her, a young girl who looked to be about 12. The two moved deliberately among the crowd, neither appearing much concerned with the vulnerability that came with open spaces. They moved quickly without rushing, the child keeping up well enough to suggest experience in such endeavors.

Claire watched them move across the intersection and make their way up the street. They approached the parking garage without looking up and stood still before the base of the building. Claire scanned the streets, her sharp eyes searching for irregularities of any kind. When she was reasonably sure that no one was tailing their movements, she picked up the paper cup and dropped it over the side of the ledge. The thing spun in its descent and then clattered on the pavement with a few hollow bongs. The woman took the child's hand without looking at the cup, and both entered the stairwell.

Claire withdrew the hood of her jacket and scratched the bristles of dark hair poking up from her shaved scalp. She sat on the hard concrete and rested against the cold brick wall, closing her eyes to better hear. Soon, she sensed footsteps clomping the stairs. She opened her eyes and watched the steel

doors open to reveal the woman and young girl. She did not stand to greet them.

“Claire?” the woman asked.

Claire nodded, and the woman led the girl forward. She set the child in a little space to the side and withdrew a tattered book from her bag. She held it out, and the girl took it. As the child began reading, the woman turned to Claire.

“Have you been waiting long?”

Claire shook her head.

“Good,” said the woman.

She approached and gestured to the ground.

“Is it alright if I sit?”

Claire nodded once.

“Thank you,” said the woman.

She tucked her dress beneath her legs and sat upon the curbed edge of a walkway, her knees popping loudly amid the cavernous concrete structure. Claire looked her over, and the itch of her stare seemed to make the woman shiver.

“Thank you for meeting with us,” she said with a daring little smile.

Claire said nothing, her eyes studying the woman, noting every facet of her appearance. She wore simple attire that had surrendered much of its color to years of wash, and her hair was pulled into a bun that did nothing to soften the wrinkles on her weathered skin.

“Your sandals,” said Claire.

The woman looked at her feet.

“Yes?”

“How can you run in those?”

The woman looked at Claire and then back to her feet.

“Beggars and choosers and such.”

The woman had a little brown purse, and she gathered it in her hands.

“Is it ok?”

Claire nodded, and the woman stuck her hand inside. She removed a wrinkled pack of cigarettes. She looked up again and Claire nodded.

“I’m sorry if I seem strange,” said the woman, as she fingered a cigarette from the pack. “I haven’t slept in two days.”

She held the cigarette to her lips and raised a lighter, the little flame shivering above her erratic hand. At last, the cigarette came to life, and she inhaled deeply. Almost immediately, the woman grew calm, her breathing more relaxed, jittering hand growing steady.

“That’s better,” she said, as she rubbed her eye. “Now, I can think.”

Claire looked over at the child.

“Who is she?”

The woman looked at Claire and then at the girl.

“Someone very special.”

Claire eyed the child again. Her hair was tangled and ratted, and her clothing was much too big for her slight frame. She wore a pair of boy’s work boots that looked about two sizes too large, and some of her fingernails were split, and those that weren’t were filled with something black.

The woman followed her eyes to the girl.

“We’ve been on the road for some time,” said the woman with a look of shame. “Things have not been easy.”

“I understand,” said Claire.

The woman looked at Claire’s hair and clothing.

“Yes, of course. I’m sorry.”

An engine murmured in the lower levels of the parking garage, like a trembling in the bowels of a giant beast. The

woman spun her head in a panic, and then looked to Claire.

“Is someone coming? Should we leave?”

Claire sat without speaking, her eyes affixed to the woman.

“Why is she special?”

The burbling engine noises died away, and the woman breathed deeply. She drew from her cigarette and let the smoke trickle out the sides of her mouth. She began to cry.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “I just need you to take her to Bloc 9.”

Claire narrowed her eyes.

“Take her why?”

The woman looked at the child.

“Because she is special.”

Claire watched the woman watch the child.

“Why is she special? What can she do?”

“Do?” the woman asked. “Nothing. Nothing extraordinary anyway.”

The child continued reading despite the slight, as if deafened by the contents of her book.

“Then what makes her special?” Claire asked.

The woman looked over her shoulders, as if to confirm that they were still alone.

“She is special, because of what she is.”

Claire studied the child for a moment, as if she might glean the truth by sight.

“What is she?”

The woman swallowed hard and smoothed her dress over her knees.

“She is an asset to them.”

Claire tilted her head and appraised the woman anew.

“An asset to the Project?”

The woman nodded once and swallowed the void in her throat.

“An asset and that is all,” she said. “Nothing more. Not a child, not human. Just an instrument for their purposes. That is all they see when they look at her.”

Dimples broke out on the woman’s chin, as emotion rushed through her body. Claire waited a moment, while the woman composed herself.

“And what is she to you?” Claire asked.

The woman’s eyes trickled upward and something bold shot through.

“I love her,” the woman said. “I care only for her safety. That and nothing more.”

Claire looked at the child again, but the girl paid no notice.

“I’m in no position to care for a child,” Claire said. “I am hunted day and night. Why would you think she could be safe with me?”

The woman nodded.

“Yes, I know,” she said. “I know about you. What you have done, what you can do.”

She leaned forward.

“I know you are hunted. I know who hunts you. It is the same with her. Hunted day and night. Pursued always.”

Claire rubbed her eye.

“Why do they want the child? At least tell me this. If you want my help, I must know.”

The woman swallowed hard once more, her throat buckling audibly.

“She knows things.”

Claire leaned forward.

“What does she know?”

The woman shrugged.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Not really, anyway.”

Claire sat back against the wall.

“You know she knows something, but you don’t know what it is?”

“Yes,” the woman said. “I know only that it is of great value to the ones who hunt you and to the Bloc 9. They would do anything to have it, both sides. To leverage her knowledge for their purposes. Your hunters, to strengthen their grip on the world. Bloc 9, to further their goals.”

“Then, why take her to Bloc 9?” asked Claire. “If they see her as a tool, how are they any different?”

The woman shook her head.

“No,” she said. “They are different. They want to topple the Project. To restore power to the people. To expose the lies. But they are also human. They care for one another. They will use her, it is true. But they will also protect her. Her safety will further their cause; the same as the knowledge in her head.”

They both sat quietly for a while, as the street traffic murmured below.

“And once they have the knowledge, whatever it is, what’s to keep the girl alive?”

Claire glanced at the girl, but she didn’t seem to be listening.

“You mean why won’t they kill her after?” asked the woman. “To keep the information from the other?”

Claire nodded.

“Because they care for one another. For me. For you. For all life. They want to expose lies. That is all. They are not interested in dominating the world. They want to save it, and then deliver it to the people.”

Claire shook her head.

“How do you know all this?”

The woman shrugged.

“It doesn’t matter. You don’t have to believe me. But you must take her. You must keep her safe and deliver her to the Bloc 9. I cannot keep her safe anymore. I cannot do what you can do.”

A horn popped loudly below, and someone yelled something at another driver. Then the street sounds normalized and drifted away into the background.

Claire looked at the girl.

“What could she possibly know?” asked Claire.

“I don’t know,” said the woman. “She will not speak of it.”

Claire turned toward the woman and noticed for the first time how wrongly her clothing fit her thin frame.

“You don’t look well,” she said. “Whatever it is, those won’t help.”

The woman held out the burning cigarette and looked it over, a daze in her eyes, as if she were staring past the object in her hands.

“It’s too late for all that,” she said. “Too late for everything.”

Her eyes flicked toward Claire.

“Except for this,” she gestured toward the girl. “This is all that is left.”

Claire watched as a tear fled the woman’s eye and raced down the swell of her cheek bone. She looked at the girl, who continued to read quietly, her demeanor unaffected by these words and seemingly all else.

“I’m sorry,” said Claire.

The woman shrugged.

“It’s alright,” she said. “Everything is acceptable as long as she is safe.”

They sat for a moment without speaking, as if they had stirred some wrong thing up into the air. At last, the woman

sucked from the cigarette and looked away.

“Why won’t she talk?” asked Claire at last. “Is something wrong with her?”

The girl looked up, a rage flaring up within her brown eyes.

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” she said. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Hush, Mila,” said the woman. She looked at Claire and sighed. “I’m sorry. She is angry about this. She doesn’t understand the dangers around us. She doesn’t know these people as we do. She doesn’t understand why this has to happen.”

The girl stood up and threw down her book.

“You just want to get rid of me,” she said to the woman. “Just go. I don’t care.”

She walked several steps away and sat on the concrete with her back turned.

Claire watched as the woman crushed out her cigarette and stood. She approached the girl and placed a loving hand on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t want this. I love you so much. You must understand. I don’t want to say goodbye. Not today. Not ever.”

Claire watched them both silently, her head slightly acrook, as if to better evaluate every gesture from a slightly irregular perspective.

“Just go,” Mila whispered. “Just go.”

The woman turned and wiped her eyes, her expression buckling from a great internal harm. Beneath them, the street traffic cut through the moment indelicately, like machinery screeching through an unspoiled forest.

“Come,” Claire said at last. “Let’s discuss the details of this. I need to know exactly where we are going. Exactly what we will be walking into. I need to know everything exactly.”



The woman looked up and forced her lips into a smile.

“Thank you.”

She left the girl to speak to Claire in low tones that would not be overheard. And, they talked for what seemed like a long while, until it was finally time to part ways and say their goodbyes. And, when they said their goodbyes, the girl did not look at the woman’s face. Nor did she return the woman’s embrace, nor affirmations of love. And, when they left the woman, she was waving goodbye, her body looking too old for its age, eyes drowning in waters of sorrow. And, when the girl looked back, she did so without waving, through eyes that were cold and dry.

## CHAPTER 3

The ticket agent assessed the crowd from behind the window glass of her booth. The lids of her eyes hung halfway, as she watched the people contend for position, each one shrewdly jockeying for space with a shoulder or an elbow or the slightest of steps. At last, she flipped the sign to affirm her readiness, and the first traveler came forward.

One after one, the rest followed, each passing over money in exchange for his or her boarding pass. And each time, the ticket agent made a smooth and seamless exchange, her wondering mind disentangled from the moment, her automatic greeting ten thousand times practiced.

After thirty or forty exchanges, she noticed the two men, maybe eight, maybe ten turns back in the line. And, once she saw them, she couldn't stop looking, despite strong intentions toward the otherwise.

There was something weighty in their presence, these two men, despite their casual expressions, despite their ordinary clothes. As she contemplated the root of this, a chill filtered its way up her back, and she stopped to elevate the setting on the space heater kept within the little ticket booth.

Finally, the two men came forward, one exceptionally large and unkempt, like someone who'd just woken up. The other, just a man, save for his eyes, which shot forth like little daggers, a natural thing or a purposeful gesture, she couldn't say for sure.

"Nebraska," the large man said, as he pushed forward his identification.

The ticket agent collected the ID and looked it over. There was a picture and a name that fit miserably the figure before her. She nodded, and he paid for his ticket. Now the second man came, his eyes bright and vivid, as if they were lit up from the inside.

He smiled and declared the same destination, and the ticket agent quickly processed the transaction.

The matter complete, she watched the men walk toward the train, her eyes transfixed, the remaining people irritable and awaiting attention as the line enlarged behind them.

As they boarded the train, the two men passed over their tickets and moved on to their compartment coach. Once inside, the larger man sat and released a great sigh.

“I’m gonna get some sleep,” he said. “This day needs to end.”

He turned over his hand and examined his knuckles, as the other man sat down beside him. They were bloodied and bruised, and a dime-sized hunk of flesh dangled apart the rest. He gripped his hand into a fist and relaxed.

“The hell you sitting right next to me for?” he said. “Get on the other damn side, leave me some room to stretch out.”

The other man crossed his legs.

“We’re riding with someone.”

The large man shook his head.

“God dammit.”

They waited a while, but no one came.

“Fuck it,” said the large man, and he began to take off his boots. “I’m getting comfortable.”

Before he had leveraged the first one free, a young girl entered the compartment. She was slim and pretty with long blond hair that bounced about in large elaborate curls.

The large man quickly forced his foot back into his boot.

“Welcome,” he said, raising up halfway. “Please.”

He gestured toward the seat across from them.

The girl appraised the two men, her attractive face polluted with discontentment, as if she’d just bitten into a rotten apple. She paused in the entryway for an awkward amount of time,

and then, having accepted her predicament, took the seat across from the two men.

“My name’s Len,” said the big one, as he plopped back into his seat. “This here’s Matt.”

The girl looked from one to the other.

“I’m Becky. Nice to meet you.”

Her quiet little words leaked out with involuntary inflections, as if they rattled over bumpy ground. Len grinned at this, but Mathew barely looked up from the newspaper he read.

“You can relax,” said Len. “We won’t bite you.”

The girl smiled politely and placed her leather bag atop her lap. She removed a magazine, positioning it to block the heat of Len’s stare.

After some time, the train whistle shrieked, and the locomotive lurched forward. All three sat quietly for the next hour, while the urban landscape gave way to open pastures, where cows chewed the grass and contemplated their places in the world.

Len watched all this through the window glass, his large booted foot thumping the floor.

“This place looks like hell,” he said at last. “Just grass and dirt and filthy animals.”

He waited a moment, but no one replied.

“So, what’s your story?”

The girl swallowed hard and lowered her magazine.

“Me?”

She had long lovely eyelashes that blinked bashfully over her big round eyes, and the fear within them made Len aroused.

“Yeah, you,” he said with a broad grin. “Tell me something about yourself. Help pass the time.”

The girl's eyes flicked over to Mathew, but he paid no attention.

"I don't have a story," she said.

Len lowered his brow.

"Everybody's got a story. Even kids got stories. Most have lots."

She shrugged.

"Well, I don't."

She watched as his face grew soft and passive, but his boot tapped faster the floor.

"Aw," he said, his voice gentle as cool cotton sheets. "Just tell me something. Help pass the time."

The girl set her magazine over her lap and covered it with her hands, as if to conceal some personal secret within.

"Well, ok but there's really nothing to tell," she said. "I'm a waitress. Born and raised in Cheyenne. Headed to visit my friend in Omaha. That's about it."

Len nodded.

"Damn, you weren't kidding," he said. "Not much to tell."

She shrugged again, and they all rode quietly for a while.

"That's it," Len said at last. "Let's have some drinks. That'll lighten the mood."

He reached inside his coat pocket and removed several tiny liquor bottles.

"Vodka or whiskey?" He asked the girl.

She lowered her magazine.

"Oh, I don't think so."

"C'mon," he said. "Matt will join us. Isn't that right?"

Mathew looked up.

"Sure, why not?"

Len passed over two little bottles of whiskey, and the girl watched as Mathew twisted one open and downed it in two swallows.

“Well?” asked Len.

The girl glanced outside as another expanse of nothingness whirred by.

“Oh, I suppose one won’t hurt.”

Two hours later, the girl had downed three little bottles of vodka, and Len didn’t seem all that bad. During that time, he had listened patiently while she spoke of her childhood in Wyoming, the cruel winters and empty spaces, the longing for something else.

“Damn, do you ever shut up?” he finally asked, a little smile poking out from one side of his mouth.

The girl sat back and crossed her arms.

“Ok, fine, you go. Tell me your story.”

He shrugged.

“I ain’t got a story.”

She gave a condescending smirk.

“Oh, come on, I know you’ve just been sitting there waiting to talk.”

He leaned back in his seat.

“My life ain’t that interesting.”

She looked over to Mathew, his eyes still trained on his newspaper, even after he’d emptied two little bottles of whiskey.

“He doesn’t talk much does he?”

Len chuckled.

“He just doesn’t want to interfere with this thing we got going.”

The girl rolled her eyes.

“Ok, ok,” Len said. “I guess I can tell you a story if that will hold your attention.”

“Good,” the girl said. “I’m getting bored over here.”

Len cleared his throat and leaned forward, his big face growing serious and somber.

“When I was a kid, I didn’t have a lot of friends,” he said. “I had this stepbrother, but he and I didn’t get along. His dad, my stepdad, treated him like he was the second coming, treated me like I was dirt.”

The girl eyed him with interest, as she sipped from her little bottle.

“Well, every day, I’d come home from school, and I’d just run to my room and close the door, and I’d hug this little stuffed elephant that I loved more than anything.”

He looked off to the side, and his mind seemed to go someplace far away.

“My stepdad couldn’t stand it. Always said eight years old was too old to have stuffed animals, but my mom wouldn’t let him interfere. Anyway, this went on for a while until my stepbrother’s birthday come around. They planned this big party out in the backyard, and all his shitty little friends were invited.”

He leaned back in his seat and rubbed his forehead like it hurt.

“Well, I tried to be friendly with all of them, but my stepbrother got them turned against me, and they kept calling me names, until I got to crying. So, I run inside to hug my elephant, like I always did, but it wasn’t there. I looked all over my room, but he was gone. And then I heard all this cheering outside, so I look out the window, and you know what I saw?”

The girl had leaned forward, her face looking fresh and beautiful, eyes wide and blue.

“What?” she asked with much interest.

Len pursed his lips and his chin trembled.

“My stepdad, that sumbitch, he had gutted my elephant with a knife, filled it with candy, and hung the damn thing up like a piñata.”

The girl pressed her hand firmly over her mouth, as if a fog of bugs had swelled around her face.

“I just sat there staring out the window crying, while they all took turns beating my little elephant to bits.”

Tears welled in the corners of the girl’s eyes, her face wrinkling up with genuine empathy.

“You poor thing,” she whispered. “That really happened?”

A big smile surged across Len’s face.

“Nah, I’m just yanking your chain.”

He roared with laughter and smacked Mathew on the back, spilling some of his whiskey.

A great rage built within the girl’s eyes.

“You are the worst person I’ve ever met,” she said.

Matt shook his head while he read his paper.

“How can you be friends with him?” she asked.

Mathew looked up.

“He kind of grows on you after a while.”

Len grinned and slapped his knee.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I can’t help it. That was funny.”

The girl shook her head.

“I can’t believe I actually felt sorry for you.”

Len raised his little bottle and swallowed more whiskey.

“You wanna hear a real story?”

“No,” said the girl. “I’ve heard enough out of you.”

Len put his hand up, as if swearing before a court.

“I promise you, this one’s true for certain.”

The girl took another sip of alcohol and narrowed her eyes.



“Fine,” she said. “If it’ll help kill the time.”

He nodded once and sat forward in his seat. As he began to speak, his broad face took on a seriousness that made the girl shutter on the inside.

“A long time ago, I had this roommate,” he said. “Couldn’t stand the guy. He was always bitching about the dishes, bitching about hairs in the sink. Annoying shit like that. Anyways, this guy, he had a girlfriend, and he comes home one day and tells me he’s proposing to this girl, and that they’re moving in together. So, this means I’m out, and I ain’t too happy about it.”

He sipped his liquor bottle and hissed at the burn.

“So, I tell him, ok fine. Do whatever. Guy just shakes his head and walks away. Later that night, I’m up drinking late, watching TV, and this guy’s asleep. So, I go into his bedroom, and I take his little engagement ring out of the box.”

The girl put her hand over her mouth.

“That’s terrible,” she whispered through her fingers. “You’re terrible.”

Len grinned at this.

“Shiiiiit,” he said. “That ain’t even the half of it. What I did next was hide the ring in my room somewhere I know he ain’t never gonna look. Then, I wait until morning, and, sure enough, he comes into my room all panicked. He’s like, goddammit Len, where’s my ring? Gimme my ring. So, I tell him I ain’t got the ring no more, cuz I lost my temper bout him kicking me out and ate the sumbitch.”

Wrinkles shot across the girl’s pretty face, as she considered Len’s words.

“You ate it?”

Len’s expression turned sour.

“Shit no,” he said. “I ain’t dumb enough to swallow no ring. That’s just what I told him.”

“Why would you do that?” asked the girl.

Len looked at Mathew, who pretended to read his newspaper.

“You tell her, Matt.”

Mathew looked at Len without acknowledging the girl.

“It’s your story.”

Len shook his head.

“Alright then,” he mumbled, before refocusing his attention on the girl. “I done it so he’d dig through my shit.”

The girl’s face turned green. She looked at Mathew.

“This really happened?”

“You bet your ass it did,” said Len. “Every day, that fucker’d wait until I had me a shit. Then, he’d fish it out the toilet and root through it with his rubber gloves, just cursing and gagging the whole way through.”

Mathew put his newspaper down and looked at the girl.

“Just let that detonate in your brain for a minute.”

The girl rubbed her temples, as if to wipe his words from her brain.

“You’re so terrible,” she said. “Did you ever give him the ring?”

Len looked a little confused.

“Nah, he gave up after a few days, and I eventually sold it to a pawn shop.”

The girl shook her head.

“That’s it,” she said. “I’m through.”

She set her little bottle down and picked up her magazine.

“Awe, c’mon,” said Len. “I ain’t even hit on you yet.”

The girl looked over her magazine, a genuine look of disgust in her round, lovely eyes. Without a word, she returned to her magazine, but whatever had been in those eyes had stirred up something malicious in Len.

“That’s alright,” he said. “I don’t drink from dirty puddles anyway.”

The girl lowered her magazine.

“What did you say?”

Len leaned forward, his eyes looking black and cold.

“I said I don’t fuck whores.”

Mathew folded his newspaper and set it neatly across his lap.

“That’s enough, Len.”

The girl looked at Mathew and then Len.

“I’m getting security.”

She lifted from her seat, and Mathew put his hand up.

“That won’t be necessary,” he said.

He looked at Len, who studied the girl with contempt.

“Go someplace else,” he said. “I’ll meet up with you when we get to Omaha.”

Len looked at Mathew and started to say something.

“Go on,” Mathew said, his voice calm and kind, as if he spoke not to an erratic giant, but a hot-tempered child.

Len looked at the girl, and something in his eyes made her palms leak sweat.

“Fine,” he said through clenched teeth.

He stood up and walked out of the compartment, his boots bludgeoning the floor as he went.

Mathew waited for a moment, while the girl tried to make sense of the before and the now.

“Sorry about that,” said Mathew. “He can be somewhat difficult at times.”

The girl shook her head and eyed the entryway with contempt.

“He’s a bastard,” she said.

Mathew pursed his lips and nodded.

“Just don’t let him hear you say it.”

The two travelled in silence for the next hour, the girl’s attention fused to yet another magazine, Mathew’s on whatever unknown scraps of information his newspaper still held. An hour outside of Omaha, he began to consider Len’s lingering absence, and worry set in.

“Where are you going?” asked the girl, as he stood.

“Bathroom.”

Concern advanced across her face.

“What if your friend comes back?”

The words rushed out of her mouth with a suddeny she hadn’t intended, and she repostured herself into an easy-looking disposition.

“I mean, is he dangerous or anything?”

Mathew thought for longer than she liked.

“Well?” asked the girl. “Is he?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Mathew said. “He wouldn’t do anything with all these people around.”

With that, he left the girl alone in the compartment, her face taking on a sickly white color, as she contemplated his words.

Outside in the hallway, Mathew looked and listened. Everything seemed calm and quiet for the most part, and this brought him welcome relief. Then, he heard someone crying a few compartments away.

He tracked the little noises until he arrived at an open compartment. Inside, a middle-aged woman cradled a man’s head in her lap like a new baby, reddened twists of tissue screwed up into his great swelling nostrils.

“Is everything alright?” Mathew asked.

The woman looked up with an expression of bewilderment.

“Yes,” she said softly. “Yes, we’re ok.”

Mathew leaned out of the entryway and looked down both sides of the hallway.

“What happened?” he asked.

The man groaned through his injury, a symphony of snorts and gags filling the compartment.

“He hit me,” said the man. “The son of a bitch broke my nose.”

Mathew looked down and shook his head.

“Someone hit you?”

The woman shushed the man considerately.

“Yes,” she said. “We were leaving the dining car, and some giant man came storming along, insisting that we give him a cigarette. Marvin told him he didn’t have any, and the man called him a liar. Then, he reached back and hit Marvin without a second thought.”

Marvin leaned over the nice lady’s lap and spat blood on the floor.

“Son of a bitch broke my nose.”

Mathew rubbed his forehead, as if he were pained by exhaustion.

“Do you know where the man went?”

“The train’s security person took him away,” said the woman. “He had to get the cook and two porters to help him.”

The man coughed and spat something objectionable into a handkerchief.

“They had to Tase the sumbitch over and over,” he said. “He just wouldn’t stop coming.”

Mathew nodded.

“I’m very sorry for your troubles.”

The woman gave a polite smile, and Mathew left them to their alliance against Len and the rest of the world’s injustices.

Several cars down, he found the train's security man talking on the telephone.

"Yessir, that's correct," he said to someone on the other end of the line. "Yessir, just jumped on one of my passengers unprovoked."

He was a thinly built man with a push broom mustache, and when he noticed Mathew, he pulled the phone from his ear.

"It's gonna be a minute."

Mathew nodded and leaned against the wall of the car, while the security man returned to his call.

"Yessir, he's a large fella. Oh, I'd have to say about six-foot-four, gotta be 260 pounds at least. Yessir, took four of us to get him to the ground. Had to shock him three times to keep him there."

A member of the train's dining crew approached holding a bag of crushed ice. He handed it to the security man, who nodded his appreciation before placing the ice against the back of his neck.

"Yessir, I got him handcuffed. He ain't going nowhere. You can collect him when we get to the station."

At last, the conversation ended, and the man hung up the phone.

"What can I do for you?" he asked Mathew.

Mathew put his hands in his pockets.

"Well, I'm afraid I'm here to see the man you were just speaking about."

The security man pulled the bag of ice from his neck and set it aside.

"You know the fella?"

Mathew nodded.

"He's my traveling companion, unfortunately."

The security man scratched his head.

“Well, what’s his problem? He on medication or something?”

Mathew shook his head.

“No, just a bit of a hothead.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but he’s got himself into some real trouble here. Assaulted one of my passengers. Knocked a tooth out of one of the porters trying to restrain him. I’ve got the police waiting for him in Omaha.”

Mathew nodded.

“Can I see him?”

The man scratched his head again.

“Well, I suppose that’d be alright. Just try not to get him riled up again. He starts screaming, I’m gonna have to gag him. Can’t have him causing a panic with the other passengers.”

Mathew nodded, and the security man led him through the dining car and into a compartment. Inside the little room, Len lay on his stomach, his great wrists and ankles hogtied together with numerous nylon cable ties. Mathew looked him over and shook his head.

“I’m sorry for the restraints,” the security man said. “We just can’t have him loose on this train again.”

Mathew nodded.

“I understand.”

Len looked up.

“Well,” he said. “How much longer you gonna let me stay like this.”

Mathew rubbed his chin, while the security man shook his head.

“I told you,” the man said. “You ain’t getting loose until we get to Omaha. Then, you can reckon with the police.”

Len flashed the man a chilling look.

“I wasn’t asking you.”

He looked at Mathew.

“Well?”

Mathew looked at the security man.

“How long until we reach the station?”

The man checked his watch.

“About 15 or 20 minutes.”

Mathew nodded and looked down at Len.

“You know you’re more trouble than you’re worth.”

Len’s teeth flashed.

“Quit fucking around,” he said, the words leaking out from between his teeth like vapor from an overheating engine.

An uneasiness began to crawl through the security man’s chest, and he appraised Mathew anew. He was only average height and looked like he refused more meals than he accepted. But, something about his eyes made the security man take a step back.

“Listen,” said the man. “I don’t know what you fellas are getting on about, but don’t do something stupid.”

Mathew ignored his words and shook his head once more at Len.

“I ought to leave you.”

Len began writhing around in his restraints, his immense chest thumping audibly against the floor.

“God dammit, Matt, I can barely feel my fucking arms. Enough with this shit. I get it.”

The security man’s hand now hovered over the Taser holstered in his belt.

“Alright,” he said. “That’s enough. You’re getting him riled up.” He looked at Len. “I told you I was gonna put a gag in your mouth if you started making noise.”

Again, Mathew ignored the man, his face relaxed and calm, as if he were sorting out trivialities on the most ordinary



of days.

“Alright,” Mathew said. “I guess I’ll give you one more chance.”

Now, the security man was out of patience.

“That’s it,” he said. “I’m gonna have to ask—”

He stopped talking, as if interrupted by a startling thought, his flesh turning stiff and still, brain growing foggy and disconnected from his body.

“Hurry up,” Len said.

“Don’t rush me,” said Mathew, as his mind probed deeper into the man’s brain. “We still have some time to kill before we reach Omaha.”

Mathew approached the security man and looked him over. His body stood rigid, and his eyes had taken on a cloudy look, as if his mind had vanished within a fog of otherworld thinking. Mathew shoved a hand into the man’s front pocket and searched around until he found a wallet. He removed it and thumbed it open. There were five crisp twenty-dollar bills inside. He withdrew all the cash and dropped the wallet on the floor.

“Get that box cutter over there,” said Len.

Mathew looked over to see the item on a counter. He collected it and sliced away each of Len’s restraints.

Once freed, Len stood up and stretched, his broad back cracking along the spine. He approached the security man.

“Keep him still,” Len said to Mathew, as he swelled before the man.

Mathew watched as Len spat in the security man’s face, the saliva dangling from his nose, like a sturdy thread of drying glue. But of this and anything else, the dormant man seemed unaware, his mind floating free somewhere, untethered to the happenings below.

A voice boomed from the train’s intercom system, announcing their arrival at the Omaha station.

“Time to go,” said Mathew, as the train began to slow.

They gathered up the security man and laid him on his stomach. One by one, they pulled his arms and legs behind his back and hogtied him, just as he had hogtied Len. When they had finished, Mathew stepped back and admired their work. Then, he ran his hand through his hair and relaxed.

As if jabbed with something sharp, the security man convulsed in a full-body flinch. He coughed and twitched about on the floor, as if he'd been set atop a hot skillet.

“Help!” he screamed, his eyes now alive with panic and fear. But before the words could travel, Len put him to sleep with his boot.

Mathew rubbed his temples like he had a headache.

“I was going to tape his mouth.”

Len shrugged.

“Didn't see no tape.”

The two men waited for the train to come to a stop, and then they left the compartment and lined up with the other travelers. Outside, six police officers waited for the passengers to exit, so they could enter and collect the security man's prisoner.

As the train doors opened, a sea of passengers flowed around them, each one hurrying ahead to his or her next thing. When the train had given up its contents, the officers entered one by one to find no prisoner, but a rambling lunatic with tales both large and tall.

## CHAPTER 4

They pressed deeper into a pastoral landscape, the refined edges of the city drifting away into the horizon, like a great apparition vanishing into the fog. Outside, cattle grazed the land, their dull eyes gazing out with indifference at the world and all its happenings.

From her window, Mila watched a lonely hawk circling among the clouds, its sharp eyes searching the verdant ocean below.

“Will we drive all night?” she asked.

Claire flinched a little, as if a mute had spoken.

“No,” she said. “We will stop for the night to eat and rest.”

Mila looked outside at all the natural nothingness.

“Where?”

They breached a hill, revealing what seemed like endless miles of rural landscape.

“We’ll camp outdoors, most likely,” said Claire.

“Oh, God,” said Mila.

Claire raised her eyebrows.

“You’ve never camped?”

Mila shook her head.

“It sounds awful.”

“It’s actually quite peaceful,” said Claire, “if you do it right.”

Mila glanced into the backseat, which held only a backpack and a small bag of food.

“Will we be doing it right?”

Claire frowned.

“This is how you have to travel if you want to stay out of sight.” She looked at the girl and gave a reassuring smile. “We’ll get through it and find something better tomorrow.”

An hour later, a tree line blossomed up on the horizon, its width snaking out for miles on either side of the road.

“There,” said Claire.

As they grew closer, they could see a bridge and a small river, which wormed like a great nourishing artery amid the trees. Claire slowed the car and pulled off the road, driver and passenger jostling as the tires rolled over the dirt and grass. At last, she stopped several feet off the road, the car sitting neatly beneath the shade of some low pines.

“If it rains, we’ll get stuck,” said Mila.

Claire put the car in park.

“I can push it out.”

They got out, and Mila stretched her legs, while Claire scanned the landscape around them. Beneath the golden light of late afternoon, the hills bowed up like the backs of giant beasts, their skins wrapped in blankets of lush green wool. She tilted her head upward and scanned the sky, a commercial jet soaring in the high away, some birds and nothing else. When she was satisfied they were truly alone, she turned toward the trees.

“Stand on the other side of the car.”

Mila looked around.

“Why?”

Claire flashed her a look.

“If you’re going to ask questions about everything, we’ll never get anywhere.”

Mila shook her head a little and walked behind the car.

“How’s this?”

“You may want to crouch.”

The girl looked puzzled.

“Alright.”

She bent down slightly and waited.

“What now? Should I roll over?”

Claire turned and took hold of a gigantic tree branch, tearing it free with a swift and effortless motion. Mila shrieked, as a loud crack cut through the peace. She flinched, as wood fragments battered the car like a hail of little darts.

