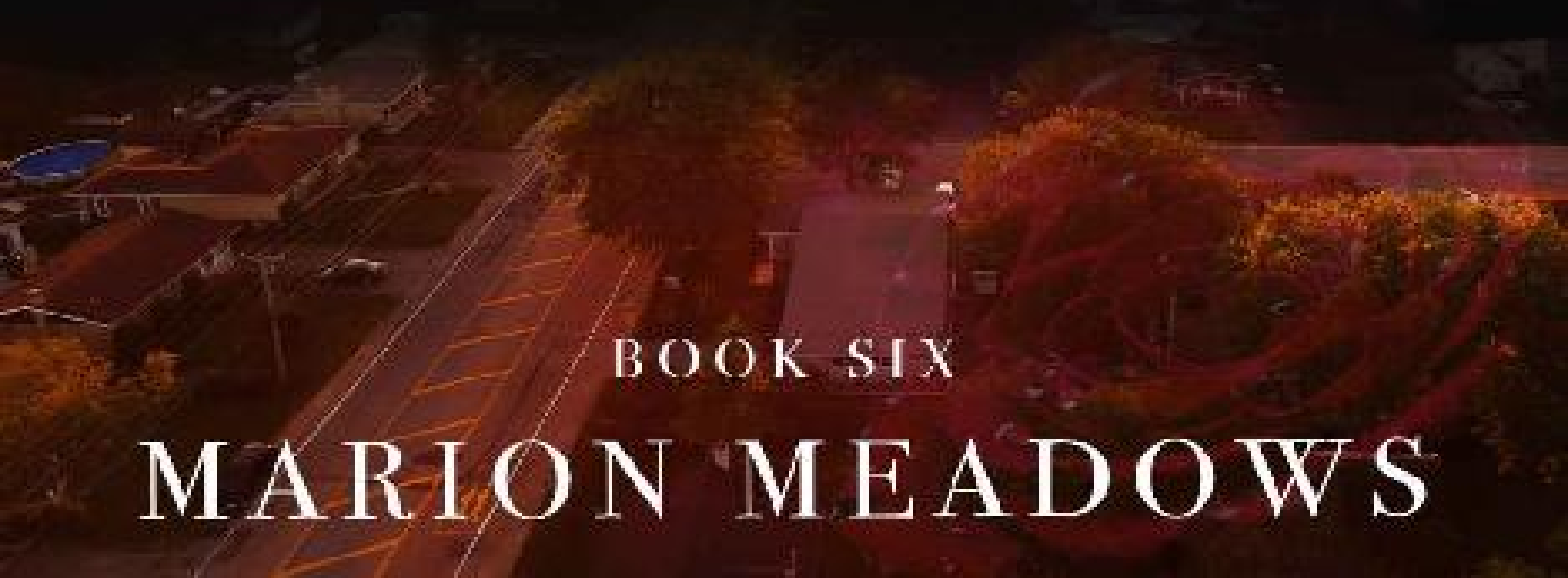




SMALL TOWN  
**SURROGATE**



BOOK SIX

MARION MEADOWS

SMALL TOWN  
SURROGATE

SINS OF THE SOUTH

BOOK VI

# MARION MEADOWS



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## ANGEL

3 5th- 59th, that belonged to the Bend Legs. The Bend Legs, like Angel, belonged to Poboy Jones.

Poboy was a light skinned man built like a Rottweiler, tatted from head to toe. His curly hair was thinning out on his forehead and his face sagged with the weight of hard living. You never saw him without his bandana or his gun.

Angel caught the gangster's eye when she was twelve years old. From that moment nobody dared try her young ass out because Poboy didn't play about females he had claimed.

When the gangster bought the fine little thing from her mother at seventeen years old, he surprised everybody when he refused to fuck her. Instead he kept her in the crib playing house for him. Cooking and cleaning, doing wife shit. Occasionally she watched him fuck other hoes. He told her one day she would have to learn the freak shit, to please him. But not yet.

There was a secret reason Poboy didn't claim his rights with Angel, and that reason was her daddy. Angel's daddy was apparently some Korean Mafia kingpin. He'd been paying her mom to keep Angel fed and dressed and all, but the old bitch was a drug addict and she sold her daughter to Poboy to score some more crack. Once Poboy learned about Angel's daddy, he worked out a little "deal" with the Koreans. Every day he didn't pop Angel's cherry cost that Asian motherfucker five hundred dollars. Nobody else in the set knew about this. Angel herself had no idea that her daddy was a millionaire, who lived

in Korea with his real family, managing his L.A strip clubs from a distance.

Poboy was obsessed with Angel more than he'd ever been with any woman. Angel was the baddest female in Saturn Heights, undisputed. A little drop of cinnamon. Big ass, fat pornstar titties, a slim waist. She had pretty slanted eyes and juicy dicksucking lips.

But she wasn't like those other hoes. She didn't bang, first of all. She had been born in Saturn Heights like the rest of them and like Poboy himself. But Angel was on another level. Quality. She always smelled clean and looked good. She spoke nice and soft, never raised her voice. She could draw better than Hillz, the artist of the set, and it made a nigga jealous as fuck, which was funny to Poboy because he knew Hillz wanted to fuck her at the same time. Hillz wasn't the only one. A girl like Angel caught attention no matter what. Many people had approached Poboy with offers for her. He considered one day selling her virginity if the Koreans decided to stop paying— always a risk— but that would never happen. Poboy had already decided Angel would be the mother of his children.

Poboy himself wasn't no youngster. At thirty-seven he was almost at a hustler's natural lifespan. Had him thinking about starting his own family. But just any female wouldn't do. Angel was like a ripe fruit and he would be the one to pick her.

Poboy had his own house in Saturn Heights. In his Mama's name, of course— you could never be too careful. Unlike the rundown one-levels that rolled on endlessly over multiple blocks, the house was a three-story, with walls, a hedge, a fence, and a gate with a buzzer and cameras.

It was a Sunday, and he'd just come back from church. Being half Mexican he was a devout Catholic. He was in a good mood, but that wouldn't last because there was still business to take care of. Poboy checked to make sure Angel was still asleep in her room— they slept separately— before he answered his phone. It was Hillz calling.

“Talk to me,” Poboy said.

“Baritone ain’t talking. Found him with the safe and the gun but he denying everything.”

“Cut off his hand.”

“You want me to use the saw, or the—”

“I don’t give a fuck, nigga. Speakerphone when you do it.”

He listened to the helpless cries of his former right-hand man (ha) with approval. Baritone was a rat for the Lincoln Heights set. Poboy had ordered his death to be slow and painful. Hillz was on the job, a true killer. If only he learned to control himself around Angel, Poboy would have made Hillz a General. Right now his current and only General was begging for his life.

“Please, cuz, I got a wife, kids—”

“Tell us where you put the rest of the money and you can go home,” Hillz lied.

“I don’t have it! I don’t— Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Poboy picked up the latest edition of *Hustler Mind*. While Hillz finished up the job, he read it cover to cover. Once Hillz hung up to take care of the body, Poboy realized he was hungry. He wanted a rare steak with mashed potatoes and asparagus. He was about to ask Angel if she wanted to eat something, but on second thought she’d been giving attitude lately and some hunger might do her good. Just then his line rang again with the last person in the world he wanted to hear from at that moment.

“Herbert? Boy, you said you was coming to take me to my appointment!”

“Ma, I told you not to call me on this phone. One of the boys will take you.”

“Last time I rode with ‘em bandy-legged negroes my teeth damn near fell out from the speed they was driving. Fuck am I supposed to do about this pain in my hip? You told me you’d take me to the doctor weeks ago. I ain’t seen hide nor hair of your ugly ass!”

They began to shout at each other, an hour passing with neither getting anywhere. Only when Hillz called back did Poboy hang up in disgust.

“What?” Poboy growled. “This had better be about my food.”

“Got a message from the Koreans. They want to talk to you.”

“Fuck the Koreans for now. Tell one of the boys to bring me a steak. Rare. I want it HOT. With mashed potatoes and asparagus. If that shit ain’t hot, they lose a finger. Tell them that.”

“Yes cuz, you got it. Your girl want something too?”

“Did I say something about my girl?” Poboy snarled.

“N-no...”

“Then shut the fuck up and come back with my steak. HOT!”

He’d shouted so loud the Pitbulls outside started howling, so he shouted some more.

In the next room, Angel Clarke was sleeping like the dead. When Poboy hung up he walked over to the room and stood in the door, watching her. He made her sleep naked. It was a rule. She was a light sleeper so he didn’t walk into the room. He watched her beautiful brown skin, her legs curled up towards her chest. Her pussy was glistening. His dick rocked up. He gripped it hard, grunted, and went to take care of himself before he did something he’d later regret.

ANGEL STOOD AT FIVE FOOT TWO INCHES TALL. SHE WAS curved like a Venus statue and pretty as they came. Her hair was thick because she had always worn it natural, in big-ass nerdy braids. By the time she’d grown, though, she could pinch one end of them nerdy braids and stretch it all the way down her back. She had a round moon-shaped face and Chinese eyes, which came from her daddy. She’d never met him—Mama said he was in prison. Who really knew?



Angel grew up in Saturn Heights. Her mother lived off food stamps and what she could get from the long line of boyfriends who cycled in and out the house. She hated Angel's guts, and the feeling was mutual. Angel stayed away from home most days, and because school was hell she spent a lot of time skipping it to chill by the Amafeo library. The librarian there was a nice lady— she never asked no questions.

Saturn Heights bordered on a nice-ish neighborhood, and by way of a shortcut Angel could walk about an hour there and spend the whole day among the books. She liked the art books. Anatomy, landscapes, surrealism, everything. You name it, Angel studied it. Sometimes she spent hours copying drawings one at a time on some library printer paper that the nice librarian lady gave her. By the time Angel was twenty-two she could draw just about anything with a pencil or pen.

These days, that was how she spent most of her time. When Poboy took off hustling, Angel brought out her sketchpad and sat there for hours in a world of her own. It was her escape. She didn't have to work a job or nothing. It was easy to keep Poboy's house clean, since he was such a neat freak he rarely fucked it up. She could have dinner ready by four o' clock, which was when he came home from his business. Most of the day she had jack shit to do, so she just drew or sometimes painted, using a makeup brush and stale coffee. She asked Poboy for paints one time, but he forgot. She didn't ask again. Asking Poboy for favors came with a price.

Life had its ups and downs for Angel. Mostly downs. But she tried to find a bright side in everything— it wasn't in her nature to stay sad.

*Saturn Heights is hell.*

*The Heights of Hell.*

Every day she prayed for a way to escape this hood. But circumstances lay against her. She even began to accept her fate. She wished she wasn't in this situation, but she had to admit it could be worse. Poboy didn't want to fuck on her— yet. She didn't know why, but shit, it made everything else bearable, didn't it? She didn't have to bang or run drugs, she

didn't have to work the strip. Because Poboy protected her from getting violated, she didn't have any babies yet. And maybe it was crazy, but she didn't want any babies. Not yet. Bringing a child into this dysfunctional environment was the last thing she would ever do on purpose.

In her dreams she wanted to be married before she made any babies. Married, and far the fuck away from Saturn Heights. But that was never gonna happen— life wasn't a fairytale. Who was she gonna marry, Poboy? She'd rather cartwheel into the freeway.

About a week before Angel's life turned upside down, a typical summer day passed in Los Angeles. Hot, dusty, hazy. Poboy was out. The gardener was cutting the hedge. Snip-snip-snip. Every few minutes Angel looked up and met his eyes through the window. He was very good looking, short but extremely sexy. He looked around her age. Maybe...no, she wasn't stupid— if she so much as said 'boo' to him, Poboy would hear about it and take it out on her ass.

With a sigh she pulled out her sketchpad— Poboy allowed her to have it, to draw his pitbulls— and started a new drawing on a blank piece of paper.

*Wish I could go to real art school. Meet somebody. Get out of here.*

Lately she'd been thinking about sex. So the drawing was a little different from her usual. Angel was still a virgin. The most Poboy had ever done was tongue-fuck her...back when he was playing nice, when she first came to live in his house.

Saturn Heights was no place for romance. You'd have better luck in hell.

Anyway, there she was. Drawing in her sketchpad that typical L.A day. Hot. Dusty. Quiet. Every once in a while she heard sirens, or Hector's Ice Cream truck, or Poboy's pitbulls howling in their kennels. Poor babies. Oprah was on TV with a "relationship specialist" talking about marriage.

"The black woman expects too much from her man," the specialist was saying. She was a lightskinned woman with locs

piled on top of her head. She wore one of them tribal sack-dresses and wooden African bracelets. Her voice was loud and strong. “Ladies, you will never get a man if you keep your standards in the sky. You got to come down to earth with that. You hear me?”

The audience cheered and clapped.

“Now more than ever, the black woman is educated. But the black man wants a partner, not a slave driver! Not a professor! You hear me?”

More cheers.

“Ask your man what HE wants! Treat him like a MAN! Ask him about his day. Ask him what YOU can do for HIM! You hear me?”

The next channel was a dirty-ass movie. Angel let it play as she drew. Slowly the fantasy in her head took shape on the page. She squirmed in the chair, crossed her legs. Angel drew a man fucking a woman from the back, shoving her down into the bed. His muscles stood out the way Poboy’s never would. The girl was crying out as he fucked her deep and slow...

Angel let the pencil fall before the drawing was complete. She passed a shaking hand over her mouth.

She shut the sketchbook and eyed the clock. Time to cook Poboy’s dinner.

“ANGEL!” POBOY’S ANGRY ROAR WOKE HER UP IMMEDIATELY. Angel scrambled off his bed. Naked. She always had to sleep naked— that was his rule.

“What time is it?” she gasped. She saw the clock on the marble dresser and moaned. “Aw, Poboy, I’m sorry— ”

He was drunk. He grabbed her by the hair. Poboy knew how to break even the toughest bitches and Angel was a softie.

“I keep you around to sleep? Get your ass up!” he roared. He shoved her on the bed and watched her titties bounce up and down. His dick rocked up. She scrambled to cover herself, which annoyed him because he liked watching her naked.

“You want me to fuck you today, Angel? I think today might be the day.”

She trembled in fear but didn't say anything.

“Maybe I'll take your ass,” he threatened.

She mumbled something.

“What? Speak up!”

“Let me put something on and I'll go to the kitchen. I made the food, I just got to heat it up,” she pleaded.

“I been gone all day long. You sleep all fucking day? Or did you run out and fuck one of these young niggas? You let Joe in here to fuck?”

“No!” she cried, eyes going wide with true fear. He knew she hadn't done nothing, but her fear excited him.

“No, I didn't! I never would. I don't ever even talk to them, Poboy, you know that!”

Yeah, he did know that, but he also knew Angel liked Joe. That young darkskinned nigga from Alabama. And the feeling was mutual—Poboy could read that country motherfucker like a book. He had plans for Joe, but for now he just wanted to torment Angel.

“If I find out you fucked him, you know what will happen,” he said, stepping to the scared girl and grabbing her throat. “I can get fifty niggas to fuck you to death in front of him. Then I'll make my dogs eat his heart while it's still beating. You think I won't do it, bitch? You think I won't?”

“Please...”

Poboy pried open her legs and groped her pussy. She froze as he fingered her tiny clit, his two fingers sliding up into her hot, heavenly wetness. “Ugh...” he groaned out loud. His dick begged to bury itself inside her tight reluctant hole. But he restrained himself, as always.

He finger-fucked her for another minute before letting her go. She was shaking with fear. Good. Let her never forget who owned that pussy.

He said, “You one lucky little virgin. Now go fix me up some food.”

He’d turned his back on her when something heavy slammed into his head. In disbelief Poboy touched his scalp and felt it wet and sticky. He charged towards Angel. She threw up her hands. Poboy grabbed them, pinned her to the bed and punched her in the face.

*I NEED TO GET OUT OF HERE.*

Angel shuddered, wiping the split underneath her eye with a rough paper towel. How much longer could she take this shit? If she had any shred of self respect she would cut that man into bits. He treated her like dirt. She let him beat on her and didn’t even fight back.

Well, she was scared to death of him. She valued her life even though it was a living hell.

“Get me something out the fridge,” Poboy ordered. After knocking her out he went to watch football. It was just the two of them in the house as usual.

“You want water?” She didn’t want him to get more drunk. Liquor just made him crazier.

He growled, “You know what the fuck I want.”

She fixed Poboy’s drink and brought it for him. As she held out the glass and restrained the urge to throw the disgusting mix in his face. He looked her over, his cold green eyes slicing her up from head to toe.

“I ain’t even hit you that hard,” he sneered.

“I know,” she lied.

“So what the fuck you crying for?”

“I’m sorry.”

His eyes dropped to her flat stomach.

“I should get you pregnant,” he said. “Fill you up with my babies.”

“No, no...”

“You doing nothing all fucking day. You need a youngin to keep you busy.”

She shook her head. “No, please. Not like that.”

His eyes were cold. “Shut the fuck up. You always fucking crying over nothing.”

Make him happy.

“I’m sorry.”

“Go in the room with your crybaby ass.”

“YOU TRIPPING,” SAID SHONEY, ANGEL’S BEST FRIEND. SHE put two more fries in her mouth and washed them down with a sip of Pepsi. “Poboy is a man. Give him space to be a man.”

“You don’t know the situation, Shoney. I can’t make him happy no matter what I do.”

Shoney and Angel were like caramel and mocha. Shoney had light skin and green eyes. She was short and thick. Angel was darker, taller, with softer features.

Shoney shrugged, then winced as her sore rib twinged. She also got beat up by her pimp/boyfriend regularly. “Look,” she said to Angel, rolling her green eyes, “You just have to know your man better and stop thinking ‘bout yourself.”

“Deebo still hitting you,” Angel pointed out. “Why you don’t take your own advice?”

Shoney turned red and glared at her. “We ain’t talking about Deebo and me. But like I told you, just do what Poboy says and you gon’ be fine. It’s a lot of bitches that wish they had him.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Angel looked around the corner store, twirling the pencil between her fingers. This spot sat on the very edge of Poboy’s turf. She might could take the bus and ride off into the sunset, far the fuck away from Saturn Heights and all its drama. Go

straight to Santa Monica or something. Then what? Nothing. Something. Anything...

Angel had been born and raised in L.A but never once seen the beach. She had some money in her pocket she stole from Poboy— risky as shit, but he still hadn't noticed. She could do it.

Shoney was saying, "Remember them pretty gold earrings he got you? Angel, come on. You go outside, everybody give you respect 'cause you his girl."

"He hardly never lets me outside anyway. You know he'd blow top if he realized I was here with you," Angel pointed out.

"Yeah, so take advantage of the privilege, bitch. You just mad unappreciative as usual. Stop complaining."

"Nevermind, Shoney."

Shoney collected her purse with a mug on her face. "I got to go. Trick says he's ready for me."

"Okay."

"I'll come get you in like a hour. He pays extra for more time though so it could be like a hour and a half."

"Sure."

"Don't run off nowhere."

"I won't."

Shoney frowned. "Once Poboy breaks you in, you could start. We could do this together. It's money, you know."

"Yeah. F'sho."

Shoney shrugged. "How do I look?" She turned around and shook her booty.

"Good," said Angel. "Them earrings, those are nice."

"Thanks. Deebo got 'em for me. Gold-plated, but they nice."

"Take care," Angel said. She wondered how it felt to fuck men for money. She didn't really want to find out. *This is life.*

*You a hood bitch with nowhere to go, accept it.*

“You better be here when I get back, bitch,” Shoney warned her. “If you run off Poboy’s gonna break my neck.”

“I’ll be here.” While it would be easy to run off and disappear across enemy lines, Shoney was right that Poboy would have her ass as punishment. Angel didn’t want to get her friend into trouble. Besides, if the opps saw her across the boundary, that meant death or worse.

Besides-besides, there was nowhere to go.

Women’s shelters, yeah.

She’d been to those with her Mama once upon a time.

Leave, leave... Then what?

Get a job... She’d have to leave Saturn Heights. Everybody she knew. Start over with nothing. The wage out there was fucking trash, and the rent these days was out the window. That’s what everybody said. That’s what Poboy said. But could she do it? She should do it. She was twenty-two. Her life was just passing by. Maybe fucking a man for money wasn’t the worst that could happen.

Angel began to draw a bird in a cage. She thought hard as her fingers made long, sure strokes in the sketchbook. Of course the real enemy was herself. The idea of walking out alone in the streets scared her worse than Poboy’s rages. Facts. She knew women who went missing, women who turned up around the strip with their bodies torn and their faces messed up. Shoney risked it every day, but she was right about the money. Paid better than Starbucks, no doubt...

Maybe...

A man came into the shop. Before going up to the counter he passed and glanced down at what she was drawing. Angel kept going without looking up. She got the idea of him from the corner of her eye, a skill you developed growing up in the hood. He was white, corporate, and obviously not from these parts. Nice watch. He should be careful walking around like that. She saw his car parked outside and her eyebrows went up a little. Fuck was Mark Zuckerberg doing on 39th?



The man went up to the counter and ordered a two-piece of fried chicken, a honey biscuit, fries, and a tall cup of sweet iced tea. Renee glanced at Angel as if to silently say, “You seeing this?”

Renee went to get the food. The man didn’t stand there waiting. He doubled back to where Angel was sitting.

“Hey, Miss. ’Scuse me.”

She looked up, unfriendly. “What?”

He was tall and blonde, shaped like a stork.

The accent wasn’t L.A.

Southern?

“Nice drawing,” he said. “How much?”

“Aw, um, what?”

“I want to buy that drawing from you.”

“Huh?” She said.

“You speak English?” He repeated the question in perfect Spanish. This close Angel could size him up better, and she swiftly judged he wasn’t no mark. He spoke like somebody used to getting his way— like a CEO or some shit. It threw her off and she found herself actually replying shyly, “I ain’t selling it, Mister.”

He smirked. “Come on. My food’s about done. Take it or leave it.”

“You serious?”

“How much, darling? Name your price.”

“A hundred,” she said boldly.

He handed her a hundred dollar bill. Angel glanced back quickly to see if Renee was watching. She wasn’t. A little breathlessly Angel said, “Uh, that ain’t a good one...I got better. See?” She showed him a couple other drawings. He studied them each intently before stopping her. “That one. I like that one the best.”

“Okay...”

She tore it out of the book and handed it to him. He said, "You didn't sign it."

"Sign it? Oh...right..." She scribbled her signature shakily in the corner.

"Angel C.," the rich man read slowly. "Alright. Thanks, Angel."

"Yeah..." She shuffled her feet. "You know, Mister? Don't be flashing big money around here. It ain't a good neighborhood like where you from, probably."

"I can handle myself."

Their eyes met. Angel gripped the hundred-dollar bill with sweaty hands. Renee came back with his food. The man paid her, and walked out with a smile on his face and not a backwards glance for Angel. He stared at the drawing for a second before climbing into his Benz and pulling out. She hoped his stupid ass didn't come back, 'cause if anybody saw some corporate white boy moving all that around they would have robbed him naked.

THE PARTY SET OFF AT TEN O' CLOCK ON THURSDAY NIGHT. Poboy's spot was where it happened. By eleven the house was choked wall to wall in thick blunt smoke and the smell of liquor was like a visible haze in every room.

Loud music rumbled the house to its roots.

Angel didn't have to do shit but sit down and stay quiet. Poboy told her to keep her mouth shut and stay out of the way. In the past when Angel was allowed to mingle with the rest of the set, one of them inevitably made a move and ended up on Poboy's bad side. With his quick-ass temper, Poboy could turn a regular kickback into a bloodbath and Angel was often the trigger.

She watched him, short and fat and old, cutting it up with his crew of yes-men. Poboy was just a sociopath and a murderer. There wasn't anything great about him except his cruelty. He was her jailer and one day he would force her to

sleep with him. Because of him, she could never leave the Heights.

LATER IN THE NIGHT HE CAME INTO HER BEDROOM. “GET UP, get up.”

She shot to her feet. He dragged her towards him by the back of her neck and breathed in her ear, “You a special bitch to me, Angel. You young and fine. I could turn you out and make money off that tight young pussy. But I won’t. ‘Cause I don’t share my bitches.” His evil eyes bored into hers. “Let me catch a nigga looking your way I’ll cut his throat and then yours.”

He pressed his thumb into the bruise next to her mouth. Hard. It hurt. “Take off your panties,” he ordered.

“No!”

He hit her, and she knew from experience refusal would make it worse. So much worse. On the other hand, he might get bored if she followed his every command like a robot. Angel removed her panties and put them in his outstretched hand.

“Remember, Angel. I own this pussy,” he snarled. He pushed her against the wall and thrust a finger inside her. She was dry and it hurt. She bit her lip and closed her eyes, imagining herself on the beach.

“You was just seventeen. Pretty young bitch...You was made for me. I own this pussy. I own you. Don’t motherfucking forget that.”

He took his finger out and shoved it in her mouth. He thrust against her tongue. She tasted herself, salty and sweet. His bloodshot eyes glazed over as he tracked the slow thrust of his fingers between her lips. He was drunk and high on cocaine.

“Yeah, Angel. Yeah. Matter of fact...” He removed his fingers and began tearing at her clothes. “Get these off.”

*No...No!*

“No...not with everybody outside. Please.”

“Do what the fuck I tell you.”