“What the hell was that?” the girl yelled.

Above their heads, birds fled the trees, their forms blending blackly, like a curious little storm in a clean summer sky.

Claire turned suddenly, the branch at her feet.

“You’re a little young for all that, don’t you think?”

The girl walked from behind the car with her hands to her sides.

“Really? That’s what you’re focused on?” She gestured to the tree branch. “You just ripped off a ginormous piece of tree like it was nothing. What is that? How did you do that?”

Claire bent over and started tearing smaller branches away.

“Just help me gather these up. We need to conceal the car.”

Mila looked around.

“Conceal the car? From what? There’s nobody out here.”

Claire looked up.

“Just help, ok?”

The girl shook her head and started gathering limbs.

“Will you tell me how you did that, at least?”

“Maybe,” said Claire. “If you listen and do what I tell you.”

“Will you teach me to do it?”

Claire smiled a little.

“Just help me pick up these limbs.”

The girl picked up limbs.

## CHAPTER 5

The dark sky hung over the city like a lid, streetlights popping on one by one, painting the streets with sight.

Len looked up and shook his head.

“It’s fixing to come down like gangbusters.”

Lightning flashed, and big purple clouds glowed through the night sky for the briefest of moments, before vanishing within a gathering curtain of black.

“Yep,” said Mathew without looking up.

Thunder roared in the heavens, and Len gave a little flinch.

“God damn it. Let’s get off the street.”

They called a taxi from a payphone outside a gas station, the first of the rain thrumming cars in the parking lot.

“Motherfucker’d better hurry,” said Len.

Mathew looked around, but there was nothing much to see.

“This town is perfect,” he said. “Let’s go inside.”

They entered the gas station and stood by the door, while the rain varnished the streets in a translucent enamel.

The old man at the register eyed them both with a scrunched-up face. After about ten minutes, he’d had enough.

“You boys gonna buy somethin?”

“No,” Mathew said without looking back.

The old man put both palms flat on the counter.

“This is a business,” he said. “No loitering.”

Len flipped his head around.

“How much money you pull into this place?”

The old man straightened.

“What?”

“You deaf?” Len asked, as he turned his body around.

The old man reached below the counter.

“I got a 12-gauge settin right here,” he said. “In case you got any other questions.”

Len gave the man a toothy grin.

“Let’s see it.”

The old man pinched his face tight.

“You boys get out. That’s the one and only time I’m gonna tell you.”

Len took a step forward.

“Alright,” Mathew said. “I’ll buy this magazine if you let us wait here for our taxi.”

The old man shook his head.

“Nope. Get out. Right now.”

He withdrew the unseen shotgun and placed it flat across the countertop.

Len smiled.

“Maybe I’ll just take that gun for myself,” he said. “Sell it for a few dollars.”

The old man stood with a stoic posture, a serious look on his weathered face.

“That’s it. I’m calling the police.”

Len started to say something else, but Mathew gave him an elbow.

“Cab’s here.”

Len looked at the old man and grinned.

“We’ll be seeing you again.” he said, backing away. “We’ll be seeing you real soon.”

The old man watched the two walk out, his face holding its stern expression. But inside, his heart thumped wildly, as if it



sought to escape at last and go it alone after all these years. And after the cab had gone, he raised a trembling hand to his chest, his age and vulnerabilities seeping out, despite his defiance against the world and all its modern failings. And, after a few minutes, he closed the gas station early and drove home to his wife.

## CHAPTER 6

“Ouch!” cried Mila. “You’re tearing my scalp out.”

“Just be still,” said Claire, as she worked the comb against the tangles in the girl’s dark brown hair.

“Ouch!”

Claire withdrew the comb and set it aside.

“This is pointless. We’re going to have to cut it.”

She removed a small bone-handled pocketknife from her pocket.

“What?” said Mila, as she scuttled toward the river’s edge. “No way.”

Claire stood up.

“It’s better anyway, just in case someone recognizes you.”

Mila put her hands up.

“No one’s going to recognize me, alright? And, you’re not cutting my hair.”

Claire stood up.

“You do understand that there are dangerous people hunting you right now, don’t you?” She softened her expression and flattened the pitch of her voice. “Look, I understand how you feel. I was young once too. But you look ridiculous right now, and there’s no way I can comb those tangles without taking hunks of your scalp with them.”

The girl shook her head.

“I don’t care. You’re not cutting my hair.”

Minutes later, Claire slipped the knife back into her pocket, while the girl sat sobbing at her reflection in the water.

“I’ll give you a minute,” said Claire, as she walked away.

She made her way through the trees and popped out into the grasses on the other side. She looked at the road, stretching out for miles into the seeable landscape. There were no cars coming and no helicopters in the sky. She took a breath and allowed herself to relax. Then, she reentered the tree line and walked back to the river, where Mila sat as before, holding strands of loosed hair, like the innocent casualties of a great injustice.

“Are you finished mourning your loss?” asked Claire.  
“Because if a car passes that bridge and sees you sitting out in the open, they are likely to stop and cause trouble for us.”

Mila remained crouched down along the sandy banks, her eyes staring deep into the flowing water, like someone meditating on the true nature of the world.

Claire sighed and looked around. To the west, the sky flared gently, as the reddening sun plunged beneath the land. Within the trees, cicadas began chirping, and Claire could see that bats had begun to fall from their roosting spots beneath the bridge.

“You know, when it gets dark, the bugs start to come out.”

Mila stood up and dusted her legs in a panic. Then, she calmed herself and folded her arms.

“I’m not scared of bugs.”

Claire nodded.

“Alright,” she said, as she approached Mila. “Do you see those birds right there?”

Mila looked up.

“Yes.”

“Those aren’t birds. They’re bats. They live under the bridge.”

With that she turned and walked back into the trees.

Minutes later, the two sat together on a blanket next to the car, the sunlight nearly consumed by the gathering dark.

“Why can’t we start a fire?” asked the girl.

Claire shook her head.

“Someone may see it.”

Mila bent her knees up and curled her arms around them.

“I’m cold.”

Claire handed her a blanket.

“Here.”

The girl took it and wrinkled her nose.

“It stinks.”

Claire shrugged, as she reached into her backpack.

“It’s all we have.”

The girl spread it over her legs.

“I’m hungry.”

Claire nodded.

“I’m working on it.”

She withdrew two cans of beans and cut the tops away with a can opener.

“Cold beans?” asked Mila. “This just keeps getting better.”

Claire set the can opener aside.

“You know, you don’t act like someone who’s been surviving on the road.”

The girl shoved a spoon in the can and shrugged.

“Well, maybe you’re just not doing it right.” She scooped up a spoonful of beans and looked it over. “I never had to eat cold beans before, at least.”

Claire stood.

“Well, don’t worry. I’m sure it will be four-course meals at Bloc 9.”

A somber expression seized the girl’s face. She dropped her spoon into the can and set it down.

“I’m sorry,” said Claire. “I didn’t mean it.”

Mila stood up and walked away. Claire waited a moment and then followed her into the darkness.

“I’m sorry,” she said, as she approached Mila from behind.

She placed a hand over Mila’s shoulder, and the girl ripped herself away.

“Why are you even doing this?” She spun around, mouth spitting out flecks of saliva like bits of clear venom. “Is it to help me or to hurt them? Do you even know? Do you even care about what happens to me?”

Claire took a deep breath.

“Of course, I care. I’m sorry.” She rubbed the back of her neck and tilted her head up. “Look, the truth is, I’m not used to being around children. I don’t have any experience with this sort of thing. There’s a lot of stuff I have to think of. A lot of planning and a lot of worry. This thing we’re trying to do will not be easy. There are a lot of variables and a lot of risks. But I shouldn’t have said that. I know this is not easy for you, and I’m sorry. Okay?”

Mila turned away and kicked the ground.

“I just want a normal life,” she whispered.

Claire approached her slowly and touched her arm.

“I know,” she said.

The girl turned, tears streaming from her eyes.

“What’s going to happen to me at Bloc 9?” she asked. “I don’t know anyone there. What if they hurt me?”

Claire put her hands over the girl’s shoulders.

“They won’t hurt you,” she said. “They will help you.”

The girl’s chin trembled.

“How do you know?”

Claire knelt down and looked into the girl’s eyes.

“I’ll make sure of it.”

Mila threw her arms around Claire and burst into tears.

“I’m scared,” she said.

Claire hugged back.

“It’s alright. Now, let’s go eat those disgusting beans.”

The girl smiled a little.

“You’re terrible at camping,” she said.

Claire stood up and smiled.

“Well, maybe we can figure it out together.”

The girl wiped her face, and the two walked back to the car, where they ate their beans in silence.

## CHAPTER 7

Out on the road, the cab driver looked casual and calm, despite his screaming intuitions.

“Where you fellas from?” he asked against his better judgment.

“Someplace else,” said the big one.

They rode in silence for a while, and then the big man leaned forward.

“Where’s a good place to get a drink?”

The cab driver flinched at the smell of Len’s breath.

“What kind of place you into?” he asked, as he cracked his window against the stink.

Len scratched the black whiskers on his chin.

“Someplace with girls.”

The driver shrugged.

“This ain’t that kind of town, really. There’s laws against strippin and such. There’s the Firehouse, though. Lots of women there. They do free drinks for ladies on Thursdays. You should do pretty well there, if you have some money to spend.”

Len leaned back in his seat.

“Well?” he asked Mathew.

“Whatever, as long as there’s booze.”

Len looked at the driver.

“Well, go there then.”

About ten minutes later, The Firehouse appeared on the horizon, its shabby wooden exterior illuminated by what looked like twinkling white Christmas lights.

“That’s it,” said the driver.

Len leaned between the two front seats and squinted.

“Looks like a dump.”

The driver swallowed.

“It’s better on the inside.”

They pulled into the parking lot and Mathew stepped out.

“Here,” Len said, as he passed over the fare.

“You fellas have a good one,” said the driver.

Len stepped out into the night without answering, the car rocking violently over the loss of his formidable weight.

“I don’t know about this,” Len said, as the cab sped away.

“As long as there’s booze,” said Mathew.

The two approached the entrance, as a pair of giggling college girls stepped outside, their skin soft and fair, eyes large and blue.

“Hello, ladies,” Len said, his face contorted by an alarming grin.

The girls stiffened and rushed past, their eyes cast down to the ground.

“Fuckin little bitches,” Len said, as he and Mathew entered the bar.

The cab driver had been right. It was better inside, though neither men could relate to what he saw. In one far corner, a young man in a cowboy hat clung to a frenzied mechanical bull. In another, couples danced to country music, their boots stirring sawdust from atop a wooden floor.

Len shook his head.

“Fuckin hillbillies.”

They sat down at a corner booth, where the dim light softened their defects and scars.

A waitress approached.



“Hi there. What’ll you have?”

Len grinned, and the waitress appeared to shutter.

“Hey there, pretty thing. How you doing this beautiful evening?”

The waitress gave a polite smile.

“Just fine, thanks. What can I get you?”

Len leaned back and threw his arms over the back of the booth.

“I’ll have a beer and a shot of tequila, undressed.”

“What kind of beer?” the waitress asked.

Len’s smile widened.

“Why don’t you just pick one for me?”

She turned to Mathew.

“And you?”

“Whiskey, neat.”

She nodded and walked away, while Len eyeballed Mathew from the side.

“Quit staring at me,” Mathew said, as he surveyed the room.

“Just take it slow,” said Len. “I don’t want no problems. This town’s got potential. I don’t want to blow everything in one night.”

Mathew didn’t answer.

“God damn, that waitress, though,” Len continued. He bent over to get a better look, as she put their order in at the bar. “That ass and that hair.” He hissed inward. “And that nose. I like it when their nose is kind of big.”

Mathew gave her quick look.

“Yeah, she’s got a look, I guess.”

“A look?” Len said. “Shit, that bitch is packing a serious body under those clothes. Trust me.”

She turned toward them, and Len sat up in a panic.

“Quiet. Here she comes.”

The waitress carried over their drinks and set them on the table. Len picked up the beer and looked it over.

“This looks alright,” he said. “You picked this out?”

The waitress offered no expression.

“Our bartender did.”

Len frowned a little. He bent to the side and the bartender gave him a nod.

“Well, fuck,” he said. “I guess beer’s beer.”

The waitress turned to Mathew.

“You all set?”

Mathew nodded, and she walked away.

“She acts like she ain’t interested,” Len said, “But I can tell there’s something there. I got an instinct for this kind of thing.”

Mathew lifted the glass of whiskey and poured it down his throat.

“God damn it, Matt,” said Len. “Are you fucking kidding me? How many times have we been over this?”

Mathew set the glass down.

“Just worry about yourself, ok?”

Len lifted his shot of tequila and sucked it empty.

“I’ll be at the bar.”

He collected his beer and walked away, while Mathew motioned the waitress over again.

Two hours later, Mathew sat in the same booth, his face looking tired, eyes studying a wet circle on the table. Across the room, two men played billiards with a pair of perky-looking girls with big bashful eyes. Even amid all the clatter and noise, these two men stood out, their voices booming with arrogance and expletives. Mathew lifted his head and watched

them. Both men were decorated with ridiculous tattoos, and both looked to have spent a considerable amount of time at the gym.

Mathew glanced over to the bar, but Len wasn't there anymore. He lifted his glass and sucked down the last sip of whiskey. Then he stood up and approached the billiard tables.

"I got next," he said, as he placed a twenty-dollar bill on the table.

The two men turned.

"Nah, we're playing with these two fine ladies," the taller one said. "There's another table over there. This one's ours for the night."

Mathew threw down another twenty.

"It's alright if you're scared," he said. "Or, maybe you just don't have the money."

The other man turned and pointed his finger at Mathew's face.

"Listen, fucker—."

"It's alright," said the taller man. "I don't mind taking this guy's money."

Mathew walked between the two men and collected a pool cue, while the tall man pulled the money from his wallet.

"Just give me a minute to dispose of this idiot," he told the girls, who seemed quite stimulated by the altercation.

The two girls walked over to a high-top table and sipped their drinks, while giggling to one another.

"What's the game?" asked the tall man, as he chalked his stick.

"Standard eight-ball," said Mathew.

"I'll hold the money," said the shorter man.

Mathew shrugged.

"Fine with me."

Within minutes, everyone could see that Mathew had made a tremendous mistake, as the tall man systematically cleared his balls from the table. Throughout the ordeal, his friend needled Mathew with boastful taunts, while the girls oohed and awed at the tall man's heroics. In no time at all, the man had lined up the eight ball for a simple shot that would close out the game.

"Get my money ready," he said, as he bent down over the table.

Everyone waited, while he studied the angle for what seemed an excessive amount of time.

"Come on, hurry up." said the shorter man.

The tall man persisted in his stance, his face locked in unwavering concentration.

"What's he doing?" whispered one of the girls.

The short man stood up and approached.

"You alright, man?" he asked.

At last, the tall man stood up, his face looking terrified, lungs sucking air. He turned to his friend.

"What's wrong? You alright?"

The tall man walked over to the high-top table and downed his drink, while Mathew watched with great amusement.

"What are you laughing at, fucker?" said the shorter man. "You are this close to getting your ass kicked."

He walked over to his friend.

"You alright?"

"Yeah," said the tall man, unconvincingly.

The girls watched the two men with great interest, one slipping a whisper into the other's ear that coaxed forth a little smile.

"Well, finish this fucker then, ok?"

The tall man placed both hands flat on the table, as if he were steadying himself on a bobbing ship.

“Yeah,” he whispered. “Yeah, ok.”

They turned to see that Mathew had collected the man’s stick.

“Here you go,” he said with a smile.

The shorter man walked over and snatched it away. He turned to his friend and offered it over.

“Here,” he said, but the tall man only stared at the stick, his face locked in some sort of mute horror.

“I don’t think he wants to play anymore,” Mathew said.

The shorter man lowered the stick and approached his friend.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his voice low and discreet. “You need a doctor or something?”

The tall man stood silently staring at the place where his friend was before.

“I’ll go ahead and take this,” Mathew said, slipping the money from the shorter man’s back pocket.

The short man spun around, his face aflame with anger and hate.

“Motherfucker, you ain’t taking that money.”

“Jackson!” yelled one of the girls. “There’s something wrong with him. Forget that guy. We need to get him to a hospital or something.”

Jackson turned to see his friend drooling all over his shirt. He approached him and slapped his cheek.

“Come on, man. Snap out of it. You’re alright.”

As Mathew returned to his booth, the tall man finally relaxed, his face regaining its color as his features perked up.

“See,” said Jackson. “He don’t need a doctor. He just needs another drink.”

While Jackson and the girls tended to their friend, Mathew slipped back into his seat and flagged down the waitress. He ordered another whiskey and drank it down. Then he followed

up with another, which he sipped a bit more considerately, at least for a while.

Now, the lights were bleary star bursts, and the sounds, a meaningless fusion of laughter, footsteps and dish clatter. He swung his head back and stared at the ceiling. He cried.

“You alright, mister?” asked the waitress, who seemed to appear as if from nowhere at the edge of his table.

Mathew whipped his head up to look at her.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m fine.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of crumpled twenty-dollar bills.

“Here,” he said, slapping the entire wad on the table. “I gotta go.”

He slid out of the booth and stumbled onto the floor, while the waitress made a false attempt to catch him.

“You alright?” she asked. “You need me to call a cab?”

“Nope,” he said, as he climbed to his feet. “I’ll be fine.”

He walked away with his arms flared out to his sides, as if he balanced upon a shifting funhouse landscape with very real hazards on either side.

“Wait,” said the waitress, her eyes big and bright. “This is way too much.”

“Keep it,” said Mathew, as he staggered away. “Buy something you don’t need.”

She watched him walk through the crowd of people, many assuming odd, wooden stances to let him pass. She waited until he pushed his way through the doors and into the outside world. Then, she gathered up the money, a broad smile forcing its way across her tired-looking face.

Outside, the storm had left big puddles in the street, and the air smelled of wet soil. He stood there for a while waiting for his senses to catch up with his body. But they never did, so he took a shaky step forward and collapsed onto the ground.

“Awe, look at this,” said God, or a passing witness, or a voice within his mind. “Ain’t this a sad sight?”

It was Jackson and his tall friend. They approached Mathew and stood above him.

“He don’t look so cocky anymore, does he?” one said to the other.

Jackson drove a boot into Mathew’s side and tossed him over onto his back.

“You fucked with the wrong people, you stupid piece of shit,” he said.

The two girls stood watching from behind, their faces painted with genuine concern.

“You two are gonna get arrested,” one said. “Just leave him be.”

Jackson turned and held out his keys.

“You two go on to my house,” he said. “Just take my car. We’ll catch up with you after we finish with this motherfucker.”

The girl put her hands on her slender hips.

“This is stupid, Jackson. You’re gonna get thrown in jail.”

Jackson stepped forward and yanked her arm from her hip.

“You go on now,” he said, as he forced the keys into her hand. “Don’t worry about us. We got it under control.”

The girl took the keys and shook her head.

“Come on, Kailey,” she said, and the two walked away.

Jackson turned and joined his friend.

“Time to pay, you stupid piece of shit.”

Mathew gazed upward at the heavens, where starlight twinkled between a tapestry of drifting purple thunderclouds.

“Get him up,” Jackson said.

The two men raised Mathew to his feet and forced him to the side of the building. His head lolled as they carried him

down a dark alley, where the smell of sour dumpster content mingled with the scent of fresh rain.

“Hold him up,” Jackson told the tall man, who yanked Mathew straight to expose his soft underneath.

Jackson glanced down both ends of the alley to make sure they were alone. Then, he took a hard step forward and jabbed his fist into Mathew, who coughed and wheezed, as the breath fled his body.

“Alright,” said Jackson. “You’re up.”

The two men switched positions, while Mathew snorted and sucked at the air.

“Hold him higher,” said the tall man, as he squared to deliver a blow.

Jackson hoisted Mathew as high as he could, while his friend swung his leg forward and sunk a boot into Mathew’s genitals. A low moan seeped from between Mathew’s lips, as the pain blossomed within his body. The tall man reached out and gathered a handful of Mathew’s hair.

“You like that, fucker?” he said, as he yanked his head up.

He started to say more, but before he could, Mathew soaked his shirt with a foul stream of vomit.

“God damn it!” the tall man yelled.

Jackson released Mathew, who collapsed against concrete like a bag of bowling pins.

“Fuck!” yelled the tall man.

He wrestled his soiled shirt over his head, as little strings of vomit clung to his hair. He tossed the shirt aside and spat.

“You piece of shit,” Jackson said.

He raised his boot and stomped on the buttons of Mathew’s spine.

“Wait,” said the tall man. “Leave some for me.”

Jackson stepped back and folded his arms, while the tall man clutched his knees and heaved dryly. After a few



moments, he gathered his composure and approached.

“I’m gonna fucking kill you,” he said. “You hear me, motherfucker? You die right now.”

He brought his leg back and drove it deep into Mathew, who cringed and coughed, his reddened eyes rolling about in their sockets, as if loosed from the wires in his head.

Suddenly, Jackson vanished backward into the darkness, his body plucked upward in a swift and soundless motion, as if God Himself had finally lost his taste for the violence of men. The tall man stopped kicking Mathew and spun around.

“Jackson?” he called out.

The darkness answered with muffled whimpers.

“Jackson, you alright?”

The darkness answered again, this time with a great clomp. And then it answered no more.

“Jackson?” the tall man muttered as he crept forward.

“He’s not really in a talking mood right now,” said Len, as he stepped from the shadows.

The tall man took a step backward, as Len’s immense form transcended into the visible light.

“Who are—,” the tall man began. But before he could finish, Len had him by the throat.

Now, he was rising off the ground, his hands clutching Len’s thick wrists, legs bicycling in the air.

“You’ve made a big mistake,” Len said, as he brought the man’s face close to his. “See, that’s my best friend right there.”

He unclasped his right hand and held the man high with his left. He brought his arm back and plunged a fist into tall man’s face, which tore apart from his lips to his nose. Garbled noises spilled out from his mutilated mouth, followed by blood and teeth and periodontal gore. Len held the man even higher and inspected his work with a false look of concern.

“My goodness. You ain’t pretty no more.”

He released the man's neck, and his body thumped the ground.

"Please," the man whistled through a torn and bloody mouth.

Len gestured toward Mathew.

"Did my friend say please when you was beatin him?"

As the tall man tried to speak, Len put a finger to his lips.

"Shhh."

He offered a friendly looking smile and then jabbed the man's head with his boot.

"It's sleepy time."

Len smiled to himself, as Mathew turned over and sat up. Len eyed him with contempt.

"Jesus Christ, Matt, what the hell is it with you? If you want to die so much, why don't you just do it yourself?"

Mathew sat in a puddle, his head bowed, legs splayed out. He spat blood in the water and watched it dilute to a soft pink.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe I should."

Len shook his head.

"Christ," he said. "Come here."

He bent over and hauled Mathew up onto his feet.

"You got to get yourself together," said Len. "This shit's getting old."

He dusted away the street filth from his coat, while Mathew tottered about like a newborn deer. He placed his hand on Mathew's shoulder and squeezed.

"I hate seeing you like this. It's beneath someone like you."

Mathew ripped away from Len's grip and staggered away down the alley.

"Oh, is that how it is?" asked Len.

Behind him in the blackness, a horrible, desperate groan leaked out into the uncaring world.

“God damn it,” Len said.

He approached the tall man and stood over him.

“Did I say you could wake up?”

He lodged his boot in the man’s ribcage and turned him over onto his back.

“Go back to sleep motherfucker.”

He raised his boot and stomped on center of the man’s face, a sharp crack stabbing into the air, as the nose gave way. The man coughed out a little fountain of blood that bloomed up like oil from a fruitful well. Then, his eyes went cloudy and his chest fell still.

Len looked over at Jackson, still limp and unconscious on the wet pavement. He approached and straddled Jackson’s torso.

“Nighty night to you, too,” he said, as he gathered Jackson’s head between his massive hands.

He gave the neck a sharp twist, and then stood up. Jackson lay dead on the ground. Len spat and looked ahead, where Mathew had collapsed onto his back.

“You gonna sleep here tonight?”

Mathew didn’t answer.

“Shit,” Len said, as he approached. “Come here, God damn it.”

He bent down to collect his friend.

“Let’s go, buddy. We gotta stick together.”

Mathew shook his head.

“I’m not like you.”

Len lifted him up and tossed him over his shoulder.

“Nah, you’re worse.”

## CHAPTER 8

Mila looked out the window, where great pastures stretched into an indefinite horizon. As the cool wind tickled the grasses, young cows skipped about beneath the indifferent gazes of their elders, which stood like living statues, save for the workings of their jaws.

“I want a hamburger,” said Mila.

Claire shook her head.

“We need to stay out of sight.”

Mila slouched in her seat and released an impressive sigh.

“I can’t eat any more beans,” she said. “I won’t eat them.”

Claire shrugged.

“You will if you get hungry enough.”

They rode in silence for a while, something wrong taking root between them.

“I can’t wait for this to be over,” said Mila.

“You and me both,” said Claire.

Static seized the radio as they exceeded the station’s broadcast limits. Claire flipped the dial in search of something stable.

“Can I at least listen to my music?” asked Mila.

Claire pulled her hand back.

“Knock yourself out.”

Mila took the knob and spun it through a cacophony of foreign music and gospel radio.

“God,” she said. “How could anyone live around here?”

At last, she settled on something modern and chaotic, the lyrics sexual, the singer inflecting wildly.

“No,” said Claire. “Find something else.”

Mila looked at her as if she’d just grown a second head.

“You don’t like this?”

She turned the radio up.

“This is my song,” she said. “I’m not even kidding. This song is about me.”

Claire glanced at the radio, as the singer crooned about having sex with multiple men. She looked at Mila.

“Really?”

Mila folded her arms.

“Maybe,” she said. “Does that surprise you?”

Claire turned toward the coming road.

“Yes,” she said, her voice dry as stale bread.

Mila looked out the window and released another impressive sigh.

“There,” she said. “Can we please stop there.”

Up ahead, a little billboard stuck up from the earth. In ten miles, it promised, home-style cooking had a home at a place called Maxine’s.

Mila perked up in her seat.

“We should avoid public places,” said Claire, as she glanced at the sign.

As they raced past the sign, Mila flipped around in her seat and stared longingly at the bare wood backing.

“Please,” she said. “I just want to eat some real food.”

Claire looked over and frowned.

“Maybe,” she said. “I’ll decide when I see it.”

Mila sat back in her seat and placed a hand over her stomach.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” said Claire. “If I don’t like the way it looks, we’re driving past.”

Mila 's face turned dark.

“Oh God, please let this happen.”

Several minutes later, they saw the restaurant sitting on the side of the road in the middle of the open landscape next to a small gas station with two working pumps. Mila looked at Claire with a sorrowful longing, her eyes wide and pleading and a little wet.

“Please?”

Claire scanned the surrounding landscape.

“Fine,” she said. “But we need to be in and out as fast as possible. Okay?”

Mila nodded furiously.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

Claire slowed the car and exited the road. They pulled into the gravel parking lot, the wind whipping fine dirt fragments through their open windows and into their mouths.

“This is not something I would normally do,” said Claire, as she filed the car into an open parking space. “You do as I say in here. Do you understand?”

Mila nodded.

“Open the glove box,” said Claire.

Mila opened the glove box and a mass of hair flopped out.

“Hand it to me.”

The girl lifted the wad of hair by the tips of her fingers, a wrinkled sneer spreading out from her lips.

“Gross,” she said, as she tossed it into Claire’s lap.

“It’s just a wig,” said Claire, as she tilted the rearview mirror her way.

Mila watched as Claire worked the wig over her head.

“Well?” Claire asked.

Mila started to say something and then considered the gnawing within her stomach.

“It’s good,” she said.

Claire took another look in the mirror.

“Maybe we should just go.”

Mila put her hand on Claire’s arm.

“It’ll be fine,” she said. “You look great. Like, I don’t even feel I know you right now.”

Claire looked at Mila and then back to the mirror. She took the wig with both hands and leveled it atop her head.

“Okay,” she said, as she slid a pair of sunglasses over her nose. “Just don’t say anything to anyone.”

Mila nodded.

“No problem.”

They left the car and crossed the lot, the sun sitting small and high in the sky, the heat like a weight on their shoulders. As the two approached the front door, a middle-aged couple stepped out, their faces indifferent to the strangers before them. The man stopped and held the door open for the woman and child. He wore a big black cowboy hat and a tiny smile that seemed more polite than sincere.

“Thank you,” said Claire. Her eyes studied the ground, like a child caught doing something wrong.

“You’re welcome” the man replied, but his face pinched inward with thought, as if he were crossing paths with a mental illness of some kind.

Claire and Mila moved swiftly through the open door, the man giving plenty of room, like someone concerned about a contagion in the air.

Mila took Claire’s arm as they entered the restaurant.

“You need to relax.”

“I can’t,” Claire whispered back.

Claire lowered her sunglasses and studied the interior, where a noisy collection of men, women and children had gathered amid a rustic setting with faux wood panels. In the

center of the room, a little fireplace hissed and crackled. Above their heads, great taxidermized beasts laughed down, their bloodless face flesh gaunt and dry.

The two stepped forward, and a young woman swooped in to greet them.

“Hi there. Just the two of you?” she said in a thick southern accent.

Claire assessed the room once more.

“Yes,” she said.

The young woman collected two large laminated menus that looked more like roadside placards for a car wash.

“Right this way.”

They followed her through a maze of tables, where people socialized over huge plates of hamburgers, fried chicken, corn, mashed potatoes and cherry pie. As she moved past them, Claire watched closely in their faces signs of recognition, but most seemed to notice the two of them not at all, and this brought her considerable relief.

The hostess sat them at a table by the window and handed over their menus.

“Your waitress will be by in a minute.”

She smiled and returned to her spot in front of the door.

Claire and Mila looked over the menu.

“Do they have breakfast?” asked the girl.

“It’s afternoon,” said Claire.

Mila shrugged.

“Some places serve it all day.”

The waitress appeared with two glasses of water, her demeanor that of someone under great stress.

“Sorry,” she said, as she plunked the glasses beneath their noses. “I’m in the weeds.”

Claire leaned over to Mila.



“That means she’s very busy.”

Mila withdrew from Claire’s whispering lips.

“I know what it means,” she said loudly.

The waitress straightened her posture.

“I’ll give you a couple minutes.”

Claire waited until the woman had crossed the room and then leaned over the table.

“If you raise your voice again, you’ll be eating nothing but cold beans for the rest of your short life.” She raised a finger and stared deeply into Mila’s eyes. “Do you understand?”

Mila nodded.

“Ok, look at the menu and figure out what you want. The sooner we leave here the better off we’ll be.”

They scanned the menus, as if there were little hour glasses upon the table, every falling grain of sand leading them closer to discovery.

“This is so dumb,” Mila whispered finally. “No one here knows who we are. Can’t we just relax for a little while?”

The waitress returned before Claire could reply.

“Ok, sorry about that.” She took out her server pad. “Today’s special is beef brisket with green beans and baked mac and cheese.”

Claire glanced over the menu.

“What is your soup of the day?”

The woman looked puzzled.

“We got chili.”

Claire nodded.

“Ok then, I’ll just have the chicken sandwich.”

She jotted it down.

“And your daughter?”

Mila opened her mouth to correct the waitress and then thought better of it.

“Do you have pancakes?”

The waitress pointed them out on the menu.

“Ok, I’ll have the pancakes and bacon.”

“How do you want your eggs?”

“No eggs,” said the girl

The waitress looked at Claire.

“It comes with eggs.”

“Scrambled is fine.”

The waitress nodded and walked away.

“I don’t want eggs,” said Mila. “I hate eggs.”

“I’ll eat them if you don’t,” said Claire.

They sat together in silence amid the restaurant clatter. People muttering, some laughter, metal utensils clacking against glass plates.

“I hope they hurry,” said Mila. “I’m starving.”

“Me too,” said Claire.

Across the room, a man stood up from his table and began walking toward them. He wore a camouflage hunting jacket, and his big belly hung heavily over a large metallic belt buckle. Claire watched him approach, her eyes assessing every detail of his appearance and behavior. Mila watched her watch him.

“He’s just going to the bathroom,” she whispered.

Sure enough, the man turned before reaching their table, but not before taking a quick glance over his shoulder as he opened the bathroom door.

“He noticed us,” said Claire.

Mila shrugged.

“He just thinks you’re pretty.”

Minutes later the man exited the bathroom and returned to his table without looking back.

“See,” said Mila. “It’s nothing.”

They sat in silence until the waitress brought their food.

“Alrighty,” said the woman, as she slid the plates onto their table. “Everything look ok?”

Claire nodded.

“Yes, thank you.”

The waitress nodded and walked away.

“Oh my God, this is so great,” said Mila, as she slathered her pancakes with syrup.

Claire watched as the girl cut off a great hunk with her fork and jammed the entire thing in her mouth.

“Slow down,” she said with a smile.

The girl shook her head.

“So good,” she muttered, her mouth crowded to its limit.

Claire took up her sandwich and took a bite. She swallowed and looked at the girl.

“I have to admit, this definitely beats cold beans.”

They both laughed, and the child shoved another forkful of pancakes into her mouth. Claire leaned back in her booth and smiled, an unfamiliar easiness tumbling over her body, despite every effort toward the otherwise. But then, in an instant, her smile dried up, like some green delicate thing in an unforgiving soil.

“I think I’m already full,” said Mila, but Claire was studying something across the room. It was the fat man in the camouflage hunting jacket busy whispering in the bartender’s ear.

“What is it?” Mila whispered, her cheeks pregnant with food.

“Shhh,” Claire whispered. “Something’s going on.”

She watched the bartender's eyebrows furrow in response to whatever the fat man told him. All the while he had been polishing a glass mug with a soiled-looking towel, and he continued to do so, until the fat man gestured toward Claire and Mila. Then, the bartender's eyes trickled toward them, and his entire body froze.

Claire stared at the man without blinking, and his eyes darted down to his shoes. Then, she flicked her focus to the fat man, who was now hurrying toward the door.

"What do we do?" asked Mila.

"Wait a second," said Claire.

Now the bartender had adopted a look of exaggerated composure. He set the mug on the bar and approached a waitress. He gestured toward some dirty tables, and she quickly set off to clean them. He threw his soiled towel over his shoulder and exchanged some friendly words with a pair of men, who were both drinking whiskey and watching the television.

An old, rugged-looking farmer asked him for another beer. The bartender hurried over and poured his glass full, took his money and placed it in the register. Then, with a most casual air, the bartender approached the telephone and started dialing.

"Let's go," said Claire.

She placed two twenty-dollar bills on table and they stood.

The bartender finished delivering his words and hung up the phone. Then, he nodded to the fat man, who was now standing in front of the door with his arms folded.

Claire and Mila crossed the restaurant without hurrying, the girl's hand tucked firmly within that of her caretaker. When they approached the door, the fat man put his hand up.

"I'm afraid you're gonna have to wait here."

Claire looked at his hand and then at his red, swollen face.

"Move."

The fat man put a finger to the bill of his camouflage baseball cap and tipped it up a bit.

“Listen, we know you’re that woman from the news. The police are on their way. Don’t make this hard on yourself. Not in front of the child.”

The girl shrunk behind Claire, her eyes looking small and rodent-like.

Claire took a step forward.

“Move.”

The sound of a pump-action shotgun filled the space behind them, as the bartender forced a shell into the firing chamber.

“You heard the man,” he said. “Sit down on the floor right there and put your hands behind your back.”

Within the restaurant, curious customers viewed the scene with mute terror, their chewing mouths stilled by disbelief.

Claire turned to face the bartender, who raised the shotgun to her face.

“Don’t try to run, or I’ll have to shoot.”

Before the bartender could blink, Claire plucked the weapon from his grip and held it in her fingers like a child’s toy.

The fat man gasped and took a step back, as the bartender studied his empty hands, the fingers still molded around an invisible gun. With a sudden motion, Claire jabbed the bartender in the forehead with the butt of the weapon, and he fell to the ground in an unconscious heap.

She looked at the seated customers, and they all turned toward their plates. She faced the fat man, who shied from the entryway and up against the wall. As Claire approached, he whimpered and turned away, his body impossibly still, as if he believed he might conceal his presence by will or by miracle or by the camouflaged clothing he wore.

Claire took Mila 's hand and the two passed quickly through the entryway, leaving the restaurant guests to swallow, at last, the food within their mouths.

Outside, the two hurried across the parking lot, the sun-soaked gravel crunching beneath their shoes. They found their little car and slipped inside, the girl's face hiding poorly the worry on the other side.

"Just relax," said Claire.

She started the ignition, and they pulled out onto the street toward the lofty buildings on the horizon.

"We're going into the city?" asked Mila. "Why?"

"We have to."

Mila rubbed her forehead.

"But we'll be caught."

Claire checked the rearview mirror to make sure they were not being followed.

"If that man called the police, it will take less than 15 minutes for the others to find us," she said. "They'll start monitoring every road that leads from the city, hoping to catch us on the run. If they get us out in the open, they have more options. They can use helicopters and drones. They can hurt you, and they will use this as leverage to make us give up."

They approached a stop sign, marking a lonely four-way intersection in the barren open prairie. She brought the vehicle to a halt and let it idle, as the fragrant wind licked all around the open windows. She looked at Mila and gathered up her hand.

"If we go into the city, we can get lost in the crowd," she said. "That's our best play. We will blend in for a little while, and I will think of something."

The girl nodded, and Claire warmed her up with a bright, sunny smile.

"Don't worry."

She took the wheel and moved on, the girl watching the golden grasses through the open window and feeling much better with every passing mile. But, when she looked at Claire again, she noticed that her hands had bent the steering wheel, despite the easy expression on her face.

## CHAPTER 9

The old man stood at the register, his eyes intense, a toothpick jutting out from one corner of his mouth. At the far side of the gas station, a young man browsed through magazines, his pants hanging low, a wallet chain looping out below his t-shirt. The old man shifted the toothpick to the other side of his mouth and shook his head.

“You planning on buying something?” he asked. “This ain’t a library.”

The young man turned around, his face showing genuine surprise.

“Yeah,” he said, as he held up a magazine. “This right here.”

The old man gave a soft grunt, as he watched the young man approach.

“You don’t do the lottery here?” the young man asked as he slapped the magazine against the counter.

“No, I do not.”

The young man furrowed his eyebrows.

“How come?”

The old man chewed his toothpick, his face looking sick, as if he’d grown weary of all the world’s questions.

“Cuz it’s a tax on the ignorant.”

The young man started to say something, but the old man was faster.

“That’s \$4.99 if you really want it.”

The young man looked down at the magazine. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a ten-dollar bill.

“Here you go.”



The old man took the money and made change.

“You have a good one,” said the young man.

The old man gave a slight nod, and the young customer walked out the door, his pace slowed slightly by two new customers pushing their way inside. Without hesitation, the old man reached for his shotgun.

“You two, out,” he said, as he withdrew the weapon. “Out, before I call the police.”

Len smiled.

“Nah, I think we’ll stay a while.”

The old man tried to lift the weapon, but now it weighed a thousand pounds.

“Pick it up,” Len said with a demonic grin.

Sweat bubbled up out of the old man’s pores and raced down his face, fingers trembling, eyes wide beneath the sag of his wrinkled skin.

“I’ll get the register,” said Mathew. “You mind the door.”

Len gave a little nod.

“I ain’t finished with you,” he told the old man before walking outside.

Mathew crossed behind the counter and moved past the old man, who stood firm and still, his body benumbed by a will not his own.

“Ok, old timer,” said Mathew, as he cleaned out the register. “I know you’re probably having a freak out inside that head of yours. But, I need you to focus for a second.”

He shoved all the cash into his coat pockets and turned the old man around, so they were face to face.

“What’s going to happen here is this: I’m going to release you for a moment, and you’re going to open that safe. Then, I’m going to put you back like this, and we’re going to leave without hurting you.”

Mathew gave a reassuring smile and cleared his throat. As if refreshed by the gesture, the old man fell to a knee and placed a hand against the white tile floor. He took in a deep breath and then vomited on Mathew's boots.

"God dammit," said Mathew as he stepped back.

The old man sucked in air, strings of filth bowing downward from his lips.

"What in the hell?" he gasped through a mouthful of bile. "What in the hell did you do to me?"

Mathew firmed his mouth and placed a hand on the man's back.

"Focus, please," he said. "This can go several ways. The way I said is best, I assure you."

The old man looked down at his hand, now pressed flat amid a yellowish pool of vomit. He withdrew it and watched the ooze encroach upon the edges of his finger tracks.

"Let's go," said Mathew. "Quickly."

The old man turned and brought his trembling fingers to the combination. He took the knob and spun it to 17, and then 18 and then 16.

"Quickly," said Mathew.

The old man withdrew his fingers and shook them, as if trying to restore feeling to a sleep-struck limb.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry."

He gagged and spat.

"Focus and try again," said Mathew.

The old man took in a deep breath and returned his fingers to the knob.

"Shit!" said Len, as he burst through the door. "We've got company."

Mathew looked down at the old man.

"Keep working on it."

He walked around the counter and approached Len.

“Cops?”

Len nodded.

“I think so. He must have hit a silent alarm or something.”

The old man raised up.

“I don’t have no silent alarm,” he said through quivering lips. “This is a gas station, for Christ’s sake.”

Len and Mathew looked at each other.

“Did you see sirens?”

Len shook his head.

“No, but—”

A black SUV pulled up and idled just outside the glass door.

“Oh, shit,” said Mathew.

“What?” asked Len. He turned to the old man, who flinched and bent down.

“Give me that,” said Len, as he took up the shot gun and forced a shell into the chamber.

Outside, two men exited the SUV, their faces veiled by the dim exterior lighting. Mathew tilted his head and peered outward, as the men strode forward, their steps deliberate but unhurried.

“Get behind me,” Mathew said.

Len took a few steps back, as the men approached the door and made their way inside.

“Thank God,” said the old man, as he fled his position and ran toward the men. “These two fuckers are robbing me.”

As he approached, one of the men withdrew a pistol and fired. The old man stumbled forward and crashed to the ground, his bloody face looking up blankly at the water-stained ceiling.

“Hello, Mathew,” said the other man, as his partner slipped his pistol back within his coat. “It’s been a long time.”

Len took a couple of steps backward, his shotgun shaking slightly.

“Hello, Demetri,” Mathew said. “Who’s your friend?”

Demetri gave a little smile.

“Not right now,” he said. “There will be plenty of time for introductions later.”

Mathew took a step forward.

“Later?” Mathew said with a smile. “Come on, Demetri. We both know how this is going to go.” He took another step forward. “Me and my friend are going to walk right between you and your friend. Then, we are going to disappear.”

Demetri raised his eyebrows.

“Well, then,” he said. “Let’s get on with it.”

Len watched and waited, his hand gripping the shotgun, eyes wide, adrenaline gushing.

“Come on, Matt,” he whispered after a few seconds. “Let’s go.”

But, Mathew held still, his eyes trained on Demetri, legs firmly set beneath his body. Len approached his friend from behind and spoke into his ear.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

And, somewhere within Mathew’s brain, these instructions found their mark, the meaning apparent, the next move clear. But, despite all this, Mathew did nothing. His expression firm. Eyes wide and unblinking.

“God damn it, Matt,” Len yelled at last, as he stepped forward and began firing.

But, even as gun smoke snaked its way into his nostrils, Mathew did nothing. Not because of fear, nor rage, nor surrender. But, because his body would not move.

## CHAPTER 10

Claire pulled up to the curb along a dingy little street, which sheared through the middle of an aging urban neighborhood.

“Here,” she said. “This is the place.”

Mila looked around at the odd collection of homes. Most were in complete decay, but a few were freshly painted before manicured little squares of bright green grass.

“I don’t like it here,” she said.

“We don’t have a choice,” said Claire. “A hotel’s out of the question, and unless you want to sleep in the streets, this is our best bet.” She leveraged the door handle. “Come on.”

They stepped out of the car and walked up the driveway, while a group of hard-looking young men eyed them from the front porch of the house next door. One of the men drank from a 40-ounce bottle of malt liquor, his neck adorned with a collage of tattoo scribble. Another of the men watched Mila with bold interest, his mouth contorted in a sinister-looking grin, purple gums lined with gold crowns.

“They’re looking at me,” she whispered to Claire.

“Just ignore them.”

They stepped up onto the front porch, where tiny ceramic pots held dainty little flowers, which seemed far too tender for such a bleak and bitter landscape.

“Be polite,” Claire said as she wrapped her knuckles against the door.

They waited in silence, the stares of the men itching their skin. At last, a shuffling commenced on the other side of the door, and the knob began to turn.

“Hello,” said a very old woman. “You must be the young lady from the phone.”

She stood small before them, her body hunched over, long hairs sprouting from her wrinkled chin.

“Yes,” said Claire. “That’s right.”

She held her hand out toward Mila.

“This is Katie, and I’m Megan.”

The old lady turned toward Mila and smiled.

“Hello, Katie. It’s nice to meet you.”

Mila smiled back.

“It’s nice to meet you, too.”

The old woman looked at Claire.

“I’m Hellen,” she said.

Claire stuck a hand out and the old woman shook it.

“Well, come inside and you can take a look at the room.”

As Claire and the woman stepped inside, Mila took a last look at the men, who waved and blew kisses, one gesturing toward his crotch. She hurried inside and shut the door.

“You have a very lovely home,” said Claire.

“Thank you,” said the old lady. “I do my best.”

She approached a tall, narrow staircase.

“If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you the room.”

They followed the old woman up the stairs, both augmenting their steps to account for the hitch in her gate. When they finally reached the second floor, she clutched her chest and wheezed.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Not at all,” said Claire. “Take your time.”

The woman gave a polite smile and moved on. At the top of the staircase, they passed through a long narrow hallway, adorned by old faded photographs of two young men in military uniforms.

“Those are my sons, God rest their souls,” said the old woman.

“Very handsome,” said Claire.

Mila looked at the yellowing photos, their subjects sporting so well the vitality of youth.

“Did they die in a war?” she asked.

Claire turned to hush the girl.

“No, no,” said the old woman. “That’s quite alright. Curiosity is superior to indifference.”

She looked at Mila.

“No, nothing as glamorous as all that.” She pointed to one of the photos. “Clark here choked on a piece of steak when he was about 60. It didn’t kill him outright, but the poor thing had a stroke while he was trying to get his breath.”

She moved to a photo of the other man and traced her lips, as if struggling to win back a memory from the fog of old age.

“This,” she said. “This is George. He was such a good boy. Always did the right thing. Even if it brought him trouble.”

Her old eyes grew misty, and she caressed the photograph with the tips of her fingers, as if to exact his essence and warm her soul.

“He was killed in a car accident.”

The three stood a while longer without speaking, then the woman turned and limped on.

“This is the room,” she said, as she reached the end of the hall.

She opened the door and gestured them forward. They entered the room and looked around. There was a single twin bed in the far corner and a dresser that would have been considered antique in any other setting.

“It’s lovely,” said Claire.

“How do you like the curtains?” asked the old woman. “I made them myself. Aren’t they fabulous?”

Claire and Mila looked at the curtains. They were sickening. Huge red stripes, and strawberries everywhere.

“I like them very much,” said Claire.

She flashed Mila a potent look.

“Yes,” said the girl. “I like them too.”

Claire reached into her bag and withdrew a handful of cash.

“We’d be very happy to take the room.”

The old woman smiled.

“That’s just fine. How many nights will you be staying?”

Claire handed over \$500.

“I’m not sure yet, maybe a few days. Maybe a couple of weeks? Is that alright?”

The old woman took the money.

“Oh goodness, yes.”

She eyed the bed, while twisting one of the hairs on her chin.

“I’m sorry there aren’t two beds. I can bring blankets for the floor.”

Claire gave a polite smile.

“Blankets would be lovely.”

The woman nodded.

“Let me get those, so you can rest. I’m sure you are both very tired.”

She left to get the blankets, while the girl eyed the bed with suspicion.

“It doesn’t look very comfortable.”

Claire set their bag against a wall.

“You can have the floor then.”

The girl tossed her a look and stretched out on the bed.



“I can’t sleep on the floor. What if a spider crawls in my ear?”

Claire smiled.

“It’s ok. I don’t sleep at night anyway.”

Mila raised up on her elbow.

“You haven’t been sleeping?”

Claire shook her head.

“Why not?” asked Mila.

Claire shrugged.

“It seems I don’t need it anymore.”

Mila’s eyes widened.

“You don’t get tired? Not ever?”

Claire shook her head.

“What do you do all night? I mean, while other people are sleeping.”

“Just sit and think, mostly.” said Claire. “Or sometimes I read.”

Mila lay back and put her hands behind her head.

“That sounds awful.”

Claire gave a little smile.

“It was at first. Now, I enjoy it.”

The old woman entered with the blankets, and Mila sat up suddenly, as if she’d been caught in some deplorable act.

“Here you are,” said the old woman.

She placed them at the foot of the bed and looked around.

“You can use the bathroom in the hallway to shower and do your business. I’ll be serving dinner at five. I know that’s a bit early for younger folks, but I don’t like to stay up very late. You’re welcome to join me if you’d like.”

Claire nodded.

“Thank you. We just might.”

“What are you cooking?” asked Mila.

Claire flashed her a look, and the old woman placed a hand on her arm.

“That’s alright,” she assured her. “Baked scrod.”

She turned to Claire.

“I can open a can of fruit cocktail, too, if she’d like.”

“Don’t trouble yourself,” said Claire.

“Oh, no,” said the old woman. “It’s no trouble.”

She gave one last smile and left the room, closing the door behind her.

“What is scrod?” asked Mila with a look of horror.

“It’s just fish,” said Claire.

The girl relaxed a bit.

“Oh,” she said. “Still, I can’t believe anyone would eat something called scrod.”

Claire started to smile, but something stopped her.

“What is that?” she asked.

Mila followed Claire’s eyes to her own arm.

“Oh, yeah, I noticed it earlier.”

Claire approached and bent down.

“It’s very dark,” she said, as she pulled back the shirt sleeve.

Mila shrugged.

“It’s just a bruise. It doesn’t even hurt.”

Claire released her arm and stood up.

“How did it happen?”

Mila shook her head.

“I don’t know. I must have bumped it.”

Claire frowned.

“Ok, well, why don’t you lie down and rest for a while. I’m going to get cleaned up.”

“Go ahead,” said Mila. “I’ll just read.”

The girl got up and approached their bag of meager belongings.

“Hand me the razor while you’re in there,” said Claire.

Outside, in the hallway, television noise raged up from the living room, the old woman talking back to game shows and commercials alike. Claire smiled a little and entered the bathroom, where busy wallpaper clashed oddly with little scratchy towels.

She stood before the mirror and a ragged-looking thing looked back. She took up one of the hand towels and washed her face, the water warm and against her skin. A small porcelain plate held little soaps, shaped like turtles and frogs. With much hesitance, she claimed one and worked it into a foam beneath the flowing faucet. She lathered her head and ran the blade over her scalp, the stubble disappearing with every measured swipe.

Then, she froze, as something caught her attention. She leaned toward the mirror, as if to confirm an impossible reality. She set the razor down and touched her bleeding nose.

# CHAPTER 11

Mathew sat in a cold metal chair, his lungs hungrily sucking what little air sifted through the black hood covering his head. Around him, he heard the sound of boot steps clapping down on a hard tile floor. Besides that, nothing at all.

At the end of his wrists, he could feel his hands dangling like dead slabs of meat, his brain unable to manipulate them in even the slightest way. After a time, his body began to slip downward in the chair, his chin digging into his chest as his torso slid flat. Shortly after, four uncaring hands manipulated his body back into a sitting state, and then everything went quiet again.

More time passed while he waited for someone to say something, for something to happen, anything at all. But nothing did, and an hour later, his swollen bladder emptied its contents into his pants and down his leg.

As he sat breathing, an antiseptic smell filtered its way through the hood, the bite of the chemicals coaxing a cough from his burning throat.

“Alright,” said Demetri at last. “You can remove it.”

A man ripped the hood from Mathew’s head, and light stabbed at his unblinking eyes. Through the luminous blear, he could see Demetri sitting next to a thin bald man, who seemed utterly lost in unwavering concentration, one of his eyes bold and brown, the other dead white.

“Hello, Mathew,” said Demetri. “It’s been a long time.”

Mathew sat still and lifeless, his eyes and mouth sagging, as if paralyzed by stroke. Demetri looked him over.

“It appears you’ve had an accident,” he said with amusement, as he studied the dark, wet patch running down Mathew’s leg.

He leaned forward and removed his glasses. He looked into Mathew's vacant eyes.

"Can he hear me?"

The bald man gave a slight nod.

"Very good," said Demetri, as he slid his glasses back in place and stood.

"This is Mr. Heinrich," he said. "And he is the reason for your impairment."

Mr. Heinrich stared forward through his one live eye, while Demetri approached Mathew and stood before him.

"As you may have gathered by now, Mr. Heinrich is very much like you."

He bent down and frowned into Mathew's face.

"Well, perhaps that is a poor description," he said. "He is like you, except, how should I put this? Better."

He smiled and stood, while drool puddled on the floor beneath Mathew's gaping mouth.

"I must apologize for this," Demetri said, as he moved behind Mathew. "I was content to let you live out there, as a criminal, as a no one, if this is what you wished."

He placed his hands on Mathew's shoulders from behind.

"But, I'm afraid the others felt differently."

He nodded to Mr. Heinrich, who relaxed and sat back in his chair.

At once, Mathew gasped for air, as if he'd been pulled from underwater. He bent forward and vomited on the floor, while Demetri patted his back from behind.

"Yes, yes, let it out. Very good."

Mathew coughed and spat, while his stomach surrendered the last of its contents. He sat back in his chair and wiped his sleeve across his mouth.

"Just kill me, Demetri. Get it over with."

Demetri chuckled and returned to his chair. He sat and crossed his legs.

“It’s not so simple,” he said.

Mathew looked at Mr. Heinrich, his pale skin even more washed out under the fierce fluorescent lighting, his bad eye looking dead and waxy deep within its socket.

“Where’d you dig him up?”

Demetri looked at Mr. Heinrich.

“The same as you,” said Demetri. “He was lucky.”

Mathew nodded and spat something vile on the floor.

“Like me,” he said. “Only luckier.”

Demetri smiled.

“Yes,” he said. “We went through 500 subjects to get to you. It was 900 with him.”

Mathew assessed Mr. Heinrich, his posture straight and upright, face hard but with no discernible expression.

“Jesus, I’ll bet he’s not ticklish anywhere.”

Demetri shook his head.

“You are just as I remember you,” he said.

Mathew spat on the floor once more.

“Does it speak?”

Demetri leaned forward and rested his forearms against his thighs.

“Enough,” he said. “We are here to talk business.”

Mathew furrowed his brows.

“Business?” He took hold of his soiled pants and wafted air into them. “I never pictured us as business associates.”

Demetri nodded.

“Well, things change.”

Mathew scratched his ear.

“Can I get something to drink?”

Demetri nodded to one of the guards, who collected a bottle of water and brought it to Mathew.

“Where is Len?” he asked before emptying the bottle in five big swallows.

“He has been placed in the subject pool, of course,” said Demetri. “If he is fortunate, you will see him again. If not, well...”

Mathew crumpled the bottle and tossed it aside.

“Len isn’t lucky.”

Demetri nodded.

“Well, the odds are certainly against him, as they are for us all.”

Mathew shook his head.

“What do you want, Demetri?”

Demetri removed his glasses and wiped the lenses with a handkerchief.

“I have been tasked with an assignment. A very complicated assignment.”

Mathew sat back in his chair and sighed.

“You want me to help you catch someone else,” said Mathew. “Is that it?”

Demetri chuckled once more.

“No, I have Mr. Heinrich for that.” He scratched at something on his glasses and then slid them back over his eyes.

Mathew gestured toward Mr. Heinrich.

“Why do you need me for anything?” he asked. “He can do anything I can do, only better, as you say.”

Demetri nodded.

“Yes, that is true. But, this is a very special situation.”

Demetri nodded to a pair of soldiers standing behind Mathew.

“You and I will be having dinner together this evening. These two will get you all cleaned up. Please do as instructed without causing any delays. We have much to discuss.”

He stood and buttoned his coat.

“I know we’ve had our differences in the past.” said Demetri. “But, I am prepared to let all of that go. I am also prepared to offer you an opportunity to be part of something consequential. You have been given an extraordinary gift, and it pains me to see you waste your life as some sort of drunken criminal transient.”

He lifted a finger, as if to declare some inalienable truth.

“You are quite rare, Mathew. And, tonight, I will show you just how rare.”

He nodded to the soldiers once more, and they hoisted Mathew up, his legs quivering beneath him, like a fawn, freshly birthed.

“I’ll take a steak,” shouted Mathew, as Demetri and Mr. Heinrich left the room.

The soldiers waited for Mathew to find his footing. Then, they escorted him out another door and into a hallway, which curved heavily to one side, as if it ran in a continuous circle around an enormous room. As they walked, Mathew saw that there were doors on only one side of the hallway, the other wall white and completely barren.

“Jesus,” he said. “What is it with these places?”

The guards remained silent, their eyes pointed forward, automatic weapons in hand. Mathew eyed their guns, and for a moment, considered an escape. But, then he remembered Mr. Heinrich and felt the cold tinge of urine-soaked fabric against his leg.

“You guys don’t talk much, do you?” he asked the guards.

One of the men started to say something but stopped when the other flashed him a look. They approached a large elevator,



which held counterfeit versions of all three within its reflective metallic doors. A dark shiny box jutted from the wall, and the soldier placed his palm against it. A soft tone burbled from within, and the elevator doors shot open without making any sound. One of the guards gestured Mathew forward with a nod, and all three men entered.

Mathew began to speak, but before he could, the doors sealed shut for only a moment and then shot back open again.

“Let’s go,” said one of the soldiers.

Mathew looked puzzled.

“This is the same floor.”

“Go,” said the other soldier, and the three exited the elevator.

Immediately, Mathew saw that they were, in fact, on a different floor. He took a step forward and looked around.

“Ok,” he said. “That is pretty cool, I have to admit.”

They walked another hallway, which looked very much like that of a fine hotel, complete with opulent décor and a lavishly carpeted floor. They stopped at a door marked 518. One of the soldiers removed an ordinary key card and used it to open the door.

“Inside,” he said.

Mathew leaned within the entryway and looked around. Indeed, it was a hotel room. A very nice one at that.

“Shower and shave,” said the soldier. “You’ll find a suit in the closet.”

Mathew took a step inside.

“How long have I got?”

Without answering, the soldier closed the door.

An hour later, the same soldier slammed his fist against the door.

“Five more minutes.”

Ten minutes later, the two soldiers eyed each other with concern.

“If he’s killed himself, we may as well too,” said one.

“Don’t worry,” said the other unconvincingly.

He withdrew the keycard and disengaged the lock. Then, he opened the door to reveal Mathew drunk and naked upon a leather couch.

“Hey fellas!” said Mathew, his face stretched wide with a toothy grin.

“Shit,” said the soldier. He turned and called the other one forth.

“Oh, Christ.” said the latecomer. “Who stocked the mini bar?”

“I don’t know,” said the first soldier. “Just get him up. We’re running out of time.”

They hoisted Mathew off the couch and dragged him into the bathroom.

“I love you guys,” said Mathew, as they tossed him into the tub.

“Shut up,” said one of the soldiers, as he turned on the shower.

Mathew screamed as the freezing water scalded his skin.

“You sons of bitches!” he yelled. “I’ll fucking kill you!” Mathew dug his fingernails into the soldier’s face and clawed away chunks of skin. The man cursed and wrestled against Mathew’s nude, writhing body.

“Grab his legs!” he yelled to the other, but no help came.

He looked over to see the other soldier frozen solid, his body teetering above the toilet.

“Oh God,” he said, as he put his hands around Mathew’s neck. “Let him go, you fucking motherfucker!”

Now, his body stiffened, and the other’s went slack, the weight of it succumbing to gravity’s mighty tug. As the

soldier's body splashed to the tile floor, his knees bent all wrong, and a panicked shriek leapt from his vomiting mouth.

"My legs!" he yelled over and over between heaves. "My fucking legs!"

Mathew took hold of the suspended soldier's head and used it to pull himself up and out of the tub. He ran from the room and into the curved hallway, as if he'd just escaped a kidnapper's basement. On and on, he raced forward, the staff people backing against walls to unfetter his progress. After several minutes, he came back around the other side, where more soldiers had gathered outside his room.

"There he is!" one yelled.

Mathew turned and ran back the other way, while all the soldiers gave chase. One by one, the men seized up and fell flat, until Mathew was running alone again. At last, he stopped and bent over to suck at the air, his naked body trembling from exhaustion.

As his head swam, he saw Demetri and Mr. Heinrich stepping from the elevator ahead. He turned to run, but his balance failed, his body splattering against the carpet, mind going black.

Demetri and Mr. Heinrich approached him and waited, as the soldiers rounded the corner.

"For God's sake," said Demetri. "It's a circle."

He turned to Mr. Heinrich.

"Lock him in his chambers until he sobers up. We will have to reschedule tonight's events."

He turned to the group of soldiers, who stood sulking like dogs before a spilled can of trash.

"And, reassign these men."

One of the soldiers dropped to his knees, and another cried out. Still another raised his weapon, Mr. Heinrich rendering his body still, along with the lungs inside it.

## CHAPTER 12

Something was wrong, but Claire couldn't put a finger on it.

"Hello?" she called, but no one answered, her voice echoing off into the invisible beyond, a foul metallic scent in the air.

A bleary pink haze obstructed her sight, and her feet stabbed numbly against a soil of fine white grains.

"Mila?"

Now, the wind picked up, wiping away the haze to reveal a pointy face she did not recognize.

"Here," the person said, a finger summoning her vision down to the ground.

There, an infant twitched upon a stone alter, its skin nearly translucent, eyes wide and aware. Above the infant stood a very tall man in a white mask and long black robe. In his hand, he held a rusty knife, which he leveled above the child's bare chest. Claire took a step toward the alter, and the man brought the knife downward.

"No!" she yelled.

"It's alright," said a voice.

Claire opened her eyes.

"It's alright," said Mila. "You fell asleep."

Claire snapped her eyelids together and then opened them wide.

"I did?"

"Yeah," said Mila. "I thought you didn't sleep."

Claire looked around.

"I don't. I mean, not usually."

Downstairs, a grandfather clock filled the house with hollow bongs. Claire looked at Mila.

“What is it?” she asked. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Mila said. “My arms.”

Claire snatched up one of the girl’s wrists and held it to the light. The bruises had multiplied overnight.

“We have to get you to a doctor.”

Mila looked at her, dark circles beneath the girl’s eyes.

“Aren’t you a doctor?”

Claire looked at the bruises.

“No,” she said. “I mean, I’m sure I could diagnose you, but not without a lab and equipment. We need bloodwork at the least. It could be any number of things, and there’s no way to know without tests. We need to go to a doctor and get some tests. Then, we can decide how to deal with it. Whether it can wait until you’re at Bloc 9.”

Mila swallowed and shook her head.

“But, it’s not safe.”

Claire ran a thumb over one of the bruises.

“There’s no choice.”

They arrived at the doctor’s office by taxi, and Claire paid the man with a fistful of crumpled cash.

“Is she alright?” the driver asked, as he looked at the girl’s face.

Claire nodded.

“Yes. She’s just a little sick.”

The man seemed uncertain as he watched the two exit the vehicle.

“Well, good luck to you,” he said.

Claire gave a polite smile, and the man pulled away, forcing his cab into an inching river of vehicles, drivers honking at one another and cursing the day.

“I feel fine,” said Mila. “Honestly, I don’t feel sick at all.”

Claire looked at her.

“That’s good. But, we’ll just see what the doctor says. If it’s not serious, we’ll go. Ok?”

Mila eyed her surroundings.

“This doesn’t feel safe.”

Claire looked around, professional-looking men and women hurrying past, idling traffic belching fumes into the air.

“It’s alright,” she said. “Let’s just get off the street.”

Inside, there was a little waiting room with only a handful of people, who coughed and sneezed into tissues.

“Can I help you?” asked a middle-aged receptionist, who looked as if she’d rather be anywhere else.

Claire looked at Mila.

“Go have a seat.”

Mila turned and crossed the room, while Claire spoke to the receptionist. As the girl approached one of the chairs, an old couple watched her with gentle concern, the husband sucking life from a tank of oxygen, his mouth open and wet. Mila gave them a polite smile and took a seat in the far corner of the room, three chairs away from anyone else.

Beside her, there was a little end table filled with mundane literature. She grabbed one of the magazines and thumbed through it.

“You really shouldn’t touch those,” said the old man.

Mila looked over the magazine, which seemed perfectly fine aside from its content.

“Oh hush,” said the old woman. She leaned toward Mila. “He just means it might have germs from the sick people who

come here.”

Mila eyed the magazine suspiciously.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” said the old woman.

Mila set the magazine back on the end table and scrubbed her hands against her jeans. Minutes later, Claire approached, her wig looking a bit loose on her head.

“Well, they say they are full today. But, they’re going to let me speak to a nurse, and I’m going to try to elbow our way in.”

Mila nodded.

“Your hair,” she said softly.

Claire reached up and straightened her wig. She turned an eye toward the old couple, but they were busy arguing about something.

“You wait here,” Claire said. “I’ll be right back.”

“Alright,” said Mila.

Claire smiled and followed the receptionist through a little wooden door, while the old couple pretended to mind their own business.

Mila took a deep breath and looked around.