She took all her clothes off and sat down on the bed, hugging herself to stop the shaking. She was afraid and upset. She knew sex meant nothing, but if he did it to her, she would lose the one part of herself she had never given to anybody.

Poboy loomed over her, the dark light of the side lamp throwing him in a demonic shadow. His green eyes glittered as he drank her terror down like Hennessy.

“When I come back, I better see you sitting right here,” he rasped.

He stroked himself through his trainers a couple times, watching her. Angel had a pretty, curvaceous figure. Deep red-brown skin. Wide eyes and a bounty of thick black hair that curled out like the crown of a palm tree. Her nipples were big and dark. Her tummy was soft and plump, the kind a man liked to squeeze while he fucked.

“Stay here,” he ordered, still watching her as he reached for the half-empty Henny bottle he’d left on the nightstand. He took a deep drink, watching her. “Damn,” he said. “Damn. Pretty young bitch...”

Angel shivered. She just wanted him to leave.

“You love me?” he said suddenly. He sounded like a little boy to Angel. The hair stood up on her neck.

“Yeah, I love you,” she whispered.

“Good.” He dipped out of the room and locked it behind him.

SOUNDS CAME THROUGH THE LOCKED DOOR ALL NIGHT LONG. Music and the slam-slam of Dominoes. Cussing. Fighting. Moaning in the next room. At one point Angel smelled fried chicken and burgers, meaning someone had brought food. Nobody came to get her for that, so she thought about something else as her stomach rumbled.

Near midnight she'd fallen asleep at the foot of the bed when someone slammed open the door. "Poboy?" She scrambled up, woken fully by the frantic beat of her heart. "Poboy, I'm sorry I—"

Her man was not alone. His friend Hillz came through, with Shoney behind him. And then Poboy came in.

They were drunk.

"Stand by the wall," Poboy barked at Angel.

Angel covered herself with her discarded clothes and did as she was told. Shoney ignored her, giggling stupidly as Hillz tossed her down on the bed. "Had a mind to fuck this bitch since I laid eyes on her," he muttered, groping Shoney's breasts. "Motherfucking Deebo... You in on this, Po?"

"Yeah money, in a minute." Poboy cut a warning look to Angel she understood perfectly well. She stood frozen, eyes darting from her friend to the two men. She kept her mouth shut.

Shoney pulled her tube top down, and her large cherry nipple titties popped out. She shook them playfully in the man's face. Hillz groaned and knelt on the edge of the bed. He took one heavy breast in his mouth and sucked it hard as Shoney moaned and scratched his scalp under his dreads.

Suddenly Poboy walked over to Angel and, dragging her by the throat, brought her bare ass up against his dick. They watched the couple on the bed. Angel could feel Po rocked up on her ass, hear him breathing all harsh and shit. He groped her. Two hands smashing her titties together. Then two fingers snaking down to her pussy.

"My babygirl," he grunted.

On the bed, Shoney's titties glistened with spit. Hillz rose up and pulled out his dick. Shoney giggled and started sucking on him, pulling him deep into her throat. Hillz groaned, working his hips. "Yeah, like that."

"He paid me two hundred to fuck Shoney," Poboy said. "And that's not even my bitch. Who else could do that?"

“Don’t make me fuck him,” Angel begged.

“Say you’ll carry my son.” He stroked her stomach and spoke his evil directly in her ear. “Say you’ll carry my babies, Angel.”

“Okay. Yes, whatever you want,” she pleaded.

The gangster breathed harshly. “I been watching that lightskinned bitch ever since she came ‘round to see you.”

“Let me go, Poboy.”

“I like her look. Them green eyes just like mine. I’mma put another youngin in that yellow bitch tonight. You’ll watch.”

“Why you doing this to me?” Angel whispered, closing her eyes.

“Look how she doing Hillz. I said *look*. You suck my dick like that, you make me happy. You want me happy, right Angel?”

Shoney sucked dick like a pro. She slobbered all over Hillz and sucked him so deep her throat popped near the bottom. She stroked his sac and pulled out, red-faced, before spitting all over it and slurping him down again. Her eyes were closed in rapture. She really loved doing this. Her hand came up and stroked, pumped, until with a jagged cry Hillz nutted all over her face and titties. Shoney smiled and licked his white seed off with her long pink tongue.

“Thank you daddy,” she moaned.

“Shit, ma,” Hillz panted, looking ready to fall over. “Shit...”

Poboy shoved Angel aside and went up to Shoney. “My turn.”

“Yes daddy,” she moaned, cutting her eyes for Angel. “You want—”

Ignoring her, Poboy turned Shoney over on her stomach and climbed on top of her.

“Wait!” Shoney tried to move away. “You ain’t got a condom or—”

Poboy dragged her back and punched his dick inside her. Shoney moaned and wiggled her ass back. Her protest was forgotten. She would do anything these men wanted. That was what she’d told Angel, right? Do what they said. Do what they wanted. Make Poboy happy.

Angel watched in a daze as Poboy fucked her friend. Hillz got hard again and eyed them for a minute before sliding his eyes covertly to Angel, where they remained.

Hillz jacked his dick and stared at Angel’s titties and exposed pussy. He licked his lips. “Damn,” he mouthed.

Angel looked away.

Sounds of wet sloppy fucking filled the room. While Poboy was distracted with Shoney’s pussy, Hillz watched Angel and jacked his dick towards her. She stood frozen. Both of them knew if Poboy saw him it would be hell to pay. But Poboy was distracted and Angel wasn’t saying shit.

Finally Hillz climbed on the bed and pushed his dick towards Shoney’s mouth. Whole time he stared at Angel, as if saying he wished it was her on the bed, forced to suck his bitter nut from his dick. Shoney obliged him instead. While Poboy used her pussy Hillz fucked into her mouth. Poboy came first. He buried his dick inside Shoney and pushed his thick nut deep with a primal noise. “Yeah...yellow bitch... Take this nut. Get a baby for daddy. Yeah. Don’t waste my shit, leave it in there. Take daddy’s nut.” He pulled out. A string of pearly cum leaked from Shoney’s slit. With a grunt Poboy pushed it back in, two fingers working hard. Hillz came again inside her mouth.

Shoney collapsed on the bed.

Poboy approached Angel.

“No,” she gasped.

He threw her down on the bed. His fingers, still wet from Shoney and his mingled cum, found her entrance. Angel tensed up but it was no use. Poboy pushed his fingers inside

her pussy and stroked her. No affection there. She wasn't expecting it. He leaned over and bit her ear. She could feel his wet dick pushing on her ass. "Next time you gon' eat my nut from her pussy," he breathed. "I want both of you pregnant, sucking my dick, giving up the pussy to me same time. That's my fantasy. Remember I own you," he growled. "Hillz!"

"Yeah," croaked the other man.

"I saw you watching my pussy. You like her?" Poboy's voice was harsh and unreadable.

Hillz stupidly replied, "Yeah, money, she bad."

Poboy wiped off his dick with a towel. "You want to fuck my bitch?"

"Yeah."

Poboy hit Hillz straight across the mouth. The man reeled back. "Fuck!"

"Go back to the party," Poboy ordered him.

Hillz fled. Poboy turned back to the two women sitting on the bed. Angel stared at the floor. Shoney stared at the wall. They pretended not to see each other.

Poboy climbed in bed and laid down. "Come here."

Both women laid on either side of him. Shoney pulled a blunt from somewhere and the two of them started smoking it. Angel didn't move. Angel didn't say a word.

When she glanced at Shoney, she found the other woman looking at her with a sad expression that became hard and unforgiving.

IN THE MORNING SHONEY WOKE THEM ALL UP BY SUCKING Poboy's dick. She wrapped her lips around him and worked him down her throat. Poboy groaned and twisted in bed. His other hand fumbled for Angel and dragged her close, cupping her ass.

Angel buried her nose in the gangster's neck. He smelled like a blunt wrap and a man who had been drinking. He didn't



do anything but grope her ass. Shoney slurped and sucked him, her curly hair bouncing against his strong muscular thighs.

“Mmm, daddy, it’s so hard for me,” she cooed.

Poboy turned his head and chuckled in Angel’s ear, “She coming for your spot.”

“She can have you,” Angel said.

The hand gripping her ass clenched tight as a vise. It hurt like hell. “Watch your mouth.” He stroked her butt. “You are my princess. That’s why I never made you do nasty shit.” He sucked on her earlobe but Shoney’s talented mouth and tongue distracted him. Angel was spared.

THE PARTY WENT ON INTO THE NEXT DAY AND THE SCENE repeated. Angel fell asleep against Poboy again, with Shoney pressed against his other side. Angel woke up in the middle of the night with her hair standing on end. Poboy was asleep next to her, Shoney sprawled across his chest. Angel had just had the strangest dream. She had been wrapped in a man’s arms, her head on his chest. The man smelled different— good. Like something real and natural. Like sage and incense, but cleaner, less smoky. Like maybe how a forest would smell, but she’d never been to a forest.

“Babygirl?” he said.

She had put her face in his neck. She could feel the heat from his skin, as realistic as the smell of him.

“You’re going to have my babies,” he said. “Because I love you.”

Angel said, “I love you too.”

His finger. Inside her. He fucked her on his hands. She could feel it...

She moaned.

“You like that?”

“Yeah...”

“Open your legs, Princess. You won’t be a virgin anymore. I’m gonna give you twins.”

She wasn’t scared or nothing. She was excited. Somehow she knew it wouldn’t be like with Poboy. She had always wanted tenderness and love, and this man would give it to her. He was a good man— a hero. The dream was real enough that she felt a powerful surge of love.

“Babygirl,” he said again. “My wife.”

Though she couldn’t see his face, she knew he was the most handsome man in the world and even if he wasn’t, she still loved him.

“Will you take care of me?” she asked him.

“Always,” he said. “I’ll always protect you.”

Poboy let out a long nasty-ass snore.

Angel’s eyes snapped open to the familiar bedroom. Samurai swords, paintings of Poboy and his pitbulls, and a picture of Poboy’s mama.

At first she couldn’t believe it. maybe this was just another layer of the dream, and if she closed her eyes she could go back to the big handsome man who smelled like a pine forest and cloves. The man who wrapped her in his strong arms and tenderly touched her body, making sure she was ready before he...Before...Fuck! No. This was reality. This was her life.

A tear slipped from Angel’s eye. She needed to get the fuck out of this bed. She couldn’t stay in here a second longer.

But just as she moved to roll over, Poboy’s arm shot out and pinned her down. Like an iron hook he dragged her towards him. She gasped and struggled, but he was a strong man and his dogs weighed more than she did.

“Where you going, Angel?” he grumbled.

“I just wanted some water.” Her voice was calm.

“Get it in a minute.”

He dragged her underneath him. Her panic rose; she sensed what was about to happen.

“Poboy, get off me.”

“Fuck you mean? I want you here. You’re mine.”

“No...Come on. I’m thirsty.”

He began touching her breasts, squeezing them hard. “Shut the fuck up and let me take what’s mines.”

“No! Stop! Get off me!” He was so heavy; she couldn’t breathe. Fear became terror. “Poboy! Get off me! Get off me!”

“I said shut the fuck up!” he hissed, gripping her throat. “I know your little game, Angel. Let Shoney top me off, you free, huh? Well guess what? I paid for this pussy and if I want to take it right now, I can.” He slapped her pussy hard. “It’s mine,” he panted, his breath harsh from sleep. He stank of Hennessy and cocaine. People said cocaine didn’t have a smell, but it did, it did.

“No, no,” she begged.

He began tugging at his boxers. She felt his dick poking hard into her leg. Angel began to scream. Poboy couldn’t stay hard or something; he was trying to get his dick up and keep her still at the same time. Meanwhile she was fighting like an animal in a trap. Every now and then Poboy lost grip on her mouth and a scream escaped her. Outside, Poboy’s pitbulls howled in their crates. But they were always howling, trapped just like she was—

Gunshots.

“The fuck?!” Poboy roared, letting go of Angel to rear back in the bed. Shoney sat up, too. “Wuzzgoion?”

“Aye!” Poboy called into the living room. He got out of the bed and Angel rolled off onto the floor. She crawled under the bed, hugging herself and trying not to pass out. Poboy had choked her up ferocious.

“What the fuck?” Shoney whined. “My head hurts, man.”

“Shut the fuck up, bitch!” Poboy roared. “Shut up! Toby! Screws! Where the fuck y’all at?”

Thumps and mumbling came from the living room. Whoever was left in the house must be assed-out drunk.

“Boss?” came Toby’s slurred voice. “You need somethin’?”

A door slammed distantly in the house.

Screws hollered, “Boss, cameras! Cameras!”

The house exploded.

From under the bed Angel couldn’t see much, but she heard it all. The rapid rat-a-tat-tat of an automatic. Shoney screaming. Pitbulls yelping, then silent. Poboy bursting out with his Glock 9, bow-bow-bow, and then the heavy slam of Poboy’s body hitting the floor. What sounded like dozens of heavy footsteps.

Angel huddled under the bed in terror as more men filed into the room. Another language— not english, not spanish— flooded her ears. She clapped a hand over her mouth.

A face appeared in the gap between bed frame and floor. A Korean face.

“Found you,” he said.

## ROSS

**T**housands of miles away, Ross McCall was casting his gaze over the glittering sprawl of Tokyo.

“You should let Mangjeol fix you up, Ross,” said Chauncey Quinton III. “I mean it. You want a girl, Manny’s got you.”

The two men had been good friends since Everdue Prep, and both rowed Crew at Princeton. The third member of the party was a slight Korean-Japanese man, the odd one out between the two foreigners. He had also attended Everdue, but as an international student. At Princeton he’d been treasurer of their frat.

It had been nearly a decade since the friends had seen each other.

Quinton polished off the rest of his squid with a big greedy bite. The man was built like a linebacker, a yellow-haired giant who lived in Japan off a family inheritance. Like Ross McCall, Quinton was heir to a great Southern fortune. Tobacco money.

“You need to think about a legacy, Ross-man. You got all that fucking money and no wife. Fucking crazy if you ask me,” Quinton drawled. “I wanted to be the last bachelor in the frat. All these other dickheads went and got married. Even Jonah, fucking fag.”

“Jesus, Quint.”

“Well I always knew, Ross. Remember that time in the bathroom? He totally tried touching my dick. Not that I blame

him. You know I always had a big sweet cock. The bitches over here can't keep away from it, you know. I've about fucked half of Tokyo by now, ain't that right, Manny?"

A woman in a silk dress came up to their table and lit his cigarette, then Ross's. She smiled at Ross, just a slight curve in her lips. Ross smiled back.

"You're pretty," Quinton barked at her in bad Japanese. "Free later?"

"Um, sorry, don't understand," the woman said, still smiling politely.

"I'm sorry, Shumi-san," Mangjeol apologized, cutting his eyes at Quinton. "He's very drunk."

"Oh, I see. It's no trouble," the woman said.

The woman left the table, moving on other customers. Ross caught her eye again. This time she met his gaze.

And held it.

Ross shifted in his seat. She was pretty, with a small face, large eyes and jet-black hair long enough to sweep the top of her ass. Would be nice to hold onto while he...

Ah.

He was single.

*Why not?*

Quinton howled with laughter at something Mangjeol said.

She was gone.

Oh well.

For the evening at the most trendy restaurant in Tokyo, the thirty-year old Ross wore a slightly-rumpled linen suit. His thick curly hair that went more red than brown. He stood at six foot two, proportioned like a Rugby player.

Like Quinton, Ross looked perfectly at home among the glowing architecture of Zumaki Restaurant. Wealthy and raised in wealth, he was comfortable in places only connections could afford.

“Mother and Father won’t shut up about getting married.”

“Neither will you,” said Ross.

Quint chuckled. “Whatever. Ross, I want to know what happened to you. Out of nowhere you start dating black girls. What’s up with that?”

“I won’t be talking my girl problems out with you, Quint, if it’s all the same.”

“Yeah, why the fuck not? We’re grown men; we can talk about girl problems if we want to. You forget I have a sixth sense. Plus everybody was talking about you dating black girls.”

“Why is it a problem?” Asked Mangjeol.

“Because Quint’s a racist,” Ross told him.

Quint said incredulously, “How can I be racist? No, Ross! You got me wrong. I’m not a racist, by no means. No two shakes about it. How can I be a racist?”

Ross grinned. “Remember that one time in the bathroom \_\_\_”

“Fuck, Ross! If you call me racist for that, then hell, I guess! But that man was definitely Puerto Rican, I would stake my life on it! Anyway, how can I be a racist?” Quinton demanded. “Ask Mangjeol how many women here I’ve fucked! And I don’t care if they’re Japanese, Chinese, Korean — it’s all the same to me! I love their women, Ross. It’s like I died and went to whore heaven.”

“I’m very happy for you, Quint.”

“Fuck marriage. I say, just try a new woman every night. You should get Mangy to hook you up. He found Akisa for me, didn’t you, Manny? I loved that girl with all my heart and soul. Wonder what happened to her.”

The third member of the rooftop party raised a glass of Soju to his lips. He had rarely looked up from the view of Tokyo below. This was the connection into Zumaki.

He was tall for a Japanese man, and broad in the shoulders. Thick black hair sprouted up sharply in all directions from his head, falling artfully sideways across his eyes. He had tanned skin and a heart-shaped face, which was now the fashion.

Mangjeol had received even more covert looks than Ross. In fact, it seemed like every Asian woman in here was ready to spread it for him, attracted to his looks, but also to his power and money. Too bad. Mangjeol never gave a fuck about girls. He never really gave a fuck about anything.

Still, Ross was surprised to learn he had gone to the sex trade.

Ross untangled the conversation. “What’s this about a whore? Is it true, Mangs?”

“It’s true. I never told you about Akisa? Mangs found her for me.”

“You still owe me for that, Quint,” said Mangjeol. Not for the first time, Ross judged. But Manny was a tolerant guy. Until he wasn’t.

“Hey now, I got you, Manny. Ease up! Look, Ross, bro gets pussy from everywhere, young as you want,” Quinton bragged, slinging an arm around the smaller man’s shoulders. “He’s been the plug since I came here. For everything.”

Ross saw a current of something pass through Mangjeol’s eyes. The Korean man shook off Quint, turning his attention to Ross. “Perhaps we can discuss it later.”

Mangjeol then directed the conversation to frat gossip, which Quint filled in earnestly with everything he’d heard about the Brothers of Kappa Alpha since graduation.

Mangjeol kept signaling for more sake. Both he and Quint were now drinking heavily. Ross followed along, confident in his abilities. He’d been raised on much stronger stuff than sake.

Quint tapped first, to nobody’s surprise. For all he was the size of a walrus he couldn’t hold his drink.



“Fuck me, boys,” the big man sputtered. “I got...get home. Reckon I’ll be excused...”

“Take my driver,” Mangjeol offered smoothly.

“I will, Mangy, I will. Go fuck yourself! Tomorrow, Ross, I’ll take you to the— what was it called? Nevermind. I’ll text you. Boys, a pleasure! A pleasure!”

“HE HASN’T CHANGED,” ROSS SAID TO MANGJEOL IN Japanese once Quinton had made a noisy exit from the rooftop. The atmosphere immediately felt more relaxed. Even Manny lost some of the tension in his ramrod-straight posture, spreading his legs and tapping his Gucci loafers idly on the floor.

“Quinton is an embarrassment,” Manny said uncharitably.

“Hmm.”

“I must keep inviting him everywhere out of politeness. But he is an aggravating person.”

“I missed your sense of humor, Mangs.”

“Thank you.”

“Tired of playing babysitter to Quinton? What happened to brotherhood?”

Mangjeol gave him a deadpan look that made Ross crack up with laughter. “I knew you always hated us.”

“Sorry,” said Mangjeol, and they both were laughing.

“Rosso-kun.” That was how Mangjeol always pronounced his name. The Korean man looked at his American friend speculatively. “Rosso-kun, why are you really in Tokyo? It’s only by chance Quinton ran into you. Why didn’t you tell us you were coming?”

“Work. I’m tailing some guy from Virginia. Not really a good time to pay social calls.”

“You came all this way, playing detective. ”

“That’s right.”

“But you accepted my offer to get drinks tonight.”

“Yeah. Yesterday the guy jumped off a bridge, putting an end to my investigation.” Ross reached for the sake with a steady hand. “Another round?”

Mangjeol shook his head, staring at Ross. “I wish you were the one who moved to Tokyo, not Quinton.”

“So is Quinton right? You’re running some kind of... *escort service*?”

“I’ve begun some work in pharmaceuticals. But I can procure women for high-value clients if they request it.”

“Never thought you’d get into the sex trade.” Ross’s eyes went flinty. “For a tech guy, I thought your interests would be less crude.”

“New technology meets old business. It’s been very successful. Everything is done gently; nobody is harmed.” Mangjeol’s eyes danced with a new cunning idea. “You know, Rosso-kun, with your line of work, you would be a great asset to the team.”

“Where do you get the girls?” Ross grunted.

“That’s classified.” Mangjeol smiled. “But I have a girl in mind for you, Ross. It’s actually something I wanted to call you about earlier. I’m happy you came to Tokyo so we could discuss it in person.”

It was hard to tell with Mangjeol; he was the friendliest guy in the world at times. But he kept his emotions in a basement bunker with a rusted fridge sitting on the hatch.

Mangjeol had emptied the sake jug. He called for more. A steady flush had risen to his cheeks but he seemed in no hurry to stop, so Ross would not either.

Ross grunted, “That’s nice, Manny, but there’s plenty of girls in the States. I didn’t come here for women.”

“Then why are you in Tokyo, alone?”

“What about you?” Ross threw back. “Hell, I didn’t hear you mention a lady.”

“I got married last year.” Mangjeol showed Ross a picture of his new bride on his phone.

“She looks, er—nice.”

Mangjeol shrugged. “Meiyumi knows her duty.”

“How romantic.”

“So why haven’t you found a wife yet?”

“Stuck on the wrong one.”

“Tina was never right for you.”

“You never even met her, Manny.”

“But I knew her through reputation. Quinton kept me informed.”

“He’s such a gossip.” Ross scowled. “Hell, why are we even discussing this shit? Begging your pardon, but I don’t need to be *matched*. I’m done with women.”

“If you cannot pick the right ones, then perhaps someone else can.”

“Damn you, Manny. I said no.”

“What do you have to lose?”

“Marrying a strange hooker you set me up with?”

Now Mangjeol seemed annoyed. “Any woman I bring for you will be a virgin,” he said firmly. “And like I said, I have one in mind.”

“Manny, I said no.”

“A virgin. Black female. American...Sweet as ginger candy. Small, but curved. Like a piece of fine jade.”

“Are you for real? You know a girl like that?”

“Of course. I owe you a debt anyway for the time you saved my life.”

“That was years ago,” Ross said. “I told you already a thousand times you don’t owe me a thing.”

Mangjeol shook his head. “It meant a lot to me. Quinton and the others left me to die. You carried me on your back to the hospital for three kilometers. You waited there all of the next day,” Manny reminded him. “You were a true friend. They nearly kicked me out, but you defended me at risk to yourself.”

“I don’t hold debts over my friends. I’m serious, Manny. Forget it.”

“It’s a matter of honor,” Mangjeol said. He reached into the pocket of his immaculately tailored jacket and pulled out a silver cigarette case. They were hand-rolled in different shapes and sizes. He offered one to Ross, and took one for himself. The waitress came up again, bearing the lighter.

“You worry too much,” Mangjeol said. “Come visit my office tomorrow, and consider it.”

“Fine,” agreed Ross. He was curious to see where Manny worked anyhow. “I’ll come see the place, but I won’t be going home with any females.”

Manny nodded, dragging deeply on his cigarette. His face was unreadable. “It’s been too long, Ross.”

“It has.”

“I’m glad after all these years we can reminisce on the good times.” Manny smiled. “Tell me about being a Private Investigator. It sounds very interesting.”

## MANNY'S DEAL

**M**anjeol sent his driver to Ross's hotel at nine o' clock the next morning. Ross had been up since five checking over a few projects from back home and working out. He shaved and showered then went down to the waiting car, towards Shibuya.

The driver asked if he could turn on the radio. Some of that new pop music they liked over here came blasting out. Ross stared at the passing city, absorbing the new sights. As they stalled in traffic, the swirl of humanity and technology hypnotized him.

Advertising...everywhere. Lights glowing through the thick early-morning mist. The mist was heavier here than in Virginia.

He settled into the seat, relaxing as the sun broke. Doll-like faces blinked at him from skyscraper billboards, promising everything.

Tokyo.

It was a far cry from his corner of Virginia. No nested tangle of roads, grubby gas stations, mounds of random trash blowing across bare cracked parking lots. No churches, no pastures. No empty space. Constant motion, like an ocean reef.

Here, somebody could disappear forever.

At one of the crossing points Ross's eye landed on a black woman in a Yukata, laughing in a group of similarly-dressed Japanese women.

His phone rang.

“Ross-kun,” Manny said. “Forgive me, I will be twenty minutes late.”

“Take your time. It’s no trouble.”

“My assistant will show you to my office; I’ll meet you there.”

The car pulled up smoothly to Manny’s building. *Joon Future Industries*. Interesting architecture. The building was shaped like an egg.

A woman met Ross at the door, speaking to him in English. “Mr. McCall, you must come this way please.”

“Thank you,” he said.

She walked up to the side of the egg, and it opened into an actual doorway. Then Ross and the Madam were moving swiftly through the building, which looked surprisingly like a regular office, but just...round. Workers milled about in the uniform black-and-white suits of Japanese professionals.

His guide whisked him through the building down a series of passageways. She wore a lanyard around her neck with a ring of laminated cards. He tried to covertly read them, but his Kanji was rusty and the movement of her figure made it difficult.

Nobody in this part of the building.

The place smelled of glass. If glass had a smell.

Ross strained for any other sound but the dainty click of the woman’s heels on the linoleum. When she spoke, he nearly jumped.

“This way, please.”

The woman pressed her index finger to a random door. The lock turned green and the door opened. Ross wondered about getting those for the office.

Since the woman, like the driver, was not talkative, Ross turned to his own thoughts. He hadn’t actually processed this deal with Manny in a sober mind. As he walked down the long

hallway, which branched off into other hallways full of strange noises and clamor, he admitted he might have waded too deep into this joke.

Manny was gonna find him a girl.

Mangjeol, Mr. No-Pussy-Getter.

By then they had come to the last door, which she opened with a thumbprint.

Ross followed her through the door. Immediately he was attacked by sensation, color, and strange scientific sounds that had been muted by the door. He was inside the building's laboratory. Churning, hissing noises came from pipes, beakers, and self-automating systems pushing different colored liquids into different colored bowls.

Ross had begun to sweat. The temperature had increased. He had no idea where they were going now. He had lost his sense of direction. He followed the assistant. Some rooms were in near-perfect darkness. Dim lights along the floor guided them. Ross put on his phone's flashlight to see what they were passing, but the woman was suddenly on him like a hawk, jerking down his wrist firmly.

"No lights, please!"

They finally came to two great doors, which once more the woman opened with a thumbprint.

Ross remembered something Manny had said the night before. The woman he'd be "matched" to would be a virgin. Ross had insisted that he didn't need a virgin. But Manny was absolutely not moving from that point.

"No. You'll get a virgin," he told Ross, as if it was a mighty honor Ross would be supremely rude to refuse.

Other scientists had begun walking past them. They were not particularly interesting— all dressed the same, unable to tell the men from the women. But one white coat passed with his head down, reading something, and he and Ross walked slap bang into each other. The big McCall caught a peek at the binder in the man's hands when it tumbled to the floor. He

knelt to pick it up and hand it over. He saw it was full of headshots of women. Young, hot women.

Ross continued forward.

Fuck.

Just where did Manny get these girls?

*Not always from the gutter.*

*Fuck, McCall.*

What else could this be?

Mangjeol “giving” him a bride. A virgin bride.

This was prostitution. Human trafficking.

If Ross had any sense, he’d turn around and walk back the way they came. Better, he’d run.

But it was too late. There was a door. The assistant waved her keycard like a wand, and it opened.



## DOING A FAVOR

Ross stared down at the photograph on the table. A young black woman with a cheerful face smiled back at him shyly. She had soft, round features, doll-like lips and large eyes that slanted nearly as much as Shumi-san's. He wondered if she was mixed race, but her skin leaned towards a darker tone, like strong coffee with condensed milk.

Her black hair was brushed back, but if the size of the puff was any indication, she had enough of it to overflow both his hands.

Manny was watching him closely.

"Ah...How old is she?" Ross asked.

"Twenty-two."

"When can I meet her?"

"You can't." Manny shifted in his seat. "Not yet."

"Is she here? In Tokyo?"

"Yes." Manny nodded. "She is quite safe."

*What's the matter with him?*

"And she's American," Ross said.

"Yes."

"Where is she from?"

"Los Angeles."

Ross set the photograph down. “Manny? What aren’t you telling me?”

Mangjeol sighed. “Ross, this girl is actually my relative.”

“She’s related to you?” Ross repeated, glancing down at the photo incredulously. “How, exactly?”

“She’s my brother’s secret daughter,” Manny said.

“Sook-Jae had a kid with an American? A *black* woman?”

“He had four children with his wife. Obviously this girl was not legitimate.” Manny’s jaw seemed wired shut with rage; he slowly ground his knuckles into his palm and stared into space. For an aristocrat, Manny had the hands and neck of a pugilist. Remnants of his Samurai ancestors, Japan’s ancient warrior class. “I fear I will be forced to give her up to my enemies here if she remains with me.”

Ross said, “What enemies?”

“A year ago, it was discovered that my brother Sook-Jae had been acting as double agent between different Yakuza here in Tokyo. Unfortunately, it was the Kozakura who found out first.” Mangjeol stared out the window as he spoke. “They kidnapped and executed his three other *legitimate* children. His sons, my nephews. My brother Sook-Jae went missing a day later; he has still not been found.”

“I’m sorry, Manny.” Ross had brothers. They were all country and loud and rough and tumble, making him always the odd man out. Ross hadn’t raised up with his brothers—he’d grown up in city royalty. His was the world of debutante balls and lawn parties. A world apart from the other McCall boys, raised in their mountain holdouts, shooting and trapping and fishing and mudding and wrangling like real men. They were the most provoking, disgusting, disturbed band of rascals in Creation. But if anything happened to them it would destroy him. So it took him aback when Manny said, “I’m glad Sook-Jae is dead.”

“Christ, Manny!”

“But the girl remains a problem. I don’t want to kill her, but she can’t stay in Tokyo.”

“Where was she before?”

“Los Angeles.” Manny exhaled. “Sook-Jae was supporting his love-child, sending money to her mother every month. Apparently this woman became addicted to drugs. A local gangster in Los Angeles discovered the connection to Sook-Jae, and purchased the girl from her mother in exchange for drugs.”

“Fuck.”

“This gangster then began to extort Sook-Jae, demanding money in exchange for the girl’s virginity. Not to worry—apparently the bastard didn’t break her seal. She is still a virgin.”

“Manny, I wasn’t worried.”

Mangjeol scowled. “I know what you’ll say, Ross-kun. You understand what I’m about to ask you. Know this is unsavory. Perhaps I should have lied...”

Ross was putting it all together and not liking the picture. “Sort of seems like you want me to take this ticking time-bomb off your hands, Manny. Goes without saying, the answer is no. But you might as well tell me the rest. How did you get your hands on her?”

“The gangster learned that Sook-Jae was missing, very likely dead, after the payments stopped. Someone must have given the idiot my phone number. He called me saying he had Sook-Jae’s daughter. Obviously he wanted money. I confirmed his story with my men in Los Angeles— that it was indeed Sook-Jae’s child— and arranged for the girl to be brought to Tokyo.”

“Risky.”

“Exceedingly, but at least I could keep an eye on her here.”

“And the gangster?”

Mangjeol gave Ross a look from the corner of his eye. Ross nodded. “Alright. Well, Manny. Where do I fit in here?”

“You would do me a great favor to take this girl off my hands.”

“You save her, but you don’t want her?”

“To save her was an impulse,” Mangjeol said. “I am regretting it now.”

“So you’re giving her to me?”

“Why not?” Manny said bluntly, “You like black women, and she’s still a virgin. Her pussy would be yours.”

“Christ!”

Manny’s lip curled. “Sook-Jae was bothersome, but what happened to his sons was an injustice. For that reason I cannot forgive the Kazakura. There will be a reckoning for them very soon but there is a risk that the girl will be caught in the middle. ”

Ross said nothing. He stared down at his old friend.

“Virginia is far away from the Yakuza,” Manny reasoned. “You may do as you wish with her as long as you keep her identity hidden. I know you to be an honorable person. You won’t mistreat her. I will pay for her upkeep for the first year —”

“Look, Manny...”

“It’s simple, isn’t it? Everybody wins. You could even get her pregnant— I would do it quickly as possible. She will never leave you, then.”

“Manny! I haven’t agreed to anything!” Ross exclaimed. He was alarmed that Manny’s absurd proposition that was taking on the dimensions of a reasonable suggestion. “In fact, I refuse. I’m sorry, Manny, but this is insane. It’s a no.”

“Ross-kun, at least meet her,” Manny insisted.

“I don’t think so.”

Manny looked away, gaining a speculative look that Ross knew meant trouble. “Then I have no choice.”

“What do you mean?” Ross asked.

“I’ll have to give her to the Kazakura.”

Ross shook his head. “Nah, Manny. Come on.”

“But then again, she’s a virgin. I can get money for her—there is a brothel in the Philippines...Shumi-san will contact them for me.”

Ross went pale. “Hold up a minute, you fucked up son of a bitch. Don’t do that, Manny.” He looked down at the photograph of the girl, her cheerful smile. She seemed so young and innocent.

“Agree to meet her.”

“Fuck!” Ross swore angrily. “The answer is no. I’m not wading into some Yakuza war on your behalf, no matter how many kegs we chugged together.”

“I understand. I will have to make amends with Sook-Jae’s spirit by some other means.”

Ross rubbed his jaw. “Seems harsh, what they did to him. Just for being a rat?”

“He was also stealing money, and sleeping with the wives of both Yakuza Lords,” Mangjeol explained.

*Oh.*

“Look, Manny, I get it. You do have my sympathies.”

“Thank you, Ross.” Mangjeol shrugged, then offered his old friend a conciliatory smile. “Have you eaten yet? Forgive me, I brought you here very early. I will arrange a meal.”

Ross glanced at his Omega and found he’d only been in the building for fifteen minutes. It felt more like five hours. Actually, he wanted to go back to his hotel room and work on his side project, organizing the Art Auction coming up in three weeks.

He glanced up at his friend, unable to explain his unease. It seemed to Ross that Manny had given in rather quickly.

But what could he do? Wasn’t like Manny could force him to smuggle the girl out of the country. Manny put in a breakfast order with Shumi-san then turned to his old friend.

“Ross, I wanted to show you something. A new product—all classified.”

“What’s that?”

“A pill. Not even Quinton knows about it. This drug removes mental resistance to a suggestion. You could make someone do anything you wished.”

Manny opened something on his computer and beckoned Ross over to examine some numbers. “What do you think?”

“This sounds like some damned illegal shit.” Ross whistled through his teeth, seeing dollar signs. “Well, now.”

Manny grinned. “Do you see these aliases? Qatar, UK, France, Germany...Countries all over the world are funding this research.”

“You’re playing with fire, Manny.”

“That’s part of the fun.”

Ross stared at the picture of the girl on the table. “What’s her name?” He asked.

Manny picked up the photo and turned it this way, that way.

“Her name is Angel,” said Manny. “Here— you might find this interesting.” He handed Ross a sketchbook from inside his desk.

“She’s an artist?” Ross flipped through the sketches, impressed.

“She is. Don’t you have an interest?”

“Nice try, Manny. The answer is still no.”

Manny nodded. “Keep the sketchbook anyway.”

“No...”

“I insist. She would insist, if she were here.”

## TAKEN

**T**hey locked the door at all times. Sometimes they put a guard. She was afraid of him.

Nobody here would talk to her. None of these people even spoke English at all. She heard commotion on a street outside— music playing day and night. Pop music, but in some funky ass language she had never heard in her life.

She was in a city. A big city. Where? Somewhere in China? No, Korea. She remembered that Poboy had been beefing with the Koreans...

Was Korea always this hot? The room was humid and nasty. They fed her, gave her a toilet, and kept her in the room. That was basically it. At least she had a window.

Angel tried making noise one day, a lot of noise. Screaming and throwing stuff at the walls. That was a mistake. Nobody down there on the street could hear her, and the guard lost his shit, going off on her in Mongolian or whatever the fuck language it was. Then some big-backed Asian lady came in the room and slapped fire from her ass. That was the end of that plan.

Angel realized she had no choice but to wait. Begging the people did absolutely nothing. The girl who brought her food was like a mouse. The guard at the door was crazy. She had no choice but to wait for something else to happen. For now she just cooled out in this hot-ass room with nothing in the world to do but be grateful she wasn't at Poboy's.

She didn't get much sleep, even without Poboy.

There was a TV, but it was broken.

Angel still had no idea why she was here, or where *here* even was. What had happened to Poboy, Shug, any of the crew?

What would happen to *her*?

Last Angel remembered, Poboy was trying to get a threesome on with Shug. The door blown in. Poboy hollering at her, Sirens, everybody shouting, shouting, shouting, and then all of it was just white noise and the smell of smoke and burned meat.

Angel had watched in a daze as the Koreans dragged Shug away. But she had her own problems to deal with. Poboy's gun had went off right next to her ear. She fell to her knees as the Koreans dragged Shug away screaming. It felt like a hot wet bubble was growing in her ear canal. The pain was the worst she'd ever felt in her life. Like a giant spider was trying to eat her head. My God. She passed the fuck out. When she woke up, she was...here.

*Here.*

In China/Korea/Thailand.

Days passed. Weeks. She thought she might actually go crazy in that room. She only had the bed, and a TV that was broken. Not even cards or dice or nothing.

The guard. In her wildest moments she imagined she could get him on her side, which meant she might have to let him fuck.

*Fuck!*

Angel was still a virgin, thanks to Poboy keeping her prisoner in his house, treating her like one of his Mazzis, something just to keep in a garage and never drive. Should she thank him for that? Poboy had never raped her body, but he had fucked up her head. Now her first time was gonna be worse than anything Poboy had ever done. But it was still Poboy's fault she ended up here in the first place.



Yeah, Poboy was a psycho. And guess what? He was dead. Those Koreans shot him in his own crib. Angel saw him laying there, Mr. High and Mighty, Poboy the King Crip, Poboy the big Dog. She saw him with her own two eyes. Just another dead gangster in Los Angeles. She wished she could have put the bullet in him herself...

*But what will happen to me now?*

## HOMECOMING

Ross's assistant Gertrude called while he was in an Internet cafe, going over a newspaper to practice his Kanji. "Hiya, Boss," Gertrude chirped, her chipper Southern accent a welcome to his ears. It seemed like the Japanese barely raised their voice at all. "Just calling to let you know, your brother Roman's been at the office every day now, and he said if you don't pick up your phone he's going to smash that *Jean-Christophe* in your front yard."

"The hell he is!"

"Should I put him on the line, sir?"

"Yes, thank you!"

Gertrude hastily obliged.

"You son of a bitch," the eldest of Ross's brothers growled through the speakers a moment later. "Where the hell are you?"

"Hello, big brother. If you touch the *Jean-Christophe* I will personally behead you."

"I've been trying to reach you damn near a week!" Roman raged.

"I've been busy. What's got your dander up?"

"Busy with what?"

"I'm on vacation," Ross snarled. "Remember?"

"Where? Africa?"

“Tokyo. What the fuck would I be doing in Africa, Roman?”

“You’re in Tokyo? How’s that different? What business you got over there?”

“Not business. I said vacation.”

“Nevermind that! You better get home, Ross, double-quick. We got a situation.”

“ ‘We’ ?”

“That good-for-nothing son of a bitch Sebastian ran off with our gold,” Roman shouted. Ross realized his brother was genuinely pissed. Not Normal-Roman-Pissed. This was Tsunami, Earthquake, Hurricane level of rage. He made a mental note to buy Gertrude some nice chocolates.

“Ross? You hearing me?”

“Calm down, Roman. What exactly do you want me to do?”

“Find the fucking son of a bitch, what else? Did all the noodles make you slow? I want that bastard back in Florin with a chain around his neck!”

“I’m on vacation.”

Ross imagined how badly Roman wanted to hit him.

“Ross, you have no idea how bad I want to sock you,” said Roman.

“Take it easy. Tell me, how much did the little bastard steal?”

“All of it,” said Roman.

Ross blanched. The McCall gold wasn’t just a fortune of cash stowed away from the Feds, a safety net in case Roman went to jail and they dissolved the family fortune. It had sentimental value. The old McCall bullion was the center of family legend. It was an artifact, something Roman, the superstitious brother in the bunch, practically worshipped.

“Aw, doggies. ” Ross rubbed between his eyes. “We’ll find the bastard, alright? Remember how I found Katie?”

“I need that money back, Ross.”

“Do you? If you need to borrow some—”

“Like hell!” Roman choked. “I’d sooner bust in my windows, and swallow the glass! You’re my baby brother, and that’s your money. For you and your future wife, whenever you decide to stop fucking around and get married.”

For some reason this comment rubbed Ross the wrong way. “What the hell do you mean by that?” He said with unnecessary aggression.

“What? Look, Ross, this ain’t the time. Can you help me or not?”

“Sure. Send my assistant the details and I’ll get on it.”

Apparently that was not good enough for Roman. “He could be in Mexico by the time you get back here!” Roman roared.

Ross reached the end of his rope. “He’s probably already in Mexico. I reckon the little piss-ant snatched the money from right under your nose, did he? Can’t say I blame him. You acted like a goddamned mark!”

“Excuse me?”

“Taking that jailbird from off the street— after he’d just done seven years for nearly killing someone. What did you think would happen?”

“If you and the boys had just agreed to work with me, I would never have done that,” said Roman, voicing an old grievance.

“You’re damn lucky I didn’t dirty my boots,” Ross pointed out. He was tired of Roman’s bitching. “This is like the fifth time I’m bailing you out of some shit. Or is it the sixth? You need my stamp on everything just to make it legit and I always oblige, don’t I?”

“Go on. Ride that high horse into the sunset,” Roman grumbled. But then he admitted, “You’re right. You’re more of a help to me than Rebel and Rain.”

“Accept it, Roman. You can’t do it the way Pa did. It’s time to change businesses and go clean.”

“What the fuck do you think I’m trying to do?”

*I’m on vacation. First vacation in six years, and here come the McCalls with the same old bullshit.* “Roman, remember when we talked about boundaries?”

“Kiss my ass with that therapy shit. Come home *now*, or I’m gonna take a wrecker to that little statue of yours.”

“It’s a *Jean-Christophe*, you termite-headed hillbilly—”

“It’s disgusting. It looks like a frog and a pedophile making love.”

“Touch it and you’re dead! It’s a work of art worth more than your bank account.”

“Shit,” said Roman, sobering. “You ain’t wrong.”

*Damn.* Just how much did Roman have riding on that missing gold? Ross cleared his throat. “Look, big bro, you just need to ask—”

“Like hell. Don’t offer again, or I’ll break your teeth. Goodbye, Ross. See you *real soon*.”

“Yeah. Okay. Love you. Go to hell.”

*Click.*

ROSS WAS SURPRISED WHEN MANNY ASKED HIM TO HANG OUT again. They met for sake and dumplings. Knowing that they hadn’t parted on great terms, Ross was wary. But they were still brothers, still old friends, and former Brothers.

They talked about baseball, mostly. For a while Ross was hopeful Manny would not bring up the girl.

But then Manny asked suddenly, “Have you changed your mind?”

“Ah,” said Ross.

“I had to ask.”

“Okay. Look, Manny, I’m really sorry. But I got a lot to deal with at home. Clan politics. You get that, right?”

Mangjeol said, “You have a right to your own destiny. My family affairs are my own to solve.”

Ross rubbed his chin. “So...what will happen to the girl?”

“As I told you. I will have to find a way to dispose of her.”

“Can’t you set her up somewhere? She’s American, right? You can find a place to stash her...”

“I thought I had,” Manny said, raising his eyebrows.

“Look, Manny, I really can’t.”

“She is a free radical,” Mangjeol said. “I cannot put more resources into keeping her prisoner. I don’t have the time to keep track of her. Wherever she goes, I must be certain that she won’t make trouble.”

Though Ross was determined not to get involved, he didn’t like the sound of that. “She’ll be a prisoner, then. Wherever she goes.”

Manny fished a dumpling from a boiling vat of broth with his chopsticks.

“Just promise you won’t give her to the bastards that killed her dad and brothers,” Ross said.

Manny popped a dumpling in his mouth and made a very Japanese sound.

“She’s innocent, Mangjeol.”

“Innocent? Not even by birth,” Manny sneered.

“She’s American. She’s got nothing to do with the stuff going on over here. She doesn’t deserve to get turned out by some Yakuza pimps.”

As a Private Investigator, sometimes he was asked to track down girls who ran away. Most of them ended up walking the strip. Ross recalled being handed photographs of the runaways

from worried relatives. These pictures usually showed a girl like Angel. Bright-eyed and full of life.

Ross ground his teeth. “But that doesn’t mean I’ll take her,” he said.

“I see,” said Manny.

“Don’t you have a heart?” Ross snapped.

“Don’t you?”

“She isn’t my responsibility.”

“In a year, you would be thanking me. Some men pay a lot to marry virgins.”

“Doesn’t she want to go back home? Back to L.A? Can’t you arrange it?”

“She was nothing but a gangster’s toy. She has no home. She’s a nothing.”

“Why keep her alive, then?”

“Sook-Jae’s ghost won’t let me.”

Ross said, “Sending her to whore for the Yakuza is the same as killing her.”

“Prostitution is a noble profession in Japan, you know.”

It was a lucky thing Manny had cleared out the restaurant to have this conversation. They were dining alone, the whole kitchen staff waiting patiently for their next order. The waitress stood far back near the kitchen, her eyes focused on a point above Manny’s head. She was ready to jump at the slightest signal. Her hands were folded before her.

Not even Roman would have done that in Florin.

Or could have.

But the gangs of these big cities played a different game from his brothers in the mountains of Virginia. Both sets might deal in the shadows, but they were not the same. The Yakuza were ruthless— Manny knew that. Ross wondered what would happen to Angel.

“Christ,” he muttered, patting his pocket for a cigarette.

“Forgive me,” Mangjeol said. As quickly as he had brought up the subject, he was now retreating. “I was wrong to ask your help.”

“Good luck with it, Manny. I mean that. I’m sorry.”

Mangjeol’s eyes shuttered. “You are a good friend to me, Ross-kun. I hope that when you return to Tokyo, it will be in better circumstances.”

“Me, too.” Ross hesitated. “Look...about the girl...”

“Nevermind her.” Manny handed him his personal engraved lighter. “Life is full of surprises. I’m sure I will think of something to take care of this problem.”

ANGEL WOKE UP WITH A MAN IN HER ROOM. ASIAN— LIKE ALL of them. He was dressed up. Literally in a suit. They must have put something in the ramen noodles the night before, because Angel found she couldn’t move a muscle. She watched the strange man approach the bed.

He was handsome, but his eyes were cold and scary. Like Poboy’s. His gaze traveled up her body, lingering on her pussy.

Angel tried to move, speak, anything. But she just lay there, frozen. If he wanted to rape her, he could have done it easy. He would probably rape her. Rape her, then kill her... Torture her slowly. Stick *things* inside her pussy. Choke her with a belt. All the threats Poboy ever made suddenly seemed possible— but she didn’t know this evil man, and she had at least known Poboy.

She could do nothing. She tried to scream, but her voice locked.

The man reached for the bed.

God.

Years later she would think of that moment and break out in cold sweat. Turned out there was some things worse than Poboy.



With a calm expression the man put a hand on her breast and squeezed. His thumb screwed into her stiff nipple. Angel shut her eyes.

“Angel, today is your lucky day.”

It was the first time she'd heard English since waking up. Angel's eyes flew open. He stared down at her with the same non-expression expression. She put every ounce of strength into one word.

“Why?”

“Because I have decided not to kill you.”

In her right mind she would have screamed the whole place down and fought. By that time she had worked out what kind of place she was in. She knew what some of the noises meant. She would have to fight when her turn came— stand on her tens and fight. No way was she becoming someone's trick without a fight.

But she just lay there, unable to *move*.

“F...fuck you.”

He pinched her chin. “You will learn I don't tolerate rudeness. If you speak like that again, I will make the guard come in here and break bones.”

Her throat locked. She wanted to spit on him, but he might actually shoot her with that gun at his waist. *Fuck*.

“I don't like to hit females. Let's try something different.” He reached into his pocket and took out a syringe. Arranging her lifeless arm in the right position, he shot a liquid from the syringe into her veins.

“This is just to prepare you,” he said. “It should take effect immediately. Don't worry— it will cause no harm.”

Her brain scrambled to hoard the little pieces of information. New words. What did he just shoot her up with?

“This is your father's fault,” Mangjeol said, looking into her eyes. “I warned Sook-Jae what would happen if he took the Kazakura for fools.”

Angel never even met her daddy. He was in prison. Sook-Jae? Kazakura? None of it made sense. She wanted to go home. She wanted to sleep.

“I’m going to count down to ten, ” the man said calmly. “How you behave from this moment will determine your future.”

He pulled something from his pocket— not the syringe. A green stone that flashed and gleamed, even in the dirty hotel light. Angel’s eyes fastened on it, and at the same time her fear and pain began to slip away like mud and dirt washed away by a cool rain.

“Do you see this stone?” The man said.

“Yes...”

“This is Japanese Jade. A very rare mineral.”

*So?*

“It represents peace. Tranquility.”

“Okay...”

“Look at it. Look at how the imperfections shine in the light. It is the imperfections that create beauty. There cannot be light without darkness. Even darkness can be beautiful.”

*The fuck is he talking about?*

“You like this stone, don’t you?”

She nodded.

“Very good. You are feeling very relaxed. There is no pain.”

*No pain...His eyes are nice. Why did I think he was scary? Why do I feel so tired? What will he say next?*

“Keep your eyes on the stone,” he ordered.

“Okay...” Easy. It was pretty. She stared at it, feeling warm and safe and happy. The man stroked hair back from her face.