On one far wall, there was a thickly textured painting of an ambling stream, and in its sky-blue waters, a faceless man in rubber waders held an antique rod and reel.

Against another wall, there was a dark wooden shelf with handmade art of some kind: animals of stick sewn together with what looked like orange twine.

And, over the doorway, there was a picture of a cartoon tooth with friendly eyes and a big happy grin. Above his head, a white bubble expressed these words in thick black type:

“Postponing necessary dental treatments will only raise the risk of infection and could lead to more costly dental issues in the future.”

And below these words, through the narrow glass entry door, a man peered in, his stare both thorough and severe.



## CHAPTER 13

Mathew followed three armed soldiers down a curving hallway, his shoes crushing into a plush red carpet, which swallowed up each step like a velvet mud. All around them, a foul medley of broiling meats and antiseptics danced in the air, as if someone were swabbing ribs with a marinade of bleach.

“What’s cooking?” he asked, but the soldiers said nothing.

As they moved through the hallway, Mathew noticed that there were several steel doors all along one wall, each one only three feet tall.

“This fucking place,” he said.

One of the soldiers gave a little smile, and the other flashed him a cold look.

“Here,” the serious soldier said, as they arrived at another much larger steel door.

The soldier gave a sudden knock and the door opened immediately, as if someone had been watching them through an unseen peephole.

“Hello,” said a thin, bald man.

The soldiers straightened their spines and clapped their boots together.

“Please,” the man said to Mathew. “Won’t you join us?”

Mathew looked at the soldiers, their bodies like statues, eyes dry and unblinking.

“What’s in there?” Mathew asked.

The thin, bald man smiled.

“Does it matter?”

Mathew looked down both ends of the hallway.

“I guess you’ve got a point.”

He stepped through the doorway, and just as he did, the thin, bald man stepped past him into the hallway, the steel door shutting between them.

Mathew stood silently, his mind coming to terms with his imprisonment. Now, he would spend his remaining years as he had before. Confined to a room, accepting meals through a horizontal slot in the wall. Talking to himself. Shitting in a hole on the floor.

“Please,” a voice said from across the room. “Have a seat.”

Mathew turned to see Demetri sitting at an oval oak dinner table, a candle jutting up from the center, its light painting the bare walls with a flickering orange. Several feet to his side, a server stood against the wall, his posture stiff, face without expression.

“Is this where you always eat?”

Demetri gave a slight smile.

“No.”

He gestured at the opposite chair.

“Please.”

Mathew approached and sat with a sigh, as if his years did not accurately reflect his age. He took up the rolled white napkin next to his plate and shook out the silverware, which clattered against the table like a heavy set of car keys.

“Sorry,” he said, as he spread the cloth over his lap. “So, what are we having?”

Demetri folded his hands on the table.

“Whatever you’d like.”

Demetri snapped his fingers at the server, who immediately crossed the room, his head pointed down, footsteps quick and choppy.

Mathew watched the man flee into a dark, doorless passageway.

“Is that the kitchen?” asked Mathew.

“More or less.” said Demetri.

“They can make anything in there?”

Demetri nodded.

“Within reason.”

Mathew thought a moment.

“So, steak, shrimp, ostrich burgers, things like that? What if I want a peanut butter sandwich?”

Demetri shrugged.

“I will try not to judge,” he said, as he carefully unwound the silverware from his napkin.

Minutes later, the server returned with a plate of bread and centered it on the table.

“Please,” said Demetri. “You must be quite hungry.”

Mathew snatched up a hunk of bread and swabbed it with butter. He took a bite and chewed.

“How about a beer?” he asked.

Demetri looked at the server.

“One beer,” he said. “Not two.”

“And, pasta,” Mathew said. “I don’t care what kind, as long as there’s no seafood in it.”

Demetri looked at the waiter.

“Bring it right away.”

The server gave a slight bow and hurried away. Mathew watched the man vanish into the doorless passageway, two more armed guards situated on either side.

“You’re not eating?” he asked.

“I have already ordered,” Demetri said.

The two sat in silence for a while, Demetri staring directly into Mathew’s face with an expression of gentle amusement.

“What’s all this about, Demetri?” Mathew asked at last.

Demetri put a finger up.

“Patience,” he said.

The waiter approached and set a cold, frothy glass of beer beneath Mathew’s nose. He then centered a small glass of red wine before Demetri, who nodded his approval.

“Thank you,” he said.

The waiter gave a slight bow and walked away.

“Please drink,” Demetri said to Mathew, as he lifted his glass of wine. “But, do savor it, if you understand my meaning.”

Mathew looked down at the glass of beer. Cold and amber, condensation bleeding from the glass.

“Is this some kind of test?” he asked. “Because, if so, I’m not going to pass.”

Demetri smiled a little.

“No, of course not,” he said. “You are free to drink. Just the one, though.”

Mathew looked down at the glass and turned it slightly.

“Alright.”

He lifted it up in his hands and claimed a small sip.

“Not, bad.”

He set the glass down on the table.

“So,” he said. “How was your day?”

Demetri chuckled.

“Still the same Mathew. You have no idea how pleased I am to have found you again.”

The waiter approached once more, this time with a steaming tray of plates. He slid a very ordinary-looking bowl of pasta primavera under Mathew’s nose. Then, he placed a steamed fish filet before Demetri. Mathew took up a fork and stirred his pasta.

“Kind of disappointed,” he said. “I’m not gonna lie.”

He forked a portion into his mouth, the flavor enlivening his senses, as if it were infused with a drug.

“Never mind,” he said, as he took another bite. He looked up at Demetri. “Just the fish, huh?”

Demetri placed his napkin in his lap.

“Yes.”

They ate in silence, the candle painting the wall with apricot light.

At last, Mathew stopped eating and leaned back in his chair.

“Alright, Demetri. Enough of this. Get to the fucking point.”

Demetri chewed his fish and then sipped his wine.

“The point. Yes, we must get to the point.”

He set his fork on his plate. He withdrew a cigar from his jacket.

“First, I would like to entertain you with a story, if I may,” he said. “We have much to do this evening, so I will keep it brief.”

He withdrew a sleek metallic lighter and brought the cigar to life, the smoke infesting the room, like a spirit unconfined.

“When I was a young boy, I lived in the streets among other young boys. All of us without families. All of us subsisting off the charity of others.”

He brought his cigar to his lips and sucked at it slowly. Then, he withdrew it and seeded the air with a thick white smog.

“In this town, where honest men sold fruit in little wooden stands, or wares in makeshift shops, or liquors in dark taverns, there was also a dishonest man. His name was Miguel Ángel Rodríguez, but everyone called him El Verdad, or “The Truth,” in English.

“In that town and in many others, El Verdad was legendary as much for his many acts of charity as for his many foul deeds, which I can assure you were indeed many and most foul. Yet, it was El Verdad who sustained the town, which had no real economy. An artificial place with no organic future. Indeed, without El Verdad, the place would have dried up to nothing within months maybe. Certainly, a year.

He paused for a moment to take a negligible sip of wine.

“Why would he sustain it, you may ask? To support his ambitions, most certainly. For sentimental reasons? Impossible.”

He pursed his lips and nodded, as if to agree with himself.

“Also, in this town was a man named José Flores.” He pointed a finger at Mathew. “This was a great man. A much greater man than El Verdad. At least, in terms of honor and honesty and dignity.” He turned his hand over. “If you value these things, then you would regard José Flores favorably. And El Verdad, poorly.”

He sucked at his cigar, eyes looking small and dark behind a thick cloud of white smog.

“To me and the town’s other street children, José Flores was a father of sorts. Appearing sometimes with cheese and tortillas and sometimes with vegetables and sometimes with clothing and shoes. But, never with money.

“It was El Verdad who appeared with this. Not for charity’s sake, but in exchange for service. Perhaps to carry narcotics from someplace to another. Or to follow a person of interest. Or to steal a man’s wallet to lead him into an ambush of gunfire. Or to slow the policía, or to carry satchels of money to the policía. Always a service. Never benevolence. And, so it went for a time.

“And, like the children, the honest men of the town served El Verdad. For money? Out of fear? What difference does it make? None at all.”

He smoked again and then crushed the cigar dead within a black plastic ashtray, which seemed far too ordinary for such a

place.

“So, all the town’s people, the children of the streets, the honest men and honest women. All in the service of El Verdad. But, never José Flores. This was a man with dignity. With principles. But, far more consequential, a man with no wife and no children. For if he had been blessed with any of these, his compliance would have been certain.”

He paused for a moment and drew air through his nostrils. Then, he crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair.

“Like all men of fear and cruelty, El Verdad worked within limits. Make a man tell you everything he knows? Torture, blackmail, simple threats. Make him do things against his nature? Some men would take their own lives instead. So, what then? Where is the button that makes a man like José Flores compliant?”

He furrowed his brows and looked deep into Mathew’s eyes.

“May I ask you, Mathew, what would a person do to keep a loved one safe?”

Mathew shrugged.

“Whatever it took I suppose.”

Demetri nodded.

“Yes. This is correct. He would do most anything, I can assure you. But, what if a man has no loved ones? Torture and threats? These have limits. And, this was José Flores’ power.”

The waiter approached with two glasses of water, and Demetri gestured him away.

“Why did El Verdad even care to control this man? Why not ignore him or kill him? I do not know why El Verdad valued this man’s compliance. There seemed no tangible gain. Why El Verdad would care either way? Perhaps it was merely an irritation. Perhaps it was for sport. Perhaps it was to make an example.

“Whatever his reasons, El Verdad sought to conquer the will of José Flores, not through fear or torture, but by

leveraging the very qualities of the man. And, so he began to slaughter the children of the streets. And, he did not stop until he had won José Flores' compliance. For what end, who can say? Perhaps for no end at all. It does not matter now. Only the lesson. That is what endures.”

Demetri pointed his extinguished cigar toward Mathew.

“By fortune alone, I survived, but through this event, sentiment revealed her true face to me: A genetic frailty and nothing more. A button to bring a person under complete control.”

At last, Mathew took up the glass of beer and cut it in half with one swallow.

“What’s the point?” he asked, as he wiped the wet from his mouth.

Demetri shrugged.

“The point is that there is nothing wrong with you.”

Mathew set the glass down and leaned back in his chair.

“What do you mean?”

Demetri smiled.

“Come, Mathew, I know everything about you. I know how your mind functions. I know that you do not feel as others do. I know you cannot. Despite your best efforts. Despite your pretensions. Your hopes, your wishes. None of it can change what you are.”

Mathew looked down at his beer.

“It’s alright,” Demetri continued. “The ways of others. Their attachments coded within their DNA. Genetic frailties and nothing more. Love, sentimentality, attachment. They are the enduring fragments of the antiquated man. Hereditary ties to the hunters and gatherers of old. The genetic traits of ancient people who lived by ancient means upon an ancient landscape, where security and sustenance could not be found alone.”

He lifted his glass and sipped his wine.



“For food, the ancient man needed his another, for protection, the same. And to seal the bond, empathy and attachment, and for those who did not develop such genes, extinction. Their genetic tendencies were washed away. For the ancient world was not a world for loners, but for creatures with a craving for company. A mysterious and involuntary craving, for it was rooted within the blueprints of their minds.”

Mathew reached forward and took up the glass of beer. He took a Demetri-sized sip.

“So, people don’t need people anymore? Is that your point?”

Demetri smiled.

“People still need people, of course, but this is recognized intellectually, not just as some impulse.” He turned over his hand, as if to make an allowance. “Or, I should say that this is the way it should be. The way it is at the highest level of humanity. The insignificants continue as before. Clinging to ancient constructs. It is so, because they have no choice. It is a path they must walk; the only path they have. It is written in their DNA. Their impulses, their desires. They could not resist them any more than a cat, the twitch of a string. It is their substance. It is all the substance they have or could ever have.”

Mathew took another drink.

“Most people would say that relationships give meaning to life,” Mathew said. “That there is no meaning without them.”

Demetri lit a fresh cigar, the smoke dancing upward in the dim light, like a delicate string of white ribbon.

“Have you felt it?” he asked. “This lacking? This need for relationships? For attachment? Your entire life, drifting from place to place. Something missing. Something inside you. An empty space perhaps? A God-shaped hole? A hole in the shape of a woman? A wife? A child, perhaps? Or have you felt no such hole? Have you felt instead the lack of the hole? And a shame for this lack. Perhaps that is your problem. You feel you should want these things. Yet you do not. You know that

others do, and you do not. And this makes you unlike others. A freak. An abomination.”

He moved his cigar over the ash tray and gave it a tap.

“Or perhaps it means you are exceptional.” He leaned back in his chair and shrugged. “Such debate is futile. For it isn’t our words and thoughts that determine these things. It is of course our actions. Perhaps you truly are an abomination. This is not for me to say. If your condition is indeed nature’s error, then you will do your damage and then perish, like so many others before you. If it is nature’s gift, you will thrive. This is evolution’s way. Everything’s existence is justified by the fact that it exists. It cannot be condemned if it exists. A weed, a squirrel, a tape worm, a virus. Its existence proves its viability and, therefore, its worth.”

Mathew stirred his food with his fork.

“So, I’m a tape worm? Is that what you’re trying to say, Demetri?”

Demetri smiled a little.

“No, Mathew. You’re a drunk who has no purpose.”

He smoked from his cigar and let the smoke trickle out from the corner of his mouth.

“This is the true reason for your self-loathing. Not some desire to be like everyone else. Must you want what they want? Love what they love? Ridiculous.”

Mathew watched his food, his mind considering Demetri’s words.

“In a world of misfits,” Demetri continued, “it is the normal man who is abnormal. And, this world, Mathew, it is a collection of misfits. Nothing more. There is no normal. No abnormal. Only strength or weakness. Purpose or no purpose.”

He crushed out his cigar and dropped it in the ashtray. He leaned forward into the light and folded his hands.

“You are strong, but you have no purpose. I want to give you the purpose you desire. The purpose you are meant to have.”

Mathew leaned over his plate and forked pasta into his mouth.

“How?” he said through a full mouth.

Demetri sat back and crossed his legs.

“Rejoin the Project.”

Mathew stopped eating and looked up.

“Not as before,” said Demetri, his hand raised as if to fend off an attack. “In a whole new capacity.”

Mathew took another bite.

“Doing what?”

Demetri smiled.

“A lot has happened since we last met. We’ve made great strides with the serum that gave you your gift. Now there is Mr. Heinrich, who you’ve met, of course. But there are also nine others. Nine men and women, like you, who have responded quite well to the injections. In addition to surviving, they acquired gifts. Some quite astonishing, in fact.”

Mathew scratched his head.

“How many did you have to kill to get to nine?”

“Oh, thousands,” said Demetri. “It takes very rare genetic tendencies to survive the serum. But, those who do almost always develop a gift as they recover. It is both remarkable and terrifying. The wait, that is. You sit and you wait. You hope it is something useful.” He pointed his cigar at Mathew. “But, not too useful.”

Mathew set his fork down on his plate.

“Who would volunteer for something that risky?” asked Mathew.

Demetri shook his head.

“No sane person of course.”

“Then, where did you get thousands of people?” asked Mathew.

“The same place we got you,” said Demetri. “Prisons. Prisons from all over the world. There are many governments who are happy to sell off the congestion in their prisons. Those who aren’t can be persuaded quite easily. It is only a matter of leverage. Just like everything else.”

Mathew pushed his plate away and glanced at his empty glass.

“I’ll take another drink, if that’s possible.”

Demetri gave a little smile.

“In time, all things could be possible,” he said. “But, not yet. I prefer you this way right now. Able and clear of mind.” He extinguished his cigar and stood. “Follow me now. I have something to show you.”

Mathew stood, and Demetri led him from the room, the soldiers following closely behind. They walked another red-carpeted hallway with flawless black marble walls that shined not at all beneath the dull overhead lights. As they walked, the hallway curved drastically to the right, so as to seriously limit their line of sight. And, every few yards, there would appear a thin steel door with no knobs or levers of any kind. Mathew eyed each of these doors with great curiosity.

“Where do these go?” he asked at last.

Demetri shrugged.

“I do not know to be honest,” he said. “Like you, I know only what I need to know. If I require additional information to perform my job more effectively, I will receive it. If I haven’t received it, I don’t need it. This the way of things here.”

Mathew glanced at one of the doors as they passed.

“You’re not curious?”

Demetri smiled at this.

“In life, there are always things unknown. Sometimes it is a great gift to uncover the truth. Other times, it is a great tragedy. Will the truth bring burden or joy? No one can say until after the truth is known, and sometimes time turns joy to burden and burden to joy.”

They continued walking, the red carpet squishing beneath their shoes. After some time, two of the soldiers slowed and took positions against the wall, their faces live and aware, as if an imminent threat lurked invisibly about them. At last they stopped before one of the steel doors, which looked every bit like all the others.

“Curiosity can bring considerable benefit in the right circumstances,” Demetri said, as he slapped his palm against the door. “But, the cemeteries are filled with curious people. So, there is this to consider, also.”

After a few seconds, the door shot up from the ground, revealing another little hallway that ended before yet another steel door.

“After you,” Demetri said.

Mathew entered, followed by Demetri and two hard-looking soldiers who seemed to be cut from granite. The men stood quietly, while the door closed behind them. Mathew approached the second steel door.

“Well?” he asked, but no one acknowledged him.

In an instant, the door and wall raced upward, as the floor descended. Mathew’s knees buckled as he tried to gather himself.

“Jesus,” he said. “Thanks for the warning.”

Seconds later they came to a stop. Mathew clutched his stomach and looked around. There was a black, glass door on one end and a steel wall on the other. Demetri approached the glass door and tapped a glowing keypad, which turned from red to green with a thoughtful little clink that seemed like something from a wind chime.

“This way,” he said, as the door opened.

Mathew and the two soldiers followed Demetri through a long hallway of dark glass, which took in the images of the men and gave them back disproportionately, transforming their arms and legs into freakish, elongated limbs, and their heads into little bulbs the size of apples.

“What’s behind that glass?” asked Mathew, but no one answered.

They walked a while further, and then Demetri stopped.

“Alright, I think that’s far enough,” he said without turning.

A soldier took hold of Mathew’s arms and held tightly.

“Just relax,” said Demetri. “This is just protocol.”

Mathew struggled against the soldier, but the man’s grip was certain.

“Let me go,” he said.

The other soldier approached, something small and black in his hands.

“Stop,” said Mathew, as he struggled beneath what seemed like two arms of lead.

The soldier glanced back at Demetri, who gave an affirming nod. Then, the soldier immediately froze.

Demetri put his hands in his pocket.

“Now, now, Mathew,” he said. “There are three of us here. Do you think that is a coincidence?”

The other soldier also stopped moving, and Mathew slipped from his arms. He stumbled backward and looked down the hallway, the black glass throwing off strange reflections to create an illusion of great distance. Demetri eyed Mathew, while the soldiers stood stiffly, like supple mannequins of flesh and bone.

“Mathew,” Demetri said. “Please calm yourself.

He withdrew his hands from his pocket and approached the soldier. He plucked the black object from the frozen man’s hands and held it out in his palm.

“It is merely a hood,” he said with an amused little smile.

He tossed it to Mathew, who caught it with one hand.

“Please, put it on,” said Demetri. “You’re going to have to trust me.”

Mathew eyed the hood.

“What’s the point?” he said, as he stepped backward. “I couldn’t find my way back here in a million years. I have no idea where we are.”

Demetri shrugged.

“It is merely protocol.” He made a gesture toward the soldiers. “Are you quite finished?”

Mathew grimaced a little, and the soldiers collapsed to the floor, their gaping mouths sucking air, as if they had just broken up from coffins.

“Sorry,” Mathew said.

One of the men vomited, while the other climbed to his feet, his eyes looking dazzled, as if he were concussed. Demetri stood before him and snapped his fingers.

“Remember the rehearsals,” he said. “Fixate.”

The soldier stepped back and lifted his index finger. He stared at it for a moment. Then, he lowered his hand and nodded toward Demetri. A few feet over, the other soldier was doing the same above a puddle of murky bile.

“Are we ready?” asked Demetri.

The two soldiers nodded.

“Alright,” he looked at Mathew. “Please, if you will. We need to stay on schedule.”

Mathew looked around.

“I guess there’s no choice.”

Demetri shrugged.

“There is always a choice.”

Mathew swallowed the void in his throat and pulled the hood over his head.

## CHAPTER 14

Claire sat in a little room, waiting for the nurse to return. In the adjacent room, she could hear a man coughing, while someone else, a doctor perhaps, spoke in a dry, monotone voice.

After a while, she stood and went through the drawers, collecting whatever medical supplies she could find. When her pockets were full, she sat and folded her hands upon her lap, a look of false innocence on her face.

At last, the door opened, and the nurse appeared, her face appointed with a bright little smile.

“He’ll see you,” she said.

Claire stood up and put a hand over her forehead.

“Thank you so much.”

The nurse nodded.

“It may be a while. Like an hour or so.”

Claire nodded.

“That’s fine. Thank you again.”

The nurse nodded, and Claire followed her back into the waiting area, where the little old couple sat all alone amid a room of empty chairs.

”Mila?” she called out, as a coldness trickled through the center of her chest.

The old couple watched her with noticeable concern.

“She went outside,” said the woman.

“Oh,” Claire said, her body relaxing some. “Ok, thank you.”

“Yes, she left with a man,” said the woman. “I assumed it was her father.”



Claire 's face lit up with terror.

“I mean, we both thought—” said the old woman, as she looked at her husband, who put his hands up in surrender.

“I didn't see it.”

Claire turned toward the door.

“Where did they go?” she asked. “Did you see?”

The old woman struggled to her feet.

“We'll help you look.”

Claire turned toward them, her eyes wide with both fear and fury.

“Where did they go? Did you see? Did they go left or right? Where did they go? You must have seen something?”

The woman stepped backward and plopped down as the seat undercut her knees.

“I, I think they went left.”

Claire turned and raced toward the door, the receptionist rising from her chair.

“Ma'am, wait,” but before she could finish, three police officers walked into the office.

Claire slowed her steps as they entered.

“Excuse me,” she said, as she moved forward.

“Hold on,” said one of the cops, his hand raised casually. “We need to see some ID.”

Claire stood straight, her eyes fixed on the door behind them.

“Move.”

One of the officers withdrew his Taser.

“Alright, now,” he said. “We're gonna need you to turn and put your hands behind your back.”

The old couple watched through terrified eyes, as Claire approached the officer.

“I don’t have time for this,” she said.

The cop smiled a little as he stepped forward to meet her.

“Please, ma’am, this doesn’t need to be—”

His words fell silent, as she tapped him aside with the back of her hand, his body cartwheeling across the tile floor. The other officers reached for their guns, but she was already gone, the walls ejecting pictures, magazines flying into the air.

“What in the hell?” one of the cops said softly, his gun rattling within his shaky hands.

Outside, idling cars infested the roadway, like a great mass of logs in a stagnant river. Claire looked left and right, eyes darting about.

In the distance, through the horde of pedestrians, behind a man with a hot dog cart, she saw them: A single agent banging shoulders with the mob, his rough grip yanking Mila along.

As they turned a corner, the agent looked back at Claire for only a moment. Then, he gave Mila a hard tug, and they were gone.

Claire gave chase, bystanders whipping their heads around in amazement, minds afflicted by terror and awe.

In seconds, she had cleared the block, rounding the corner with a precise and sudden turn that brought her face-to-face with a young couple, leisurely strolling the city walk. So as not to pulverize them, Claire turned to narrow herself, slipping between them with a nimble movement that left both man and woman in disbelief.

Up ahead, she saw the agent pushing Mila forward, the man’s head whipping back to assess her whereabouts. When he saw her coming, the agent stopped before a closed restaurant. He tightened his grip around Mila’s arm and jabbed the locked door open with a blow from his booted foot. In they went, closing the door behind.

As Claire closed the distance, astonished drivers slowed their vehicles to observe her movements through wide,

unblinking eyes. At last, she reached the restaurant, forcing the door off its hinges with a swift swipe of her hand.

She surveyed the interior, most of its contents concealed by a curtain of shadows. At the far end of the restaurant, the wood floor creaked beneath the weight of a foot. Claire turned toward the noise, and when she did, she saw a shadowy figure holding an RPG.

The shadow squeezed the trigger, and a deafening roar seized the air, the space around him made luminous for an instant by the weapon's fiery discharge.

Flames engulfed the entryway, as the blast smashed into her chest, its force somersaulting her outward and into the street. Stunned drivers veered as her body flipped before them and into the road, cars crashing against others, a calamity of metal and glass.

The agent rushed up to the ruined doorway and looked out at the wreckage. At least a dozen vehicles littered the road, front ends collapsed in on themselves, airbags deployed. As drivers suppressed bleeding wounds, the agent cupped his hand over his eyes and peered through all the smoke. Somewhere within, he saw her rise up amid the wreckage, eyes throwing hate, clothing nearly scorched away.

The agent raised his weapon for another try, but before he could fire, a car soared over the hill and bore down on her position.

Claire's head spun around in time to see the car's front end closing in. As the driver realized the situation, he jammed his foot against the brake. But the vehicle slowed little before crushing itself against the figure before it.

All sound seemed to vanish for an instant, and then the air detonated with a savage crack, as if the sky itself had been broken in two. The agent watched as Claire braced herself against the impact, her feet sliding backward against the ground, as her body split the car in half.

Onlookers watched with amazement and then horror, hands clutching their heads, lips murmuring silent messages to

their concussed brains. Claire stood among the smoke and fumes and jags of metal, her eyes affixed to the restaurant, which was now fully ablaze.

People gasped as she surged toward the burning structure, leaping over torn strips of metal and flickering little fires. As she approached, dark black smoke began bellowing from the entryway, which was now a charred hole at the base of the building.

She rushed inside, her body engulfed by the foul smog. Within the structure, flakelets of burnt clothing wafted upon the air, like a spoiled snowfall in some gray nuclear beyond. Through the black gloom, she saw that the room was empty, and she saw the back exit, where the agent must have fled.

Across the room she dashed, flicking with the backs of her hands, large oak tables from her path. She sprinted through the exit and poured out into a narrow alley, the force of her movements drawing out smoke in her wake.

She looked left and then right but saw only barren cobblestone paths. Countless little pings filled the air, as bullets tapped the ground. She looked up to see a half-dozen men lining the rooftops, machine guns launching round after round at her inexplicable flesh.

She flinched from habit only, and then leapt up onto one of the buildings, fingernails digging deep into mortar between the bricks. Like an enormous insect, she climbed the structure, her little hands precisely maneuvering over each dull red brick.

Soon, she was atop the building, fists balled like fleshy little hammers. The men fired wildly, each wide-eyed and stricken by a panicked consternation. One by one, she plucked every last man from the rooftop and flung him over the edge, all of their eyes alight with horror, hands and legs swimming in the air. Shriill howls filled the alley as they plunged, and then everything went silent, save for the crackling of fire, which fed greedily on the restaurant's bowels.

As a distant bloom of sirens swelled on the horizon, she surveyed the city, her eyes auditing everything with a single glance. Two blocks over, another agent raced along the edge of

the street, while dragging Mila by the arm with much difficulty. A few blocks ahead of him, a caravan of black SUVs moved in their direction, the rapid pace of the vehicles unaffected by traffic lights and seemingly all else.

As he ran, the agent stumbled, and Claire saw Mila break free for a moment, her footsteps pattering the pavement as she stumbled from his grasping fingers. The girl made it a few steps before the man knocked her in the head with a heavy fist, and this loosened a fury in Claire that was bright as white and perfectly raw.

The adjacent building stood several yards away, and Claire vaulted the gap with little effort. From there, she let herself fall to the street, her shoes touching down on the sidewalk without noise, as if she had hopped off a little stool onto bare feet. A group of pedestrians flinched at the sighting, their jaws slackened by disbelief. While she straightened before them, they backed away, as if threatened by some great contaminant, poison enough to rot their very bones. Then, she was gone, the people's heads whipping to trace her movements and doubting very much what their eyes had given them.

Two blocks over, the agent yanked the child across a crowded plaza, a pistol in his hand waving people out of the way. Soon, he heard the thundering sound of motors swell, and then the black SUVs appeared from around the corner. Traffic had knotted on the street before the vehicles, so all six swerved onto the sidewalk, parking meters falling like dominoes before them.

People shrieked as the SUVs invaded the plaza and formed a circle around the agent and child. In an instant, a dozen armed men fled the vehicles and assumed strategic positions, their weapons hot and aimed in all directions.

“Give her to me,” screamed one of the men, his whiskered jaw twitching beneath the skin, gloved hands clutching at the young girl's limbs.

The agent forced the child toward the man, who gathered her up like a carnivorous plant. He pulled her within his vehicle and shut the door, as gunfire erupted all around them.

“Go, go go!” the man yelled, and the driver mashed his shoe against the accelerator.

The vehicle lunged forward and then jerked to a stop, as if its rear axle had been tethered to a short length of chain. The scent of sizzling rubber filled the air and the vehicle fishtailed for a moment. Then, driver, agent and child all lurched forward, as the rear of the SUV elevated several feet.

“Go!” said the agent in the backseat, his face panicked and pale.

The driver looked in his rearview mirror.

“I can’t.”

Outside, Claire held the vehicle’s bumper with one hand, while the agents peppered her with round after round. Sharp metallic pings blended with screams and gunfire, as people fled the bullets, which flattened against her flesh and ricocheted in all directions.

“Put it in all fours!” yelled the agent from the back seat.

The driver shifted into four-wheel drive and gunned the accelerator. The vehicle spasmed as the front tires bit into the pavement. Then, the bumper tore away, and they were free.

“Go, go, go!”

The driver levered the vehicle out of four-wheel drive, and the transmission made an awful racket. He gunned the engine, and an overwhelming smell surged up their nostrils.

“I don’t think we’re going to make it far,” said the driver.

“Just go,” said the agent from the backseat. “Drive as far as you can.”

As they raced forward, he strengthened his grip around the child and put his cellphone to his ear.

“We’ve got her.”

Instructions came from the other end of the line, and he lowered the phone to check the rearview mirror.

“I can’t tell,” he said. “It’s too far.”

As he peered through the smoke and distance, the child bit into his arm, blood flooding her mouth like a hot salty brine. The agent screamed obscenities and dropped the phone on the floor. While the driver swerved around traffic, the agent beat at the girl's head, until she fell unconscious and her jaw went slack. He shoved her to the other side of the vehicle and cradled his arm like a ruined prize.

“You alright?” asked the driver.

“Just drive,” he said, as he retrieved his phone from the floor.

Behind them, Claire wielded the bumper like a great sword, chopping down agents like brittle stocks of corn until the gunfire fell silent and the plaza was red with blood.

Bewildered witnesses looked out from windows with horrified expressions, while the sound of sirens moved ever closer. Ahead, Claire could see the gimpy SUV ambling forward, a great cloud of white smoke belching upward from its hood. She dropped the bumper and ran, her small swift feet tapping the pavement, as buildings and vehicles washed by in great blurs.

“We're not going to make it,” said the driver, as he watched the figure take on weight in his rearview mirror.

“Just keep going,” said the agent from the backseat.” He lifted his cellphone to his ear. “We need support! We need it right now!”

As if mobilized by his very words, two pilotless aircraft appeared from overhead and discharged their payloads behind the fleeing vehicle.

A tremendous burst of light seared the air, as the missiles detonated against the ground. The earth trembled, and fire raced in all directions, people screaming, street fragments tearing awkward tunnels in stone walls.

Overhead, the drones circled around to survey the impact through great volumes of black smoke, which billowed upward in swirling tangles from the great scorch below. Through their cameras, the planes recorded no movement.

And then, from beneath a sizable quantity of rubble, the target emerged, her skin blackened with soot, but damaged, not at all.

Without delay, the drones unleashed another barrage, but when the missiles seized the earth, she was already gone.

Up ahead, the SUV rambled on, its engine strained to the limit. At last, the vehicle slowed and then quit altogether.

“Wait,” said the agent from the backseat, as the driver reached to open his door.

A half-dozen police cars sped past on their way to the spectacle.

“Ok, let’s go.”

He looked at the girl, now awake and clutching a lump on her head. He put the gun to her face.

“No more trouble, you understand?”

She nodded, and they fled the vehicle, the three quickly absorbed by the hoard of people fleeing the area.

A block away, Claire raced through an alley, her clothes burned to tatters and falling away with every step. Ahead, a homeless man lay curled within a closed entryway, his eyes flaring at the sight of the naked woman approaching. She stopped before him, all black and steaming. Then, she scaled the building, while he finished his bottle of wine.

From atop the structure, she scanned the surrounding area, her eyes parsing bodies and faces, like a machine designed specifically for the task. Somewhere in the massive flow of humanity, she saw them: the two agents shoving people out of their path and dragging Mila behind them.

A group of curious bystanders had gathered along the street, their faces eager to know the delightful oddity that had broken up their day. With brazen force, the agents pushed through them and entered an office building.