“I would have kept you for myself,” he said. “But nature prevents it. Instead, you are going to do me a favor. Repay a

debt.”

“A debt,” She mumbled.

“That’s right. Now you will listen closely to me,” he said. “I am going to count down from ten.”

His voice echoed inside her head. Though his lips were not moving, she heard his words as clearly as if he’d spoken them out loud.

*No pain...*

“Okay,” she whispered, staring at the stone.

“One,” he said. “Two...”

WHEN ROSS LANDED IN LOS ANGELES, HE RAN DOWN THE clock on his layover staring at the dusty yellow tarmac. His book lay neglected in his lap; he stared into the distance the way Manny had stared into Tokyo that night at Zumaki’s. Beyond the dusty glass Ross caught a glimpse of the L.A. sprawl before it vanished in the ozone-stinking haze. Of course he recalled this was Angel’s city. She probably had family here still. Did they miss her? Did they worry? She would never see them again.

The whole thing left him with a bad taste. Fuck Manny, he repeated to himself. Fuck Manny for even suggesting... Damn it, he couldn’t get the girl off his mind. Angel with the sweet face. Angel...Pretty name.

Still...

He was through with women.

But Ross considered Manny’s offer again, allowing his dark side to play devil’s advocate. What if he’d brought Angel back to Virginia?

What if she was *so grateful*, she did everything he said?

Ross frowned absently at a baby in a stroller. The child began to cry. Her mother scooped her up and tickled her until the cries turned to laughter.

Ross didn't remember his mother at all. He remembered his father. Tears led to ass-whuppings in Duke McCall's household. Ross, the youngest, was a bonafide crybaby. He rubbed the scar on his collarbone unconsciously, remembering when Duke had broken it with a socket wrench.

Ross went to live with his mother's kin after that. Grandmary and Grandfather came from old traditional southern stock. They believed children ought to be seen and not heard.

*Get her pregnant.*

Ross wanted kids, yeah. Eventually. But not with Manny's niece, for Chrissake.

Ross had a photographic memory, so he easily recalled Angel's face. It was petite and round. She had beautiful eyes and a soft, doll-like mouth. On the flight back to Virginia he sketched her face, imagining what it would be like to lay her in his bed with the white linen sheets...to take care of her.

He flipped through the sketchbook and landed on an explicit scene. A man and woman, fucking.

*This is what she imagines. This is what she wants.*

In his mind the girl had a soft voice. She was intelligent, but not cunning like Tina. She was quiet, but had a will of her own. She wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered, *thank you for saving me...* Right before opening her legs and letting him thrust deep into her young, beautiful body.

But when he landed in Virginia, he found Roman waiting for him, and so Manny and his tragic niece went right out of his head.

## CONCUBINE

**A**ngel opened the door and said, “Um?”

The guard turned. He was a giant. He stood damn near six foot three and must have weighed two hundred and sixty or more. He looked mean as hell, just like Poboy, but this guy could have eaten Poboy for breakfast. She never knew they made Asians in that size. *Calm*, she told herself. *Just stay calm.*

He shouted at her in the language. She still hadn't learned a single word of it, but some things you didn't need words for, right? She beckoned to him, and he stepped towards her furiously, pointing and yelling. Now was the moment...Angel opened the door wider...revealing that she was naked.

The guard's eyes went small.

“Yeah, you like that?” She purred, her heart climbing sickeningly into her throat. “You like my big brown titties, huh? Come closer, dummy...”

She played with her nipples to encourage him. Looking over his shoulder to make sure nobody was looking, he blundered into the room. Blundered, and then stumbled. The cord Angel had pulled out of the curtain trim painstakingly over the last couple of weeks hummed like a guitar string as the man crashed over it. She leapt back, astonished the trap had even worked. But there was no time to appreciate it. He roared like a pissed-off Rottweiler. She helped the motherfucker stay down by shoving the broken TV off the dresser. It crashed right onto his back and his roar turned into a

wh. She had done it. Without wasting a beat Angel grabbed the bag she had prepared on the bed, and sprang right over the guard's back like a rabbit. She took off stark naked down the dark hall of the brothel.

The place was bigger than she had thought. Doors opened and slammed in her peripheral as she sprinted towards where she hoped her instinct was leading her— outside. Let her get outside, Please God!

People were shouting, yelling, slamming doors. She heard a familiar voice. Shit! Had to be that big-backed lady with the ferocious right hook. *Outside, outside, please!* A large rectangle of light appeared in the wall. Yes!

Behind her the big-backed lady screamed something — *Close the door!*— but Angel had taken their asses by complete surprise. With a desperate scream she threw herself towards the door, knocking aside the girl standing in front of it with her mouth wide open. She tumbled out into sweet fresh air—into freedom.

Before her the pristine street unrolled like a magic carpet.

She didn't stop, she didn't wait. Angel made a left. Butt naked and all. She ran. She ran like that time in high school when she won the 200m gold against East Central. She ran like she was gonna grow wings. She ran for her life. Maybe even faster than that.

The air was cleaner than Los Angeles. It was about two o' clock in the afternoon— right after the guard had his lunch. He always got tired after that, which was why she had picked this time. Men always got hungry and horny after eating. They were all the same!

She sprinted past people, taking streets that looked empty until she found some that were. She stumbled down a dark alley and fell to her hands and knees, gasping for breath. Her legs back underneath her now, but they wouldn't stop trembling. She was exhausted to her limit. And still naked.

With shaking hands she opened the bag, which she had made from the pillowcase on the bed. She pulled out her

clothes one at a time: long cotton pants, a T shirt.

She had no shoes, but she would fix that soon, because apparently people left shoes everywhere in this country.

Angel dressed, shivering in spite of the hot, humid air. She was thirsty as fuck, and hungry, but the most important thing was to get dressed and blend in.

Blend in? She burst out with a whoop of laughter. With a hand clapped over her mouth she controlled herself. *Chill.*

But the idea was funny, because this place— *WHERE?*— was full of nothing but pale Asian people. Angel was like the opposite of that. With her weave in a mess, wearing them funny pajamas, no shoes and no bra, she would stick out like a fly in the buttermilk.

She guessed this wasn't L.A. The air was different. Her nose twitched. She craned her neck around the side of the two buildings she'd crammed herself between. Lots and lots of lights, movement, people...And nothing familiar. Angel shivered, but shoved aside the panic that wanted to come bursting up to the surface. *Don't panic. Panic kills.*

Think, think. Now where did they have buildings like that? Holding in her trembling breath, she racked her brains for anything familiar. There were signs in a foreign language. Chinese? Maybe it was New York. Maybe she was in Chinatown. But Angel knew New York couldn't be *that* clean. Her bare toes wiggled in the overgrown moss; she shivered. *I'm not in America no more. So where am I?*

Fuck it. She wasn't gonna panic.

She wasn't.

*Please, God, she prayed. Help me!*

When she opened her eyes, she saw something leaning against the side of a nearby building.

A bicycle.

It was red, shiny and new. Someone had just parked it there. Not even locked it to anything.

*Thank you, God!*

The alleyway darkened.

Angel screamed and dragged the bike off the wall, but it was too late. Two giants pinned her in from both ends of the alley. No escape, but she tried. She couldn't let them throw her in that room again...Now way, she couldn't, she couldn't...

They dragged her off the bike. Shouting to each other in their language they wrestled her against the wall and cuffed her arms together. These men, unlike the guard in the hotel/brothel, wore suits. And nice shoes. She screamed her head off, kicked and wriggled and did everything to throw them off, but it was no use— they were so much stronger. Very easily they dragged her from the hiding place into the bright midday sun. The streets were empty, or pretending to be. She knew how that game played. Nobody would help her.

THE MEN BUNDLED ANGEL INTO THE BACK OF A BLACK CAR. Instead of taking her back to the brothel, the men drove deep into another part of the city. Here the buildings were taller and shinier, newly rising from the low-sunk houses of the hood she had been kept in. She must be in the business district. This was where the big boys stayed.

*Is this Japan or some shit?* She passed a billboard for an American movie— *Preacher Man*— but the writing was all in that funny alphabet. Now there could be no doubt she was not in Los Angeles, or even in America.

The car drove deeper into the maze of skyscrapers. Some were so tall she had to crane her neck into the window to see the tops— many disappeared into the white mist above. She glanced at her captors, whose shiny black hair was cut low and tight. They're shiny new watches peeking from the cuffs of their very-very white shirts. They wore dark sunglasses.

The car was a Honda SUV, but none Angel had ever seen before. Some new fancy Asian model...

*Money.*



Angel guessed they were taking her to the Boss. The man with the cold eyes who had beaten her while she lay helpless in the bed.

She could smell her own fear.

“Aye,” she said. “Don’t y’all want to turn the AC on?”

They ignored her.

Eventually they pulled into a dark underground garage. Angel was too tired and scared to fight— she had the feeling now they wouldn’t kill her. Why, she had no idea.

They went inside an elevator. The guard hit the button for the twenty-third story.

Angel shut her eyes as the elevator rocketed towards the sky. *Look on the bright side. They would take you to a basement if they wanted to kill you, not way up that way. Unless they want to push me out of a window...*

Her eyes flung open when the elevator hissed smoothly to a stop. Her legs were shaky as hell; she had pictured falling to her death the whole way up. Both men put their big iron-hard hands on her arms. They marched her down a hallway with a cold linoleum floor...or was it *glass*? Windows showed Angel a tiny sprawling view of the city. The place that was so real just minutes ago, full of sounds and smells and wet misty rain-taste, was now shrunk to the size of a tiny insect hive.

The men growled at her. Another door opened. Angel stumbled inside, and came face to face with *him*.

HE SAT BEHIND A LARGE BLACK DESK. TODAY HE WORE A black suit, but the jacket hung on his chair and he had rolled up the cuffs and unbuttoned the front. More casual than the men dragging Angel into the room, which made his rank above them more obvious. The man pointed to a chair in front of it. Angel sat. He told the suits to leave. They left. Now Angel and the evil man were alone. He toyed with an expensive-looking fountain pen. On the desk in front of him

was a blank sheet of paper, but it was in their little Asian writing. Shoot.

Already her survivor's brain was searching for an angle, some piece of information she could manipulate him with. But the office was bare as an egg. There was nothing. Some weird-ass painting behind him, but that was it. No family pictures, no friendly signs like in the social worker's office, which was the most business-like place Angel had ever been in her life. She might have been on an alien spaceship. This man wasn't human.

"Please," she said. He might be a psycho, but he was the only one she'd met who spoke English. "I had to get out. Please, don't hurt me."

"Hurt you?" He said, his arrogant tone making Angel's heart sink.

"Please— I don't have no beef with you. You don't need to hurt me, I'll do anything you say."

The man sneered. "Today I sent my men for you. That is why they were able to get you back so quickly— they had just arrived to bring you away. You forced them to chase you down, go to great inconvenience to follow orders. Now they are angry. I am angry. Your hurt is insignificant to me."

Angel nodded, swallowing hard. "Um, I'm very sorry."

"At least you have manners. You will apologize to the men as well."

He raised his voice with a sharp command, and the two guards entered.

"Apologize," the man ordered Angel. "On your knees."

Flashbacks of Poboy. What was one more humiliating move? She climbed off the chair and got down on her knees. Some inward instinct made her drop her head as she said, "I'm very sorry."

The men laughed— briefly. With another sharp word they were sent back through the door.

For a while Angel and the Boss stared at each other. Then he said, “My name is Mangjeol. I am your uncle.”

She burst out laughing.

A mistake.

Angel shrank from his furious expression. Why did she always laugh at the wrong time? “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it. I just thought— I don’t think that’s possible, Mister.” Gulping, she tried to calm herself down. Her crazy nerves were making her act stupid.

“I will make them beat you,” the man said coldly. “Is that what you want?”

“No! No, I don’t want that. But I’m confused by what you said.”

“Your father was my brother Sook-Jae. He is dead, which means you are now my only surviving relative.” He sneered.

Angel blinked at him. “What? I know my daddy was part Chinese, that’s why I got eyes like that. But he’s in jail, not dead.”

“Chinese?” echoed Mang-whoever like she said her daddy was part Stink Bug. His voice rose with every word until he was shouting. “Chinese? Where did you hear that ugly lie?”

“Um,” said Angel. “That’s just what my Mama used to say.”

“Your drug addict mother, who sold you to a gangster to become his sex toy.”

Angel’s jaw worked. *Fuck you. You have no idea what I been through, or Mama for that matter.* Her mother was an evil bitch, but hearing this man talk down on her had her heated. But she didn’t say nothing— she had to agree with whatever this man said if she wanted to make it out of here in one piece.

“How do you know all this about me, Mister?”

He ignored her. The man stood up and paced behind his desk. “Your father was *Korean*. From one of the oldest most

noble families in the country. Chinese...I forget you are just a stupid American. You will never understand..."

"I want to understand," said Angel quickly. "Help me to understand, Mister. So you brought me here because of my daddy? He's dead?"

"That's right." Her supposed Uncle's dark evil eyes narrowed. "So listen to me carefully, because your life depends on it."

Angel nodded, hugging herself. "Okay."

"You can't stay in Japan."

*I'm in Japan. Ain't that a bitch. How long did they knock me out for before I got to the hotel? How did they even get me here?*

"Okay," she said.

"As the daughter of Sook-Jae, you are in danger from his enemies. I want to get you off my hands, but I cannot keep you in this country, nor will I risk sending you back to Korea."

"Okay," she said.

"Be quiet," he snapped.

Angel bit her lip. This man was crazy.

"I have come up with a solution."

She nodded, glancing at the view outside the giant windows that shot all the way up to the ceiling. *Right.*

"My plan requires your cooperation. If you refuse, I will have to send you to Moscow."

"Moscow? You mean in *Russia*?"

"Please don't ask another stupid question."

Angel wished she could put the man's fancy fountain pen through his eye. Jaw clenched, she nodded again.

"There is a man, Mikhail, who savors women like you. Young black girls from Nigeria. Of course, he prefers them a little younger than you...You would have to work hard not to disappoint him. Do you understand me?"

It sounded like another Poboy situation. Angel could read between the lines. Despite his order to keep quiet she said, “I don’t want that. Please— I would do anything else. I’ll clean, I’ll cook, I’ll do anything.”

“I think you will like my second option better,” he said. “I won’t have to send you to Moscow if you agree to these terms.”

“What’s that?”

The man seemed to take pleasure from her fear. His lip curled. “A close friend of mine in Virginia wants a child. You are going to give it to him.”

“Ex-excuse me?”

“His name is Ross. He is a good friend of mine. I went to the trouble to analyze your blood type, and I found you two would be a perfect genetic match. Ross likes black women, and you are American as well, which means—”

“Hell no! You want me to get pregnant for one of your freaky-ass friends? Go to hell with that! Hell no!” Angel jumped to her feet. Her heart pounded wildly; she looked around for any escape, but there was none. She had missed her only chance. Between her legs throbbed. She remembered Poboy’s abuse, all those nasty things he’d made her do... That would be nothing compared to this. She couldn’t cry, but her heart was damn near ready to break in pieces.

“Why? I don’t understand. If I’m your brother’s kid, why would you put me through this? Why can’t you just send me home?” She begged.

But there was no begging with this monster— men like that always got their way in the end. Mangjeol ordered her coldly, “Sit down.”

She did, on the edge of the seat. She wiped the single tear that rolled down her cheek, and forced back the rest. “No. No, Mister, I won’t do it.”

“Ross is a good man. Honorable. Many years ago he saved my life. I vowed to repay him. And since I have saved your

life, it is your duty to repay me. You will go to Ross, and you will become a surrogate for his child.”

“No!” She stood up again.

Mangjeol did not react to her outburst this time. Instead he tilted his head and watched her up and down, examining her. “You will go to Ross,” he said softly. “And you will become a surrogate for his child, Angel.”

Angel sat down.

Her mind went blank. Hazy. Suddenly she couldn’t remember where she was. She blinked to clear the smoke over her brain. *What’s happening to me?* “I won’t...I won’t...” she mumbled.

“You will.”

“No...”

He pulled a file from the desk and slid her a picture. Angel stared. White guys were not her type— the kind that hung around the hood were crusty as fuck. But this white guy was... clean. He came from another world. No tattoos, piercings, nothing. He wore a suit in the photograph, a blue suit that complimented his dark red curly hair. Squinting into the sun, his eyes gleamed like two slanted eyes that looked almost Asian, like her own. He looked kind of mean, actually. He was glaring at the camera as if the photographer had pissed him off.

“This is your guy?”

“Yes, Angel.”

The picture slipped from her fingers. Angel blinked. Mangjeol watched her like a cat watching a mouse. “Excellent response.”

“What did you do to me?” She whispered.

“Angel, stand up.”

She stood up.

“Turn around.”

She turned around.

“All the way around.”

Now she was back to looking Mangjeol in the eye. His were a void of evil. They were the exact same shape as hers. *My uncle.*

“Tell me your deepest secret,” Mangjeol ordered her.

She did not even hesitate. Strange. “I got my daddy killed by his own set,” she said in a deadpan, confessing what she had never told another human being. When Mangjeol raised an eyebrow she added, “My step daddy.”

“Interesting. Tell me more.”

“He was molesting me,” she said. “Kept feeling on my titties, saying nasty stuff to me when Mama wasn’t around. So...I made it look like he was stealing money from the kingpin. He was holding onto the money— that was his job. I snuck in his room while he was getting high and took it. I threw it away. They thought he was stealing, didn’t believe him...Crips shot up his car at the gas station. Killed his friend Vic alongside him. I felt bad about that. Vic was a good dude and he had kids.” A tear ran down her cheek but under the trance she felt no emotion.

“Did he ever have intercourse with you?”

“What? No. I never had sex, ever.”

“Good,” the man said.

She shook her head. “Maybe there’s something wrong with me...I ask God for forgiveness. I was thirteen. Knew what I was doing...”

“That’s enough.”

“Sure.” She rubbed her eyes, feeling strange...calm and relaxed, thought she should be panicked. *What’s happening to me?*

“I never told anybody that. Why am I telling you that, Mister?”

Mangjeol had a cold smile for her. “It is unfortunate. I can’t send a thief to my friend Ross.”

She protested, “Hold on— I ain’t a thief. I didn’t even keep the money, and I never stole again.”

“If there is a chance you will hurt my friend, then you must go Mikhail instead.”

“Please...”

Mangjeol considered her fully again. His eyes traveled up and down her body, though Angel imagined he couldn’t see much with the loose baggy clothes she was wearing.

“Do you know what ‘hypnotic suggestion’ is?”

Every time he said that word she sank deeper into a fog. *He’s hypnotizing me? Hell no. Fight it...I gotta fight it.*

“I know what it means. You doing that to me?”

“We have been developing it here for some time.”

Angel struggled to think. She reached down and picked up the photograph of the strange man *Ross* again. Okay. *Breathe*. No more screaming, yelling, nothing. She had to think straight and ask the right questions. Information would be her weapon.

“Where does he live?” She asked.

“Virginia.”

“*Virginia?*” About as far from L.A as you could get!

“You said he’s rich?”

“Of course. No more questions. Do you accept?”

She had no choice. At least once she was back in America she could find a way to escape. Unless this mean-looking bastard tied her up in his basement...

“You’re sure he ain’t crazy?” She asked, hating how much her voice trembled.

He watched her curiously for a minute before he said, “Put the picture down.”



Angel set the picture down. Mangjeol pulled something from his pocket— a glittering green stone.

Her eyes felt heavier and heavier. She sank into the chair.

“Now let’s begin again,” he said. “What’s your name?”

Angel said, “Angel...”

## ELROY'S

**A**t Elroy Madison's family home in Rowanville, the upper crust of Virginia Society were gathered for that worthy's birthday. Ross and Elroy were distant cousins and classmates at Everdue. Since the event was twenty minutes from his house, there was no way for Ross to refuse the invitation.

Elroy greeted them at the door, chipper as a squirrel. "Ross! How is the family? Haven't seen you in ages, have I? Tina is here, by the way. Trying to avoid her? Quint! I told you that's the last glass you're having, understand?"

"Quinton's here?" Ross said a moment before Quinton came up to thump him on the back. He was red-faced and jolly as usual. "Ross!" He bellowed. "Couldn't believe it when Nerdboy said you were coming. I just flew in from Tokyo yesterday. Couldn't miss a shindig at the Madisons. Elroy, get me another drink, will you pal?"

"Don't make me throw you out this time, Quint! I mean it!" Elroy turned his great blue eyes on Ross. "Ross, the auction next week. Are you coming?"

"Sure thing," said Ross. He handed Cousin Elroy an envelope. "Happy Birthday."

"Stocks in Sleta? Thanks, Ross! You get the best presents," Elroy said, his grin widening as he tore open the corner. He gave Ross a genuine hug and tucked the envelope into his coat.

“We were supposed to get you *presents*?” Quinton said.

“It amazes me he still invites you anywhere,” said Ross dryly as Elroy stormed off.

Quinton loyally accompanied Ross to the edge of the room. “Seen Tina yet?”

“No.”

“I couldn’t believe it when she married Charlie. What a bitch. Didn’t I tell you she was a snake in the grass? Like they say, Ross, ‘skin folk ain’t kin folk’.”

“I don’t think that means what you think it means.”

“But I warned you, didn’t I? That’s what I’m saying,” said Quinton affably.

Ross McCall stared at his ex-girlfriend Tina. She was swishing across the room to schmooze up to an Oklahoma oil baron. Diamonds glinted from her curvaceous figure, the largest in the white gold setting on her wedding band.

The venue was the old plantation home of the Madison family. Ross admired the soaring rafters brushed with gold leaf, the original Rembrandt above the fireplace, the leather furniture, the hand carved doorway from Louis XVI era France, through which more guests streamed every minute. Southern money gathered in one place, a royal family that had clawed a bloody trail to the top of the food chain, and grown bloated and lazy from the feast.

Ross’s eyes lingered on Tina. Her father had been a Jefferson. She belonged to this world as much as he did— one half. She was half black, and Ross was half redneck.

That was the end of his bourbon, but Quinton loyally refilled his glass. “What do you think of the stock?”

“The same as always,” Ross shrugged.

Quinton surveyed the young women fluttering about in their best. Ross saw lilacs and mint green, cream, rose-of-sharon, soft pink feminine colors. He’d always liked the bolder tones, and bolder women.

Quinton confided, “I’m thinking I might try Samoan females next. Planning a trip there soon. Come along?”

“Reckon I’ll pass, Quint.”

Ross wrestled with his cynicism. Despite what he’d said, what Quinton said, not every woman in here was the same. They were fine women in many ways. There were daughters of Senators and oil barons, heiresses to any number of big businesses in the South. Girls with college degrees and accolades, girls who would be happy to marry him and bear him a litter of blonde children.

Tina met his eye.

Where was her new husband? Ross glanced around for a man with a bulldog-face and listened for an obnoxious laugh. She was alone? No— Ross saw the young billionaire was getting friendly with a breasty redhead near the chocolate fountain. Figured.

“Fuck Tina,” Quinton said. He glanced towards the door and found a new distraction. “Look— it’s Bridget. Remember her, Ross? She was obsessed with those orphans in Uzbekistan. Hey, Bridget! Over here.”

As Bridget gave Quinton the cold shoulder, Ross watched Tina lay eyes on Charlie, her husband, and his new little friend. Charlie and the busty redhead were basically necking into the fondue.

*She married him. She could have married you, but she married him.*

Charlie pinched the redhead’s nipple over her silky slip dress. With an expression of complete indifference Tina walked off to refill her champagne. Ross stared at his ex-girlfriend. His eyes confirmed what it had taken him a long time to accept. Tina had broken his heart for a man she didn’t give two fucks about.

Ross glanced at his watch. It was time to leave; he’d paid his due and surely Elroy wouldn’t mind.

“Ross, did you ever hear from Manny about that girl?”

“No.” Ross took the bottle of Bourbon from Quinton and capped it himself. Before Quinton could protest or Ross could initiate his departure, a pretty young woman fluttered up to their corner. Her blonde hair was long and flowing, and she wore a conservative dress in the usual safe pastel tones that Southern women preferred. She had giant eyes and a small, mincing little mouth. A true Southern belle.

“Beg your pardon, you’re Ross McCall?” The woman asked in a melodious and feminine voice. *Don’t be an ass, she looks nice.*

“Hello there,” said Ross. His eyes ran up and down her body. “To whom do I owe the pleasure?”

“Um,” she said, with a glance at Quinton that suggested she wished he was not there. “Arabella Ghastle. It’s nice to meet you.”

“A pleasure,” said Ross. He recalled the Ghastles owned a shipping company and Howard Ghastle was rumored to be racist. Ross wondered if Arabella Ghastle knew about his three sisters-in-law, all black, and the passel of mixed-race children that made up his nieces and nephews.

“It’s a nice night, isn’t it?” Arabella said.

Ross nodded politely. “Are you related to Elroy?”

“Who, Elroy? Yes, I’m his cousin, on our mother’s side.”

“That’s nice,” said Ross.

“Inbred,” said Quinton suddenly. “Er— sorry. Talking to myself. Ross, Tina’s coming over.”

“So, Ross— do you like tennis?” Arabella ventured, but she never got a reply because Tina had descended.

“Sorry, am I interrupting?” Tina said sweetly.

“Yes, you are,” said Ross.