Without thinking, Claire leapt from the rooftop, her body outstretched against the air and then bouncing hard against the



street. Someone screamed as she hit the pavement, and then several more joined in when she found her feet.

She ran, her great strides consuming the distance, the traffic and people and buildings washing by in a blur.

She reached the office building and pushed through the door, the glass exploding around her in a fine puff of glittering fragments. Well-attired business men and women shrieked at the thunderous intrusion, their bodies flinching and then crouching to the floor. Claire stepped forward and gathered up a man by the front of his shirt.

“The girl and the two men, where did they go?”

Indecipherable babble trickled from between this man’s lips, as he studied the nude woman with astonished fear.

“Where are they?” she yelled again, shaking his body about.

“The elevators,” said a woman huddled against a wall. “I saw them go to the elevators.”

Claire flung the man aside and raced through the lobby. She found the elevators and stood before them. She waited, her eyes assessing each one’s whereabouts by the green digits above the sealed metallic doors. As she watched, one of the elevators popped open to reveal three men in suits. They gasped at the naked woman before them, her chest heaving with every breath, a silent rage confined within her stinging glare. Amid their little box, the three men stood without speaking, one of them jamming the button to beg the doors shut. At last the doors flashed out from their hiding places and the world made sense again.

Claire focused on the other two elevators, one descending from the ninth floor, the other nearing the roof. She raced over to the stairs and yanked the door from its hinges. Through and up she went, scaling entire flights with only the occasional step. In the stairwell above, a frightened woman cried out and flattened herself against a wall, as Claire rushed past with a gusty scent of soot and sweat.

As she neared the roof, Claire heard the churning roar of helicopter rotors chopping through air. She scaled the final two flights of stairs and breached the steel door, which burst outward like an enormous chunk of shrapnel, wrecking the body of an agent and carrying him over the edge.

“Go, go,” said the other agent, as the helicopter ferried Mila upward, her little voice carried off by all the swirling wind.

As the helicopter climbed, Claire approached the other agent, plucking him up by the crown of his head and tossing him to the streets below. The helicopter pilot absorbed this happening with mute terror, the aircraft bobbing under the paralysis of his disbelief. As the aircraft wavered, he retrieved the control stick, but before he could level the helicopter, Claire had launched herself up and onto the landing skid.

“Shoot her!” yelled the pilot to an agent, who was struggling to restrain the child. He released the girl and collected his weapon. He turned to fire, but Claire had already entered the cabin. She yanked the gun, and the agent came with it, his body spilling out into the open air and down to the welcoming earth.

Claire gathered up Mila and looked her over, as if searching for cracks on a fallen vase.

“Are you alright?”

The girl nodded, and they embraced, as the helicopter hovered above the building.

“I’m sorry,” said Claire. “I’m so sorry.”

They held each other a moment longer, the sweating pilot silent in all his observations. At last they parted, and Claire turned to the pilot.

“South,” she said.

And south they went.

## CHAPTER 15

Mathew sucked the stale hot air within his bag of black, the hood's coarse fabric itching his lips with every inhale.

"How much longer?" he asked. Of who? He did not know.

There was a chair beneath him, a smell of disinfectant in the air, and a rhythmic whirring from a place he could not discern.

"Hello?"

An hour later, he still sat, lips growing dry from all the heavy breathing, open eyes throwing out colors amid the nothing black before him.

"Demetri?"

At last, the hood released him, a soldier's hand yanking it off with a sudden jerk that forced his chin in a painful upward motion. He looked around, as the light stabbed his blinking eyes.

"Where are we?" he asked, as the scene crystallized before him.

He and Demetri sat in a small square room with metal walls. Before them, a broad panel of buttons and knobs sat below a wide glass window, which looked into another room filled with men and women in latex attire, a surgical stretcher centered among them.

Mathew rubbed his eyes and stood.

"What are we looking at?"

Demetri slapped him on the back.

"Just wait a moment."

After a few minutes, the door opened, and two soldiers escorted a man into the room at gunpoint.

“Oh, now I get it,” said Mathew, as he stepped toward the glass.

He watched as they forced Len onto the stretcher, his broad face black and swollen, lower lip torn vertically into two flabby hunks. As Len lay back, one of the soldiers held firmly a gun to his face, while the other wrenched his arms into medical restraints. While they worked, Len’s mouth began to move, despite its current deformities.

“What’s he saying?” asked Mathew.

Demetri approached the panel of buttons and turned on the intercom.

“—and you’ll be the first one,” yelled Len, a fine leakage of bloody saliva spilling out the gory breach extending down into his chin. “And then him, and him and her, every last one of you. You’re all dead, when I get free. I’m gonna fuck your corpses and eat your souls.”

Demetri positioned himself behind Mathew.

“He’s quite charming, your friend.”

Mathew chewed his teeth.

“He’ll do it if you let him.”

Demetri nodded.

“If he’s lucky, he’ll get the chance.”

Mathew said nothing, while the lab people placed a mask over Len’s screaming face. As the chemicals funneled in, Len grew deliriously glad, one of the technicians turning the patient’s head to keep drool from seeping into his lungs. A minute later, they removed the mask, and he was their pet.

“Hey, hey, hey,” he murmured to the white-coated beings above him. “This is...this...this is...what is this?”

He began to laugh and one of the lab techs jabbed him with a pointy metal rod.

“Ow!” he yelled. “You bitch! You wanna die?”

She turned to another technician and nodded.

“Let’s proceed,” this man said.

He withdrew a large syringe and approached, while they wiped Len’s skin with alcohol. Then, the lab tech sunk the needle into the flesh of Len’s right arm, and everyone stepped back.

“What did you stick me with?” asked Len through his torn slobbering lips. “What the hell are you doing to me?”

The lab techs flinched at the sound of Len’s shrieking voice, his torso now jerking about the table, as if they had awakened something that wanted out.

“What the hell did you do to me?” he yelled, his mind growing lucid, as adrenaline scorched through his veins.

“Please, try to relax,” said one of the techs, but his words came out like whispers in the wind.

There were soldiers in the room, and they raised their weapons in unison, one turning his head toward his reflection in the two-way glass.

“What should we do?”

Demetri approached the intercom.

“Let it play out.”

He turned to Mathew.

“This must bring back memories,” said Demetri, as he fell in beside Mathew.

Mathew took a step toward the glass, his eyes assessing everything with a cold, ambiguous stare.

“It doesn’t look good,” he said.

Demetri shrugged.

“This means nothing. They all go through it, either way.”

Now, Len’s body grew tense, and his jaw slammed shut. The lab techs took another step back, as the color drained from his skin, only to return in a great flush that turned his body a brilliant red.

“I’m burning up!” he yelled, a clear foam bubbling up and out with his words.

Demetri pointed toward the glass.

“This,” he said. “This is a positive sign, believe it or not. It is by no means a guarantee, but it does suggest he has escaped the rot.”

Mathew watched quietly, as screams traveled the intercom system.

“Kill me!” screeched Len in a shrill voice not his own. “God, kill me, please!”

Demetri eyed Mathew.

“Does it sadden you?” he asked. “To watch him suffer this way?”

“I don’t know,” said Mathew. “I guess. Yes. It bothers me.”

Demetri shook his head.

“I don’t think it does,” he said. “I think you know that it should bother you. That it would bother an ordinary person. But, I don’t think you are bothered. Perhaps you are bothered that it doesn’t bother you, but I think maybe not even that.”

On the other side of the glass, Len convulsed, while the lab technicians stood by, one checking his watch, another suppressing a yawn behind his surgical mask.

Mathew raised his hand and touched the glass.

“If that’s true, then I’m as much a monster as you, I guess.”

Demetri shook his head.

“No,” he said. “This is why you are special.”

He pointed to the glass.

“It is as I said before. If this man is a button, you cannot be truly free.”

Mathew watched quietly, as Len passed out, his body falling still.

Quiet stretched through the room, and Demetri straightened before the glass.

“Now we will see,” he said, as the soldiers raised their guns.

They all waited for something to happen, Len’s chest blooming up and down, his breathing rate slowing with every rise and fall.

“How long will it take?” asked Mathew.

“Not long,” said Demetri.

Moments later, Len’s body began to look different to Mathew, though he could not be sure how. Minutes later, the changes grew more obvious, bruises fading, pimples and moles absorbed by the supple flesh around them. Youth smoothing out all the wrinkles of a hard and vicious life.

“Look,” whispered Mathew.

Demetri nodded.

“I see.”

While they watched, the rip in Len’s lips came together, as if closed by an invisible zipper. Soon, he had hair in the balding areas of his scalp, and the wrinkles under his eyes dissolved, the skin stretching firmly around the bones of his cheeks.

“He made it,” said Mathew.

Demetri approached the intercom.

“Stay alert,” he told the people within the room.

As if aroused by Demetri’s words, Len awakened, his eyes springing open, the whites flawless as new snow.

“What?” He looked all around. “What is this?”

He tried to lift his arm, but the restraints held.

“I feel...” he murmured. “I feel...”

One of the lab technicians stepped forward, his hands up, as if to calm a feral dog.

“Just relax,” said the man. “You need to relax.”

Len began laughing hysterically.

“This isn’t real,” he said. “This isn’t real.”

The soldiers leveled their weapons at his head.

“Let me go,” he murmured, his arms pulling upward against the restraints. “Let me go!”

One of the lab techs nodded to another, who rushed over and collected a syringe.

“Get the fuck away from me!” screamed Len, as the young woman approached.

“Calm down or we will put you down,” said one of the soldiers.

With great force, Len ripped his arm free, the restraints breaking with a violent snap. He ensnared the lab tech by the throat, the color fleeing her face, the syringe dropping to the floor.

“Let her go!” yelled one of the soldiers, his finger caressing the trigger of his weapon.

“Stop,” said Demetri through the intercom. “Let it play out.”

They all watched, as Len crushed the woman’s wind pipe and dropped her to the floor. The lab technicians stared at their broken workmate, her face looking startled, neck bent all wrong. They fled their positions and cowered behind the soldiers, as Len reached for the other restraint and tore it free with a simple tug.

He stood and swelled before them, his body now scarless and supple. He looked at his tattoos, which flaked away like dust.

“Let me out,” he said, his youthful face now unrecognizable to Mathew.

Demetri leaned toward the intercom.

“Kneecaps.”



One of the soldiers lowered his weapon and fired into Len's leg. Screams stung their ears, as Len collapsed to the ground, his hands clutching the wound, blood spurting out from between his fingers.

"You fuckers!" yelled Len, as he rolled around on the floor. "I'll—"

He stopped talking, his eyes growing wide, face breaking out with sweat. He released his knee and brought both hands to his temples. He screamed.

"What's happening?" asked Mathew.

Demetri approached the intercom. "Please vacate the room."

A lab tech tapped a panel on the wall, and the doors shot open. One by one, they all fled, the lab people holding their ears against the screaming, the soldiers backing out with their weapons raised.

"No," said Len. "Don't leave."

As Mathew watched, Len's flesh darkened, as if he were a dead animal festering on a sun-soaked highway.

"Come back," Len yelled, as his body turned rigid beneath the burning surgical lights. "Please, come back."

Violent seizures came next, followed by low whimpers and then more seizures after that.

"Put him down," said Mathew, as he collected a handful of Demetri's sleeve. "If you can't help him, at least put him down."

Demetri shook his head.

"No," he said. "He could still pull through."

Len let out a garbled cry, and Mathew turned back toward the two-way glass.

"Now," said Demetri. "This is an especially bad sign."

Countless swollen veins pushed outward from beneath Len's blackened skin, like little worms nourishing themselves

from within.

“Ok,” said Mathew. “That’s enough.”

Demetri shook his head.

“There is still a chance.”

Mathew leaned forward and placed a hand against the glass.

“Let him die,” he said. “Just let it end.”

As if he had heard his name, Len raised his head toward the two-way glass. He opened his mouth to say something, but a gush of vomit rushed out and splashed against the immaculate tile floor.

Mathew turned to see that Demetri had triggered the intercom.

“Please continue,” said Demetri. “He can hear you.”

Mathew turned to face Len, but he couldn’t find any words.

“Shut it off,” Mathew said. “Shut it off.”

Demetri shrugged and flipped the switch.

“Why, Mathew? Why does this bother you? Because you feel something for him?” He stretched out a finger toward the festering body on the other side of the glass. “For you, this should be nothing more than a man. A friend perhaps, but just a man. To others, he might be something more. A lover, a husband, a father, a son, an extension of the self in some way. Whatever the case, a weakness to be exploited. A button to be pushed. A button to make the carer run or jump or kill or suffer willingly or make others suffer. It does not matter which. What matters is the existence of the button, which can be used like magic to make impositions that further the pusher’s will or goals. A button that turns good men bad or bad men good. A button that can make someone torture a stranger, murder a president, or even kill another loved one. A button that can do almost anything.”

He pointed toward Mathew.

“That is attachment,” he said. “That is devotion.”

Mathew rubbed his forehead.

“He doesn’t deserve to suffer.”

Demetri chuckled.

“If anyone deserves to suffer, it would be this man.” He shrugged. “Or perhaps it is you who should suffer. Or me. It doesn’t matter. Should is an irrelevant concept.”

He opened his jacket and removed a pistol. He forced a bullet into the chamber and handed it to Mathew.

“You are one decision away from a totally different life,” he said. “One way or another.”

Mathew looked at the pistol for a moment and then snatched it away. He looked at Demetri standing before him.

“Will it fire?” asked Mathew.

Demetri turned his hands over.

“Of course.”

Mathew turned to look into the other side of the glass, where Len flopped about on the cold hard floor, eyes cloudy, skin boiling with sores. Mathew walked away from Demetri and opened the door, two armed soldiers ready to meet him. Demetri gave the men a nod, and they separated to award passage. Mathew walked through them and stood at yet another door. He waited for it to open and then entered the room.

Beneath his feet, Len had begun to melt, his adipose tissue bonding to the floor like a blistering adhesive, invisible strings of pollution rising up and into Mathew’s nose.

“I’m sorry,” said Mathew, as he leveled the gun at Len.

The melting man’s head tilted for a moment, and a cloudy eye sunk its weight into the locus of Mathew’s soul. But if it were capable of discerning a presence within that space, the bullet was faster.

## CHAPTER 16

The sleepy town blushed beneath a new sunrise, the cracked streets coming to life amid the promise of another sweltering day. On one side of the broken cement road, outside a rundown motel, an old Mexican woman forced along a cart of towels and cleaning products, her legs riddled with bulging blue varicose veins.

The old woman settled her cart before one of the motel doors and wrapped her fat knuckles against the flaking orange paint.

“Housekeeping,” she said in a hoarse voice, dripping with accent.

“No,” said someone from within.

The old woman turned and pushed her cart to the next door, her shuffling steps like sandpaper against the long cement walk.

“Housekeeping,” she said, as she knocked the next door.

No one answered.

“Housekeeping,” she said, again.

Silence.

She flipped through a great silver ring of keys until she found the right one. She slipped it into the lock and pushed open the door. Inside, flies tangled together in the air, and beer cans littered the floor. She took a step within, the scent of vomit invading her nostrils, like a disease in search of a supple host. With a great sigh, she turned and gathered items from her cart.

About an hour later, she closed the door behind her, back aching, nostrils burning from chemical disinfectant. She removed her latex gloves and pushed them down into a plastic

trash bag. Then, she took hold of the cart and moved toward the next door.

“Housekeeping,” she said, as she knocked.

“Por favor,” said a voice from within.

The old woman grasped the knob and twisted.

“Esta bien?” she said, as she cracked open the door.

“Sí,” said Claire.

The old woman stepped inside and closed the door behind her. She immediately looked at Mila, her old wrinkled eyes narrowing, head slightly askew. Without speaking, the woman turned and secured the door by both bolt and latch. Claire watched as the woman straightened her posture without turning around.

“What is wrong with the girl?” asked the old woman.

“She’s sick,” said Claire.

“How sick?” asked the old woman.

“I’m not sure,” said Claire.

The old woman turned to look at the girl’s skin.

“Es imposible,” she whispered.

Claire stepped in front of her.

“We’ll decide that.” She put her hands on her hips. “Tell me what you came to say.”

The old woman bowed her head.

“Of course.”

The old woman leaned to the side and looked at Mila.

“Ella no entiende?”

“No,” said Claire.

The old woman nodded.

“Bueno.”

Claire looked at Mila.

“Give us a moment to speak, ok?”

Mila nodded, and the two women spoke in Spanish, no notable expressions to reveal the meaning of their words. After about 15 minutes, they stopped, and the old woman turned toward Mila.

“I wish you well, young miss,” she said. “Remember the impact of your choices.”

With that, she gave a little bow to both Mila and Claire. Then, she unlocked the door and exited the room.

Mila watched as Claire sat down on the bed.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “What did she say?”

Claire rubbed her forehead.

“It’s not good,” said Claire. “Not what I hoped for anyway.”

Mila approached and sat next to Claire.

“What do you mean? What did she say? Tell me what she said.”

Claire put a hand to her forehead and sucked in a breath of air.

“This isn’t going to work,” she said, as she looked at Mila’s battered-looking face. “It just won’t.”

The girl looked up at Claire through large white eyes, which bulged like little bird eggs within her darkened sockets.

“Why not?”

Claire put her hand on Mila’s wrist.

“Because you’re too sick to go where we need to go. You might not even make it if you were completely healthy, to be truthful.”

Mila swallowed.

“Where are we supposed to go? What did she say?”

Claire shook her head and squeezed the girl’s arm.

“It doesn’t matter, Mila. It’s too far, and we need to focus on your health right now.”

Mila shrugged.

“Why can’t you just break into a pharmacy, and get some medicine?”

Claire let go of the girl’s arm and stood.

“Because, I’m not sure what’s causing your symptoms, and we might make it worse.”

Mila looked down at her lap.

“I thought you were a genius or something?”

Claire turned away and rubbed her head.

“Look,” she said. “It’s like I said before. You need all sorts of tests. I need equipment and resources. And, time, Mila. What we need most of all is time. And, we don’t have it.”

She turned back toward the girl.

“Mila, you may have a very serious health problem. I don’t want to scare you, but it’s true. I don’t know for sure, but it is a very real possibility. But what I do know for certain is that there is no way we can continue this journey. It’s not possible. Not under these circumstances, at least.”

Mila looked up, tears welling in her eyes.

“I can make it. I promise. Let’s just keep going, ok?”

Claire sat back down on the bed.

“Listen, Mila. The place we are supposed to go is called, Selva Lacandona. It’s a jungle in the south of Mexico. We’re supposed make our way across the border through the length of Mexico past kidnappers and drug cartels and the police, all of which will have been paid to look for us, I can promise you that. We’re supposed to travel through all of that, over 1500 miles, Mila, to Selva Lacandona, which is a jungle with water that might make you sicker and mosquitoes that spread all kinds of disease.”

She took Mila’s hand.

“Then, if we get there, we are supposed to find a contact who is supposedly going to take us into Guatemala. Mila, it’s ridiculous. There’s no way you survive the trip. You either die on the way, or we get caught or separated. It’s not an option, Mila. We just can’t do it.”

Mila tugged her hand, and Claire let go.

“Are you going to leave me?”

Claire squared her shoulders toward the girl.

“No,” she said. “Absolutely not. I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to think of a way to get you some help. And, then, once you are better, we will figure out what to do next.”

She reached out and lifted Mila’s sinking chin.

“Ok?”

Mila nodded, and the two embraced.

“It’ll be ok,” said Claire. “Try not to worry. Just try to focus on right now.”

They released one another, and Mila rubbed her eyes.

“Claire?”

“Yes.”

“I’m hungry.”

Claire gave a soft smile.

“That’s good,” she said. “You need to eat.”

She stood up from the bed and gathered a handful of change from her bag.

“There’s a vending machine in the laundromat across the street. It’ll have to do for now. When it gets dark, I will go out and get something more substantial. Ok?”

Mila nodded.

“Come here,” said Claire.

Mila stood up and followed Claire to the window.

“Stand back a little.”



Claire pulled the curtain slightly.

“Do you see that nail salon?”

Mila nodded.

“The laundromat is right next to it. It doesn’t have a sign, but it’s there.”

She let the curtain fall back and put her hand on Mila’s shoulder.

“I will be watching this place closely,” she said. “But I don’t want you to watch me through the window. Do you understand?”

Mila nodded.

“Just stay here, and don’t open the door for anyone. Ok?”

Mila nodded.

“Just hurry.”

Claire nodded.

“I will.”

Moments later, Claire trotted across the street in her sunglasses and wig, the traffic sparse at this time of the day . When she reached the other side, she hopped over the curb and assessed her surroundings. A few people walked the sidewalks along the road, and an old rusty pickup truck passed by with a chugging snort. After a few seconds, she turned and made her way into the laundromat.

Inside, a single Mexican woman sat reading, while her clothes churned about in a rattling machine. Claire gave her a quick look, and the woman offered a weak smile.

“Hace mucho calor,” said the woman.

Flies immediately clung to Claire’s sweaty arms.

“Sí,” said Claire.

The woman began reading again.

“Funciona?” asked Claire

The woman glanced at the vending machine, which sat alongside a bulletin board filled with fliers and business cards.

“No sé.”

Claire approached the machine and surveyed the disappointing selection. After a moment, she forced coins into the slot and punched the B and 7. With a dull squeak, the coils came to life and twisted forth a package of peanuts. Claire pushed in the reservoir door and collected her award.

The woman continued reading, as Claire walked back to the entrance and looked at the motel.

“Esperando a alguien?” asked the woman.

Claire turned and gave her a cold look.

“No.”

The woman swallowed hard and lowered her head. As the woman read, Claire returned to the vending machine and fed it quarters until she had a handful of peanuts and pretzels. When she was finished, she turned and rushed toward the door.

“¿Sabes qué hora es?” asked the woman. “Siento molestarte.”

Claire stopped and looked at the clock on the wall, which sat frozen at 3 o'clock.

“No sé,” she said. “Nueve treinta o diez.”

The woman smiled.

“Gracias.”

Claire gave a nod and went outside. She shielded her eyes against the sun and looked around. The sidewalks were empty, and the streets were bare. She clutched the peanuts and pretzels against her chest, as the bright yellow sun beat the pavement. The wind kicked up slightly. A dog barked somewhere far away.

Without hesitating, Claire retreated backward into the laundromat.

“Cómo te llamas?” she asked the woman without looking.

“Andréa,” said the woman, “y usted?”

Claire stood silently, her eyes fixed on the motel across the street.

The woman watched her nervously. Then, after a few moments, she stood up and took a few steps toward a washing machine, before breaking into a full sprint toward the rear of the building.

Claire continued watching the motel, as the woman disappeared out a backdoor. She waited a few moments longer, her breath slow and steady. Then, she stepped outside and trotted across the barren street. Once she reached the outside of the motel room, she stopped and looked the street up and down once more, before slipping inside and shutting the door.

Inside, the room sat empty, the bathroom door closed, faucet running.

“Mila, hurry up. We have to go right now.”

Claire collected their meager belongings and shoved them all into their bag.

“Mila.”

Water trickled behind the door.

“Mila, what’s wrong?”

Claire approached the door and knocked.

“Mila?”

No answer.

Claire took hold of the knob, but it was locked.

“Mila, open the door.”

With a sudden yank, Claire tore the thing from its frame, wood splintering along the doorjamb.

“Oh, god,” she whispered to the empty room.

She turned and raced toward the door, exploding into it and out the other side. As tiny wood particles danced in the air, she looked all about her, the streets empty as before.

“Mila!” she yelled, her voice like a bomb in the ghostly silence.

She ran out into the middle of the street and cupped her hands around her mouth.

“Mila!”

The dog began barking again, its voice cutting deeply within the startling quiet. Then, it fell silent, as the sound of chopping rotors swelled in the distance.

Through tears, Claire watched, as a black helicopter lifted above the buildings and trees.

“Mila!” she yelled, as she began running.

But, in just moments, the helicopter had grown high and small.

Even still, Claire kept chasing, tears streaming down her cheeks. But, after a while, there was nothing left to chase. And, so she stopped and sat down in the middle of the road.

## CHAPTER 17

“And, then there are these people who just want things handed to them,” the senator told the crowd. “Don’t want to earn it like you good folks.”

Boos spread through the hoard of people gathered tightly in the town square, the old, the young, men and women alike. The senator nodded and thrust his finger into the air, his blue eyes twinkling, hair parted neatly to one side.

“They don’t want to pay the price for better lives. They want you to pay the price for them.”

The booing intensified, signs waving madly, little babies crying, screaming faces painted red, white and blue. The senator raised his hands, and a hush fell over the crowd.

“Now, I’m not saying this country ain’t for everyone. Hell, if you were born here, then by God, you’re an American by law.” He made a fist with his right hand and brought it to his chest. “But, if you ain’t willing to work ...”

“Amen, brother!” someone yelled from the crowd.

“If you aim to subsist off the sacrifices of others...”

“Preach it!” yelled an old man with a cap that said Vietnam veteran.

“If you don’t live your life according to the teachings of our Lord and savior...”

“Then get the hell out!” a woman yelled from the back.

The crowd went mad, and the senator smiled.

“Well, sir, I guess she said it for me.”

Minutes later, the senator moved through the crowd, offering sweaty handshakes and wide, practiced smiles. Someone held up a baby, and he gave it a kiss. A man asked for his autograph, and he happily obliged.

“Now you good people don’t forget to vote,” said the senator, as his security team escorted him away. The crowd cheered their assurances, and the senator gave one last down-home smile. He put his thumb into the air and waved goodbye. Then, he entered a long black Lincoln, and a cavalcade of vehicles swept him away.

“I swear,” he told his campaign manager, as he settled back into his seat. “I hate elections. I can’t take another day in one of these shithole towns.”

The campaign manager nodded, as he jotted notes into a ledger.

“That’s it for today, at least.”

The senator rubbed his forehead.

“Well, what else then?”

The campaign manager checked his notes.

“A handful of meetings back at the hotel.”

The senator kicked off his shoes and the air grew stale.

“Jesus,” said the senator. “Who is it this time? Oil people, pharmaceuticals, the fucking Boy Scouts of America?”

The campaign manager cracked his window, and a rush of fresh air wrestled against the odor from the senator’s socks.

“Let’s see here,” he checked his notes. “Bob Franco from BelCo, Ted Michaels from FLW, and... it says here Nathan Windell.” He thumbed through the pages of his ledger. “Hmmm, I don’t have anything here about who he’s with. Do you know...”

The senator’s face had lost all color, and sweat leaked from his every pore.”

“Are you alright, sir?”

The senator swallowed and nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “Let’s just not talk for a while.”

While the senator finished up with Ted Michaels from FLW, Nathan Windell sat quietly in the hotel lobby, his legs crossed, a casual expression on his face. Across the way, he eyed a perky little blond seated at the hotel bar, her long creamy legs crossed in a way that made her look both difficult and delicate. As he studied her curvature, one of the hotel's hospitality people approached and greeted him with a sparkling white smile.

"May I interest you in a shine while you wait?" he asked. "Our shoe polish artisans are the city's finest."

Nathan looked at his shoes.

"What are you trying to say?"

The hospitality person flashed a look of terror.

"Oh, sir, please do not misunderstand me. I did not mean that you needed a shine. I only suggested it, because it is one of the hotel's more popular luxuries.

"I'm just messing with you," said Nathan, as he looked around the lobby.

The hospitality person relaxed.

"Oh, of course, sir."

Nathan saw the senator's campaign manager approaching from across the room.

"You can go now."

The hospitality person gave a slight bow.

"Yes sir, of course."

He turned to leave, and the campaign manager quickly took his place.

"I'm very sorry to keep you waiting," he said. "The senator is a very busy man, these days."

Nathan stood.

“I’m sure he is.”

The campaign manager looked him over.

“Please, follow me.”

They left the lobby and walked a long hallway, a lush wine-colored carpet hushing the impact of their shoes.

“I’m sorry, who are you with?” asked the campaign manager. “I don’t have it in my notes.”

Nathan saw the conference room ahead, the senator standing at the door, his face straining to hold an impossibly affable grin.

“Don’t worry about it,” Nathan said, as he picked up his pace.

The campaign manager stopped and watched, as Nathan shook the senator’s hand and entered the room. The campaign manager mouthed something to the senator, who silenced him with a raised hand. Then, he followed Nathan into the meeting room and levered the window shades to conceal the happenings within.

As Nathan took a seat at the long conference table, the senator stared at the shut window shades, his mind calling up courage, like a man coaxing forth a quivering, beaten dog.

“Well, this is somewhat unexpected,” he said, as he turned to face Nathan. “What can I do for you?”

Nathan waited while the senator took a seat on the other side of the table.

“Well, just a few things really,” he said. “Nothing that will take up too much time.”

He folded his hands on the table before him, and the senator gave a nod.

“Okay, no problem,” he said.

They sat quietly for what seemed like a long time, Nathan’s intentions cloaked within an indecipherable expression. At last, the senator cleared his throat.



“Listen,” he said. “Your people don’t have nothing to worry about. My vote is for the amendment. I got your message loud and clear. You won’t have any trouble from me, I can assure you.”

Nathan pointed over to a tray, which held a pitcher of water and several glasses.

“Do you mind?”

The senator jumped out of his seat.

“Of course,” he said. “I’m very sorry.”

He rushed over and collected the tray, the glasses rattling atop his jittery hands.

“Here you go,” he said. “Sorry about that.”

Nathan nodded.

“Thank you.”

He took a glass and filled it. He raised it to his lips and took four big swallows. He set the glass on the table and dried his mouth with his sleeve.

“Well, we will actually need you to vote down the amendment.”

He waited for the senator to digest his words.

“Well, wait now,” said the senator. “I’m sorry, but all this time, I was told I needed to be supportive of the amendment.” He pushed his chair back and scratched his jaw. “Now, I’ve been traveling around propping this thing up. If I were to change course midstream. Well, then, I’m bound to lose this here election coming up.”

Nathan nodded.

“Yes, I understand.”

The senator waited for more, but nothing came. He shook his head and slapped his hand against the table.

“Now hold on here,” he said. “I thought you wanted this damn amendment?”

Nathan nodded.

“Yes,” Nathan said. “That’s right.”

He reached inside his jacket, and the senator flinched a little. Nathan gave a polite smile and withdrew an envelope. The senator watched as he laid it flat upon the table.

“I’m sorry for the confusion,” said Nathan. “We do want the amendment, but we need to avoid the appearance of...” He thought for a moment. “...solidarity, if you will.”

The senator removed a handkerchief and mopped the sweat from his forehead.

“Listen,” he said. “I’ll lose this election for sure if I change my stance on this. It can’t be done. I’m sorry, it just can’t.”

Nathan nodded.

“I understand your concern,” he said. “But, we’re willing to accept this outcome.”

The senator looked at him through bewildered eyes.

“Look,” said Nathan. “We’ve decided to throw weight behind the other candidate. He’s younger, and his reputation is squeaky clean. It’s nothing personal. I’m sorry, but this is the way things go.”

He stood and made his way around the table, while the senator stared forward, like a man in receipt of a terminal diagnosis.

“You’ve done a good job,” said Nathan, as he approached the senator from behind. “Been reliable.” He placed his hands on the senator’s shoulders. “Now it’s time for you to ride off into the sunset. Let the next guy pick up the reins.” He gave him a hard slap on the back. “Hell, you’ve earned this.”

The senator sat silently, while Nathan turned toward the door.

“You’ll find generous compensation inside that envelope,” he said, as he took hold of the doorknob. “Just remember the vote. That’s what matters most right now. For you, for your family.”

He opened the door and left the senator to contemplate his newfound insignificance in the world.

In the lobby, Nathan was met by the head of his security detail, a tall and tense man with muscles like solid wire.

“Will you be leaving the premises, sir?”

Nathan glanced over and saw the perky blond, still nestled along bar.

“Nah, I think I’ll stay in for the night.”

The lead security man nodded.

“Yes, sir.”

The security man turned and walked away, his finger frantically summoning one of his men.

Nathan checked his watch and ran his fingers through his dark black hair. Then he made his way over to the bar and took a seat next to the blond, who was now engaged in a prattling conversation with an important-looking man in a fine tailored suit.

Despite her sophisticated clothing, the girl’s dimness was on full display amid the burble pouring out her mouth. But if this bothered the important-looking man, he hid it behind a mask of sheer fascination.

“You know, I’m sorry, there’s just something about butterflies,” said the girl. “I just love them.”

The important-looking man conveyed his agreement on the matter of butterflies by nodding furiously.

“Yes, yes,” he said. “Butterflies are quite underrated.”

Nathan summoned the bartender who brought him a glass of scotch without being asked.

“I think butterflies are vermin,” said Nathan, before downing the glass in one swallow.

As if she herself were a butterfly, the blond spun in her chair to assail the heartless barbarian. But, when she saw Nathan’s face, a little smile leaked out involuntarily.