Ross detected no remorse in his ex-girlfriend’s eyes for anything that had happened between them. He hadn’t expected any. To his surprise, up close Tina didn’t look as good as he remembered. He wondered if she was still drinking.

“Ross is so funny,” Tina said, turning to the startled Arabella. “Isn’t he?”

“I don’t know. I just met him,” said Arabella, frowning. “Excuse me, um, Ma’am. But who are you?”

“A jealous ex,” said Ross.

Tina smiled but it just missed her eyes. “Ross, I understand your brother is selling land?”

“Pardon?”

“Excuse me — ” Arabella tried. Tina ignored her and said to Ross, “Your brother Roman. My *husband* is buying about a hundred acres from him.”

“I didn’t know Roman was selling anything. I’m sure you heard wrong,” said Ross.

“We could be neighbors!” Tina laughed. “Wouldn’t that be nice?”

Quinton, who had fallen uncharacteristically silent, looked back and forth between them.

“Nice isn’t the word,” said Ross.

“They’ll be cutting the cake soon,” said Arabella.

Tina paid her no mind. She was jealous of Ross even if she had rejected him to marry Charlie Goldfinger, the California billionaire.

But in some ways Tina regretted ever choosing Charlie over Ross. Charlie might be richer, but he gave her a taste of her own medicine. He was a cheater who embarrassed her at every opportunity. Tina’s social standing had fallen ever since and in her usual way, she blamed everybody but herself.

Ross refused to forgive her for the abortion and it wasn’t fair. The facts were that he’d got down on his knees and begged her not to have it. She promised she wouldn’t, but then she did. Her only mistake was getting it done in Rowanville. She had tried to pass it off as a miscarriage, but Ross got nosy and found out the truth. In the end it wasn’t that she had killed

their baby twins. It was the lie, he said. He could never forgive her.

But Ross should have seen it from her point of view. Charlie's money went long, and ever since Tina's father had gambled away her trust fund with that fraudulent horse breeder, she needed to go with a husband who could support her lifestyle. If he wasn't so stubborn he could have had her anyway; they could always have a discreet relationship while she stayed with Charlie. But Ross was greedy about women.

"Ross is getting set up with a hot Korean chick, Tina," said Quinton.

"What?"

"Look, there's the cake," said Ross.

"Ross, I want to talk to you," Tina said. "Miss Ghastly, would you please give us a minute?"

For a second it seemed like Arabella would stand her ground. But the girl saw the crazed look in Tina's eyes and backed down. Well it saved him the awkwardness of a rejection, but he felt bad. She seemed like a sweet girl.

He looked down his nose at Tina. "I don't think we have anything to say to each other."

In response Tina grabbed Ross's hand and steered him away from the crowd, and from Quinton, who just shook his head. Her long nails dug into his flesh.

"What the hell does Quinton mean?" Tina demanded once they entered the deep shadows under one of the staircases. Ross stared down at his ex girlfriend. She seemed flustered and irritated. He felt nothing...

"Exactly what it sounds like," said Ross. "None of your damned business."

"You look at me all night, then you act like you don't want to touch me," Tina whined.

"How is Charlie?" Ross demanded.

“He doesn’t make me feel the way you do,” Tina said. She touched his chest, stepping closer.

Ross felt himself getting sucked in. Her perfume was the same. Like a poison flower. When he made no move to reciprocate the gesture Tina’s eyes went wide and watery—fake tears, always fake. “You still won’t let it go? Are you getting a Korean woman now? I don’t understand.”

“How is that any of your business?”

She slapped him, her ring opening his cheek. Pain, blood. He grabbed her by the throat, but immediately found the controls to his temper and released her. McCall rage. Ross blinked furiously several times, trying to clear the red haze forming over his brain.

She stumbled back, wheezing, overdoing it. “Ross,” she whimpered in that little-girl voice he had always hated. “Ross, how could you?”

Noises around the corner. Before Ross could duck out from under the stairway, Tina flung herself at him and wrapped her arms around his neck. Perfume. Soft. Ross struggled to remove her, but she bit down savagely on his ear. He recognized those voices. The Governor of Virginia and Judge McAllister were two of the most powerful men in the state. Both uncles of Elroy Madison.

“Bad doings with the McCalls downstate, Archie,” said the Governor.

“Very bad,” agreed the Judge. “But it won’t be long long before the trash is swept down the chute.”

The Governor said, “The sooner we put these creatures in their place, the sooner I can get the Feds off me. They’ve been sniffing around my office for nearly two years. Why they don’t arrest these hillbillies is a mystery to me.”

“Bribes,” said the Judge.

“You can’t bribe the Feds,” The Governor scoffed.

“Roman McCall has found a way.”



“Hunting this winter?” The Governor sniffed something off a tiny spoon.

“Mmm? Yes— Gambia.”

“Excellent shooting.”

“So I hear. This year I’ll try for an elephant.”

Tina whispered in Ross’s ear, “We don’t want to make a scene, right?”

His cock hardened against her soft stomach. Her perfume...so familiar. She could feel it, his desire for her even after everything.

Hate, love...two sides of one coin.

The demon around his neck reached for his dick and squeezed. “You’ll always love me,” she whispered.

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“Fuck you, Ross.” His ex-girlfriend knelt and removed his belt, pulled him loose. She moaned softly, soft enough so only he could hear it.

“You’re bigger than Charlie,” she moaned. “So much bigger, baby.”

Ross tried to push her away...not very hard.

Tina took full advantage, suckling him into her mouth. Crown and shaft disappeared down her talented throat. This was her secret weapon. But Ross knew her tricks, even if it had been so long...

He deliberately held in his orgasm, forcing her to blow him for nearly twenty minutes. After a while she stopped and rose up. Shining lips, flushed cheeks, her eyes flashing. “You arrogant...”

Ross put away his dick. Then he puckered her cheeks between one of his strong hands and forced her back. Something in his expression scared her.

Good.

“You used to do it better,” he said cruelly.

She wiped her mouth, her eyes spitting fire. “Liar,” she said.

He said nothing.

“You could have it all, you know,” Tina said, slapping his hand away. Her dark eyes begged him. “You know I only married Charlie for his money.”

“What did he marry you for, I wonder?”

“I told him I was pregnant...”

“Ah. Of course.” Ross rubbed some of her weave between his fingers before he caught himself. “What happened when he learned the truth?”

“It was the truth. I am pregnant, Ross.”

He stared at her with numb rage. “You aborted our daughters,” he rasped, “But you’ll breed with that clown?”

“I had to do it, Ross. I had to give Charlie a baby.”

“Money. It was always about his money.”

“That doesn’t change things for me. You were the one who left me,” Tina argued. “Ross...what we had sexually...” Tina pressed her body against his. He responded to her, aching to hold her close, to shove her against the wall and drive his cock deep inside her. But he controlled it...he controlled it.

“We could still have it,” Tina whispered in his ear, sending goosebumps up his arms. “You never even wanted a relationship, Ross. I get that. It’s fine, honey...We could keep it going...just you and me. As long as you wanted. Charlie doesn’t have to know.” She got on her knees again and took his hard and aching dick into her mouth.

“Mmm,” she said. “Mmm...Baby...always like this...”

A FEW MINUTES LATER ROSS RETURNED TO THE MAIN PARLOR. People were milling around talking, gossiping. He wanted to leave— now. He only had to find Elroy for the sake of good manners.

A survey of the room showed that Quinton had barely moved from his spot. He was beaming all around the room, thinking happy Quinton thoughts. The blonde giant raised his new Miller Lite in salutation. “Elroy just passed. He was looking for Tina? Discussing that faggotty-ass art thing y’all do every year.”

“This year they lowered the entrance fee, Quinton. Now you can come instead of just hating.”

“Ha! You asshole. Where’s Tina?”

“The Ladies.”

Quinton looked him up and down. “Y’all fucked?”

“No.”

“You two go together like a frozen turkey and a deep fryer.”

Ross glanced around and saw Charlie Goldfinger glaring daggers at him from across the room. Where was the big-titted redhead? Gone. Ross stared back at Charlie without blinking. He let the rage come. The entire time he’d been seeing Tina, Charlie had been fucking her and plotting his move.

Ross would never know what possessed Charlie to marry Tina against the wishes of his family. But sure enough he treated Tina the same as he’d done to many. His interest in a woman never lasted long. Charlie was a scumbag, but Tina married him for his money. In a way they deserved each other.

Eventually Charlie lowered his gaze and stormed off, maybe in search of Tina, or more cocaine. It was a small satisfaction to Ross that Charlie was scared of him.

“Guess who called while you and Tina were definitely-not-fucking?”

“Mm?”

“Manny,” Quinton said, excited. “He’s in town tonight.”

“What, in *Rowanville*?” Ross hadn’t heard from Manny since leaving Tokyo. What would bring Manny all the way out here in backcountry Virginia? He glanced at Quinton from the

corner of his eye but decided not to inquire. He'd find out soon enough, knowing Quinton.

"Sure 'nuf. Reckon we'll see him tomorrow," Quinton nodded. "By the way— that girl Arabella? She's friends with this girl Nadia, right? Oil money. Daddy's worth like a gazillion. Got hawks and shit, mazzis. Prince Saudi-bin-Aladdin or whatever the fuck. There she is. You should totally tap that. Reckon after I'm done in Samoa I should try Saudi Arabia. Reckon the women are banging."

"Women in Saudi Arabia, known for their sexual liberties," Ross commented.

"Are they? Excellent. There she is, Ross. Arabian princess with your name all over her."

Ross didn't even bother look where Quinton was pointing, nor did he try to decipher what the fuck Quinton was talking about. He glanced at his watch. "I'm out, Quint."

"No doubt. Take a bottle with you," said Quinton. "Elroy's such a cube he won't care."

ELROY'S DRIVER TOOK ROSS BACK TO ROWANVILLE. ROSS lived in Crown Vista, a wealthy corner of the county. The famous architect Rachmann Weiss had designed the house, which Ross had purchased five years ago on his twenty-third birthday. He lived there by himself.

Ross tipped the driver and walked the half mile up his private driveway for the exercise, and to clear his head. Sounds of the night called to him. He heard crickets and an owl, and saw a colony of fireflies dancing at the top of the hill.

He put in his private code for the gate and remembered the fingerprint scanners he'd seen in Tokyo. Buy some next week. Tokyo...What a strange trip that had been. Mangjeol was in Rowanville? Had to be a good reason. Manny never left Asia these days, unless it was a trip to Los Angeles to keep an eye on the business.

Something not right. Manny in Virginia... Why?

Ross walked up to his house, his mind abstractedly wandering on, considering the events of the night. He had actually let Tina suck his dick in the middle of Elroy Madison's house. Tina's soft juicy lips wrapped around his cock...He needed to shower.

Coming up to the front yard, Ross got face to face with the *Jean-Christophe*. He remembered Roman's threat and shook his head. Ross had waited nine months for that sculpture, outbidding a Chinese billionaire and a Russian oil baron. It was the size of an ostrich egg and worth its weight in gold.

He stopped for a moment, watching the moonlight gleam attractively on the wrought bronze. The statue would outlive him. In his children's lifetime, the value would double.

But he might never have kids at this rate.

Once his mind fixated on a woman, every other seemed to disappear.

A pity that the object of his fixation was Tina. No matter where he went, the memories of her lingered in his mind. They weren't memories of Tina, of course. Merely the person she had pretended to be.

And that was the hardest thing, wasn't it?

ROSS ENTERED HIS HOUSE AND WENT STRAIGHT TO HIS bedroom. In the darkness he undressed, then in his boxers he went to the kitchen and poured himself a finger of whiskey.

The house smelled different.

Like...a woman.

Everything echoes in an empty house. Ross sat on his couch— another *Jean Christophe*, nearly as expensive as the statue. He stared into space.

He knew he had a somewhat sour personality. Laughter didn't come to him as easy as Rebel. He didn't take comfort in arts and music like Rain. Ross would rather hang a painting on his wall than make one. And he didn't have the family shit to keep him busy, like Roman. Plenty of times his older brother

offered to take him into the fold, but running drugs and whiskey across state lines had never been Ross's calling.

Ross worked as a Private Investigator. He already had money from his family, so it was not necessary. But he liked the work.

Hell, he liked everything about his life, except the big gaping hole in the middle of it.

Some nights he slept on the floor of his office just to hear the sirens and commotion of Rowanville. All the money in the world couldn't cure loneliness.

But in a perfect world...Why not something like what his brothers had? Think of Roman. He had saved a girl from being some Snatch Hill's concubine. Though she had practically no education, Serena proved to be a good wife and mother. She turned Roman's house into a real home. She raised their kids and rubbed off some of the burrs in Roman's personality. Ross might like a woman like Serena.

*Isn't that what Manny promised?*

Fuck that.

Ross swilled the whiskey in the glass. His sole experience with real love and tenderness all came from his mother. The memories were scarce because she had died young. He wanted to feel emotion for somebody, to look after somebody. He wanted a wife and kids and the perfect family life.

*That's enough*, Ross thought, setting down the whiskey. Once he reached that dark doorway there was no turning back.

The burn in his chest felt good. Time to sleep. He navigated his way to the shower in the darkness, and washed Tina off his dick.

That was never happening again.

Ross brushed his teeth and towel-dried his curly hair. What time was it? Jesus. He made his way to bed, eager for the black embrace of sleep. Another day, another day...

Bed...

There was someone in his bed.

## THE INTRUDER

Ross's open palm slammed on the switch next to his four-poster, flooding the room with incandescent light.

He had his gun cocked when he got a real look at the sleeping figure amid the rumpled silk sheets.

Ross stood there with his mouth hanging open for several bloody heartbeats. He squinted and he stared. He must be drunker than he thought. Regardless he put his father's Desert Eagle down. His heart pounded sickeningly. He could have obliterated the very beautiful female lying fast asleep with his pillow between her legs, easy as breathing.

Damn it, she was real. Not some mirage cooked up in his whiskey-addled head. He uttered an oath that would have made his redneck relations proud.

Just what in the hell...

Ross didn't stand there long. He already had his man. He stumbled from the room and grabbed his phone from the inner pocket of his jacket. With shaking fingers he dialed a number. The line rang out. Of course it did. *We're sorry! The number you have dialed...*

"Manny, you son of a bitch!" He growled.

Ross scraped a hand through his hair and paced the room, every ten seconds glancing down at the girl, who didn't magically disappear. She slept like she was in her own bedroom. Ross got hold of himself and knelt on the edge of the



bed. He shook her roughly. Yep, she was real alright. Real as life.

“Hey!”

She mumbled, “Shut your bitch ass up.”

“Hey! What the hell are you doing in my house! Hey!”

What the fuck had been her name? Angie? Ross realized shaking her wasn't going to work. He slapped her gently, but that didn't work either. What now? Poke her with a shoe?

How the *fuck* had they got her in here?

In Ross's closet a panel on the wall opened to show the different views of his security cameras. He rewound the footage. When Mangjeol's face appeared suddenly in the screen, he jumped. Manny looked very amused with himself—in whatever way it was possible for Mangjeol to look amused. His face filled the screen. With the smirk Ross remembered from their Kappa-Alpha days, Manny waved. What a crazy son of a bitch. Manny held up a yellow manila envelope. Ross cut to the living room cameras and saw Manny slip it under the cushion of the Jean-Christophe couch, exactly where Ross had been sitting just moments before, drowning his woes about Tina with whiskey.

After gently patting the Silfaka Leather back into place, Mangjeol calmly left through the front door, re-armed the security system, and walked down the driveway at a leisurely stride. Lights at the bottom indicated a parked car was waiting for him.

Ross paused then, listening. His ears strained through the semi-darkness for any other sound. He would have to sweep this room for cameras later. Who knew what kind of freak game Manny was playing?

Sweat gathered on Ross's neck. He backtracked through more footage, but the cameras went black. Like a mastermind thief, Manny had wiped the feed showing him and his minions moving the girl into the house. It was in that moment Ross realized that maybe Roman had a point about upgrading his home security. There were other homes along the track back

down to the main road with cameras that might serve him better, but Ross was in no position to draw attention to himself by calling on his neighbor.

Now what? He tried Manny's number again to the same results. In his consternation he nearly dialed Quinton. Quite possibly the worst friend one could hope for in a dire circumstance after the Florin PD.

The girl was pretty just like Manny said. She had slanted eyes and a button mouth. Her face was dainty as a doll's. Her hair was thick, so thick it looked like she must never contain it. It floated in the slow drifts from the air conditioning.

She only wore a white silk teddy. It was extremely revealing. The front of it dipped between her titties and showed the smooth and flawless chocolate brown color that darkened prettily in the middle. What color were her nipples? Would they be red, or a deeper brown, like cocoa? Urge to pull it down and see...

Her disproportionate titties were nothing, though, to the smooth round curve of her ass. Ross's jaw slackened. Jesus. Manny was right— exactly his type. *Exactly.*

He fixated on the teddy again, his inherent good taste recognizing the maker. What a nice touch. Perhaps he ought to thank Manny— after he killed him.

Cursing, he went to the living room to search for the envelope, but not before grimly twitching the sheet back over his sleeping guest because she looked cold.

Ross went to find the envelope. Bitter and ugly thoughts raged through his head. By God! If he ever saw Manny again he'd beat the bastard senseless. Then he'd kill him. He'd thank him, beat him, then kill him.

No, he wouldn't thank him.

Just kill him.

Ross flung the cushion off his expensive couch. Something across the room shattered. He grabbed the manila envelope and returned to his room, breathing through his teeth. Should he call Roman?

*Are you simple? Roman's*

The envelope was suspiciously light.

He set it down and refreshed himself with more whiskey. Under the dimly-pulsing halogen he shredded open the top of the manila envelope and dumped out the papers it contained.

One of them caught his eye immediately because his name was on it. ROSS MCCALL, spelled in Mangjeol's immaculate handwriting. Ross had not expected a written confession. He read grimly,

DEAR ROSS,

OUR LAST CONVERSATION LEFT NO DOUBT AS TO YOUR OPINION ON THE MATTER WE DISCUSSED. HOWEVER, I FEEL VERY STRONGLY THAT THIS ARRANGEMENT WILL BE TO YOUR BENEFIT AND I AM UNABLE TO ENSURE HER SAFETY IN KOREA.

THIS TREASURE IS MY LAST SURVIVING RELATIVE. WORD OF SOOK-JAE'S DEATH CAME TO ME A WEEK AGO. IT WAS UNFORTUNATE. BUT I TRUST YOUR DISCRETION AND WISDOM IN THIS MATTER. I WOULD ASK YOU TO LOOK AFTER HER AND TREAT HER WITH ALL THE CONSIDERATION I KNOW YOU ARE CAPABLE OF.

ANGEL WILL BE AVAILABLE TO YOU IN EVERY WAY.

THANK YOU,

MANNY.

ROSS THREW THE LETTER DOWN. HE WASN'T ONE TO GIVE UP, but he knew when he was beaten. Manny wasn't a fool, and Ross was in no position to chase him all over Virginia. There was an airstrip nearby, and Manny flew private. The bastard was probably on his way to Los Angeles that very minute. Or

maybe he was reclining in the Rowanville Springs taking a load off with a towel on his head. There was no way to find out.

Ross knelt on the bed and shook Angel's shoulder again. Her skin was like dark velvet.

"Hey," he said. "Hey. Come on. Wake up."

Nothing. Suspicion told Ross to check the insides of her arms. He was able to move her without any reaction but a small pucker between her eyebrows.

He ran his thumbs up her forearm, his brain absorbing the softness and weight of it as he would for any woman. Hell, he wasn't made of wood. He noticed her attributes but his search led him elsewhere. Had they given her something for sleeping?

Sure enough he found small puncture marks on the insides of her elbows. Ross didn't suppose Manny would send him a junkie, so he could only assume someone else had administered those drugs. She might be out for a few more minutes, or hours.

Ross pulled a chair to the edge of the bed. He sat down hard, keeping the whiskey closeby.

"Well, shit," he rasped, staring at her. Impulse made him dim the lights next to the bed, which were shining in her eyes. Another sign this sleep was artificial...Nothing to do but wait.

Why drug her? "What did they do to you, Angel?" Ross murmured. "Thought you wanted to come here. Was that a fucking lie?"

He tried Manny's number again and again. Nothing. As Ross's panic lost its edge he slipped into detective mode.

There was no question of the girl staying. But if Manny didn't want her, then what? Ship her back to Korea?

Ross cast his eye over the pile of documents that had come out of the envelope. With an expert eye he recognized forgeries. Zero effort forgeries. Manny would spend three

racks on a fucking silk teddy but order forgeries that had clearly been printed in a Wuhan wet market.

Ross ground his teeth. He'd have to question the girl thoroughly once she woke up. Her sweet, innocent look boded ill for him. Women had always been his weakness.

*Think, stupid bastard, think.* No sending her back to Manny. The obvious next step would be to get her back to where she'd come from. Not Korea or Japan, but Los Angeles. She must have family there. A life.

Los Angeles.

Ross's finger hovered over Quinton's number. But Quinton couldn't keep his mouth shut and the hour was late. He'd had a lot to drink. He got to his feet and discovered that very quickly. Sleep was returning in spite of the circumstances. Tomorrow was another day. He couldn't send the girl anywhere tonight. Except the police station.

*She's gorgeous. Fuck— are her nipples pierced?*

Ross reached out a finger and slowly, slowly pulled down the frilly edge of the negligee bodice. *They're pierced. Oh God. Tattoo of a heart on her left titty. Probably means nothing.*

His mouth was full of saliva. His dick was hard. He withdrew his finger.

*Don't even think about it.*

Ross started for the living room couch but changed his mind. Fuck that. He'd sleep in his own damn bed. For one thing, it was his house. Damn right, it was his house. And what if sleeping beauty woke up before he did? He imagined her creeping around and going through his shit. No fucking way. Bear-like, Ross lumbered to the bed, shutting off the light before the eiderdown swallowed his large frame. The girl was all up on his side, but he resolved that with a couple strong shoves, which then became a gentle but stiff male embrace with her head on his chest.

*Angel will be available to you in every way...*

Fuck.

Sex. Manny was talking about sex. He'd talked about it in Japan.

That was the whole reason, wasn't it?

The girl would fuck him in exchange for shelter and protection.

Ross put the back of his hand under her nose. Still breathing, thank God.

She smelled good. Like she'd just showered. Ross touched her hand. Then her wrist. Yeah...Yeah. She was nice and soft. Her hair smelled like vanilla and cocoa beans. Like a chocolate he'd had one time in Aruba. He rubbed his nose in the coarse curls and his arms tightened around her. Warm, soft, woman. That was nice. That was real nice...

His other hand clutched his large stiff erection. It was the liquor. Making him stupid. Making him think...dirty things.

Little soft body. His dick was so hard. She would be wet. Jiggly. Warm. Tits. Smelling like vanilla...Would her pussy smell like that? Eating her pussy. God, just eating her pussy, sucking her clit, trying her cunt out a little with two fingers while her curvy thighs wrapped gloriously around his ears.

His eyes drifted shut. He stroked his dick a couple more times then forced himself to stop by gripping the sheet and thinking of that time Rebel convinced him to do a backflip off the Wheeler tailgate into their pond. Ross had been convinced at the time that a giant dick-eating lizard lived in that pond. Surely Roman's inventive stories about giant dick-eating lizards had nothing to do with it. Ross went off the tailgate and sank to the bottom where Rain grabbed his ankle and made him swallow half the pond in terror. They still gave him shit for that. Bastards.

Distracted, his mind slid backward, doors closing in his head until the black surrender of sleep claimed him. Morning would come, the girl would leave.

Everything would be alright.

Little bitch...sneaking into his house. What the fuck did they take him for? He wouldn't let this shit stand. This had to be resolved. Manny was so dead.

He held her tightly all night long, his thumbs occasionally brushing the hard little diamonds in her nipples.

ANGEL DREAMED OF A DUSTY CITY IN THE DESERT. YELLOW wind and greasy smoke rising over a sprawl of houses all piled together. She stood on a corner watching cars pass by, but nobody could see her. She was hurt and bleeding. She'd run for a long time and she was so tired now. She wanted someone to see her, someone to help her. But she was alone. Cars passed by. People didn't even turn their heads. Why wouldn't anybody help?

A COLD FRESH MORNING DAWNED OVER ROWANVILLE, Virginia. The sleepy city nestled in a valley of the Blue Ridge slowly came to life as the blue hour of dawn faded into day. Down the mountain pickup trucks rumbled into the city, and the routines of two hundred thousand people began anew for a Thursday like any other.

High up in Crown Vista, Angel woke up in a feather bed. She knew it was feathers from the smell of down, which was familiar to her, but she couldn't say where. When she turned her head, her eyebrows coming together in a confused frown, a whiff of something else tugged at her nose.

Coffee.

Groaning, she sat up. Her tongue felt thick and heavy in her mouth and it took a minute for her eyelids to unglue themselves. Her arms and legs felt heavy as a bitch. She blinked into the gloomy atmosphere of the room, trying to make out where she was.

She saw a dresser with a framed picture of four men. Brothers? A man's hairbrush, cologne, a rumpled old tie. The room smelled like aftershave and new sheets. She gulped. *I'm in a man's room. Okay.*

*My titties hurt.*

“Hello?” she croaked. Her voice sounded like she hadn’t used it in months.

Suddenly the curtains pulled back, and a shaft of light burst into the room directly into her eyes. Ouch! She ducked her face into her hands. “Ahh! Damn,” she complained.

“Good morning,” came a deep male voice. Angel blinked up into the jarring brightness and a figure took shape, a great big shadow with a lot of curly hair.

Her jaw dropped.

“Woah,” he said. “Easy, darling, I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Who are you?” She said, putting up her hands between them. “I don’t know you. Where the fuck am I? What’s going on?”

“Easy on the language, alright?”

“Motherfucker, I don’t know you! Get away from me!”

She looked down at her bare legs. All she wore was some little lacy white thing, like a fancy underwear. She plucked at the hem of it. When did she put *that* on? She backed up from the man further.

“My name is Ross. I expect you’ll be confused from the sedative.”

“The *what*?”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” the man said in a calm voice that drawled out like dark molasses off a spoon. But despite his tone she saw he was aggravated; his dark eyebrows slashed together and his freckled face and chest were turning redder. “Just relax, alright?”

“Okay. What’s your name?”

“Ross. I guess it will take a minute for you to get your bearings.”

“Ross?” She frowned.



“Did it affect your hearing, too?”

“Mister, I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.” She rubbed her eyes as the man walked back to the window and jerked the curtains back over it a little. Better. That light was a bitch. She rubbed her watering eyes. “I feel like I spent the night on skid row.”

“Close enough,” said Ross dryly.

Quickly she sized him up. Six foot one, maybe two. Broad-shouldered, so he worked out. Hairy chest— white, or mixed. Probably white. No tattoos, period. Angel didn’t know anyone without tattoos...

*Who do you know?* Names and faces flickered somewhere distantly in her mind. She shivered. Okay, so she was in some white dude’s bedroom. He sounded Southern or some shit. Was she in the South?

Her memory of the night before came up against a wall. She tried to think back to *any* memory at all, but that just opened up a big black hole that scared her so bad for a moment she couldn’t speak.

Ross. He said his name was Ross. Ross who? Ross what? Did she know a Ross? Did she know *anybody*?

“Um,” she said, a bad thought occurring to her. She put a shaking hand to her face. “Did we...Did we have sex in here, mister?”

He jerked backward. “We did not,” he snapped. “I hope you know I’m a gentleman. I would never do that.”

“My titties hurt.”

He turned even redder. “I came home drunk and found you in here. We were...cuddling in the night. But not by my intention.”

“You lying,” she accused.

He scowled. “You have a lot of explaining to do yourself.”

“And that accent is fucked up. Just tell me *where I am*, okay?”

He laughed harshly, and stepped sideways and a shaft of daylight fell across his face. With his back to the window it was difficult to see him clearly, but she picked out two slanted hazel eyes, curly brown hair shot through with gold streaks, a long straight nose and a generous mouth. *He's fine...*

"I don't understand," she said. "We spent the night in here but we didn't sleep together?"

"You slept next to me, that was it. I never motherfucking touched you, alright?"

"Why you getting all defensive?" She said incredulously. "Chill."

"You want me to *chill*?" A dark red flush crept across the man's face, and the scary eyebrows twisted together in a hard V. "Girl, you better start talking and explain what the fuck kind of game Manny is playing."

Her stomach turned over. "Um, what?"

Ross's fists clenched on the windowsill. "That's not the answer I wanted."

"Look..." She had no idea what to say. Her throat was dry as Tijuana. "Look. I don't know. Mister, I'm so thirsty."

"What?"

"Yeah. Can I please have some water or something?"

"Yeah. Sure."

He walked through a dark doorway into what she assumed was the kitchen. Immediately Angel swung her legs over the bed and tried to stand up. *Mmmm...* Her toes sank deep into a plush carpet. She wriggled them. *Woo, that's nice.*

She took a step towards the door the stranger had just walked through. Her stomach did a somersault. *Woah. Oh no. Hell nah.*

Ross-whomever came back in the room with a tall glass. "I didn't know if you wanted ice—"

"Oh," she said. She leaned over and threw up right on the pretty carpet.

“I WAS AFRAID OF THAT,” SAID ROSS GRIMLY AS HE HANDED her a wet towel. She wiped her mouth but the movement was not steady. He put the glass of water down and got a hand under her elbow.

“I’m all dizzy,” Angel muttered, shrinking away from him. Would he be pissed? Suddenly she was afraid of him. She tensed up and subtly backed away from him, but he didn’t raise his hand or his voice.

“It’s just puke,” he said slowly, staring at her.

“Yeah. I’m so sorry.”

“Can you stand?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

Ross hesitated, then came forward and suddenly scooped her into his arms.

“Must be the sedative,” he said.

“Nobody sedated me,” she said irritably.

“Oh really? So did you walk in here with Manny, or did somebody carry you in, sleeping beauty?” Ross fired back. He lifted her into his arms and carried her through a different doorway, and she knew it was the bathroom before he even flicked on the light. Actually, he didn’t flick on the light at all. It just turned on by itself, *automatically*.

“You rich, Mister?” She asked him as he carefully set her down, a firm hand braced on her back in case she fell over again.

“I am. Figured Manny would have filled you in.”

“Who the fuck is Manny?” Angel muttered to herself. Again, that feeling like she was two steps behind. Maybe she hit her head last night. She felt for any bumps. “And to answer your question, I don’t remember.”

“Because you were sedated.”

“I wasn’t!”

He grabbed her arm and forcefully extended it. He was very, very strong. With a sick shock she saw the puncture wounds inside her elbow.

“That could be from anything,” she snapped.

“Like what? Heroin?” His eyes were narrow and sharp. “Are you on drugs?”

“Fuck no!”

“Good.” He watched her as she rinsed her mouth and splashed water in her face. The vomit had been mostly water. Nothing on her stomach. She was so hungry.

*Ugh.*

“Don’t go tumbling over in here. That marble ain’t kind to the human skull.”

“Don’t worry...I’m good.” She dried off her mouth. “This is a nice bathroom. That’s marble ain’t it?”

He gave her a funny look in the mirror. “Yes. I had it remodeled recently.”

“Is this your house for sure?”

“It is.”

She cast her eyes around the bathroom, searching for clues that might clear the haze in her mind. The sink looked like a giant clam shell opening under a fountain of pure bright water. The toilet was normal, the shower was not. She saw dials and numbers outside the frosted glass pane. This was some big boy shit.

“It’s nice in here,” she said. She sniffed the bar soap. “Yeah, real nice.”

“Thank you.”

The strange man opened a medicine cabinet, glanced at the rows of white bottles, then seemed to change his mind. “Been enough of that,” he muttered, shutting the cabinet.

He turned back to her and cupped her chin. His eyes pierced hers and a current of *something* passed through her.

“Better?” he demanded.

She jerked away, afraid of the way her heart began speeding up and taking over her brain. “Hold up, hold up. Before you start touching on me, you need to tell me who the fuck you are and why you brought me here.”

“Manny should have—”

“*Who is Manny?*” She said, a little too loud. Anger crept up in her voice. “I need to hear some real answers ‘cause I don’t know what the fuck is going on!”

“Irrational anger— another side effect,” the man said like he was a scientist investigating a fascinating specimen. “Maybe you’re just hungry.”

“I just threw up. Shit, I don’t want to eat at all,” she lied. Every minute she thought more clearly, and now it seemed obvious that this man was some kind of sick bastard who was keeping her captive. She mustn’t eat or drink anything. She had to escape.

A vein in the man’s jaw pulsed. Fuck was he so keyed up for?

“Just how much shit did they shoot you up with, exactly?”

“Nobody shot me up with nothing.” She began breathing hard. “I don’t remember...I don’t know what I’m doing here! Where am I? Where is this place?”

“Virginia. Rowanville, Virginia. Manny should have told you that. What the hell is going on?”

“Who the fuck is Manny?!” Angel screamed, her self-control snapping. “I don’t know anybody named Manny! I don’t know a damned thing. You better tell me exactly what’s going down here before I call the police!”

It was an empty threat and they both knew it. First of all, she didn’t have a phone. Second of all, she didn’t expect the police to do jack shit; she wasn’t dumb. She knew how it would go down. Bad optics— she’d be the one spending the night in a cell while this rich white man fed them whatever story he wanted.

She wanted to get out of this room. It seemed to be turning into a different room before her eyes.

“Hey,” the white man said. “Angel, right? That’s your name? Okay, just take it easy.”

*Angel.*

All of a sudden she shut up. Her panic vanished between one moment and the next. Suddenly she felt completely calm. What was she so heated for? No idea— not important— she was already forgetting her anger and fear of the situation. The feeling of waking up in the bedroom of a man she didn’t know at all disappeared. The nerves that came from the fact that she couldn’t remember exactly where she had come from, or even what her real name was, was not as important as the sensation of sleepy pleasure suddenly coursing through her veins.

Her eyes fluttered shut. *Mmmm. I feel good. Really, really good.*

“Angel?”

She gasped. Ross swam in her vision, then took shape again. He seemed taller, more handsome. Matter of fact, he was the most gorgeous man she’d ever seen in her life. He was perfect. She stepped towards him with a moan, needing more than air itself to feel his muscled body tense and tight against hers. Angel’s eyes drooped and her body warmed until she felt her own blood rushing through her veins. She walked up to Ross— he didn’t move, surprised, maybe— and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“What the hell?” He choked, backing up from her. “Hey! Get off me!” He tried to pry her loose, but Angel only gripped him tighter. The rising need inside her body wanted one thing only. Between her legs went slick; her nipples tightened under the lacy silk.

It only grew stronger the longer they stayed like that, bodies pressed against each other. His resistance did not last long. With a deep male noise of surprise— but not exactly hating it, either— he let her wriggle up against him. Torment

raged in his pretty hazel eyes. Angel giggled. His arms slowly but powerfully came up around her.

“Okay,” he said. “This calming you down, right? Feel better now?” He stared down stupidly at her breasts. “Christ,” he muttered.

“I feel better,” she said. “Say my name again.”

“Angel?”

She shivered.

“Okay. You just needed a hug. Okay. Right. I get it.”

In response Angel rubbed her breasts across his chest, deeply fascinated by the difference in their bodies and wanting more than anything to get naked with him and feel him deep inside her.

She tugged at his sweatpants. Hard.

He said, “Woah, Angel, hey— we can’t...”

*Angelangelangel.*

Her mind went blank but her body moved of its own will. Eyes closed, she leaned up and sucked his lower lip into her mouth, dizzy with a sweet pleasure she had never known.

LATER ROSS WOULD TRY TO PUT THE PIECES OF THAT MOMENT back together. He would try to find out where he stopped using his common sense and started thinking with his dick.

“Ross,” the girl breathed.

“Hey. Stop...”

But his hand on her waist felt too good. He left it there. He shouldn’t have. She moved it lower over the curve of her ass, deliberately.

The girl had an insane body. No denying it. As will often happen, Ross’s male urges overcame his sense. With both curiosity and bold desire he squeezed her soft flesh and felt only an eager response. She moaned and her hips twirled against his thigh. She smelled like vanilla and jasmine flowers.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay, I think that’s far enough.”

“I feel better now.”

“You taste like puke, sweetheart. No offense,” he said into her neck. *Vanilla, jasmine, green tea, charcoal...*

*YOU TASTE LIKE PUKE.* THE GENTLE REBUFF DIDN’T GO WITH his actions, since Ross was now trying to pull her closer. But the small jab reached through the haze washing over her and touched her pride. Angel pulled away. She felt a deep flicker of unease, where she couldn’t remember how or why she had initiated her actions. Ross took advantage of her sudden confusion and firmly set her apart from him, taking a step back himself.

“Okay,” he said. Ross was aware that they had taken it too far. Breathing in Angel’s scent was not going to help him think clearly. He needed to talk to Manny about this— he needed to get the girl out of here as soon as possible. Whatever had just happened, let it be the first and last time. He was aware that Mangjeol had laid some kind of trap and he was walking right into it.

“Okay. Uh...maybe it’s better if you stay in here and wash up. I’ll leave.”

“No,” she said.

“No?” He repeated.

She seemed confused. “I...I don’t know.” Her pretty brown eyes lowered. Her hands fell to her sides. She looked lost.

Ross was no expert on soothing feminine anxieties. He offered the only reassurance he could. “We’re both a little rattled by the change in circumstance. I’ll talk to Manny and figure out what the next step is.”

Privately he told himself that the girl was delirious from the sleeping drug and acting irrationally. Her sudden sexual come-on was bizarre and he found that could be the only explanation.



But something wasn't right.

Did she even know who Manny was? She sure wasn't acting like it. Almost seemed like the name both meant nothing to her and deeply upset her.

He kissed her forehead awkwardly and left the room with all due speed. He changed clothes in the guest bathroom, and went out to the garden to call Mangjeol, determined to give the bastard a piece of his mind.

AT THAT MOMENT MANGJEOL WAS ON HIS WAY TO LAX, stuck in traffic. But time was no issue, since he would be taking a private jet back to Seoul. He picked up the phone on the third ring. "Ross-kun, what a surprise."

He heard his friend's barely-concealed rage loud and clear through the phone. "Finally. Just what kind of fucking game are you playing here, Manny?"

"Has she done something to upset you?"

"She's out of her mind with whatever you shot her up with. What did you give her?"

"A mild sedative."

"Mild? She's like a cat in heat right now!" Ross said in fury.

Mangjeol said, "I don't understand the expression."

"Motherfucker...I told you I didn't want her. I'm going to send her back from wherever she came. Now tell me how to get rid of her," Ross growled. "Where do I send her? She's from Los Angeles? Where? Where's her family? Tell me!"

"You can't send her back."

"Excuse me? Did you just say I *can't*? Manny—"

"Sending her to Korea or Japan would be a death sentence for her, Ross-kun. Los Angeles is not a good option, either. Sook-Jae's enemies are everywhere. That is why I'm obliging you to look after her in Virginia. I went to great trouble to bring her for you."

“Thanks for that!” Said Ross sarcastically.

“You’re welcome.”

“You waltzed into my fucking house without warning and dumped her like a piece of trash—”

“I bypassed your extremely vulnerable security system,” Manny countered. “Next time choose a less obvious passcode. And those little cameras— where did you get them? One of your dollar stores? I can recommend you some better ones.”

After uttering some ugly curses Ross expressed a huge angry breath. “Yeah, no shit about the cameras. I will be upgrading, so thanks. Thanks for nothing.”

“You’re welcome.” Manny smiled.

“Next time I see you expect to get your ass kicked.”

“Is she really giving trouble?” Mangjeol frowned. He had never experienced failure with his methods. “What exactly is she doing? She should be agreeable to you in every way.”

“I swear to God, Manny— I never signed up to babysit your niece!” Ross exploded.

“Angel and I had an agreement. She is going to do whatever you say. She will not cause trouble. I don’t think there is anything complicated about it.” Manny regarded the traffic through the window with impatience. He was anxious to get to Seoul. The flight would be arduous, but sitting in this dusty, stinking traffic had to be worse. Ross-kun was still shouting.

“I had a look at those documents you sent with her. Forgeries that won’t pass muster at a gas station! Jesus, Manny, the girl’s a ghost. How dare you fudge her off on me! Do you know what would happen if anybody found out I had some undocumented girl living up under me?”

Manny sighed. His friend was truly looking for complications where none need exist. He said, “Nothing would happen. You can offer her a great life. With your business, fixing the issue of documentation should be no trouble. You may send me the bill.”

“It’s not about the money, asshole.”

“Ah, so what’s the problem?”

“It’s the principle!” Ross roared.

“I’m very sorry to put you in this position, but as I have explained I didn’t have a choice. And I owed you a debt.”

“Don’t twist it, Manny! I thought I was your friend. I thought we were blood brothers. You betrayed me, violated the trust I put in you,” Ross said. “This is beyond anything Quinton’s done, and that’s saying a motherfucking lot.”

“Quinton was in on it,” Mangjeol said. “He told me you wanted children, you were jealous of your brothers.”

“*BEG YOUR PARDON?*”

“Quinton is as much to blame as I am. We all want to see you happy and getting over that woman.”

“Manny, you are dead to me!” Ross raged.

“I promise, everything will work out. Angel is her name. She is an Angel. She will be your Angel. Now I have to go, Ross. I have a call from my Philippine partners in five minutes and it requires great patience to deal with them on a good day when I have not been sitting in traffic for forty minutes. Today is not a good day.”

“This isn’t over,” Ross swore. “You will absolutely pay for this. I’m sending that girl back to you, and she better not try any motherfucking tricks before I do.”

Manny grinned. “But she is beautiful, isn’t she?”

“Fuck you.”

Mangjeol replaced his Samsung in his pocket, feeling unmoved by Ross’s consternation. He was generally a cool and emotionless person. However he had good instincts. Those had rarely failed him. If he had been in Sook-Jae’s position, things might have turned out differently.

Manny truly believed this was the best solution to divest himself of the troublesome niece without putting her in danger. Ross was an honorable person. He was also an aristocrat with

near unlimited wealth and resources, like himself. Ross-kun would make sure the girl was taken care of. They were both American. In time, he and Angel might discover they had other things in common. The girl was an artist. Ross was a collector of art. There! Love was not an impossibility.

And if all else failed, Manny had given the girl very clear instructions. She was to get pregnant as quickly as possible with Ross McCall's baby, using any means necessary. Ross might not want the woman, but he would be overjoyed by a child. And if Angel gave him a child, he would not send the girl back like used goods— Ross had too good a character for that.

Therefore Mangjeol felt comfortable with his decision. He had done his duty by Sook-Jae, his brother. He had acted with the best of intentions towards his dear friend. Potentially, he had arranged what might very well become a loving partnership.

Right before the Philippine partners called, Mangjeol's wife texted him a picture of herself sitting on the veranda of their Swiss chateau with a dainty croissant and a pot of cream on the table next to her. MISS YOU, she wrote, followed by a string of sad emojis.

Meiyumi was a good wife. They had nothing in common but Manny found her adorable. It had been an arranged marriage, and both of them found contentment in each other. Manny paid for her lavish and very boring lifestyle, and she stood by his side and never complained even if sometimes months passed without them seeing each other. Sometimes in a marriage you couldn't ask for better.

With an ironic smile he settled back in the seat and watched the freeway traffic slowly break open, releasing the tension it had built up all morning.



## HYPNOSIS

**I**t was clear Ross had no choice but to question the girl outright. He paced around the garden after Manny hung up. It helped him think, to walk around. Hoping maybe for inspiration to shoot down from heaven like a bolt of lightning. It did not. But it was alright. The girl would surely give him a better idea on her situation. Ross had experience with getting information out of difficult people, and he should have no trouble with Angel, even though she seemed a bubble off plumb. *'Mild sedative', my ass.*

He paced the fountain, where the floating petals of cherry blossoms gilt the surface of the water. The air was fresh with the smell of magnolia. Birds flew between the branches of the trees inside the lush grove he'd tended since he bought the house. Ross stopped at a flowerbed and absently ripped out weeds. Then he turned towards the house, wiping his dirty hands on his jeans.

No fuck-ups this time. Okay, he was attracted to her. Of course. He wasn't blind. In fact, her physical beauty had been Manny's trump card. He knew how Ross would take it. Thing was, it would be harder to get rid of her if he started fucking her. Point blank.

In front of the house, Ross stopped and stared at the tiny *Jean-Christophe* statuette, mounted on its bronze base. It usually filled him with a sense of great peace, but today he saw it through Roman's eyes. His brother might be right.

Scowling, Ross turned away from the priceless work of art and entered the house, prepared to interrogate the suspect.

He found Angel in his bed.

She had a book open on the sheets. She sat with her legs crossed, leaning over it in some bizarre yoga pose only females could do.

“Hey,” she said, raising her eyes to him. She was really too beautiful. That face ought to be in magazines. Plastered from the side of buildings like those girls he had seen in Tokyo. But nothing could beat seeing it in his bedroom. He felt a wildly possessive instinct.

“What are you reading?”

“A book.”

“No shit.”

She held it up. *Architecture of Hong Kong*.

“Where did you get that? Did you go through my things?”

“It was on your shelf.”

“This ain’t a guest house. Put it back. No, nevermind— Sit up; I want to talk to you for a minute.”

Angel sat up, frowning. “What?”

The lingerie agreed with him. He had never seen something more flattering on a woman in his life. Ross rubbed his jaw, then turned around and went to his closet. He returned with a long-sleeved henley shirt, wadded it up and tossed it to her. “Cover yourself.”

She pulled the shirt on quickly. “Maybe you can stop staring at my titties now,” she muttered.

“Why the hell are you even wearing that?”

“I don’t know,” she said, her tone finally mirroring his. “Why you coming at me rude over the book? You wanted me to just stay in here staring at the wall?”

“Right,” said Ross grimly. “Okay, girl. Let’s have it. The whole story. Where are you from? Los Angeles, but where? I

need an address, something. Names. Who's your family? Why are you—“

“I already told you I don't fuckin' know, leave me alone!” She cried. Something flickered through her eyes— what? “Maybe I hit my head or something 'cause I don't remember shit.”

“It's not a good idea to lie to me.”

“You think I'm scared of you? I've seen scarier ten year olds. I've been with a man that put me through hell. There's nothing you can do to scare me.”

It was a bold statement, and it was a lie. Her brown eyes were too soft. He cupped her face in his hand. “What man? What was his name?”

That flicker again. “I-I don't know,” she stammered. “It's all like, blurry...I don't know!”

“This sudden bout of amnesia is mighty convenient,” Ross said menacingly. “Names! An address! Something! Start talking or I give you to the police in those clothes.”

“I don't know! I said I don't know!” She cringed away from him.

Ross stayed silent for a minute longer to give her a chance to reveal herself. A petty tactic, but sometimes it worked. When she matched his silence he frowned. Finally he said, “Angel, this is really for your own good. This situation can't continue. I have no responsibility for another grown adult, let alone a— let alone a woman like you. I feel like Manny sent you here with wrong intentions, and it's really better if we stop this. Right now. Are you listening? Hey!”

Angel had climbed off the bed and wrapped herself around him. For such a tiny girl she seemed able to look right in his eye whenever she wanted. Her smell walloped him like a bouquet of flowers over the darker, feminine scent of a woman who had rolled around in his bed all morning. His cock was hard even before she pressed her small face into his neck. Firmly he set her away from him.



“Angel, don’t touch me. This isn’t what— this isn’t what...Oh, Jesus.”

She backed away and sat down on the bed. Her eyes glazed over.

“Angel?”

She moaned and her back curled up like he had stroked her pussy. “St...sop...” she moaned. “Stop saying my name.”

“What the fuck are you doing?” He rasped.

“I can’t...I want...” She had broken out in a full sweat. She fell backward onto his bed and cried out, one hand shooting between her legs.

To her pussy.

“Oh, no. Hell no. Come on.” Ross looked around the room for cameras but her moans distracted him. She was possessed or some shit. Had to be. His dick was so hard and he gripped it — why not? She was shucking off all her clothes. Her bare titties glowed in the warm morning light. The nipples were dark red, like cherries.

“What are you doing? This ain’t gonna work. Distracting me with sex—”

“I need it...I need you,” Angel moaned. It sounded real. Not like some fake pornstar act. Already trying to convince himself. He was the dumbest bastard alive if he fell for this. Under no circumstances must he fall for this. Teeth gritted, Ross gripped his dick and forced himself to just watch. Watch as her muscular little legs fanned open and she split for him, showing him the dark flower of her cunny. The fat juicy petals separated, showing her pink insides. Apart from a little triangle over her plump clit, she was smooth and bare. She looked so tight.

“This bipolar shit won’t fly,” he said, his voice hoarse. “You need to start talking. Names. An address. Something... Christ...”

Hypnotized, he watched her cute little fingers thrust hard inside herself. She stroked out her wetness, coating her

knuckles with white cream he knew would taste sweet as cake. He salivated, watching her. She tried to satisfy herself on just her fingers but was having difficulty.

“Get over here, Mister,” she moaned. “Help me.”

He knelt on the bed, his heart pounding, his dick straining his sweatpants. He rolled her into his arms. His very touch set her off in an apparent orgasm. She curled up on herself and shook violently as he carried her from the room. Her wet pussy leaked a gooey trail all over his forearm. Breathing like a bull in rut, Ross got her into the guest room and dumped her out on the fresh bed in there. He liked this room better than his own. It had a nice thick door— solid oak, in fact.

“What are you doing?” Angel moaned. Her nut seemed to have made no effect on her drive. Like a cat in heat, she craved the real thing. She reached for him, trying to grab him with her little witchy fingers, which smelled like her pussy. “Come here...Please touch me. Please!”

He backed up through the door and closed it.

“Nooooo,” she cried. He heard her on the bed. She came again with loud, almost tortured cries. Something was wrong with the girl. Ross grunted, putting his whole hand around his dick under his sweatpants and jerking off to the sound of her orgasms until he had to lock the door and leave her there, still in the throes of whatever delicious sickness was claiming her.

As he washed the thick cum off his hands and belly, Ross felt better. He hadn't touched her. He hadn't fucked her. Just beat one off. The crazy little jess hadn't closed him in her trap. He was still a man of common sense and reason.