“Well, maybe you just haven’t met the right one yet?” she said, her round eyes beautifully rimmed with long dark lashes.

An hour later, the important-looking man was gone, and the blond sat giggling beside Nathan.

“Oh my,” said the girl, her body now teetering upon her seat. “I don’t usually drink this much.”

Nathan smiled.

“Well, why don’t you come up to my room and rest.”

He paid both their tabs and helped her into her jacket. They crossed the lobby and entered the elevator, Nathan moving the girl along swiftly to avoid his security men. Once the elevator door closed, he kissed the girl hard, and she returned the favor, her hands fondling the hair on the back of his head. By the time the elevators parted on his floor, Nathan was visibly aroused, and the girl massaged the evidence with a slow and practiced technique.

Outside the elevator, he hurried her down the hallway to his room. He searched his jacket until he found his key card, while the girl rubbed her crotch against his knee. After two clumsy attempts, the door gave way, and they stormed the room in a tornado of lust.

He lifted the girl up in his arms and carried her inside, the door closing behind them with a noiseless clasp. He tossed her little body onto the bed and stripped off his shirt, while the girl wriggled her panties down from underneath her dress.

“Hello, Nathan,” said someone from the other side of the room.

The girl shrieked, as Nathan spun around to see Claire seated in a chair.

He flipped over off the little blond and stumbled to his feet.

“What the hell is this?” asked the girl. She grabbed her panties and scrambled off the bed. “Is this your wife or something?”

Nathan stood still, his mind racing through every option and outcome. He started to say something and stopped. The air conditioner clicked on.

“Nathan?” asked the girl.

Nathan cleared his throat.

“You should probably go,” he told the girl.

She looked at Claire and then back to Nathan.

“You’re a pig,” said the girl, as she slipped on her shoes.

She crossed the room and opened the door. She looked back at Claire.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

She closed the door, and the room fell silent.

They watched each other, Claire sitting upright in her chair, face gently lit by a weak lamp on the little end table beside her. The air conditioner clicked off again, and the room grew quiet.

“It’s been a long time,” Nathan said, at last, his face stiff and emotionless, as if he had rehearsed the moment countless times.

Claire said nothing.

“Do you mind?” he asked, pointing to his shirt on the floor. Without waiting for an answer, he reached down to collect it, and she watched while he fastened each button.

“There, that’s better,” he said, as he sat on the edge of the bed. “Well, you look like you’re holding up ok.”

He smoothed the wrinkles from his slacks.

“I assume my security team is dead.”

She leaned forward, and his neck bulged with a great empty swallow.

“Where is she, Nathan?”

He shrugged.

“Who are we talking about?”

Claire rested her arm against the end table.

“Don’t,” she said, her cold voice cutting through him like sharpened steel.

Nathan scratched at the growing whiskers on his face.

“Alright,” he said. “You mean the girl you’ve been dragging around. Is that it?”

She tapped the table with a fingernail, each knock like a ticking clock within his head.

“We can get to that,” he said. “But, why don’t we catch up first?”

Her finger stopped tapping.

“Would you prefer if I start?” he asked.

She stood.

“Alright, hold on now,” he said.

She approached, and he raised his palms slightly.

“Ok, ok,” he said. “I’m happy to help you in any way I can.”

She took possession of his right index finger and gave it a twist.

“Jesus!” he yelled.

“Where is she, Nathan?”

He clenched his teeth and peered into her eyes.

“Let go,” he said. “I’ll tell you.”

She released his finger, and he looked it over.

“Fuck,” he said. “Not necessary, God damn it.”

He rubbed the finger.

“Just sit down, please,” he said. “I’ll tell you where she is.”

He gestured to the chair, his crooked finger veering awkwardly. Claire flexed her jaw and returned to her seat.

“Talk,” she said.

“Not a problem,” he said.

He took hold of the damaged finger and wrenched it back into place with an audible snap.

“God damn it!” he yelled.

She started tapping her fingernail again, while he massaged his hand.

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know,” he said, as he raised his head to look at her. “And, do you want to know why?”

She said nothing.

“Because that’s what I’ve been told to do.”

She tapped faster now.

“I don’t believe that,” she said. “I wouldn’t believe anything you say.”

He shrugged.

“I don’t blame you.”

She stood again, and he raised his hand.

“She’s at a facility in Cambodia,” he said. “I can draw you a map.”

He smiled without opening his mouth.

“How do I know you are telling the truth?” asked Claire.

Nathan shrugged.

“I told you. That’s what I’ve been instructed to do.”

“By whom?” asked Claire. “Who told you to do this?”

“My superiors, of course.”

Claire shook her head.

“Who are your superiors?” she asked. “Who is behind all this?”

Nathan raised a finger.

“Now, that I can’t tell you.”

She took a step forward.

“Wait, wait,” he said. “Don’t get me wrong. I would tell you anything to keep from getting my head split in two. It’s just, I don’t know.”

She sat down and rubbed her temples.

“How can you not know? How is that possible?”

He chuckled to himself, as if he were pestered with questions from a small-minded child.

“That’s how it all works, Claire. I know what I’m supposed to know. I get my orders. I follow them. And, so does everyone else.”

Claire looked at him, her eyes growing wet.

“And Alfred, Nathan? Was that you?”

He frowned.

“No,” he said. “But, I didn’t try to stop it.”

She shook her head, and a tear trickled down her cheek.

“Why, Nathan? Why go along with it all?”

He gave another closed-lip smile.

“Because I have to,” he said. “Everyone does. No one has any choice, Claire. You’ll see that too in time.”

She stood.

“Draw the map,” she said.

He nodded.

“Hand me a pen.”



## CHAPTER 18

The soldiers watched as the ship docked in the harbor, their eyes asquint against the blinding sun glints in the roiling waves. High above in the yawning blue, seabirds circled, their squawking voices a merciless symphony of irritating shrill cries. Beneath their fluttering wings, the scent of dead fish polluted the air, the soldiers spitting out the stink gathering in the backs of their throats.

After a while, one of the soldiers whistled to another, who nodded once and then waved forward a caravan of green buses, each one outfitted with little window slits adorned with thick steel bars. As the buses motored ahead, the soldiers followed, machine guns in hand, boots stabbing into the wet sucking mud. In minutes they reached the water's edge, where the ship's captain greeted them with a cautious bow.

They exchanged very few words, and then the soldiers motioned the buses forward. When everything was in place, the captain instructed his men to open the hull door, revealing at least 50 men and women huddled up together within the cold darkness. As the hull door opened, a revolting smell fled out into the open world, assaulting the soldier's senses and enraging their minds.

One of the men stepped forward and waved his gun at the prisoners, some cowering, others staring off into the nowhere through dazed eyes. Soon, the other soldiers entered the hull and herded everyone out into the world, their terrified eyes blinking frantically against the searing flood of light.

In no time at all, the buses were filled and moving, their great tires thumping the ground and painting the flora with thick streams of mud. Inside, the passengers jostled about, wrists bound to seats, some looking fearful, others resigned. All looking sick and starved. At least one a few days within death. Still some stared forth stoically, their souls fanning glimmers of enduring rage, which would swell and enliven,

before inevitably flickering out in all the excruciating days ahead.

After some time, they passed through a secured fence line, where dozens more armed soldiers stood guard. Once through, the buses ambled up a gravel road which elevated toward an immense hill of windswept yellow grass. As they reached the hill's apex, a massive concrete structure seemed to rise up before them, and some of the prisoners gasped, while others studied their laps.

An hour later, they all stood naked in a long line, while the soldiers assaulted their bodies with forceful blasts from a watering hose. Next, they were led single file into another room, where men in surgical masks dusted their bodies and heads with handfuls of delousing powder.

At last, the soldiers handed the men and women same-colored garments and forced them into confinement, three to a cell.

"Fuck you!" one of the prisoners said, as the cell door slammed closed.

A soldier turned to look at him.

"Step back," he said through closed teeth.

"Go to hell," said the prisoner.

The soldier removed an electroshock device from his belt and prodded the prisoner in the belly. The man screamed and fell backward, his body convulsing against the cement floor. One of the man's cellmates rushed to his aid, as the soldier reholstered his weapon and walked away.

"Shh," said the cellmate. "You mustn't make things worse. There's nothing you can do here. We must do as they say."

As the man's body stilled, the third cellmate approached the bars and looked about.

"What are you doing? Stay away from the door. You will get us all killed."

The third cellmate continued looking about.

“Did you hear me?” the man said, as he cradled the stunned prisoner’s head. “You are a woman. You should be careful most of all.”

Without acknowledging the man or his words, the woman placed her hands on the bars and pulled them apart like great sticks of licorice. As she slipped through the gap and raced away, the remaining two prisoners sat quietly, their mouths open, eyes blinking, as if they had become aware within a dream from which they could not wake.

## CHAPTER 19

Demetri sat in a brown leather chair, a small cigar in one hand, a very old-looking book in the other. To his left, a wall of bookshelves stretched out and around half the room. To his right, an electric fireplace roared with high-definition flames.

A small, considerate tone broke the serenity, but he seemed not to notice. Seconds later, the door opened, and Mathew entered.

Demetri continued to read, as Mathew stood before him fully uniformed, arms crossed behind his back.

“You wanted to see me?”

Demetri held up a finger without looking up. After about a minute, he snapped the book shut and shook the curling ash from his cigar into a diamond-shaped glass tray.

“Hello, Mathew. How are you today?”

Mathew shrugged.

“Ok, I guess.”

Demetri looked into the simulated fire and nodded.

“That’s good. Very good.”

He placed the cigar in the ashtray and removed his eyeglasses.

“And the injections?” he asked as he polished the lenses with a very small cloth. “Have they been helping with your affliction?”

Mathew looked down at the floor.

“Yes,” he said. “I don’t like it, though.”

Demetri replaced his glasses.

“Well, it is most often unpleasant to be remade for the better.”

Mathew shrugged.

“I guess.” He unfolded his hands and tugged at his pants. “These things feel like sandpaper.”

Demetri nodded.

“Yes, it promotes alertness. Please have a seat.”

He gestured toward a rigid wooden chair that seemed inappropriate to its surroundings, placed perhaps for this particular interaction. Mathew sat on it.

“Fancy.”

Demetri smiled.

“Well, I don’t take many visitors in my library. I prefer the solitude.”

He inserted the cigar into his mouth and smoked thoughtfully, while Mathew pulled against the crotch of his pants.

“Tell me Mathew, what do you know of the Centennial Light?”

Mathew shrugged.

“Never heard of it.”

Demetri smoked and exhaled.

“The Centennial Light is the world’s longest-lasting light bulb. Since 1901 it has burned, and it continues to do so, for more than 100 years, without interruption, even to this day.”

Mathew pinched his eyebrows together.

“Is that true?”

Demetri nodded.

“Oh, yes. It is absolutely true.” He turned his hand over as if to make an allowance. “It was originally a hand-blown 60-watt bulb, but over the decades, it has grown as dim as a night light. But, still, it continues to burn.”

“That’s interesting,” said Mathew.

Demetri nodded.

“Yes, but not for the reason you think. You see, there is nothing special about the Centennial Light. While its longevity is extraordinary, it can be duplicated quite easily.”

“Is that what you’ve been doing here all this time?” Mathew asked. “Making a better light bulb? Is that what the Xactilias Project is?”

Demetri chuckled.

“No, of course not. And, what for? There is no need. The hundred-year light bulb has been possible for more than a century. You could make a billion of them if you wanted. There is nothing to it really.”

“Ok,” said Mathew. “So why can’t I buy one?”

Demetri crossed his legs and leaned back in chair.

“Awe, yes, that is the important question. Why are store shelves filled with inferior light bulbs? The answer is quite simple. Many years ago, each of the major bulb manufacturers combined to form the Phoebus cartel in order to control the manufacture and sale of incandescent light bulbs. In doing so, it created a notable landmark in the history of the global economy, when it engaged in large-scale planned obsolescence.”

Demetri paused to smoke, as if waiting for Mathew to ask another question.

“You see,” he continued, at last, “for any economy to grow, thrive or exist at all, the people must consistently purchase and consume products and services. When the market is saturated with refrigerators, cars and mobile phones that function for decades, consumption ceases. Businesses cannot profit. Jobs are lost. An economy collapses. Poverty and starvation follow. Crime, war and so on.”

Ash built on the end of his cigar and curled downward, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“If a company sells a million light bulbs that last a century,” he said, “why should anyone continue to purchase light bulbs? How can that business remain viable? And so, the cartel used various bureaucratic and economic methods to

force member companies to create fragile bulbs that would require constant replacement. And by doing so, it created a model, which modern companies continue to use today. A computer printer, a screwdriver, a spark plug, it does not matter. Everything is made inferior by intention. And when it becomes obsolete, the consumer purchases another. The cycle continues. The economy survives. People are employed. Disaster is averted.”

Mathew shook his head.

“Sounds like rich people scamming poor people to me.”

Demetri smirked.

“There would be a great many more poor if not for planned obsolescence. It is the very reason humanity enjoys its prosperity, however artificial or temporary it may be.”

Demetri stood up and tossed his cigar onto the floor. It sat there for a moment, burning bright and orange, and then a small flat machine raced along to suck it up from the tile. Mathew watched as the little thing zipped away.

“I guess temporary is the point you’re trying to make,” he said.

Demetri nodded.

“Yes, very good. This is the point.” He began pacing about the room, a hand on his chin, his forehead wrinkled with worry. “At its current pace, humanity will face mass starvation and societal chaos due to the increasing population explosion. In the continent of Africa alone, the population is projected to increase from 1 billion people to 5 billion in the next few decades. In more developed places, such as Japan, Western European nations and the United States, populations will grow much slower or not at all; however, this is only due to reduced fertility rates, which have already created an increasingly elder population of ill, infirm citizens who consume vast medical and food resources without participating in the economic engines that cultivate these resources.”

He stopped and raised a finger in the air, like a professor punctuating a lecture.

“By 2035, there will be 78 million US citizens older than 65 and only 76 million below the age of 18. Medical advancements will only increase this trend, as older citizens are able to escape illnesses and live longer. This will lead to catastrophic horrors, as senior populations begin to out-consume resource production. Coupled with the increasing populations of poorer nations, this will all lead to an apocalyptic outcome. Unless something is done to prevent it.”

Mathew narrowed his eyes.

“Like what?”

Demetri held his hands out to his sides.

“Don’t you see? I have already provided the answer.”

He returned to his chair and sat.

“Much like the Centennial Light, the current human burns far too long, growing weaker and less useful over time. Taking up space. Consuming resources. Unable to contribute to their production. Because of improved health standards, mass human reproduction is no longer the survival imperative it once was. As people breed less, population growth slows, but this inevitably leads to older, less capable populations. Declining productivity, fewer resources, starvation and the ultimate end of humanity as we know it.

He leaned forward and clasped his hands together.

“But, what if we could roll back life expectancy, say from 75 years to 70 or 65 or even 55? This would increase the need for breeding, creating a vibrant, healthy population, while eliminating the ill and infirm who consume without contributing to the production. This would save the world and ensure the survival of humanity.”

Mathew looked at the electric fireplace, its lovely flames roaring silently on repeat.

“How?”

Demetri shrugged.

“Planned obsolescence. Through the food supply. It could be done quietly and quickly. We have the ability to affect



virtually all of the world's food supply with an effective substance. A substance we have already synthesized. It is here now, ready for deployment. We have only to flip a switch and the process will have begun."

Mathew shook his head.

"This is crazy."

Demetri pointed at Mathew's face.

"No, Mathew. It is survival. It is the purpose of the Project to control what must be controlled in order to secure humanity's fate in acceptable terms."

Mathew leaned back in his chair.

"What are you waiting for then? Why haven't you flipped your switch?"

Demetri sat back in his chair and crossed his legs.

"Well, let's just say the Project believes that some of us are meant to exceed such limited timelines."

Mathew shook his head.

"So, you won't do it until you also have a cure for it. A cure for yourself and all the rich, important people."

Demetri frowned.

"Not me," he said. "Never me. I am nothing more than a soldier. I do as I am told. Though, I must admit I do very much agree with this particular directive."

He furrowed his brows and turned a hand over.

"That being said, I am told I will be among the spared. And, so will you. If you do your part."

"What part?" asked Mathew. "I still don't know what you want from me, Demetri. I'm no scientist. I can only do one thing, and you already have someone who can do it better. I'm just a drunk who got lucky. What am I even doing here? How can I help you get what you want?"

Demetri lowered his eyebrows.

“No, Mathew. You are much more than that. And, you can help. And, you must help. You are the key to all of this. And, if you do not help, it will not succeed. Humanity will fall. Not now. But, soon. And, inevitably so. And, if you do not help, it will be you who is to blame.”

Demetri approached and put a hand on Mathew’s shoulder.

“It’s time for you to become who you were meant to be.”

Mathew looked into Demetri’s eyes.

“Are you fucking with me, Demetri? Is this another one of your games?”

Demetri squeezed Mathew’s shoulder.

“No,” he said. “It is no game. I need you. The world needs you. I swear it.”

Mathew leaned back in his chair.

“Alright,” he said. “What the hell? Let’s see where this goes.”

Demetri smiled.

“Good. Now, let’s go over the plan.”

## CHAPTER 20

The soldier wept, as his arm broke free from its socket.

“I don’t know,” he whispered through a slobbering mouth.  
“I promise, I don’t know.”

Claire pushed her lips against his ear.

“Who does?”

The soldier swallowed and looked around.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Claire put her hand over the soldier’s mouth and wrenched his arm upward.

The soldier screaming quietly into her hand, and his legs went limp.

“Please, don’t,” said a voice from behind.

Claire spun around to see a nervous-looking middle-aged man in a white coat.

“Who are you?” she asked,

“I’m Todd,” he said. “I assume you’re Claire.”

Claire put the soldier in a headlock and choked him unconscious. Todd’s jaw fell unhinged for a moment. Then, he gathered himself and delivered his lines.

“They’re expecting you.”

“Of course, they are,” Claire said, as she let the soldier fall to the ground.

“Well, then,” he said,. “We should get going. I will show you the way.”

Claire wiped the soldier’s slobber against her pants.

“Alright.”

Todd gave a slight bow and turned.

“This way.”

For several minutes, they walked a curving doorless hallway, walled with dark black tile that gave back no reflection. For a moment, Claire thought to touch the surface for curiosity’s sake.

“Please don’t,” said Todd. “The walls are electrified.”

Claire shook her head.

“You should hurry,” she said, as she flexed her fingers.

“Of course,” said Todd.

They walked the hallway, Todd’s pace slow and relaxed, as if he were giving a tour.

“Please disregard the staff,” he said, as the two moved forward. “They will not interfere under any circumstances.”

As if responding to a cue, a soldier appeared before them and passed by without showing the slightest bit of interest.

“No worries,” said Todd. “They have all been instructed to ignore us.”

Claire looked forward.

“I’m not worried.”

Todd nodded once.

“Of course.”

On they walked through the curving hallway, the occasional soldier passing without giving the slightest glance, as if her presence were the most natural thing in the world. At last, Claire stopped.

“We’re back where we started,” she said.

Todd stopped and turned.

“I can see how it seems that way.”

Claire approached him and collected the front of his shirt.

“No games,” she said through clenched teeth. “Don’t waste my time.”

Todd swallowed and held his hands up.

“Never.”

He raised his arm and stuck out a finger.

“Just go a little further. There is a door.”

Claire released his collar.

“You should leave this place,” she said.

Todd straightened his tie.

“Yes. I’ve known this for some time.”

He gave a slight bow and walked past her, his footsteps unhurried, eyes looking straight ahead. Claire watched him disappear around the corner. Then, she turned and walked forward until she saw a very ordinary-looking steel door, which seemed as if it had been placed temporarily as a substitute for something more elaborate.

As she approached, the door shot up from the floor, exposing a long, wide hallway entirely comprised of onyx tile. Through the blackness, on the other side, she could see a figure, low and obscure, difficult to define. She narrowed her eyes, and the edges of the figure cut a shape in the darkness. It was a person propped still in a chair at the center of a very large room.

She stepped forward, and the tile released a gentle tone, as it bloomed around the edges with golden yellow light. Slowly, she crept on, each tile flaring audibly beneath her footsteps and then dying out as she left it behind. She tossed a look backward, and the door dropped silently, as if she’d willed it somehow with her mind. She turned back to see the figure as before, quiet and unmoving, hands atop its thighs.

“Identify yourself,” she said.

The figure sat motionless, like a mannequin of plastic, entirely lifeless, but for the subtle heaving of its chest.

“I won’t hurt you unless you make me,” said Claire.

She stopped midway through the hallway and stood straight, like a bodybuilder projecting the threat of physical

power. Another louder tone cut through the silence, and the hallway illuminated to reveal a very thin man with one pale eye.

“Are you alright?” Claire asked.

She stepped forward, and the tile toned lightly. Slowly, she crept on, each tile flaring audibly beneath her footsteps and then dying out as she left it behind. She tossed a look backward, and the door dropped silently, as if she’d willed it somehow with her mind. She turned back to see the figure as before, quiet and unmoving, hands atop its thighs.

The man sat motionless upon his chair like a static figure in wax museum, his face expressionless, skin impossibly pale.

“Do you need help?” Claire asked.

She took several steps forward, a genuine look of concern on her face. And then, in an instant, she stopped, her knees wavering, as if she surfed upon shifting terrain.

At once, the pale man stood, his face tightening up like leather.

Claire looked down and placed her palms against her thighs, her brain concussed, mind swimming.

Mr. Heinrich stepped forward, and Claire felt a jarring in her head, as if something had burst from inside. She collapsed to one knee and fell forward onto the ground, her skull bouncing against the tile, blood trickling from her nose. Seconds later, the room brightened, and a low whimper slipped from her lips.

Mr. Heinrich waited and watched, his eyes studying his conquest thoughtfully, face showing neither satisfaction nor regret. He took another step forward, and Claire’s body jerked straight, as if she were being pulled at both ends by invisible hands. As she siphoned air through the narrow slit in her face, Mr. Heinrich cocked his head to assess his victim. Then, after a few moments, he turned to address someone standing off in the shadows.

But in that briefest of moments, Claire reclaimed herself and rose to her feet, face drooping to one side, eyes pointed in

different directions. A sharp voice bellowed from the shadows, and Mr. Heinrich whipped his head around in time to see Claire charging forward, one leg dragging behind her, little fingers bent into claws.

Without hesitating, Mr. Heinrich straightened his body and sank deep into her mind, his face reddening, skin undulating beneath his clenched jaw. Claire slowed only slightly, her one working eye almost entirely black with pupil, throwing out rage and hate. Mr. Heinrich swallowed hard and leaned forward, his knees slightly bent, as if to anchor himself against a raging wind. But, even still the woman crept toward him, her dead leg now gaining traction, crooked eye coming back in line.

“I can’t,” Mr. Heinrich whispered, droplets of sweat bleeding from his face and racing down to his shirt collar.

As if refreshed by his words, Claire’s body regained its natural form, even as thin currents of blood streamed from both nostrils. Mr. Heinrich bit hard into his lower lip and took a step back from the woman’s hand, the fingers snapping at him, slobber drizzling out from her lips.

“Alright,” said the voice from the shadows.

Claire turned toward the words, but before her eyes could parse the blackness, her muscle tissue began stiffening.

“Yes,” said the voice. “there we are.”

Demetri stepped out into the light, Mathew beside him, eyes firm and focused on Claire.

Mr. Heinrich stumbled a bit, and then stood straight. He swallowed hard and took another step forward, Claire slowing, feet shuffling against the floor.

“Good,” said Demetri. “Very good.”

Now, Mr. Heinrich dug in, his mind penetrating deeply within Claire, immobilizing all but her breath. Mathew fell in beside Mr. Heinrich, both men locking onto their target, who teetered about like a wobbly statue. At last, she fell forward and thumped against the floor, the two men closing in to complete the conquest.

“Just a moment,” Demetri said. “Give me a moment, please.”

Mr. Heinrich relaxed a little, and Claire’s fingers fluttered a bit, her face looking off to the side like someone in a vegetative state.

“Yes, that’s enough,” Demetri said.

He approached and bent down, tilting his head to look into her face.

“Hello, again.” He gave a soft smile. “It has been quite a while, hasn’t it?”

He reached out and ran a hand over the budding hairs on her scalp.

“And yet, despite all the time, you have never been far from my mind.”

He palmed her head and jerked it about, her eyes rolling back, tongue lolling outside her mouth.

“Such a pity,” he whispered. “You could have been something special. A world-changer.”

He drove his fingertips into her flesh and lifted her head up, stretching out her neck.

“But, you made a choice, and look at you now.”

He relaxed his fingers, and her head plunked against the floor.

“It is very sad to me,” he said, as he stood up. “Very sad, indeed.”

He withdrew a handkerchief and massaged her sweat from his fingers.

“I could say that I knew we would meet again. But, it is more appropriate to say that I knew we must.”

He nodded, as if to agree with himself.

“But, preferably on my terms.” He turned his hand over and shrugged. “Such as they are.”



Claire lay sprawled against the tile, jaw slack, drool puddling upon the floor.

“You knew this as well, perhaps, that we must meet. For the unfinished business. For your selfish need. To exact vengeance upon the Project. On me, also, I would imagine. Ego-driven foolishness and nothing more. Yet, here we are nonetheless. And, why? Not for petty, selfish reasons. But to save the world.”

He began pacing before her, eyes wide behind his little glasses.

“But, how to arrange such a meeting? How do you compel a seemingly invulnerable creature such as yourself? Not so easy a task.”

He stopped pacing and bent her nose with the tip of his shoe.

“Would you like to see her?” He gestured toward the other side of the room. “She has been waiting for you so patiently.”

He turned his head and gave a soft smile.

“Come ahead, dear. It’s all right.”

They all stood in silence, as Mila stepped out of the shadows, her face looking sullen, trembling chin tight with little dimples.

“Come, come,” said Demetri. “Don’t be shy.”

She swallowed hard and stepped forward, her little shoes scuffling atop the black tile floor. Demetri’s smile broadened as she approached, and he held out a hand to welcome her.

“That’s it,” he said. “Come see the amazing thing you have done.”

Mila stepped forward and took hold of Demetri’s hand, her eyes cast downward, as if she were entangled in an act of great shame.

“Yes,” said Demetri. “Here she is. Safe and sound. Beautiful as ever.”

He lifted the girl's hand high into the air and spun her in a circle, as if to show off her bruised flesh in some facetious way.

Demetri noticed Mathew eyeing the girl.

"No, Mathew?" he said. "You do not find the beauty in this?"

He ran a hand over the girl's skin.

"Ah, but it is not here where the beauty lies, but well beneath."

He released the girl and regarded Claire, her body slumped awkwardly, legs splayed apart at an obscene angle.

"Let's see, here," he said as he knelt down beside her. "Yes, here we are."

He gathered up one of Claire's arms and held it out to expose a tiny green bruise on the inner elbow.

"Yes, there is the beauty." He caressed the bruise with his thumb and pushed into it like a button. "Does it hurt?"

He leaned over and looked at her pallid face, eyes wide and seemingly uninhabited.

"Can you hear me, dear? Are you in there listening?"

He wrenched her arm into an awkward angle, bringing the bruise before her face.

"Do you see it here? This exquisite flaw. Do you know how it came to be? It is a mystery to you, yes? Despite your great intellect, you have no answer."

His face soured, and he dropped her arm, which slapped against the tile floor like a dead fish. He stood up and tucked his shirt into his slacks.

"Well, I can tell you the answer. It is a little gift. A very special gift. But, not from me." He snatched up Mila's hand and yanked her forth. "It is from her."

Claire continued staring off into the nowhere, but Demetri seemed not to notice.

“You see,” he continued, “she has attained a gift. The same as you and these two men”

He squeezed Mila’s hand as if he meant to break it, and the child buckled at the knees. After a few seconds, he released her and held up his hand, the palm now painted with a purpling bruise.

“You see?” he said to Mathew. “She is like a disease. It is her gift.”

He knelt down and held his hand before Claire.

“This will be difficult for you to accept, but she has been here with us before.” He stood up and grimaced as he flexed his hand. “She was one of the many subjects in our attempt to replicate the success of the serum. When she survived the injection, we waited to see if she might develop a similar gift. But, she never did. Or, so we thought”

He began to pace back and forth next to Claire, as if she were a secretary taking dictation.

“But, then the girl’s guards and caretakers began to grow ill. Some with bruises and lesions, others organ and tissue cancer. Everyone sick and dying. Was there a toxin in the facility? Who was spreading this contagion? It didn’t take long for us to connect the dots. The effects were localized around the girl. She had indeed attained a gift.”

Mila stared down at the floor, as her secrets spilled across the room. Demetri approached her and slid a hand beneath her chin.

“A truly amazing gift,” he said, lifting her head upward. “And with so many applications.”

He released her chin and turned toward Claire.

“Unfortunately, although she demonstrated remarkable resistance to the effect, it did begin to take a toll on her after a time. First, bruises, then coughing. Finally, pneumonia and ultimately, it would appear, unavoidable death.”

He gave a hard frown and nodded.

“I was very disappointed at this. Of course, we took samples. Blood, spinal fluid and whatnot. But, the actual specimen. Such potential. To see it lost? I was willing to try anything.”

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a small orange bottle of pills.

“This is Triceserone.”

He held up the bottle for Mathew and Mr. Heinrich. Then, he knelt down and showed it to Claire.

“It was synthesized from your blood plasma.” He shook the bottle to rattle the contents. “It was originally an attempt to harness your gift and pass it to others. Unfortunately, it proved lethal for all our subjects. Lots of terrible reactions. It was an unpleasant experience for everyone involved.”

He turned his head toward Mila.

“But, for her, it proved lifesaving.”

He turned back toward Claire.

“And, so this is why she has brought you to me.” He held the bottle in front of Claire’s vegetable face. “In return for this.”

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

“And, now here you are.” He reached within his jacket pocket and withdrew a large metallic syringe. “The last piece of the puzzle.”

He bent down and yanked up Claire’s shirt, leveling the syringe over her lower back. With great force, he drove the needle between the buttons of her spine, but when it touched her skin, the metal bent and snapped away, skipping across the clean, shiny tile.

Demetri stood up and gestured to a soldier who had just entered the room.

“Escort her to the waiting area.”

The soldier claimed Mila’s arm and led her away, the girl studying her steps through sorrowful eyes. As they reached the

door, Mila ripped her arm from the soldier and turned toward Claire.

“I’m sorry,” she yelled. “I’m so sorry.”

The soldier gathered up her wrist and yanked her from the room.

Demetri approached Mathew and Mr. Heinrich.

“It will take a few hours for her body to dry out. Then, she will weaken, and we can proceed.” He looked at Mathew.

“Stay on guard. Assist Mr. Heinrich. When she weakens, he will no longer need your assistance. Then, you will each work in shifts.”

Demetri addressed Mr. Heinrich.

“I will return in three hours.

He walked away and exited the room, while Mathew and Mr. Heinrich turned their attention toward Claire.

## CHAPTER 21

Mila sat at a steel table in an empty room, one hand bound to her chair, hair hanging over her face. Through tears, she studied the bruises on her loose arm, all the shattered capillaries a patchwork of blue, purple and black. From across the room, a soldier watched, his back pressed firmly against the wall, face pouring sweat.

Mila looked up at him, her lips dry and cracked.

“Can I have some water?”

The soldier swallowed and crept forward. He took up a pitcher of water from the table and slid it toward her. Then, he retreated back up against the wall, holding his sleeve over his mouth and nose.

Mila eyed the pitcher. ‘

“Can I have a cup?”

The soldier swallowed again.

“Just drink from the pitcher,” he said through his makeshift mask.

Mila started to say something but stopped when the door swung open.

“Hello, my dear,” said Demetri as he entered the room.

The soldier dropped his arm to his side and straightened. Demetri looked at the full pitcher of water and turned toward the soldier.

“Why doesn’t she have a cup?”

The soldier opened his mouth but nothing came out.

“Out,” said Demetri.

The soldier gave a quick nod and exited the room.

“I’m very sorry,” said Demetri, as he shut the door. “You have everyone a bit nervous, I’m afraid.”

He took a plastic cup from the table and approached.

“Here we are,” he said, as he sat down beside her.

He took up the pitcher and filled the cup.

“Please drink,” he said, as he slid the cup beneath her nose.

Mila sat still, her head low, hair hanging over her face.

“Please, dear, you must drink.”

Mila said nothing.

“You mustn’t be so hard on yourself,” said Demetri. “You have performed a great service. You have helped avert an incredible tragedy. Saved countless lives.”

Mila stared at her lap.

“Please just leave me alone.”

Demetri lowered his eyebrows and frowned.

“You are just a child,” he said. “You cannot be expected to understand. In time, things will make more sense. Until then, you must trust others to represent your interests.”

The door swung open and Mathew entered the room, his face pale, shirt collar drenched with sweat.