ANGEL MADE HERSELF CUM FOR THE BETTER PART OF AN HOUR. Almost an hour on the dot. When she finally pulled her sore fingers from her sticky pussy she felt some of the haze lift from her head and that was when the fear returned. She was afraid. She didn't know what brought on that feeling to fuck, but it completely took over her mind and body and left her

feeling dazed and helpless. Her pussy ached and her titties felt sore and heavy.

She opened her eyes, and they happened to land right away on a suitcase in the corner. Something about it looked familiar. The hazy feeling crept over her mind again, and she stood up and walked over to it. She dragged it out and unzipped. It was full of women's lingerie. Lace and silk. Stuff to get fucked in. Angel knew somehow these garments were meant for her to wear. She pulled out something green, her favorite color. It had the bottom cut out, for her pussy lips.

*I like green the best. Least I remember that.*

This new room wasn't like Ross's. It was smaller, more cozy. But it had a guest room had a bathroom attached. Holding the new clothes in her hands Angel walked in— the lights here were automatic, too.

She washed herself with the expensive-smelling soap, dried in a towel that had been warming up in a heated closet (!) and then sat down on the bed. Her legs hurt. Her head hurt. She still wanted that man.

Where am I? Why am I here?

She needed Ross to get in here and fuck her...No! She didn't want to fuck Ross. She didn't want to fuck at all. She wanted to get out of here and go— where?

Where?

Where?

Who am I? What's my real name? Why am I here? What's happening to me? Why do I want him to fuck me more than anything in the world?

She shuddered. She didn't have an answer to the last question any more than the others. But it was the most important question. Getting Ross to sleep with her was the most important thing in the world.

“Mister Ross,” She groaned for what might have been the hundredth time. “Ross, come back. Please come back...”

She hadn't heard Ross at all since he left the room. The door was locked. She had tried it.

Locked in a room...again.

Sometimes flashes of her old life came back to her. These were always scary. She saw a man's face, the evil plain in his eyes. She heard his rough voice. She knew she would never escape.

"Ross!" She screamed. "Ross! Ross!"

"Hey, enough!" He roared, and the door swung open and he came in so fast he must have been standing right outside. "Girl! What the hell is the matter with you? All this noise for what?"

She saw his erection straining thick in his sweatpants. She flung herself into his arms, naked. "I just was missing you!" She said wildly. And in that moment Ross gave up the battle and let her lips make contact with his. She sucked and licked his bottom lip, and she tasted just like coconut candy.

Ross was kissing her. Finally. With desperation and relief she kissed him back. His lips felt like heaven. The pressure in Angel's head eased up and she felt able to breathe again. Between her pussy ached. Yes, she thought. Yes, this is what I want...

She pulled him closer, rubbing herself on him like she had done earlier.

"First you cuss me, then you beg me to fuck you. Make up your mind," he growled.

"I want to have sex," She panted, grabbing his hand and pressing it against her pussy.

Another powerful orgasm racked her. He watched the whole thing, his eyes nearly as glazed as hers.

She tore at her panties frantically, dragging them down her legs. "I'm ready." She didn't care; nothing mattered but getting Ross's cock buried inside her.

It was Ross's turn to groan as she flung the panties off and spread her legs. His thumb slipped inside her and he began to

move it.

“Yeah.” She rocked her hips, greedily twirling her pussy over his digit. “That’s right...”

Haze. Pleasure. Pleasure. Nothing mattered but this. She would do anything for this man. She would let him fuck her into oblivion.

She grasped him through his sweatpants and squeezed. He had a big, thick dick. Dimly an alarm rang in Angel’s mind, but it went quiet as he ducked down and began eating her pussy.

He ate.

And ate.

He ate like his last meal, sucking and licking her like no man ever had. Angel moaned and began rocking her hips, spreading her wetness over his face as he found the exact point of her need and put all his attention there.

But it wasn’t enough.

“Please, Ross. I need you.”

He looked up and moved from between her thighs, away from her. He was still hard but his eyes were narrow. He was jacking off, his dick aimed at her like a cannon. “Aren’t you a virgin?”

“Yes,” she replied, though she didn’t know until that moment that she was. What else don’t I know about myself?

Ross rolled off the bed, quickly jerked his pants up over his waist and fastened them over his bulging thick erection. Scraping a hand through his wild hair, he looked her up and down. He seemed to be fighting for breath. His whole face and chest was red.

“That’s enough,” he said. “Look, Angel...”

“Ross!” She screamed. “Ross! PLEASE! We have to fuck... We have to!”

He stared down at her like she was crazy. In a hard voice he said, “No the fuck we don’t. This is beyond wrong.”

He wrenched away from her and moved to the door, looking uneasy. She followed him, shaking from head to toe. Her veins and bones were vibrating. She felt ready to faint just thinking what would happen if he left. Her heart pounded with a sickening swirl of emotions. She needed this man to sleep with her. What if Ross locked her in?

“No, no. Stay in here, Ross, please don’t go and leave me in here.”

“You don’t give up, do you? I don’t know what kind of freak game Manny is playing...”

“When you s-say my name...I can’t help myself,” she panted, burying her face in his chest. “I can’t make it stop!”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t stop w-wanting sex. I’m sorry.”

“Bullshit,” he said harshly. ““You’re not acting right ‘cause you’re a crazy relation Manny’s pawned off on me. Are you even a virgin? Fuck— never mind. You need to quit this. We are not sleeping together. You’ll stay in here until you remember just where the hell you come from and that’s the end of it.”

ROSS JACKED OFF. IT RELIEVED HIM JUST A LITTLE. HE THEN went about his day, distracted. He left the house after locking Angel in the guest room. She went nuts when he did that. But there was no other option. The girl was out of her tree and a danger to his health as well as his personal code of honor.

He considered working from home to keep an eye on things, but deemed it best to keep up an appearance of normalcy to the outside world. So he went down to the office and did more trace-work for that Sebastian boy who had made off into the night with Roman’s gold. A man at a gas station in West Virginia claimed to have bought gold coins from a tall redheaded man passing through. But there was no way to verify his claim and from there the trail went cold.

Understanding that the man was a felon, Ross contacted Sebastian's PO. It was a last resort because getting the law involved was always a risk. But the lady informed him that Sebastian McCall's parole had been lifted for good behavior.

"I called in that favor for that lying snake," Roman said in cold fury when Ross relayed the news on the phone. "No good deed, as they say. He could be anywhere by now."

"I'll find him, Roman," Ross replied. "Rest assured, they always make a mistake somewhere. Might just have to be patient."

"Patient while he spends our money?"

"Your money. I'm already rich."

"Fucker. You want something to eat? I'm in town."

"I'll pay," said Ross. "Since you're too poor."

"Little Lord Fauntleroy motherfucker. One day I'll take your little *Jean Christophe* to use for target practice."

"Not funny," snapped Ross. Roman laughed evilly and hung up.

At noon, Ross's brother came over with fried chicken and biscuits. They ate in Ross's office.

Roman wore a faded black shirt splattered with bleach stains, and old jeans. The red mud on his boots told Ross he'd been up by some of the old Mulberry lands.

"A lack of sleep kills," he said to Roman.

"I know it," shrugged Roman. "Everything seems to be going to hell in a hand basket. Got me up late thinking."

*You're not the only one.* "I need your advice on something," said Ross.

Roman choked on a piece of chicken. "Beg your pardon?"

"I need your advice. Shut up— I know it's rare, me asking."

"No shit. What can I help you with, little brother? Girl problems?"

Ross worked his jaw back and forth. “Remember that lady who used to hypnotize people?”

“Miss Celine. Sure I remember,” his older brother nodded.

“Guess I was just wondering if you believed in that stuff.”

“What, hypnosis? I mean...” Roman’s eyes went distant. It was one thing Ross admired about his eldest brother— his encyclopedic knowledge of Florin and everyone who had ever lived there. Roman mused, “Hell, it’s been years since I thought about Miss Celine. Once she made Billy Sturgill swim across Fickle Pond in his underwear just for stealing her marmalade pies.”

“Exactly,” said Ross. “Billy Sturgill was terrified of water.”

Roman eyed him. “You act like you don’t remember nothing about being raised up Florin.”

“I remember some. So you believe in it, then? You think she really hypnotized him?”

“Of course. I guess it’s possible. Thinking of a career change?”

“Guess I’m just trying to figure out how far it would go. Like would it be possible to make somebody fall in love or something like that.” The minute the words left Ross’s mouth he wanted to shoot himself. Roman’s eyes went wide, and then narrow with amusement. Roman said, “Ah, just what exactly did you get up to in Japan, brother?”

“Nevermind,” snapped Ross, alarmed that Roman had struck so near to the truth even in a joke. “Just a thought, is all.”

Roman chuckled. “Well, I have always wondered about that. Hypnosis. At the time I figured Miss Celine must have dabbled in the dark arts. Of course you would have a logical explanation, Ross-boy.” He paused expectantly.

“I don’t know that much about it, truthfully,” Ross admitted.



“Right. Just a thought.” Roman gave him an odd look. “Well, as long as you aren’t locking up females in your basement and hypnotizing ‘em for nefarious means.”

“What the hell gave you that idea?” Ross snarled. “Nevermind. This is why I don’t come to you for nothing! Anyways, I got a lot of work to do, so best we pack it up. Thanks for stopping by. Thanks for the food.”

“You’re getting too skinny,” Roman said. “You ought to eat more.”

“Sure. Right.”

Roman cleaned up and rolled the takeout bag up between his massive hands. “You let me know about Sebastian, then, little brother.”

“Of course. Take care. My love to the kids. Bring Isaiah over some time. Actually— don’t. I’ll drive up this weekend.”

“You will?” Said Roman suspiciously.

“Yeah. I’m, ah, doing renovations.”

“Again?”

“Bad work done last time,” Ross lied. Once Roman cleared out Ross began doing some research on hypnosis. Sebastian and the McCall bullion were swiftly forgotten. The mountain of work on his desk went ignored.

MEANWHILE AT THE HOUSE ANGEL HAD FOUND A PENCIL AND A notebook. She drew for hours under the raw reddish light of the guest room window, which looked down over a beautiful garden. Unfortunately the window was one of those modern types that didn’t open. She wished she could have just a little fresh air, but she would have to make do until the man of the house came home. Whenever that would be.

She copied drawings from the art books she found in this room, happy that Ross was apparently into this stuff heavy, just like she was. At one point she fell asleep, the pencil still balanced between her fingers, her cheek resting on the edge of the new drawing.

When Ross came home he found the house quiet. But he felt the new presence; the subtle change in environment that meant he wasn't alone. He went up to Angel's door and knocked. With no reply coming, he took his key and opened it.

The room smelled like Angel, like flowers. It was a damned good smell that played hell with his senses. The lady was sprawled out on the bed. Dressed. She wore a shirt from the guest room closet.

And the green panties.

Ross observed the suitcase in the corner. It had shocked him to see it the first time. He wondered how many more easter eggs Manny left sprinkled around his house. Making a mental note to check for cameras later, he leaned down and shook Angel by the arm.

"Hey."

This time she woke up immediately. Her pretty doll's-face puckered. "Where am I?"

"Wake up, sunshine. You're still in Virginia."

"Oh...it's you."

"Yeah. Me." Frowning, Ross pulled the sketchbook out from underneath her. "You did this?"

"Yeah," she said, rubbing her eyes. Ross remembered the sketchbook Manny had given him.

"Have you been to a school? Perhaps your father paid for one?"

"What? Fuck no," Angel laughed. "I just like to draw, that's all."

"You did this from memory."

"I imagined it," she said. "I seen pictures, but I've never been to a beach."

Ross stared down at the drawing, impressed by her technique. The composition was clever, and her sense of light and shadow created a lifelike, dreamy scene that seemed real as any photograph. A girl sat on the sand, staring at the waves.

He was reminded of a particular beach in Aruba. He tapped Angel's nose and said, "Is this L.A.?"

Angel shrugged. "Yeah. Maybe."

"Maybe? You don't remember?"

"I've never been to the beach. I wasn't thinking about any place in particular. This just came from my head. Like I said, I've seen pictures..."

"How can you be from L.A but you've never been to the beach?"

"Why do you think I'm lying about stuff? And how do you even know where I'm from? Stop asking all these questions!" She challenged. "Besides, I don't remember everything. Just flashes. I know I always wanted to go to the beach but I can't tell you which one or where. I close my eyes and I see palm trees...But it's lots of palm trees everywhere, right? Could be any place."

Ross told her to wait a moment. He went to his room and dug around in his bag from Tokyo, which he still hadn't unpacked completely. He brought the sketchbook back and handed it to her.

"What's this?"

"You tell me."

She flipped through it, her eyes clouding with confusion. "I don't get it. Looks like my style, but did you draw this?"

"No. You did."

"I don't remember." She lingered on a drawing of two people in a rather intimate embrace. Her eyebrows went up.

Ross cleared his throat. "Get up."

"Why?"

"We're taking a walk. Reckon you could use it."

"Yeah, make sure the prisoner gets her exercise," she grumbled, putting the sketchbook down. "I don't remember drawing any of that stuff anyway."

He cupped her chin. “You know why I had to lock you in here.”

“No I don’t.” Her eyes were disturbed. “You don’t have to lock me in. I’m not running away and I won’t go through your stuff.”

He glanced down pointedly at the notebook she had been sketching in.

“I had to entertain myself,” she said defensively. “Now can we go? I want to see the garden.” She was eager to escape the room. Ross decided it was probably okay to let her roam the house, with some conditions. As she started swishing out the door he thought of one condition straight away. Catching her arm he said, “I prefer you to wear clothes.”

“I don’t have none to wear,” she retorted.

“You don’t have any...”

“What?”

“Nevermind. Just keep that shirt pulled down over your ass. Your little succubus act won’t wash this time.”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Attitude.”

“Whatever.”

THE SUNLIGHT FELT GOOD ON ANGEL’S FACE. SHE WALKED alongside Ross as he led her through the most beautiful garden she had ever seen in her life. In the late afternoon hour, golden light made every flower and glimmering drop of rain look sent from heaven.

“This is lovely,” she said. “I love this place.”

“Thank you.”

“You do all this yourself?”

“I do,” said Ross.

“You could hire somebody.”

“I could.”

“But that would take out the fun,” she said.

“That’s exactly right.”

They walked past the fountain then over the bridge. Ross watched her from the corner of his eye. She stopped in the middle of the bridge, staring down at the orange fish moving through the green water below. He wondered what she might be thinking of. He saw the tension in her posture, but she wasn’t afraid of him.

Ross put his hands behind his back, his stance loose but his attention fixed on Angel. “So let’s say you’re telling the truth, babygirl.”

“Truth about what?”

“Your amnesia.”

She stiffened. “I am telling the truth. I been telling the truth. But yeah. What?”

“Well now, where does that leave you? Where’s that leave me? You can’t stay here.”

“I know that.”

“You want to go home, don’t you?”

“I guess...I guess that’s what I should want,” she said slowly. She confessed, “When I think home, I don’t feel good. I feel sick in here.” She put a fist in her stomach gently, twisting up the borrowed Henley shirt.

“It’s important that we find a place for you to go,” he said firmly.

She kicked an acorn off the bridge. It hit the water and sent ripples over the water’s emerald surface. “I know,” she said.

He chased away a tiny yellow butterfly from her hair. Angel watched it flit away between the rosebushes.

“What are you thinking about?” Ross was suddenly moved to ask.

“This might be the prettiest place I ever seen,” she said.

The garden looked even better with her standing in it, but he didn't say that.

"There's something else we got to discuss," he said. "What happened this morning. And before."

"The sex thing," she said, surprising him with her directness. "I know. I can't explain it. Every time you say my name I just feel like I have to go to bed with you no matter what. Like if you don't touch me...It feels wrong if you don't touch me. There's something the matter with me, heavy." Fear bled into her voice. "I don't know where I am, I don't know who I am. There's a big hole in my mind."

He realized she might be telling the truth.

Ross said, "I may have figured out what happened to you, and found a way to fix it."

He heard her inhale. "It's not like a disease, is it?" She raised her chin bravely. "I mean, I want you to tell me if it is."

"No," he said. "It's not a disease."

The small shoulders hunched in relief.

ROSS ORDERED FOOD TO THE HOUSE. IT WAS TAKING A RISK, but they were both hungry and he found that in fact the girl wasn't the worst company. When she wasn't trying to twerk all over his dick at the sound of her own name...

Don't think about that.

He showed her around the rest of the house, admiring her ass the entire time, but liking her talk. She wanted to know about everything. She was fascinated by the stairs, the windows, the mosaic, the koi pond, the bamboo grove. As an artist, she could appreciate the harmony of style and function. She was more perceptive than he imagined.

"This is a paradise," she declared.

"I love this house. But the truth is I'm rarely here most of the time," he confessed.

“Where do you go?”

They were on the roof. Angel leaned over the railing and stared down in wonder at the sharp decline towards Rowanville Valley, which was stunning in its own right but overshadowed by the sprawling view of the Blue Ridge Mountains covered in an ocean of mist.

“Aruba,” he said. “Tokyo. Italy.”

“And you live here.” She stared at the view. Hypnotized. “I would love to paint this.”

“You can,” he said automatically. When she looked up at him curiously he forgot himself and said, “If you want. I have...I can get paint. Canvas.”

“Thank...you,” she said, eyes wide with surprise.

Ross bit the inside of his cheek. He was furious with himself; the girl just had to make sheep-eyes once and he was breaking every rule. “Anyway, this place will always be home. Family needs keep me here, but I try to get out and see the world.”<sup>a</sup>

“How do you pay for this? What’s your job?” she asked bluntly.

“I’m a Private Detective.” He had vowed to keep details of his life secret, and like the other vows he broke it in an instant.

She bombarded him with questions and they were caught up for some time before he managed to circle back to the task at hand. Back in the house they crashed in the living room. They were both starving. Ross sat on the couch and finally told her his theory about her missing memory and the way the sound of her own name triggered a heightened sex drive.

“I’ve been hypnotized?” Angel said when he had explained it all. “What? Are you crazy?”

“That’s just my theory. The good news is there’s a cure. If it doesn’t work, we’ll need to get you an MRI, run tests...”  
*Which I’ll have to pay for.*

“Wait, wait ! How do you know there’s a cure? What’s the cure?”

“I have to hypnotize you again.”

“Nope,” said Angel instantly, eyes widening. “No, hell nah. You’re not doing hypnosis on me. Sorry.”

“I know it sounds insane, but it might work. I believe it will work, honey.”

She paced around his living room, her bare feet moving gracefully on the polished concrete. Or maybe she was just cold. “Hypnosis,” she muttered. “Hypnosis?”

“Are you cold?” Ross asked.

“What? Oh. No, I’m fine.”

“You’re shivering.”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “Why do you keep it like this?”

“Right, you come from a tropical climate.” He turned up the thermostat and brought her another shirt.

“What, Los Angeles?”

“No. Africa.”

She choked back a laugh. “Hey, that’s racist.”

“No it’s not. Your ancestors are literally from Africa.”

“Where are yours from? Siberia?”

“Scotland. You like the art in here? I see you looking but you haven’t said a word about it.”

“Yeah I like your art, if you’re gonna make me say it.” Her gorgeous eyes danced at him, twin diamonds sparkling in the deep hearts of jet-black roses. A current passed through him. Strange, Ross thought. She’s not under suggestion now.

“You have nice art,” she said. “Nice big art.”

He licked his lips. “Thanks.”

“But it’s not my taste,” she said.



“What’s your taste?”

“I like when it leads me to something,” she said, looking into his eyes. “But yours? All this...” She looked away and gestured to the paintings. He wanted to stare into her eyes again but she wouldn’t join him. She said, “It just stands still. It doesn’t move. It doesn’t do anything.”

Ross stared at her. “You would be a riot in the galleries.”

“I don’t know about that.” She looked uncomfortable. “You got any more clothes?”

He found a pair of sweatpants for her, and once she had covered herself some more he was able to get his head back to the charted course for the night. The sight of her bare skin caused an unwanted reaction from his body.

“So now what?” He prompted.

“I’m not letting you hypnotize me,” Angel said flatly, rolling up the hems of the sweatpants.

“Think about it,” he argued. “Your name makes you lose control, and your memory’s jammed, likely because Manny did something to you before you came here. Hypnosis makes sense. He was running on about some pill they’re developing — but I think he made the suggestion to you the normal way. Your name is a trigger— that’s what hypnosis does. Cue and response.”

“If I get my hands on that Manny motherfucker he’s dead.”

Ross said grimly, “I’m not too happy about this situation myself.”

“Right. Your rich boy life is all messed up.” She blinked. “Sorry. I mean, you got a right to your peace without me invading it.”

“You’re not invading,” said Ross immediately.

“Then why— never mind,” she interrupted herself. “So this Manny guy is your friend?”

“Yeah. We were frat brothers. Don’t give me that look.”

“I didn’t say nothing. Okay, so you said he’s my uncle?”

“Yep. You’re his brother’s daughter. Do you remember your father? Sook-Jae? He would be about fifty years old.”

“No,” said Angel.

“Right,” said Ross. “Got it. No memories.”

Angel shook her head. “So why would this Manny guy just throw me on you like this?”

“Er— let’s worry about the whys and wherefores later. In a word, I think he thought it would be funny.” Ross rubbed his jaw. He didn’t exactly want to share the details about his conversations with Manny, who seemed to think he’d be happiest keeping Angel barefoot and pregnant. Like he was some kind of Sultan in need of a concubine.

“Why don’t we try something? I can try to break you out of the suggestion,” Ross offered.

She bristled like a wildcat. “You ain’t about to shrink my head. I said no, and I meant it.”

But Ross insisted, and when Ross insisted on anything he got his way. With Angel it was no different. Whether she wanted to or not, she was going to do this. Thankfully she gave in without his needing to resort to drastic measures. With a reluctant sigh Angel sat on the footrest, facing the couch.

Ross sat across from her. “Close your eyes.”

“Yes, sir.”

*I like when she says that...stow it, you big dumb jackass.*  
Focus.

Angel’s eyes fluttered shut. Long thick eyelashes brushed her elegant cheekbones. Her wide nose was cute, but the rest of her face could have been carved from pure cherrywood. She was perfect as a painting. Ross could stare at a beauty like that every day for the rest of his life and never find a flaw. As the thought came on him suddenly, behind it followed the realization that he wanted her to think of him in the same way. Under layers of cynicism the urge to impress her burned hotter, a tiny coal slowly building to a flame.

“Now what?” she whispered, eyes still closed. “Stop staring at me.”

“I’m not staring.” Ross lied. “You ready?”

“Yes.”

“Picture a calm, very still lake.”

Her lips twitched.

“An— girl. Focus.”

“Don’t say my name.”

He threatened, “I just might, if you don’t listen.”

Her eyes opened. “You would do that?”

He put a hand on her leg. “Close your eyes.”

Something burned in her gaze as she obeyed him. He left his hand on her leg.

“Now what?” She whispered.

“The lake. Picture the lake.”

Ross understood that as hypnotist he must help guide the hypnotee through each transition carefully. He had to make small suggestions at a slow pace, leading her deep into the spell with a gentle hand. He thought to create an atmosphere. Gently he said, “The water is blue. The sun is shining—”

“The water is green,” said Angel.

“Green,” agreed Ross. “There’s birds. Um— Geese.”

“No there’s not.”

“You can’t talk while I’m hypnotizing you.”

“You’re ruining my fantasy with your geese.”

Ross was annoyed. “Do you even want to do this?”

Her eyes snapped open again. “So I can’t think of a lake unless it’s your lake?”

“Women,” said Ross. “Fine. Take your green lake and close your eyes.”

“This don’t make no sense, anyway. How am I supposed to get my memories back thinking about lakes?” Angel saw his expression and flushed. She shut her eyes then. “Whatever. I’m thinking about my green lake,” she mumbled.

Ross checked himself. “It’s peaceful...calm...There’s a boat drifting towards you.” He thought about the cram session he’d had that day on hypnosis. Reading, listening to theories, digesting every piece of information he could in the hopes it would work. There were two types of people in the world: those open to Suggestion, and those who were not. The fact that Angel had been hypnotized once meant it could be done again.

But Ross had not hypnotized anybody before. The method was straightforward, but one could still make mistakes. He had to be careful. Removing Manny’s suggestion would be like trying to dig out a burrowsome tick with fine-point tweezers.

“There’s something in the boat,” he said.

A pucker appeared between Angel’s eyebrows.

The house was too quiet. Damn if the girl wasn’t the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. Damn Manny...

*You could have just sent her in here normally. I like her fine the way she is.*

Would she ever see him in a natural way without that sex-freak split personality taking over?

*Angel, Angel.*

*I could have her in the bed with just one word.*

“What do you see in the boat?” he asked.

“You,” mumbled Angel.

“Am I alone?”

“Yeah.”

“What are we doing?”

“We’re naked,” she said. “We’re naked...touching each other.”

“Ah...” He tightened his hand on her knee. *Fuck.*

“Where am I touching?” *Fuck-head! Back off! Retreat!*

“My titties,” she said.

He leaned closer. “You like it?” he asked.

“I love it.” She shuddered and curled up her back like she was shaking something off her shoulders. Or shaking her titties.

“I love it...But not just because I have to,” she whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“I have to fuck you because Manny said.”

“Right,” Ross rasped.

“But it ain’t just Manny in my head. There’s me, and what I’m thinking.”

“What are you thinking, Angel?”