Demetri smoothed his little mustache and leaned back in his chair.

“Water, Mathew,” Demetri said without looking up. “Drink some water.”

Mathew glanced at the girl for a moment and then approached the table. He took up the pitcher of water and filled a plastic cup.

“Over there,” said Demetri, as he gestured toward a small chair in the far corner of the room.

Mathew looked at the girl once more. Then, he approached the chair and sat, the cup shaky within his two jittering hands.

“In any case,” Demetri continued. “It is over. The world will change and survive and thrive. And, all because of you, my dear.”

A tear broke loose from Mila’s eye and tumbled down her bruised cheek.

“Come now,” said Demetri. “You mustn’t worry over her. She is a danger to the world. You have seen it yourself. Her violence is breathtaking. She has killed countless people. Directly. Indirectly. Innocent men and women. People who were only doing their jobs. It was your duty to help stop her.”

“She’s not a bad person,” Mila whispered. “You’re wrong.”

He shrugged and turned his hands over, as if to proclaim himself innocent in this matter and all others.

“I would have had things differently. I would have made her part of the solution. Believe me, I tried. But her mind does not see reason, whether from her affliction or her misshapen view of reality, who can say? It does not matter. What matters is she will not see reason and cannot be controlled.”

Mila swallowed the knot in her throat.

“Will you kill her?”

Demetri leaned forward and propped his forearms against his thighs.

“Yes.”

Mila’s eyes flashed upward for a moment and then fell as before.

“It is not with any pleasure, I assure you,” said Demetri. “It is a great failure for me. A magnificent waste.”

He looked at the bruises on Mila’s arms and pursed his lips.

“Do they hurt?”

Mila shook her head without looking up.

“That’s good,” he said. “There is still plenty of time.”



He raised up in his chair and slipped his hand into his jacket pocket. He withdrew the bottle of pills and unscrewed the lid.

“You must take this now,” he said, as he poured one of the tablets into his hand. “Your condition will deteriorate further if you do not.”

He took up the pitcher of water and filled a plastic cup.

“In time, you will come to see things differently.” He slid the water across the table. “You are still a part of the solution, and there are many more things for you to do.”

He stood and straightened his tie.

“Drink your water,” he said as he turned away.

He approached Mathew and whispered something in his ear. Then, he exited the room, leaving Mathew and Mila alone.

When he was gone, Mila placed a hand over her face and wept, her shoulders bobbing, eyes emptying tears onto the table. Mathew watched her from across the room, his head leaning back against the wall, shirt drenched in sweat.

“You should take the pill,” he said.

Mila rubbed her eyes and snorted a few times.

“If you don’t take it, you’ll get even sicker,” he continued. “You’ll die.”

Mila shook her head slowly.

“I don’t care.”

Mathew watched her, his eyes pinched together, as if he were working out an impossible equation within his head.

“I heard what you told her,” he said. “That you were sorry.”

Mila stared at the floor.

“Why did you say it? Is it because you care for her?”

Mila stared at the table, chin trembling.

Mathew stood up and crossed the room. He joined her at the table and leaned in.

“Why did you do it, then?” he asked. “Why did you help them catch her? Is it because of the pills? Because you knew you needed them?”

“I didn’t know anything about the pills,” she whispered. “I didn’t know why my skin was bruising. Not until now.”

Mathew tilted his head slightly, his eyes boring forth.

“Then why?”

Mila took a deep breath.

“My sister,” she said. “They would have killed her if I hadn’t cooperated.” She looked up, the green hint of a fresh bruise beneath her left eye. “I didn’t have a choice.”

Mathew looked confused.

“Your sister means more than this woman?”

Mila shook her head.

“I don’t know,” she said. “At the beginning, I guess. I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore.”

She bent over to cry, while Mathew watched her, like a scientist studying a strange and beautiful insect.

“I envy you,” he said dryly.

She looked up, confusion infesting her face.

“What?”

He leaned back in his chair.

“Not your pain. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. I guess I mean, I’ve never felt anything like that for anyone. Not the way you feel for your sister.” He gestured toward the wall. “Or the way you feel for her. I envy your ability to feel it. I wonder what it must be like. I’ve never felt it. Not for anyone. Not once.”

She ran her sleeve across her cheek.

“Not for anyone?” she asked. “You don’t care about anyone?”

He pursed his lips and shook his head.

“No,” he whispered. “Not the way I’m supposed to anyway.”

She straightened in her chair.

“What does that mean?”

He rubbed his jaw.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Whatever it is in your brain that makes you care. I don’t have it.” He firmed his mouth. “Believe me, I’ve looked everywhere for it.”

Mila began crying.

“Why are you telling me this?”

Mathew sat back in his chair, his tired face looking old for its age.

“I don’t know. I guess I just wanted to understand what it feels like. To care like that.”

Mila looked at him, her face peppered with bruise after bruise. Dimples broke out on her chin, and she bit into her lower lip.

“It’s awful,” she said. “It hurts.”

Mathew shrugged.

“Then, what’s the point?”

The girl squinted her eyes, as if she’d been given a riddle.

“What do you mean?”

Mathew leaned forward and propped his forearms against his knees.

“I mean, if it hurts, why do it?”

Mila moved back in her chair, as if she were trapped in a cage with an animal that might crush her at any moment, if only by accident.

“You really don’t understand anything, do you?” she whispered. “You’re just Demetri’s robot.”

Mathew flashed his teeth and slammed his palm against the table.

“I’m nobody’s anything.”

The girl turned away, as if expecting to be struck. But, Mathew only watched her, his face relaxing, breath steady as ever. He pushed the pill toward her.

“Demetri said I should make you take the pill. But, I won’t.”

He stood up and walked back to his chair.

“You should be able to die if you want,” he said, as he took his seat. “Maybe you deserve to.”

Mila straightened her head and looked at the pill, her eyes boiling with tears. After a few moments, she gathered it up and pushed it into her mouth.

Mathew gave a little smirk as she swallowed.

“There,” he said. “Not so noble after all.”

The girl watched Mathew sip his water, her eyes now completely dry.

“You really shouldn’t be in here with me, you know. It’s bad for your health.”

Mathew shrugged.

“I don’t care.”

Mila shook her head.

“You know, I remember you,” she said. “From before.”

Mathew nodded.

“I remember you, too.”

Mila tilted her head a little.

“And, now you work for them? How does that happen?”

Mathew shrugged.

“It’s complicated.”

Mila lowered her eyebrows.

“You know they’re going to kill you,” she said. “When this is over. They’re going to kill you, and then they’re going to kill me, because that’s what they do.”

Mathew leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head

“Probably.”

“You don’t care?” asked Mila.

Mathew shrugged.

“Even if I did, there’s nothing I can do to stop it. There’s no getting out of here. You should know that by now.”

Mila leaned forward and put her palms flat on the table.

“There is,” she said. “All we have to do is set her free.”

Mathew laughed a little.

“That will get her out of here, maybe.” He leaned forward and set his cup on the floor. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter if you do get away. They find you eventually. They’re everywhere all the time. They’re everything and you’re nothing. I’m nothing. Everyone is nothing. You’re just too young to understand.”

Mila started to cry again.

“Just stop,” said Mathew. “That shit doesn’t work on me.”

Mila sat up and wiped her eyes.

“You’re just a coward,” she said. “You’ll just lie down and let them win.”

Mathew rubbed his head, as if reasoning with an imbecile.

“Even if I tried to help, I couldn’t beat that fucker out there. He’s like a god.”

Mila’s eyes opened wider.

“We do it together.”

Mathew’s face hardened.

“This isn’t a fairy tale,” he said. “They’ll kill us on the spot.”

Mila turned her palms upward.

“You said they’ll kill us anyway.”

Mathew rubbed the back of neck.

“Yeah, that’s right.” He sunk back in his chair and ran his fingers through his hair. “What about your sister? They’ll kill her if you run.”

Mila shook here head slowly.

“I don’t have a sister. It’s like Demetri said. What I did, I did it for me.”

Mathew nodded.

“And, now? Would you be doing this for that woman out there, or would you be doing it for you?”

Mila shook her head.

“Does it matter?”

Mathew reached down and took his water from the floor. He drank it dry and tipped the empty cup over.

“You seem like a survivor,” he said. “And, I don’t mean that as a compliment. You see, I’m a survivor, too. And, the one thing I know about survivors is they’ll do anything to survive. That means they’ll work people to get what they need. You can’t trust anything they say.”

Mila lowered her head and started crying.

“Hey,” said Mathew. “Don’t feel bad. I’ve done it myself more times than I can remember. That’s why I understand. You gotta do what it takes to get by.”

He crushed the empty cup and tossed it on the floor.

“There’s no way out of here, kid. Maybe you live. Maybe you die. You don’t have any control. Just suck it up and hope for the best.”

Mila looked up, her face alight with rage.

“You’re just a coward.”

Mathew shrugged.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. “Maybe I’m a coward. Maybe that woman out there is a hero. Maybe Demetri’s the devil. Maybe you’re a saint. It doesn’t make any difference. It all ends the same for everyone. Even if they have good intentions. Even if they have gifts.”

The door opened and a soldier poked his head in.

“You’re up,” he said.

Mathew nodded and the soldier walked away.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me. I’ve got things to do.”

He stood up and stepped toward the door.

“Wait,” said Mila. “Listen, I’m sorry, ok. You’re right. I’m scared. I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to die. I don’t want her to die. Just help us, okay?”

Mathew firmed his mouth.

“I’d only slow you down, kid.”

With that, he walked away, the door shutting behind him and locking with a gentle, certain clasp.

Mila chewed her teeth and yanked against her constraint. Seconds later, the door swung open, and the first soldier entered once more, his face red and swollen on one side. Mila sunk back into her chair and lowered her head, as the soldier retook his position against a wall.

The two waited silently without speaking, the soldier looking straight ahead toward the opposite wall, as if he might avert contamination by avoiding the sight of the girl.

“Sir?” she asked, her voice sounding very small.

The soldier glanced over and swallowed.

“Yeah?”

Mila swallowed hard and bent her eyebrows upward.

“Can I have some water?”

The soldier thought for a moment and then rubbed his swollen jaw. He took a few slow steps toward the table and gave the pitcher a nudge.

“Go ahead,” he said.

Mila shook her head, her body sagging, eyes sunken back within blackened sockets.

“I can’t lift it,” she said, as she raised her discolored arm. “Please, I need your help.”

The soldier swallowed hard and approached. He lifted the pitcher and filled a plastic cup.

“Please,” she said. “Can you help me?”

The soldier looked devastated.

“You can’t lift a plastic cup?”

Mila began to cry.

“Alright, alright,” said the soldier.

He lifted the cup and approached.

“Just don’t touch me,” he said.

Mila raised her chin and opened her mouth. The soldier licked his lips and steadied the cup.

“You ready?” he asked.

Mila nodded, and the soldier brought it to her lips, his hands trembling slightly, face bleeding sweat. Mila opened her mouth and received the cup. The soldier waited, as she sucked it dry.

“Ok?” he said.

Mila shook her head.

“Can I have some more?”

The soldier chewed his teeth.

“Alright.”

He took up the pitcher and filled the cup.



“Here,” he said, as he brought the cup toward her. “But this is the last—”

Before he could finish his sentence, she sunk her little teeth into his knuckles.

“God damn it!” the man yelled, as he dropped the cup. “Let go, you little bitch!”

Mila held on, as the soldier jerked backward.

“Fuck!” he yelled, as her teeth cut into his flesh.

He balled his fist and hammered down on the top of her head until her jaw finally fell slack.

“You little cunt!” he yelled, as he staggered back.

Mila clutched her scalp, mouth open and breathing, little teeth slick with red.

“Oh, man,” said the soldier, as he inspected the wound. “You fucking bit me!”

He looked at her, his eyes alive with fury. He took a step forward, both fists tightly balled. Mila shrunk back into her chair, her teeth clenched together, eyes pinched shut. But, instead of delivering a blow, the soldier stopped and placed his hand against his forehead.

“Oh, shit,” he said, as he staggered backward. “What the fuck did you do to me?”

Mila watched, as the man held his arms out to steady himself.

“Oh, no,” he said. “Oh, no.”

He turned toward the door and took a step, but the top part of his body was already falling.

“Oh, god,” the soldier said, as he slammed down against the floor.

Mila watched silently, a taste of iron on her tongue.

“Ok,” said the soldier, as he turned himself over. “It’s alright. You just stay there, ok. Don’t come any closer. Just wait.”

Sweat poured from his face, and he started to cough. He spat on the floor beside him a sticky clot of blood.

“Oh, god,” he said. “Oh, no.”

He tried to stand, but his head spun.

“Please,” he whispered, as he looked at Mila through big, frightened eyes, a longing look within them, as if he thought she might take it back. But, if he sought solace, he didn’t find it in the girl’s stony face. And, now his eyes leaked the tears to prove it.

“Oh, God,” he whispered once more.

And, then, it was over, Mila turning her head away, as the soldier’s face crashed forward against the unyielding tile floor.

Now, silence stormed the room, its presence certain, as if it meant to hold the place forever.

Mila tapped her foot and waited, but no one came through the door. She raised in her seat and eyed the soldier, blood spilling out in pools from the young man’s ears and eyes. She swallowed hard and firmed her mouth. She stood up and crossed the room, dragging the chair like an anchor from her little wrist. She kicked the soldier, but there was nothing inside. She knelt down and looked at him, his eyes cloudy and far away. She took a knife from his belt and cut herself free from the chair. Then, she slid the knife into her pocket and slipped out through the door.

## CHAPTER 22

Mr. Heinrich leaned forward in his chair, elbows propped against his knees, hands holding his chin upright. Demetri placed a hand on his shoulder, as Mathew approached.

“Just a bit more,” he said. “Then, she will be weak enough for Mathew to relieve you.”

Mr. Heinrich glanced at Mathew.

“I will stay,” he said in his thick German accent.

Demetri shrugged.

“As you wish.”

Demetri approached Claire.

“Yes,” he said, as he looked her over. “I believe we are making progress.”

He reached into his jacket and removed a pistol. He leveled it at one of her legs and pulled the trigger. Mathew flinched, as the bullet bounced away.

“Jesus,” he said.

“Good,” said Demetri, as he knelt beside Claire.

A dark welt began to rise from the impact point.

“Yes,” he said. “We are getting close.”

He turned and approached Mr. Heinrich.

“You are drinking water?”

Mr. Heinrich nodded.

“Good,” said Demetri. “Swallow every drop. Do you understand?”

Mr. Heinrich nodded, and Demetri turned toward Mathew.

“How do you feel?”

Mathew shrugged.

“I’m ok. A little tired.”

Demetri reached into his pocket.

“Take this,” he said, as he passed over a small pill.

“What is it?” asked Mathew.

“Amphetamine.”

Mathew took the pill and put it inside his pocket.

“I’ll save it just in case.”

Demetri gave a small nod and gestured toward one of the soldiers.

“Bring a chair,” he said.

Mr. Heinrich flexed his jaw.

“I must be alone,” he said robotically.

Demetri shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I will clear the room, but Mathew must stay. We can’t take any risks. Not with her.”

He turned toward Mathew.

“Sit, and say nothing,” he said. “Do not distract Mr. Heinrich in any way. Assist only if necessary. Otherwise, just sit and stay awake.”

The soldier entered with a chair and set it a few feet from Mr. Heinrich.

“Whatever you say, boss,” said Mathew, as he plopped down.

Demetri turned toward Claire.

“We’re close now.”

He turned back and raised a finger at both men.

“No mistakes.”

With that he walked away, the soldiers falling in behind him.

Mathew waited for them to leave and then slouched down within his chair.

“Jesus,” he said. “You’d think they’d give us something a little more comfortable.”

Mr. Heinrich remained a statue.

“This thing is pretty lame,” Mathew continued. “But, I guess they wouldn’t want us to fall asleep. I mean, I get why we don’t have recliners, but—”

“Be quiet,” said Mr. Heinrich.

Mathew rolled his eyes and turned toward Claire.

“How much longer do you think?” he asked.

Claire lay upon the floor, her eyes far away, pupils like the points of sewing needles.

“Be quiet,” said Mr. Heinrich.

Mathew shook his head and let his posture go bad. He turned his head to the side and eyed the woman, her body swelling only slightly with every breath, a puddle of urine between her legs.

“This is boring,” he said. “You want me to take over for a while? You look like you could use some rest.”

Mr. Heinrich flexed his jaw.

“Fine,” said Mathew.

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a granola bar. He tore it open, and the sound cut the silence in half.

Mr. Heinrich’s nostrils flared.

“If you make another noise,” he said. “I will stop your heart.”

He turned his head toward Mathew, who had just sunk his teeth into his granola bar.

“Do you understand?”

Mathew froze for a moment, saliva pooling within his mouth and spilling down the back of his throat. At last, Mr.

Heinrich relaxed, and Mathew bent forward and coughed it all up onto the ground.

“Jesus,” he said, as he threw the granola bar against the tile. “Have you ever just tried asking for something?”

Mr. Heinrich’s lips curled up over his teeth, as he started to speak, but before his tongue could fold into an appropriate position, Mathew’s head spun away in a panic.

“Fucking Christ!” he yelled, as Claire climbed to her feet.

Mr. Heinrich turned to see Claire staggering forward, one eye shut, tongue lolling. He waited for a moment, as she approached, her posture straightening with every step. At last, he stood up from his chair, and the woman collapsed to the ground, her bones poking out like sticks within a sack of skin.

“Jesus,” Mathew whispered, as he stood.

He took a few steps forward and looked Claire over.

“How is that possible?”

He looked up at Mr. Heinrich, as if expecting a response, but the man only shook his head with disgust.

“You do not belong here,” he said, his voice thin and low. “You are weak and foolish.”

Mathew narrowed his eyes.

“And, what the fuck do you think you are?” he said, as he took a step forward. “You think you’re special? You think you’re Demetri’s right-hand man or something? You’re just a tool, buddy. That’s it. Nothing more. You’re just a fucking rake, and that over there-” He pointed toward Claire. “That’s a leaf. And, when all the leaves are gone, where the fuck does that leave you?”

Mr. Heinrich lifted his arm and extended a skeletal finger toward Mathew’s chair.

“Sit now. And, do not speak again. I will not give you another warning.”

Mathew shrugged.

“Whatever you say, Heiny.”

He approached the chair and plopped down, Mr. Heinrich watching him the way entire. Mathew stared forward, his foot tapping the floor.

“But, you know,” he said. “If you mess with me too much, she’s liable to jump up and twist your scrawny old-man neck.”

Mr. Heinrich’s one live eye grew wild with rage, and his lips parted to make way for words. But, before he could set them free, something stung his leg. He turned to see a knife jutting out from his left calf, blood spilling out from a considerable wound.

Mathew watched in disbelief, as Mila pulled the knife away and leveled her gaping mouth over Mr. Heinrich’s wound. With his one working eye, the man studied the girl, his expression calm, as if he’d envisioned this and every other happening years in advance. And, then, it was all over, Mila stopping and tumbling over onto her side, body still, eyes cloudy and wide.

“Jesus,” Mathew said, as Mr. Heinrich positioned himself over the child.

The girl began convulsing, her mouth exuding a froth of clear foam.

“That’s enough Heinrich,” said Mathew. “Demetri wants her.”

Mr. Heinrich tilted his head slightly, and the girl went still, her breathing down to nothing, a glaze coming over her eyes.

“That’s enough!” yelled Mathew, as he dug his fingers into his chair.

Mr. Heinrich’s knee buckled, as Mathew engaged his mind. With a desperate sound, Mila sucked in a deep breath of air, as if she’d just broken up from beneath a frozen lake.

As she gasped life back into her body, Mr. Heinrich steadied himself and turned toward Mathew, his face glowing with rage. But, before he could claim Mathew’s brain, Claire climbed to her feet.

Without hesitating, Mr. Heinrich turned toward the slouching woman, who jolted back without falling. Mr. Heinrich narrowed his eyes and tried again, but a great nausea overtook him, as Mathew engaged deeper into his mind.

“Stop,” said Mr. Heinrich, his eyes trained on Claire.

Mathew leaned in, and Mr. Heinrich trembled.

“Stop,” said Mr. Heinrich once more, his voice reduced to a seeping whisper.

Mathew dug his fingers into the arms of his chair and leaned forward, clenching tightly the nucleus of his brain.

“Enough!” said Mr. Heinrich, as he took a sudden step toward Claire.

At once, Claire tumbled to the floor, her body splashing against the tile like a sack of loose parts.

Mr. Heinrich trembled and vomited on the floor. He coughed and spat something vile. Then he turned his head and sunk deep within Mathew’s core.

As if slapped with a baseball bat, Mathew jerked backward in his chair, saliva slinging from his mouth, air deserting his lungs. As Mr. Heinrich drove his will deeper, a low scuttling bloomed up from across the room, as Claire’s scratching fingers flicked outward in search of traction.

Mr. Heinrich turned, his mind releasing Mathew, who tumbled off his chair and onto the floor. Once more, Claire froze and crumpled, as Mr. Heinrich forced his way into the cavities of her mind. He stepped forward, a twist of veins bulging out from his temples, like a bundle of worms beneath the surface of his skin.

Mathew turned over and placed a hand against his head, his brain squeezing to make sense of what he saw.

A low moan exited Claire’s mouth, as Mr. Heinrich rooted himself deeper within. But, all Mathew could hear was a dull ringing, as he watched Mila lift her small body from the floor.

For a quick second, she looked into Mathew’s eyes, and he looked back, and in that briefest of moments, he saw



everything anew. Now, Mila was scrambling forward like a wild animal, her mouth open, teeth bright against her purpling face.

As if alerted from within, Mr. Heinrich turned and stepped toward Mila, his face pale and severe. But, when his foot came down, the ankle bent all wrong, as Mathew slipped within the nooks of his mighty brain.

Mr. Heinrich cringed, as his body fell forward, his knee cap splitting in two, as it smashed against the tile. He screamed and reached for his injured leg, but Mila was already there, her mouth open, little teeth snapping. Heinrich placed a palm against her forehead and pushed. The girl flopped backward and fell still.

“Demetri!” Mr. Heinrich yelled, as he rubbed his broken knee.

He turned toward Mathew, who wobbled like a drunk.

“Stop,” Mathew whispered. “Don’t hurt the girl.”

Heinrich squared his shoulders, his face tight with rage, But, before her could deliver a final blow, Claire stood again.

“No,” she whispered through numb lips.

Heinrich turned and watched, as Claire straightened before him, her body dark and small amid the low light in the room.

Without hesitation, Heinrich stood up, the pain a nothing within his perfect mind. As if refreshed by the challenge, he stepped toward the woman, his one good eye wide and piercing.

Claire buckled some and grimaced, one side of her face completely sagging, the other bright and all there.

Mr. Heinrich steadied himself, his body leaning forward, as if pressing through the winds of a great storm.

Claire shrieked and clenched her fists into little balls, as Heinrich summoned the whole of his brain.

Even still, Claire staggered forward, her arms hanging like dead meat. And, then she met an invisible wall, Heinrich no

more than four feet away.

And, as such, they all remained. Mathew stumbling like a drunk man. Mila nearly unconscious on the floor. Claire helpless and still. And, Mr. Heinrich, secure and sound. For in seconds, Demetri would enter, and put right all the wrongs. Everything tidy. Everything just so.

But, within the blur of his concussion, something called Mathew forward. And, for the sake of pity or hate or delusion, he sunk his everything into Heinrich, who faltered for only the briefest of moments. And, in that briefest of moments, Claire closed the distance and placed her hands on her enemy, breaking him apart like a false man made of hollow sticks.

Mathew gathered himself together and rushed over to Mila, as Claire collapsed to the floor.

“Hey,” he said, as he shook the girl’s body. “You ok?”

Mila’s eyes shot open.

“Yeah, I was faking.”

Mathew put his hand on his forehead.

“Jesus,” he said. “That was pretty good.”

Mila climbed to her feet and rushed over to Claire.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, as she took Claire’s arm.

Claire’s eyes rolled back into her head and she coughed hoarsely.

“Shit,” said Mathew. “We need her up and around, or we’re both dead.”

Mila turned and pointed toward Mr. Heinrich’s chair.

“Get his water.”

Mathew rushed over and picked up the cup.

“It’s fucking empty.”

Mila turned toward Claire.

“We have to get her some water.”

Mathew looked around the room.

“There’s no fucking water in here,” he said. “We’re fucked.”

He rushed over to Mila.

“Listen, you’ve got to leave her, ok?” He put his hand on Mila’s shoulder? “We’ve got to get out of here or we’re dead.”

Mila pushed his hand away.

“We’re not getting out of here alone, do you understand? We have to get her some water. That’s the only way.”

Mathew stood up and placed a hand on his head.

“Alright, alright, let me think.”

“We don’t have time to think,” Mila said, her mouth firing bits of spittle onto Mathew’s arm.

Mathew withdrew in disgust and wiped away the girl’s saliva.

“God damn it, just—”

He stopped and looked at his glistening hand. Mila followed his eyes and her face lit up.

“Hurry!” she said.

Mathew lifted the cup and spat inside.

“Go,” he said, as he tilted it toward Mila.

The girl sucked her cheeks and spat.

“How much will it take?” asked Mathew.

“I don’t know,” said Mila.

Seconds later, the cup was half filled with a glutinous slush of saliva and mucous.

“Go,” said Mathew, as boot steps gathered outside the door.

Mila bent down and held the cup to Claire’s mouth.

“Drink,” she said. “Please God, drink.”

Claire leaned over and opened her mouth, her chin trembling, eyelids low.

Mila put her hand on Claire's back, as she sucked in the filth.

"It's ok, it's ok," she whispered. "It's not that bad."

Claire grimaced and swallowed, as Mathew watched through wide-open eyes.

"Don't throw up, ok?" he said, and Mila flashed him a look.

They waited for a moment, as if they expected light to shoot from Claire's ears. But, instead, she simply stood up and breathed deeply the air.

"Gross," said Mila, as Claire wiped her lips.

Mathew looked at the door, as Mila stumbled to her feet.

Claire looked around, as if she'd woken up in an unfamiliar place.

"Are you alright?" asked Mila. "Are you fixed?"

"Shhh," said Mathew. "Listen."

The boot steps had fallen silent.

"What does it mean?" asked Mila.

Mathew looked at Claire.

"I think it means they know she's up."

Claire started to speak, but the shrill sound of the intercom microphone stabbed their ears.

"Hello," said an unfamiliar voice. "We must ask that you surrender immediately, or we will be forced to flood the room with a nerve toxin. Rest assured that no harm will come to any of you. We only wish to remedy the situation without further violence. Thank you for your cooperation."

They stood silent for a moment, but nothing more came.

"What should we do?" asked Mila at last, her little face painted with terror.

"Nothing," said Claire.

Mathew held his hands out.

“What? We have to surrender. We have no choice.”

Claire shook her head.

“No, we stay right here.”

“Look,” said Mathew. “Maybe you can breathe toxic gas, but I sure as hell can’t.” He held a finger toward Mila. “And, neither can she. I get why you couldn’t give two shits for me, but if you care about her at all, you’ve got to give up. We all do.”

Claire shook her head.

“It’s only a bluff. They’re trying to leverage my feelings for Mila. But, they won’t follow through.”

Mathew put both hands on top of his head.

“Ok, listen, I get you’re smart. But, I know Demetri, and he does not bluff. Not ever. If you says he’s going to gas us. He’ll fucking gas us without thinking twice.”

Claire gave an exasperated sigh.

“And, then what?” she said. “What happens after he gases the room and you two are dead? What happens next?”

Mila approached Mathew and took his sleeve.

“She’s right. He knows Claire will kill everyone in this place. He won’t do it.”

Mathew rubbed his forehead.

“The way I heard Demetri talking to you,” Mathew said, “it’s pretty clear he hates your guts. Maybe he just does it to fuck you over. Then, he gets on one of his helicopters and flies away. Have you thought of that?”

Claire gave him a sharp look.

“He tried to extract my spinal fluid. Any idea why?”

Mathew swallowed.

“Yeah,” he said with a quiet voice. “I think so.”

Claire and Mila listened while he told them about the Centennial Light and the end of infirmity. When he finished

talking, Claire seized him by the neck.

“And, you,” she said, as she drew his face closer to hers. “You would help him do it.”

Mathew grabbed both her wrists, as his face grew red.

“No,” he gasped. “That’s not what I want.”

Mila took Claire’s other hand.

“Please,” she said. “He didn’t have a choice. Just like me. No one has a choice, Claire. That’s the way they make it.”

Claire squeezed harder.

“There’s always a choice.”

Mathew’s face turned purple, and Mila pushed herself between the two.

“Claire!” she yelled. “Let him go!”

Claire looked down at Mila’s face.

“Ok, Mila,” she said. “If that’s what you want.”

She released Mathew and he collapsed hard against the ground. Mila put a hand on his shoulder, as he choked in the air.

“I don’t have shit to do with this nonsense,” Mathew said with ragged voice. “I just want to get out of this place. That’s all I was trying to do. And, I don’t give a shit if you believe me or not.”

Claire turned away and approached the door.

“Where are you going, Claire?” asked Mila. “Are you leaving us?”

Claire continued on without answering.

“Claire!” Mila yelled.

As she reached the door, Claire stopped.

“Shh,” she said without turning around.

She gave two gentle wraps against the door.

“Tell Demetri I will give him what he wants if they let Mila go. But, first, he has to come talk to me. Just him. All alone. Otherwise, I’ll tear everything apart. This entire place, and every other place you build. Until there’s nothing left. And, every single one of you is dead.”

She could hear the sound of boot steps shuffling down the hall behind the door.

“What are you doing?” asked Mathew. “If you give them what they want, they’ll kill us. That I can promise you.”

“He’s right, Claire,” said Mila. “You can’t give in because of me.”

Claire turned toward them, her face like stone.

“You two need to be quiet, do you understand?”

Mila swallowed and nodded. Mathew shook his head and walked away.

“I’m sorry, Claire,” Mila whispered.

Claire flexed her jaw.

“Be quiet.”

Moments later, boot steps gathered outside the door again. Claire turned, her hands clasped behind her back, chin held high. Mathew approached Mila and put his hands on her shoulders, their eyes locked on the door, as if they awaited the unveiling of a great mysterious beast.

With a gentle woosh, the door shot up from the ground to reveal Demetri, his suit looking clean and ironed, face calm and stern. As he stepped forward, he glanced over at Mila and Mathew, his eyes showing hints of disgust. When he was within a few steps of Claire, he stopped and matched her posture, his arms behind his back, chin firm and pointed upward.

“Hello, again,” he said.

Claire said nothing.

“I can only imagine your feelings right now. I suspect you are experiencing a significant amount of anger, which is

understandable, of course.”

He inhaled deeply and raised his eyebrows.

“I wish to explain my position, if you are willing to hear?”

“Go ahead,” said Claire.

Demetri gave a slight nod.

“That is very gracious of you.” He cleared his throat. “I know we have been in conflict. And, I understand that this has brought you great personal suffering. For that I will apologize sincerely. I’m sure you must consider me a monster. It is understandable. I have performed monstrous acts, this is true. But, this was never my choice, you must understand. I am only a soldier. I do what I am told and that is all. It is a simple matter.”

He brought his hands from behind his back and turned his palms upward, as if to show himself unarmed.

“I understand we do not see things the same. Not right now anyway. And, I also understand that we are not likely to become friends. Not today or in the days to come. For what it’s worth, I am sorry. Not just for the pain caused to you, but to everyone. To Mathew and to Mila. All of the subjects. Everyone who has had to sacrifice. It has not been fair. Not to any of you. But, this was never my choice. It was simply a result of the directive.”

Claire stared at him coldly.

“And, what is your directive, Demetri?”

Demetri pushed his glasses higher onto his nose.

“To save the world, of course.” He shrugged. “By any means necessary.”

Claire widened her eyes.

“To save the world,” she whispered. “That sounds important. And, you need me to help you do it, is that it?”

Demetri shrugged.



“As I said, I am a soldier. It is not for me to question my directives.”

Claire flexed her jaw.

“So, you’re just a mindless pawn; is that what you’re saying, Demetri?”

Demetri flexed his jaw.

“As I said, we are not likely to become friends. But, working together, we can save the world from itself. This is why I stand before you now. With great humility. Ready to beg your forgiveness. If it means you would look outside yourself and throw aside immaterial grudges. If it means you would help me save the world, I would do anything. This is the truth.”

Claire rushed forward and collected Demetri by his scalp.

“Oh, Demetri,” she whispered, as she brought him closer. “I thought you were smarter than this.”

Demetri grimaced, as she dug the tips of her fingers into his skull.

“Stop,” he whispered. “Stop this, or there will be hell to pay.”

Claire smiled, her eyes looking bright and wild.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “You’re right about that.” She bent his head back and brought his ear to her whispering lips. “I will make sure of it.”

Demetri grabbed her wrist.

“But, you will be spared the sight of it,” she said. “I will do you this one courtesy in return for your humility, which you so graciously offered.”

Demetri chewed his teeth, as blood trickled down his face.

“You’re not going to kill me,” he whispered. “It’s not who you are. And, then, there is also the matter of Mila. She is only a child, after all.”

Claire’s face grew somber, and her chin tensed.

“You know, Demetri, you’ve taught many things. For better or worse, you truly have. It’s another courtesy I extend to you. To let you know how much you’ve enriched my life with your lessons.”

She dug her fingers deeper, the tips perforating the skin and touching bone. Demetri opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

“But,” she continued, “it’s the greatest lesson of all that brings you here to this moment right now. And, do you want to know what that lesson is?”

Demetri choked Claire’s wrist with both hands, but it was like squeezing a brick.

“If your enemies have no morals,” she whispered, “your morals become their greatest weapon.”

Demetri hardened his face and opened his eyes wide, as if he aimed to steal Claire’s victory by concealing his pain.

“Then, you are truly free,” he said, his voice low and serrated. “But it won’t matter. Please, remember I told you that.”

Claire narrowed her eyes and brought their noses together.

“Goodbye, Demetri.”

She looked into his dark eyes and he looked back, his face red and trembling under the pressure of her mighty claw. And, then, she closed her hand around his skull, his body flopping like a great fish and falling still against the hard, black tile.

“Jesus!” said Mathew, as he pressed his hands against his temples. “What did you do?”

Claire stepped away from Demetri and looked around the room.

“Holy shit,” said Mathew, as he walked around Demetri’s body. “Holy shit, we’re so fucking dead.” He looked at Mila. “We’re dead.”

Mila looked at Demetri, his body sprawled awkwardly, head shattered above the neck.

“What happens now, Claire?” she asked, her voice small and jittery. “What are you going to do?”

Claire wiped Demetri’s blood against her shirt.

“Now, I’m going to finish them and everything they’ve built. Until there’s nothing left. And, every single one of them is dead.”

Countless boot steps clapped the ground around them, and all three gathered together, like tiny things in an infinite storm.

THE END

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# CHAPTER 1

Mason put a pot of tea on the stove and gave it some heat. He laid a clean spoon next to the ceramic pot of sugar on the countertop. Then he opened the refrigerator and retrieved a half-gallon of milk. This he set next to the spoon and sugar, each item parallel to the other, the countertop impossibly clean.

As the pot simmered, he thumbed through his mail. Mostly junk, a couple of bills, something about the county seat election. He sifted out the bills and crammed the rest in the trash. Then he entered the living room and flipped on the TV. As if punched in the face, he winced from the sound of pundits bickering about this and that, government policies, the end of the world.

“Freedom should be protected at any cost,” a woman said.

“Not if the cost is this nation’s destruction,” replied an angry-looking man.

“This country’s gone to hell in a handbasket,” said a fat man with chaotic gray eyebrows.

Mason collected the remote and changed the channel.

“This is Jeopardy!”

The teapot announced its status with a piercing cry, and Mason hurried back to the kitchen. He took a small teacup from the cupboard and filled it with boiling water. Then he plopped in the teabag and watched the steam erupt into the air. He took a deep, cleansing breath and placed his hands flat on the countertop.

“Hello, Agent Barnes” he said without turning around.

“Uncanny,” said a low grainy voice from behind him.

A chair squeaked as Barnes occupied it.

“You’re still using one of those?” he said. “You know they’ve got these Keurig things now that can make it in seconds.”

“I like the old way,” Mason said. He took up the string and bobbed the tea bag up and down in the water. “Shall I make you a cup?”

“Sure,” said Barnes. “Why not?”

Mason opened the cabinet and took out another cup, which he filled with hot water and another bag of tea. He turned toward Barnes who was seated at his kitchen table.

“Sugar, milk or both?”

“No, thank you,” said Barnes with a polite smile. “I like it plain.”

“Suit yourself,” said Mason as he collected the cup.

He approached Barnes and set the tea beneath his chin.

“Why, thank you.”

Mason gave a little nod and turned back toward the countertop.

“I wasn’t expecting you until next week,” he said as he added sugar and milk to his tea.

“Yes, I know,” said Barnes as he bent over and smelled the tea. “That’s very fragrant. What type of tea is this?”

Mason placed a spoon inside his cup and turned the tea in circles.

“Tie Guan Yin.”

“You don’t say,” said Barnes as he filled his nostrils again. “I may have to pick me up some of that.”

Mason collected his cup and turned around.

“Why are you here?”

Barnes smiled.

“We had to move things up.”

Mason approached and sat across him at the table. He held his cup with both hands and stared down into the rising steam.

“Why?”

Barnes shrugged.

“Reasons,” he said.

Mason looked up and assessed the man before him. His hair was slick and black except around the sideburns where faint traces of gray had begun to sprout up in awkward places. He wore a dark suit that looked like it might be several years old and brown pointed boots that were scuffed around the toes. His face was barbed with a dense five o’clock shadow, and when he smiled too big, you could see his overcrowded teeth jutting in all the wrong directions.

Mason took a sip of his tea and set the cup down.

“What reasons?”

Barnes smiled again.

“That doesn’t matter. What does matter is I’m here now, and there’s been a change of plans.”

Mason put both hands on his cup again and raised his eyebrows.

“I’ll finish the assignment by next week. I have everything in place.”

Barnes leaned back in his chair and frowned.

“This isn’t about that. You’ve been doing a great job. No one’s worried about that.”

“Then let me finish,” said Mason.

Barnes shook his head.

“No,” he said. “The situation’s changed. Our plans have to change with them. It’s just not in the cards anymore. I’m sorry.”

Mason took another sip from his tea and placed the cup on the table. Once again, he held it with both hands, his eyes studying the content without really seeing it.



“I’m not going back,” he said without looking up. “I told you I would do what you wanted as long as I didn’t have to go back.”

Barnes leaned forward in his chair and rested his forearms on the table, a slight smile on his face, fleshy lids hanging low over his cold blue eyes.

“I know,” he said.

At last Mason’s eyes ticked upward and a flicker seemed to ignite from within.

“You can’t make me go back,” he said with a flat, emotionless tone. “You know I won’t let you.”

Barnes leaned back in his chair and folded his arms.

“I know.”

A subtle creak echoed in the living room, and Mason knew the front door had opened. He took one last sip from his tea and returned the cup to the table.

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” he said. “There’s still a chance to change this.”

Barnes frowned.

“No,” he said. “I’m afraid there isn’t.”

Three men entered the kitchen and stood behind Barnes, two of them, obvious agents, the other, a tall obese man in a poorly fitted suit.

“Is this your backup?” asked Mason. “It won’t be enough.”

Barnes lifted his cup and took a large swallow. Then he set the cup down and stood.

“I’m sorry about this, Mason. I really am.” He turned and the men separated to let him pass. He took one step forward and then stopped. “Thanks for the tea. I liked it, and I’m not really a tea guy.”

With that, he left the room, the other men congealing back in their previous places. They stood there watching Mason, their jaws stony, hands hanging by their sides. Except for the

tall obese man, who stood in the back with a lazy, expressionless face, his whiskered jowls hanging low from the edges of his massive jaw.

Mason gave a sigh and stood up slowly, like a man who'd grown weary of this and perhaps life itself.

"Alright," he said. "Who's first?"

With a swift and effortless motion, he plucked the entire table from the floor, the teacups flying upward and shattering against the ceiling. The men took a step back, as he wielded the large piece of furniture above his head with a single hand. One of the agents began to withdraw his gun, but the other stayed his hand.

"Anton," the agent muttered. "Execute."

The great man took a step forward and filled his lungs with air. Without waiting, Mason brought the table backward and started to sling it forward. But before his brain could signal the action, Anton puckered his fleshy lips and a faint whistle filled the air.

In an instant, both agents collapsed to the floor, legs bent awkwardly, eyes turning up inside their heads.

Anton took a step forward while the dull, nauseating tones continued to spill out from his large, wet mouth.

Mason's knees buckled as the whistle washed over him. He dropped the table to the floor, and the legs snapped away. He stumbled backward and steadied himself against the countertop, the room spinning, his head growing faint. He tried to speak, but nothing came out. And then, he was falling, his face slamming against the tile floor, a tooth shooting off and skipping between Anton's legs.

At last, Anton stopped whistling and tried to replenish his air. He bent over and propped his massive hands against his knees, his expansive chest heaving, face beet-red. He felt a hand on his back and turned slightly. Barnes was standing behind him.

"Well done," he said as he stepped into the room. "Very well done."

Barnes looked over at Mason, a growing puddle of blood expanding around his head. He reached in his pocket and removed a syringe. He removed the cap and gave it a little tap. Then, he bent down and plunged it into the neck of one of the agents. The man sprung to life, his breath shallow and rapid.

“You’re fine,” said Barnes. “Next time wear your earmuffs.”

The agent looked as if he didn’t know where he was. Then, his mind seemed to clear, and he clutched at his leg.

“I think my leg is broken.”

Barnes stood up and withdrew another syringe.

“We’ll deal with that later. He tossed the syringe in the man’s lap. “Help your friend.”

Barnes turned and approached Mason. He eyed him with curiosity, his head tilted, mouth curled into a slight smile. He bent down and gathered up a handful of Mason’s hair and yanked his head upward. Then, he withdrew a large knife and cut his throat, a fountain of blood emptying out from the gash.

The newly awakened agent helped his injured comrade up just as the blood reached their feet. They looked at Barnes with sickly expressions, the injured agent clutching his swelling leg.

Barnes released Mason’s hair, and his head thumped the tile.

“Let’s go,” he said.

He approached the injured agent and looked him over.

“Can you walk?”

The agent gave a slight nod.

“Yes, I can make it.”

Barnes nodded his approval.

“What now?” asked the other agent.

“Follow our orders,” he said. “Decommission the assets before they become liabilities.”

He looked up at Anton, who immediately looked away.

“Not you, big boy. Don’t worry.”

He gestured to the agent.

“Help him to the car.”

Barnes left the room, and Anton followed, his body nearly scraping the top of the kitchen entryway. The agents watched them go and then struggled after them, their boots slipping and skidding on the blood-soaked tile of Mason’s little kitchen.

## CHAPTER 2

Tree branches raked the sides of the vehicle, as they rumbled along the red dirt, their knees knocking together as the tires bobbed over the weather-torn road. Up high, the sun hung small and bright, buzzards circling far beneath it, something dead on the wind. Throughout the treetops, leaves jittered in the breeze, their colors browning, flesh turning brittle and dry.

Mathew hung his head out the window and closed his eyes. Mila watched him with concern, as he let the cool air fill his nostrils.

“You’re going to take a branch to the eye,” she said.

Mathew groaned.

“I gotta get some air or I’m gonna fill this car with puke.”

“We’re almost there,” said Claire.

They ambled up the path, boring deeper into the woods. Mila raised up and peered between the two front passenger seats.

“Are you sure we’re on the right road?”

Claire didn’t answer.

“How do you know this is the right road?”

“Sit back, Mila.”

The girl crossed her arms and flopped back in her seat.

“Ohhhh, shit,” said Mathew. “You’d better pull over.”

Claire slowed the car, and Mathew bailed out. They waited while he emptied his stomach onto the parched earth. Mila studied him closely, her little fingers clutching the headrest.

“Is he going to be ok?”

Claire said nothing, her fingers tapping the steering wheel.

“Alright,” said Mathew. “Alright, I think that’s it.”

He returned to the car and sat back in his seat.

“Here,” said Mila, as she handed him a bottle of water.

“Thanks.”

Mathew took the bottle and swallowed a few sips, as Claire forced the car up the old dirt path. They drove on another ten minutes, the road winding like a snake, tires throwing up little stones which pinged and popped against the undercarriage. At last, something appeared before them.

“Look,” said Mila.

A little lonely mailbox stood upright on the side of the road, its exterior caked in rust, vegetation engulfing its base. Claire pulled up in front of it.

“This is it,” she said.

She put the car in park and opened the door. Mathew and Mila watched as she approached the mailbox. She pulled open the metal front, and it shrieked. She glanced inside to find it empty. She looked back at Mathew and Mila. Then she took hold of the entire thing and yanked it up from the earth.

They watched as she carried the mailbox to the back of the car and tossed it inside the trunk. Then she approached the driver’s window and bent down.

“Wait here, I’m going to go scout things out.”

They watched her cross in front of the car and trot down the long front drive which cut far and deep into the brier bushes and overgrown trees. After just a few steps, they couldn’t see her anymore.

“This doesn’t feel safe,” said Mila.

“Don’t worry,” said Mathew. “She knows what she’s doing.”

He looked back at Mila, his face looking pale.

“Try to relax,” he said with a comforting smile.

Mila’s face grew somber,

“I’m sorry, Mathew.”

Mathew lowered his eyebrows.

“Hey,” he said. “Come on. It’s not your fault. Anyway, I’m fine. Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

He gave a little smile and patted her knee.

“Ok,” she said. “It’s just, you can’t leave me alone with her, ok?”

Mathew chuckled.

“Yeah, you don’t leave me alone with her either.”

They waited in the quiet, Mila’s knee bobbing up and down, Mathew’s fingers drumming his knee. Somewhere in the trees, a large bird gave a throaty cry and then leaped upward into the breeze.

“Play the radio,” said Mila.

Mathew leaned over and tapped the radio.

“Most of the stations around here only play country music or religious programming,” he said.

“Anything’s better than this.”

He channeled through the stations until he’d proven his point.

“See, it’s all unbearable.”

“Wait,” said Mila. “Go back”

Mathew tapped the button.

“...the worldwide manhunt includes the use of aircraft, police dogs and drone technology, along with cyber tactics aimed at locating the suspects and identifying potential collaborators. If you know the whereabouts of these individuals, you are strongly advised to contact authorities and avoid direct confrontation.”

Mila sank back in her seat.

“Are they talking about us?”

Mathew shrugged.

“Maybe.”

They sat there listening to the local news and stock market report. Pork belly futures were up. The local high school team was in the championship game.

“You’d better turn it off before she gets back,” Mila said.

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

He flipped the switch just as Claire stepped from the thicket. They watched her approach and open the door.

“It’s clear,” she said as she sat down inside.

She started the car and turned up the long-overgrown drive, stray tree branches cracking beneath the weight of the tires. Mila peered between the seats as the car crept forward, but there was nothing much to see. Then all at once, they saw it, a little rundown cabin tucked amid a chaos of unhampered vegetation.

“Where’s the old man?” asked Mila.

Claire drove forward in silence.

“Did you find the old man?”

“Hush, Mila.”

She brought the car in front of the cabin and killed the engine.

“This will do for a couple weeks,” said Claire. “Get our stuff and take it inside.”

Mathew pinched his eyebrows together.

“That bartender said an old hermit lived here.”

Claire opened the door.

“I took care of it.”

She stepped out and closed the door. Mathew watched Claire approach the cabin.

“She scares me,” said Mila.

“Yep,” said Mathew.



They both waited a bit longer. Then he glanced back and smiled.

“Get your stuff. Let’s go inside.”

## CHAPTER 3

Charlotte Maren zipped down the roadway, her fingers tapping the steering wheel in pace with the radio's beat. A thin film of moisture saturated the black road, which glistened here and there beneath the pale glow of a full autumn moon. The speed limit said 45, but that didn't matter. The rest of the girls were already at the bar, and she was badly in need of a drink.

The road curved this way and that way as it cut a path through the dense Appalachian landscape, and she flexed her foot over the gas pedal to keep from flying in one direction or the other.

Most drivers would have erred on the side of caution with the roadway wet. But she knew this drive like the back of her hand, and she was still young enough to think that mattered. Even still, she peered intently through the windshield watching for wildlife both living and dead.

Far ahead on the shoulder of the road, something caught her eye. It was a young man waving his arms for help next to an old beat-up Volkswagen. She slowed the car and pulled off next to him.

"You alright?"

He trotted over to the passenger window and she let it down.

"Hey," he said. "Thanks for stopping. My car broke down, and I can't seem to get her running."

Charlotte looked him over. He was very cute, and his clothes looked crisp and neat. His boots looked new, and he had one of those incredible dimples in his chin.

"I'm headed to Antlers. I can drive you there."

"Antlers?"

"It's a local bar up yonder. They got a phone."

The young man looked back over his shoulder and scratched his head.

“I don’t want to put you out.”

Charlotte smiled.

“Ain’t no trouble. I’m headed up there anyway.”

The young man gave a smile.

“I sure appreciate it. Let me grab my bag.”

Charlotte waited while he ran over to his car. He reached inside and withdrew an Army-green duffel that looked as new as his clothes. He trotted over and climbed inside the passenger door.

“You all set?” asked Charlotte.

“Yep. Thanks again.”

“No problem,” she said as she pulled back onto the road.

She jammed her foot against the gas, and the car fishtailed a little.

“What’s your name?”

“James,” he said as he clutched the armrest. “Do you always drive like this?”

Charlotte grinned.

“Awe, don’t worry, I could drive this road with a bag on my head.”

James stuck his duffel between his legs and leaned back.

“So what’s your deal?” asked Charlotte. “I know you don’t live around here, cuz I know damn near everyone who does.”

James gave a tepid smile.

“No, not from around here. I’m from Ottawa. Working my way across the country.”

“Ottawa, huh?” asked Charlotte. “Where you lookin to end up?”

James shrugged.

“Not sure. Vegas maybe. Or Reno.”

Charlotte shrugged.

“Sounds like a good time.”

They drove without talking for several minutes, the throaty hum of the engine filling the silence, trees whirring past as they ate up the miles.

“Can I ask you something, Charlotte?”

“Sure.”

“Do you have any cash on you?”

Charlotte glanced over for a quick instant and then reset her eyes on the road.

“Ain’t nobody I know carries cash no more. It’s all cards these days.”

“So, no?”

He ran his hand over the wrinkles on his clean, new shirt, and from the edge of her eye, Charlotte saw that he had dark dirt beneath his fingernails.

“No,” she said.

He pursed his lips and gazed through the window at all the black rolling by.

“Why you asking?”

He shrugged without altering his gaze.

“Thought maybe I could borrow a couple bucks.”

She glanced over at him again, and for the first time, she noticed that his hair looked greasy and unwashed, a faint smell of body odor emanating from beneath his pristine clothes.

“I can buy you a beer when we get to Antlers.”

He didn’t respond.

“You not a drinker?” she asked.

“What about a gun?” he asked.

Charlotte swallowed.

“A gun?”

“That’s right.”

He started tapping his fingers against his knee.

“No, I ain’t got no gun.”

He turned his head toward the coming road and let out a deep sigh.

“No gun, huh? I thought all you backwood hicks carried guns.”

Charlotte pushed harder on the accelerator.

“Well, not me. And that ain’t a nice way to speak about people.”

“But if you did have a gun, I’ll bet you’d keep it right here.”

He gestured to the glove box in front of him. Charlotte pressed her lips together and shrugged.

“Nope. I ain’t got no gun, and if I did that ain’t where I’d keep it anyhow.”

James raised his hand to his face and pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes watering, as if he’d just smelled the business end of a skunk.

“What’s wrong?” asked Charlotte.

“Nothing,” he said.

They drove on for several minutes, the road bending to and fro as it cut a path along the edge of the mountainside.

“How much further?” he asked.

“It’s just down the road here. We’ll be there in a couple minutes.”

He pinched his nose again.

“I don’t think that’s right,” he said. “I think we’re still pretty far.”

Charlotte gripped the steering wheel.

“Well, maybe a little further than that, but we’ll be there shortly.”

He gave another sigh and reached toward the glove box.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

He slipped his index finger beneath the latch, and she grabbed his sleeve.

“Hey, stay outta there. Stop!”

He shook her off and flipped open the box, exposing a shiny, black 9mm pistol.

“Stop!” she yelled as he withdrew the gun.

“Hey, hey,” he said. “Settle down.”

She put both hands on the wheel, her chest heaving with frantic breaths, eyes white and wide.

“Come on. Put that back.”

James fondled the piece, turning it over from one side to the other.

“Not bad,” he said. “Your daddy give you this?”

“Come on, don’t play with that. It’s loaded. Just put it back ok?”

James lowered his eyebrows thoughtfully as if he had just recognized the lethality of the weapon.

“Loaded, huh?”

He raised the gun and pointed it toward Charlotte’s head.

“I’ll have that cash now.”

Charlotte’s chin broke out in dimples as she started to cry.

“Hey,” said James. “Come on. I’m just kidding around.” He lowered the gun and grinned. “You’re not much for jokes, are you?”

Tears fled the corners of her eyes and ran like rivers down her youthful cheeks.

“Please,” she said. “Just put that back, ok? You’re gonna make me have an accident.”

“Calm down,” he said in his gentlest voice. “It’s going to be alright.”

She began to slow her breathing and wiped the tears from her face.

“There you go,” he said. “Now, isn’t that better.”

She gave a little nod and more dimples broke out on her trembling chin.

“Good.”

He watched her for a while, his eyes looking small and black on his young, handsome face. He licked his lips and inhaled the scent of her freshly washed hair.

“Ok,” he said as he lifted the gun to her head once more. “Let’s go ahead and pull over.”

Charlotte began to hyperventilate as more tears broke loose from her eyes.

“Please,” she said. “I’ll give you my money. I’m sorry I lied. I didn’t mean it.”

“Shhhh,” he said. “Pull over.”

Charlotte kept driving as if she were safely cocooned within the car’s constant motion.

“Listen there’s gonna be people looking for me. They’re expecting me up at the bar. If I don’t get there in the next ten minutes, they’ll come looking for me.”

James pinched his nose and water gathered in his eyes.

“Shut up,” he said. “Don’t tell another fucking lie. Just pull this fucking car over, right now.”

Charlotte swallowed hard and slowed the car, James pushing the gun hard against her temple as she pulled onto the shoulder of the road.

“Now,” he said. “You don’t have another gun in your purse, do you?”

She shook her head.

“Speak,” he said.

“No.”

He waited for a second and smiled.

“Good. Reach back there into your purse.”

She turned and reached between the seats, her hands trembling, face polluted with smudged makeup and tears.

“Get all your cash.”

She sifted through the bag and pulled out a zebra-print pocketbook. She unzipped it and withdrew three hundred dollars in bills.

“Good,” he said. “Hand it to me.”

She placed it in his hand and resettled in her seat. He jammed the cash in his pocket and took a deep breath. He looked her over, hair done up nicely, lips slathered in pink lipstick. She looked up at him, ink streaming from her eyes like little rivers of black.

“Take your sleeve and wipe all that shit off your face.”

She mopped the tears from her eyes and erased some of the chaos from her skin.

“There,” he said. “That’s better.”

He twirled a strand of her hair with the gun, and she could feel the intensity of his stare against her skin.

“Please,” she whimpered. “Just take the money and my car. I won’t tell no one.”

Fresh tears welled up in her eyes as she stared ahead at the landscape, tall pines sticking up from the rocky earth, past the edge of the car’s headlights and high away into the cold dark sky.

“You know it can’t be like that,” he said.

Somewhere in the distance, a coyote announced its presence to the world, the howls echoing through the woodlands and then swallowed up by the night.



“It can if you want,” she said. “You’re in control. You can make it whatever you want. You’re a good person, I can tell.”

He pinched his nose, and his face contorted with rage.

“Shut up,” he said as he snatched the keys from the ignition. He opened the door and stepped out. “Come on this way.”

She held the steering wheel like a life preserver, eyes raining tears.

“I can’t,” she said with the littlest of voices.

“Right now,” he said. “I’m not going to tell you again.

She made a slow, solemn scoot across the console and passenger seat. Then she swallowed hard and stepped out into the cold, dark world.

“This way,” he said as he motioned to the rear of the vehicle.

She took infant steps as if to withstrain time— more time to think of what to do or say. She thought about running. Maybe she could get away.

But her feet kept moving forward in an automated sort of way, her body shaking uncontrollably, mind collapsing in on itself.

“Please,” she whispered.

He popped open the trunk.

“Climb up in there.”

She looked into the trunk for a moment, her lips forming the word “no.” But even as they did, she felt herself crawling into the trunk and curling her knees against her chest. Then all the light went away as he shut the hatch, and there was only darkness and the smell of the spare tire, which mingled indelicately with the expensive perfume on her skin.

## CHAPTER 4

They sat evenly spaced from one another in the cabin's chilly interior, a deafening quiet at large in the air. Claire approached the fireplace and opened the flue, a steel echo billowing upward through the aging ductwork. Without speaking she turned and walked outside, the screen door slapping the wood frame under the strain of a rusted spring.

Mila leaned forward and peered out the door, but she couldn't see where Claire had gone. She turned to Mathew and started to speak, but her mouth slammed shut when the door swung open again.

Claire entered with a handful of wood which she dumped on the floor alongside the stone hearth. They watched while she loaded the fireplace with newspaper and small strips of wood. Soon, an infant flame began to twist and flicker, amassing more and more size as it fed on all the parched wood.

Outside, the wind licked the leaves, the air aflutter with a gush of natural noise. The gust swelled all around the little cabin as if to wipe its objectionable presence from the green and growing. Little leaves broke away from branches and battered the exterior, and Mila flinched in her chair. Then, as if leveraged by an unseen switch, it all died away to nothing, and the silence roared.

"I'm going to throw up," said Mathew.

He stood up and rushed across the room.

"Do it away from the porch," yelled Mila, as he opened the door and hurried outside.

She winced at the sound of his choking and gagging until it faded amid the rekindling wind.

Claire bent down to stoke the fire.

“He’s getting worse,” she said. “I heard him coughing last night”

Mila glanced at the door.

“How serious is it?”

Claire knelt down and sat on the floor, her eyes gazing into the flames.

“He’s not going to last much longer like this,” she said. “We need to separate the two of you.”

Mila studied the back of Claire’s head.

“Is he going to die?”

Claire tilted her head upward and scratched her jaw.

“No,” she said. “He should start feeling better within a few days.” She turned back toward the fire. “As long as we get him away from you soon.”

Mila glanced at the door.

“You’re going to send him away?”

Claire shrugged.

“We have to.”

“Where will he go?” asked Mila.

Claire studied the fire, its lashing tongues flickering in the depths of her eyes.

“Claire?”

She didn’t answer, so Mila sat back in her chair and folded her arms. She sat for a moment trying to think of what to say next, her lower lip jutting outward, chin firm and fixed.

“You hate him, don’t you? You want to be rid of him, and this is just a good excuse.”

Claire said nothing.

“If you send him away, they’ll catch him. Then they’ll torture and kill him.”

Claire shrugged again.

“If he stays with us, he won’t survive,” said Claire. “At least out there, he’ll have a chance.”

Mila stood up and approached a window. She parted the curtains with a finger and looked out. Several yards away at the edge of the tree line, Mathew was voiding his stomach, his pale hands clutching his trembling knees.

“Please,” said Mila. “He’s my friend.”

Claire turned toward the girl, her face expressionless and cold.

“You trust him?” she asked.

Mila turned from the window and looked at Claire.

“Yes.” She gave a hard nod. “Definitely.”

Claire turned back toward the fire.

“Unearned trust is a liar’s most valuable weapon.”

Mila turned back toward the window and watched Mathew.

“You don’t trust anyone, is that it?” she asked. “Because of me. Because of what I did.”

Claire watched the fire, her eyes flaring slightly, pupils like tiny pinpricks.

“Tomorrow, I’ll go to town and find him a vehicle.”

Mila swallowed the knot in her throat, a tear gathering mass in the corner of one eye.

“Where’s he supposed to go?”

Claire rubbed her forehead as if pained by the discussion.

“I have a project for him,” she said. “Something to keep him busy.”

Mila spun around.

“What is it?”

Claire said nothing, her mind lost in thought, possibilities and probabilities, a hundred things at once.

“Claire?”

“Hush, Mila,” she said. “The less you know the better.”

Claire stood up and dusted her hands. She picked up the poker and stoked the fire with fresh life. Then she turned and looked the room over without looking directly at Mila.

“I’ll go tell him now,” she said. “You stay here.”

Mila watched her cross the room and open the door.

“Will it be today?” she asked, but Claire said nothing and shut the door behind her.

Outside, the wind had really found its legs, and Mathew wavered against the intermittent gusts, his body rocking side to side, face looking sick and green.

“You alright?” asked Claire as she approached from behind.

Mathew spat something vile in the grass and raised up.

“Not really.”

Claire took his arm and timed his pulse. She stood quietly, his gentle heartbeats tapping the flesh of her thumb.

“Well?” he asked.

Claire dropped his arm.

“It’s time.”

Mathew nodded.

“Yeah, I kind of figured you’d say that.”

He turned toward the cabin, the clouds of smoke thickening as Mila fed wood to the fire.

“Did you tell her?”

Claire nodded.

“Well, that’s it then.”

He cleared his throat and spat on the ground.

“Tomorrow, I’ll go to town and find you a vehicle,” Claire said. “It should be good for a couple days, and then you’ll

have to find something else.”

He nodded.

“I’ll get you some food and some anti-inflammatory medications too. Make sure you drink a lot of water. You should start feeling better in a few days.”

Mathew pursed his lips.

“What if I don’t?”

“You will,” said Claire.

Mathew put his hands on his hips.

“What will happen to her?” he asked. “Where will you take her?”

“That’s not your concern.”

Mathew shook his head.

“You’re a cold one, aren’t you? I guess I can understand that.”

Claire folded her arms.

“That’s not what this is about.”

“No? What is it then?”

Claire took a step toward him.

“I need you to do something for me.”

Mathew raised his eyebrows.

“Do what?”

“Something important.”

Mathew shook his head and sat down on the grass. He leaned over and spat the bile from his mouth. He tilted his head upward and eyed her carefully.

“You know this is all pointless, right? This idea of doing away with them. Even if we could, which we can’t, someone else would take their place. There’s always someone pulling the strings. It’s been that way since forever. If you wrestle the power from them, someone else will be happy to take it.

Maybe even someone worse. Nazis, communists, dictators, it's a never-ending cycle. It always has been. Since the Greeks, since the Mayans. Hell probably since we lived in caves. Tyranny in the shadows, tyranny in the light of day. It's all the same. There's no escaping it. It will always be this way. This is what humanity is. You're smart, you should know that."

Claire waited for a swell of wind to blow itself out.

"You're right," she said. "It is inevitable. Someone pulling the strings. Maybe it's even necessary, for balance, for order. To keep humanity from devouring itself. But this, Mathew, what they are, what they're doing. It's what happens when power goes unchecked. They're way beyond preserving the world order. Keeping the rich, rich and the poor, poor. They're plotting the next stages of human evolution. Who lives, how long. Under what circumstances. They've become like some malignant god. They've enslaved the world, and everyone thanks them for it."

Mathew said nothing, the wind rifling through the treetops as if in search of something among the leaves.

"Mathew, this thing I ask of you, it will require more bloodshed."

Mathew swallowed and looked away.

"I don't think I can do that," he said. "I don't have it in me anymore."

Claire narrowed her eyes.

"What you did at the facility suggests otherwise."

Mathew studied the ground.

"That was different."

"Why?" asked Claire.

"Because I did it to survive."

Claire watched him, her face without expression.

"I went through their system, Mathew. I know all about your past. Why you were in prison in the first place. Everything you've done."

He glanced up at her for a moment, but it was like looking at the sun.

“I’m not like that anymore,” he said.

Claire knelt down.

“I need you to be like that again,” she said. “It’s the only way you’re going to pull this off.”

He said nothing, so she bent down and took him by the chin.

“I don’t care about your fresh outlook. I don’t care about your fucking new leaf. I care about winning this and ending them. That’s all I care about. And I need your help to do it.”

She released him and stood up.

“If you turn me loose tomorrow,” he said as he massaged his jaw, “how do you know I’m not going to just disappear.”

She glanced back at the cabin.

“Because you know I’ll find you. And you know what will happen when I do. And if you don’t help, she’ll die.”

Mathew looked up at her.

“What do you mean?”

“We’re running out of time. Without your help, they’ll find us. And even if they don’t, we’ll run out of the Triceserone in a few weeks. She won’t survive without it.”

Mathew looked at the cabin, the smoke swirling up from the chimney in dark tangles and then vanishing altogether in all the rushing wind.

“Can’t you make more? Isn’t it based on your blood?”

“If I had a lab and equipment and time,” she said. “I can’t synthesize something like that in a gas station bathroom.”

Mathew spat into the grass.

“Alright,” he said as he looked off into the woods. “What do you need me to do?”

She turned and started walking away.



“I’ll tell you everything tonight. Just rest and try to drink some water.”

He watched her go, the vast world seeming small around her little body. Such a frightening thing contained within a delicate package, stamping down the yellowing grass with, what? A hundred-and-thirty pounds of weight?

He watched her a bit longer, all the while fearing she might look back, and as she went inside, he felt both relief and terror that she was gone, and he had somehow found himself on her side.

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