She climbed suddenly into his lap. This wasn’t part of the plan. He could have removed her. He didn’t. Instead Ross sank back into the couch, his dick hardening in a flash. Straddling him not only set her cunny down along the length of his cock, it pushed all her favorite parts right up in his face.

His careful plans scattered as she rolled her hips directly on his dick, her face in his neck.

*And she’s wearing those nothing-panties. I could fuck her. I could fuck her.*

She moved like a girl half-asleep, but still begging for dick.

What was he supposed to do? He touched her. Just touching, not fucking, nothing. He cupped and squeezed her ass. Slapped it a little and felt the nice good weight on it that would make fucking her a dream come true.

It was so close. So close to her pussy. He could just change the angle. *Angle, Angel...* He could be inside her *now*. One deep stroke and it would be done. She was so wet. No one would stop him. He could do everything Manny said and even

put a baby in her. Fill that little dancer's body up with a baby — his baby, his child.

She rolled on him, grinding her pussy on his cock, on his thigh. When Ross felt the explosion coming he got hold of himself and said through clenched teeth, “No...no. Fall back, Angel. Fall back.”

She toppled away from him onto the couch cushions. Her eyes were two glittering slits. Her big afro framed her face like a halo. The flush in her cheeks deepened. She was coming out of the trance.

*Focus, idiot.*

Ross understood that keeping a calm tone was the most important thing. He must go slowly now. Anything could happen.

“Sleep,” he said. “Go sleep. Count with me. One, two...”

Hypnosis is a conversation. Her eyes shut again as she re-entered the trance.

“What...what do you feel, Angel?” he said, tucking his dick away fully.

“I want to fuck on you,” she moaned.

*You don't know how bad you attract me.*

“Why?”

Her face pinched. “What? I like you. I like feeling you.”

Aware that he was entering dangerous waters, Ross said carefully, “Why are you here?”

“I'm here to get pregnant for you,” she said. Her voice came flat, like she was reciting lines. “If you don't want me, I can just be your surrogate. Give you a baby and then you can get rid of me.”

The last of his goodwill to Manny evaporated at her words. Ross said, “Is that what you want?”

She said, “I don't want to go back to Saturn Heights never again. After that I want to be a famous artist.”

“Is that where you’re from? Saturn Heights?”

“Yeah,” she said.

Ross made a mental note. “Okay,” he said. “Now, Angel, I need you to trust me as I ask these questions.”

“Alright,” she whispered.

*In hypnosis, you must undo every knot at the source, one of his primary sources had read. To solve a problem, find out where it began.*

“So who made you want to be here and get pregnant for me?” Ross asked her.

“Manny.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. But that’s not the only reason.”

“What do you mean?”

“You seem like a solid dude.” Her voice lowered to a mumble. “I’m attracted to you. I don’t have hella options. You’d never want a girl like me, though.”

“Why not?”

“Too hood.”

Christ. Ross wiped sweat off the back of his neck. “Okay, Angel. You hear your name, you feel attracted to me. But you realize that it’s not you. It’s someone else.”

Behind her closed eyelids her eyes moved back and forth. Her soft lips parted.

Ross said, “Somebody told you to want that.”

She nodded slowly.

“Somebody told you to stay here and offer yourself to me.”

“Yeah,” Angel said. “Uncle Manny.”

“Let’s start there,” said Ross...

ANGEL CAME OUT OF THE TRANCE SLOWLY. THE FIRST THING she saw was Ross. He looked tensely down at her, his hands clenched into fists. The hypnosis had been a peaceful experience. He was slow and patient, getting her to relax with his words. But now she saw the strain it had taken on him.

“How do you feel?” Ross asked.

“Normal.”

He watched her closely. “Do you remember...anything?”

“No,” she said.

“Angel,” he said.

She froze.

“It worked!” they both exclaimed a moment later. Ross put his face in his hands, laughing with relief.

“I can’t believe it worked! You hypnotized me!” Angel said, stunned.

“By God! Fucking Manny— I’ll kill him...Thank God.”

Ross’s happiness was all well and good, but it didn’t take long for Angel to feel like she was standing on the edge of a cliff with the rocks coming out under her feet.

*At least I had a good excuse to touch him before. .*

Without sex she lost some value to him, and right now she had to take what value she could get. It was the grim reality. Besides, it wasn’t like she didn’t see it for Ross. He was fine as hell and he had skills in the bedroom she had only got a tiny little taste of.

“I guess I still don’t have my memories,” she told him.

“It’s alright,” he said quickly. “We’ve done enough for now.”

So she still didn’t remember her past. Was that such a bad thing? Gut feeling told her those memories were not good ones. She’d come from a bad place. Maybe L.A, like Ross said. Maybe not. Regardless, she wasn’t in a hurry to find out.



She thought about the beautiful garden with the pond full of orange fish. She thought about the cherry tree and the fountain, and the bathroom with the automatic lights. And Ross, who kept staring at her like chocolate dipped in honey.

Angel looked around at the comfortable, spacious living room and knew deep down that going back would be a change for the worse. She looked at Ross, who looked away trying to front like he hadn't been studying her face. Her heart sped up a little and did not slow down.

“Christ, I’m hungry,” Ross yawned, ruffling his hair. Then he stopped and looked ashamed of himself. “I should have left you some food before I ran out this morning. I do apologize... Angel.”

They both breathed easier when he said the name again with no reaction from her. She told Ross it was fine. That had been the worst part of being locked in the guest room, though. She had a flash of a distant memory, begging somebody for something to eat through a closed door.

Ross said, “The delivery’s on its way but you can help yourself to anything in the fridge.”

“I’ll wait to eat with you,” Angel said. She wanted to draw to put those feelings away, so she went to look into the guest room for her supplies.

She sat down and began sketching lightly with the pencil. When she raised her head she saw Ross watching her again.

“Say, you got anything on this TV?”

Ross shrugged. “Movies.”

*Too short. Movies end.*

“What about shows?” she prompted.

“There’s one I wanted to start,” said Ross thoughtfully. He eyed her. “It’s a black show. It’s got black people on it, I mean.” He cleared his throat. “I mean, I’m not suggesting it just because you’re black.”

“Put it on,” said Angel. “Sounds good.”

“It’s called Preacher Man.”

“How many seasons?”

Ross clicked his way through with the remote. “Nine,” they read at the same time off the show’s description.

*Perfect*, thought Angel.

Ross clicked on Episode One, then paused. “We need some drinks,” he said, going to the kitchen.

Suddenly a loud noise went went bong like a Chinese instrument and they both jumped.

“Delivery,” said Ross and left the kitchen, but Angel was nearer and got to the door first.

A bug-eyed teenager gaped at her when she swung it open. His eyes leapt up her bare legs and lingered where Ross’s shirt just barely covered her pussy.

“Um. Ma’am, how are you,” the boy stammered.

At the sight of Ross the boy relaxed. He said, “Hi Mister McCall. H-here’s your order of the Grand Slamming Big Fat Country Boy Dinner. I asked them to put in extra sauce on the brisket for you, and Stacybelle made the potato salad this time so it won’t taste too bad.”

“Perfect,” said Ross. “Thanks, son. You eat already?”

Angel’s eyes nearly popped out her head but thankfully the kid said, “Uh huh, I had some just an hour ago.”

“Don’t let ‘em starve you, alright?”

“No Mister McCall, sir, I won’t!”

Ross gave the kid damn near a hundred dollars in exchange for a mountain of food, which Angel went to lay out on the burlwood dining table.

“How’s your Ma?” Angel heard Ross ask.

“She’s fine, doing much better after you found that rascal who run off with my sister. Now our Stacybelle’s back making potato salad, where she ought to be, all thanks to you Mr. McCall.”

“Give everyone my fond regards.”

“Yes sir. Good-bye, Ma’am.”

“That’s child labor, right?” Angel said once the boy left.

“This is Virginia,” said Ross. He rubbed his stomach. “Open up them boxes, I’m starving.”

THE SPREAD WAS IMPRESSIVE. ROSS HAD TRIED TO IMPRESS her. Two entire racks of ribs slathered in a sweet and spicy barbecue. *Spicy-spicy*, just the way she liked it. Cornbread, crab cakes, sweet potato pie, collard greens, macaroni, butter beans, roast chicken and two slices of chocolate cake Ross immediately put into the fridge. “They’re better ice cold,” he told her.

Angel ate to her heart’s content, and then she ate some more. The food was all delicious. They washed it all down with cold lemonade and then they busted into the chocolate cake.

“You eat like this and you look like that?” she said in wonder as Ross scraped the last bit of chocolate icing off the plate.

“Hardly ever.”

“This is so good.”

“Worth every calorie.” He flashed a smile that made her quiver inside. Then they went to the couch and started up the first episode of *Preacher Man*.

“So how come you don’t have a lady or a wife or something?” Angel mumbled, inhaling the clean male scent that permeated the whole house. “You ever want kids?”

“Of course.” Suspiciously he remembered her words while she had been under the trance. “Why do you ask?”

“You’re so rich I guess you could pay for it if you wanted to.”

“Many do,” shrugged Ross. “But I always wanted the real thing. Money can’t buy what matters.”

She fell asleep with her head on his chest. After a few moments of enjoying the sensation, Ross picked her up. He started to carry her to the guest room bed, but on second thought he brought her to his own room.

She woke up as he was putting her to bed. Sleepily she asked him for a toothbrush. He found her an extra, plus a towel and a blanket.

After she cleaned herself up he did the same. In the shower Ross thought about the future explanations he'd have to give to people over this girl, then decided he didn't care.

"Why did you bring me in here?" She asked him as he rolled in the bed beside her.

"Do you want to move?"

"No."

He shut off the light. They lay beside each other for less than a minute before he was dragging Angel underneath him.

They kissed and kissed, their lips learning the shape of the other, their breath mingling. Ross imagined she tasted like the inside of a flower. He shouldn't be doing this, but the chorus of his better angels was distant in his mind. He had never been so turned on in his life. As he mauled Angel's lips between his teeth, sucked on them, he ground his dick on her and slid two fingers around her clit, teasing it back and forth through its saucy wetness.

Angel responded to his aggressive advance with complete pleasure. "Yes," she whispered. In no time she was scrabbling at his body. She pulled his dick out; her small hand closed around the shaft and stroked up and down. She wanted it.

"Can I taste him?"

"For a minute." He wanted to make sure she came first.

She scrambled down the bed and knelt on the floor. Ross sat up on the edge, his heart pounding with excitement. He stroked her kinky hair back over her face as she swallowed his dick, sucking him deep between her full, soft lips.

“You smell so good,” Angel whispered. Her innocence mingled with the minx-like lust drove him wild. She slurped down as far as she could go, relaxing her jaw and throat to get him in deep. Meanwhile her hand stroked him, paying special attention to the sensitive underside. Another minute and Ross was thrusting into her, fucking her mouth.

“Christ!”

Ross’s toes curled into the plush carpet. His hand shook as he guided her head down to lap at the pearly drops splashed across his muscled stomach.

He pulled her up again and tumbled her down to the bed. She wined up against him as if trying to get his dick inside her panties without using her hands.

“Woah, babygirl.”

“Can I say something?” She whispered in his ear.

“Yeah.” He jacked his dick against her soft, silky stomach. “What?”

“I’m yours,” she panted. Her eyes widened at him in the darkness. The sight of his long dick lined up from her pussylips to her navel drove him crazy.

“I’ll take care of you the way you need, Ross.” She flung her arms around his neck and in that moment confessed everything she had been thinking. “I want to stay here with you. Nobody’s making me feel that. Not Manny, not anybody. If you want...I can just stay right here with you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Stop asking me that.”

“You’re so fucking tight.”

Two fingers now. Fucking her. She came all over his hand, gushing and shaking, both of them beyond the point of words. They stared into each other’s eyes. Ross worked his dick fully out in the open. Her blowjob had primed him like a gun ready to go off. He laid flat on his side on the bed. He pulled Angel towards him, hitching one of her legs over his waist, opening her pussy. He was doing this. He didn’t care.

He tore open a condom from the nightstand and together they rolled it on his dick. “For the first time...your first time, Angel? Manny said you were a virgin.”

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “But I don’t mind if it’s you that’s my first.”

“Take deep breaths.”

The doorbell went off just as he’d fitted the tip of his cock inside her and prepared to thrust. *Gong*. The sound echoed ominously through the house, and they both froze. Ross looked down at Angel. The beautiful fuck-drunk expression faded into confusion. “Who’s that?” She whispered.

“Fuck,” he growled.

“Are you expecting somebody?” Angel sat up, her hair toppling over her shoulders.

“Not at all.”

“Who is it?”

“Probably Roman. Fuck, baby I’m sorry.” He kissed her on the forehead and climbed out of bed. He ruffled his always-messy hair again and went out of the room, pulling a robe on as he did.

Angel heard him curse loudly. “Ross?” She called, instinct sending her heart racing.

“It’s fine. It’s nothing— shit, what the fuck does she want?”

He must have seen a face he didn’t like through the buzzer cam. She heard him open the door.

Raised voices, more curses, and then shouts.

Angel slid out of bed.

A *lot* of shouting.

Suddenly a woman was barging into the bedroom with all hell and fury. Another black woman, but not Angel’s type. This lady was dressed real fancy in a designer dress, but she

was soaking wet from the rain, her makeup was a hot mess and the strap on her purse was broken.

She stared at Angel, who was naked.

Angel barely had time to be surprised before the woman let loose a deathly scream.

“Ross, *who is that?*”

Angel gasped; plain as day she saw the wedding ring on the woman’s hand. Hurt and betrayal made her freeze, looking in confusion at Ross.

Meanwhile Tina was making her own judgment, her eyes scraping Angel from head to toe and summarizing her as a hoodrat. She saw the tattoos and piercings and nearly bust a vessel.

“You’re fucking this ghetto bitch instead of me?” She shouted at Ross.

“Excuse me? Who the fuck you calling ghetto?!” Angel bellowed, and threw the AC remote—the first thing she could grab—straight at the woman’s head.

“Oh my God! You little bitch, you hit me!”

“Tina, get out of here!” Ross tried to drag her off, but the woman fought him. She beat against Ross’s chests with both hands.

“You make love to me two nights ago and act like it’s all back to normal between us, but meanwhile you’re fucking some little ghetto bird! Some little girl!”

“I don’t see any little girls here, just one big old bitch! Take care I don’t smack some manners into you!” Angel said, her eyes huge as they could get and moving between Ross and the lady. “Ross, is this your wife?”

Tina broke free and lunged for her, but Ross managed to block her and strong-arm her out of the room. The woman began sobbing furiously; she sounded crazy, but love could make you crazy and obviously this woman loved Ross.

“You’re pregnant!” Angel heard him bellow. “Why the fuck are you drinking?”

“Because you hurt me!”

Feeling cold to her bones, Angel followed them, pulling on the Henley shirt over her naked body. She trembled from head to toe. Her fury with Ross grew each passing second. This whole time he’d been married! And was this woman *pregnant*? Did she hear that right?

“You bastard,” the woman named Tina was wailing. “How could you?”

“You are delusional,” Ross said to her, thrusting her down in one of his fancy hardwood dining chairs.

“Who is this girl?”

“My girlfriend,” said Ross. Angel laughed cynically, her heart breaking. He was full of shit! Just like all men!

“You’re with someone?” Tina screamed like she’d been stabbed with a kitchen knife and fell out of the chair. It was hard for Angel not to feel sorry for her in a fucked-up way. Ross didn’t even look ashamed. Just beside himself and annoyed.

“She’s drunk,” he told Angel. Angel leaned closer and sniffed; he was right. But that didn’t excuse anything. That didn’t excuse the fact that he was married. She felt angry, betrayed and helpless.

Tina’s cries turned into hiccups when Ross took down a bottle of wine from the open kitchen shelf and poured her a glass. On second thought he transferred it to a plastic cup.

“Jesus, Tina, did you walk in the rain? The baby— ”

“It’s not your baby, so why do you care?” She snapped.

“Wash the stink off her,” commented Angel.

“Angel, *please*.” Ross turned back to Tina. “So what’s this about, T? Why are you here?”

“You made me think we were back on,” Tina said as she finished the wine in three swallows. “You had me fooled.”



“You fooled yourself. What happened at Elroy’s was a mistake and I won’t be repeating it,” said Ross firmly. “We’re done. Done. You have absolutely no permission to come running up on my property like this.”

“That little girl looks like a prostitute,” said Tina.

Angel nearly had the bitch by the lacefront when Ross hauled her back. “No, sweetheart, no,” he muttered in her ear, clutching her close with a large forearm crammed under her breasts.

“Let me go!” Angel howled.

“She’s just trying to rile you. Don’t listen to her. She’s nothing to me and hasn’t been for a long time.”

“You gonna let her talk to me like that?”

“No, I’m not.” He turned to Tina and said, “Woman, unless you want me to call the police you stay in that chair and hush your fucking mouth.”

“Fuck you, Ross McCall!”

Ross whispered in Angel’s ear, “I’m sorry.” She felt his hard dick on her ass and shivered. *Mine*. “I’m sorry,” he said. His dick pulsed. Hard for her. Only her. “Don’t be upset, I’ll get rid of her.”

“You got me fucked up,” she told him shakily.

*I’m not a prostitute*, thought Angel. But wasn’t she? Before this woman came in, she had just offered her body to Ross for the payment of a roof over her head and a place to stay.

Tina watched them carefully, her drunk eyes moving between Angel and Ross. She reached for the bottle of wine. “Slut,” she mouthed to Angel.

“Does she really need more of that?” Angel gritted her teeth and tried to suppress the urge to break the bottle over the bitch’s head.

“It’s the only way to shut her down,” Ross said, his eyes not leaving Tina. “Angel, babygirl, would you go check if

there's a car at the bottom of the drive?"

He released Angel from his embrace with a deliberate pat on her ass. She paused, considering rushing Tina, but Ross wouldn't want that.

Angel did as she was asked. She peeked out the door, staring down the long picturesque drive. "Yup," she said. "A Mercedes Coupe. That's her? She left her lights on."

"You're damned lucky you didn't end up in some ditch!" Ross said to Tina.

"I came here to see your new toy," Tina flung back at him. "Quinton said you had a new toy from *Manny*. Where did you get her? Is she even eighteen?"

"You better call her a cab or something," Angel said, struggling with her temper.

"There aren't any," said Ross. "This is Virginia, not Brooklyn. I'll just have to drive her home." He saw Angel's face. "I don't have a choice. Either that or she sleeps it off here," he said bluntly.

"In your room?"

"No," said Ross. He met her eye. "That's where you sleep."

"Enjoy it while it lasts," said Tina sweetly.

Angel turned and went to Ross's room before he could reply or she could swing on Miss Tina again. Ross would just have to explain himself later. *You don't have a choice but to forgive him!* She didn't want to sleep with a married man, but in the end she was still trapped here with him. What choice did she really have?

She heard him getting the woman settled down in the guest room. He was back in about five minutes.

"That was fast," she said dully.

"She'll sober up by morning. I took care of the car." Ross rubbed his eyes. "Well, I definitely wasn't expecting this turnabout."

“She’s married. I saw her ring.”

“Did you? Cost a fortune, thankfully not mine.”

“Married...Not to you?”

Ross shrugged. “She fucked my friend Charlie while we were together, hence why we aren’t together anymore. They were married this year.”

“Y’all used to go together, then.”

Ross said, “Where are the damned cigarettes?”

He found the cigarettes. Angel followed him into the closet, confused until a doorway sprang out of nowhere and led to a crawl-space. They now stood on a small balcony overlooking the mountains and the deep chasm of the valley.

Angel looked over her shoulder with the paranoid thought that the drunk woman in the house would come bursting through and push her over the edge.

“Don’t worry about Tina,” Ross said, sensing the reason behind her frown. “She just needs to sleep it off.”

He smoked, calming himself down.

“You’re just leaving her in there by herself?” Angel said doubtfully.

“The door on the guest room locks. Remember?”

“Right.” Angel winced. “Don’t throw me back in there, please.”

“I won’t,” he said quietly. “Promise.”

They stared out at the black shapes of the mountains. In the deep shadows glowed the faint stars of electricity. Ross’s cigarette smelled like cloves and orange peel.

It was nice. The stars, the mountains, the sweet summer breeze.

Real nice.

Nicer than anything.

*I wish I could stay here forever,* thought Angel.

Ross said, “Don’t worry about Tina. She means nothing to me. We go back all the way to college and we have history, but it’s all over now. She used to be different from what you just saw. She’s changed. Made a mess of her life with selfish decisions.” He paused and then added reflectively, “Reckon we all have.”

“So you feel nothing for her?” Angel said, hoping against hope.

“Nothing,” said Ross. He raised his free hand to push hair away from her face.

“Can I say something to you?” He said, echoing her earlier words in bed.

“Okay...”

“When I put you under the hypnosis, you gave me the name of your old neighborhood. A place called Saturn Heights.”

*Dusty. Hot. Palms. Gunshots. Dogs howling. I’m locked in this room. Poboy wants to fuck me. Is Mama dead? Why does it hurt to live?*

“I...” No words came. The flashes came, though. And maybe Ross saw them in her eyes. She grabbed the nearest support, trying not to make it obvious her legs were shaking. *He’ll send me away now.*

“It’s not a good place,” she managed to say.

Ross nodded. And then he took a risk. He said, “If you accept what I’m offering, you won’t have to go back there yet.” Ross McCall’s eyes lost some of their color. They glittered just like the distant lights in the hills. “But there’s a price,” he said.

“Oh...”

Ross said, “You can stay here for at least nine months. If you want to leave after that, I’ll write you a big check and we can be done with each other.”

She was wide-eyed.

“Nine months,” said Ross. “Then you’re free.” He put the cigarette down and let it burn. He coughed and turned away from her, his broad shoulders hunched.

Angel’s mouth opened in a little *o*.

“You’re saying, I get pregnant, I don’t have to leave?”

Immediately he began to justify it. “I know it’s sudden. But Manny vouched for you. I don’t see a reason why not. You’re sweet, artistic, attractive. A little rough around the edges, maybe...Maybe this is what we both need, even if we come from different worlds.”

“I can’t help that,” said Angel quickly. “Nobody taught me how to talk nice and be fancy.”

“I don’t care about that.”

Angel chewed her lower lip. “I want riches for myself, I don’t care about it much in others. It doesn’t bother me that you’re rich.”

“I hear that.” Ross shrugged. “But you don’t need to be in my world. It can be just a transaction. You need the money, I want a kid. Simple. Stay here and raise it with me, or take the money and run.”

“Oh my God.”

“Think about it,” he said gruffly. “That’s all.”

*Take the money and run.*

“They would grow up here? In this place? The babies?” She asked carefully.

“You’re thinking more than one?” He teased.

“Twins run in my family.” She blinked. “Oh my God, I just remembered that. My twin cousins...My mama was a twin. I remembered *two* things! Ross, I think my memory’s coming back!”

“Twins?” Ross didn’t speak for a long time. He seemed to be struggling for words.

“Look,” he said. “I have no plans to move. The mountain’s my home. For better or worse. But as for yourself...I’d pay you enough to go anywhere you want. You wouldn’t need to stay here if you didn’t want to. The kid would be my full responsibility. No hard feelings.”

“What if I didn’t want to leave?” She whispered.

He stared at her. “Then don’t.”

She turned away, her heart climbing up in her throat. “That’s a big decision to make tonight.”

“I understand. You can take your time.” He frowned. “But in the meantime...I’ll be looking into that place. Saturn Heights.”

*Hell, thought Angel. Saturn Heights is hell.*



## THE AUCTION

**A**ngel slept curled up against Ross's body in spoon-fashion. She had to braid her hair to keep off his face, though he claimed he didn't mind.

Sun came in through the window, bright and yellow. Angel turned over and looked at Ross. His eyes opened, hazel and yellow in the morning light. The sun beat copper into his hair. His red freckles expanded as he grinned.

"Morning," he said.

"Good morning."

"How did you sleep?"

"Like a newborn."

He pushed a curl off her forehead. "Feeling good?"

"Oh, yeah."

Ross grunted and tucked her closer.

"Ross," she said.

"What?"

"Shouldn't you go check on that lady?"

"I never knew Tina to get up before nine o' clock. Sweetheart, if you don't want me to fuck you, you'd better get your ass off my dick."

Angel turned to him and wriggled closer. They kissed, Ross's lips soft and salty in the early morning. Ross took his



time, savoring her.

“I love your body,” he said. “I love every part of it. I’m glad you’re in my bed.”

“Stop,” she whispered, her heart pounding deliciously fast.

“It’s too early in the morning for lies.” He grinned at her. “You thought about what I said, didn’t you?”

She raised her eyebrows. “While I was sleeping?”

“Of course.” His kisses moved to her neck. He sucked on her. *I love that, she thought. Oh, I love that. I love that.*

“You thought about it...You’re going to say yes,” he teased. “Say yes...”

“Yes...”

He loomed up over her, his eyes gentle. “I’d never screw you over or hurt you.”

“Ross...”

“I’ll treat you with dignity if you do for me the same.”

“My answer is yes.”

He laid her down. “Hold still...tell me if...don’t stop...”

She barely understood him but it didn’t matter. His bare dick thrust inside her, breaking her virginity.

“Fuck,” he hissed.

She gasped; It was the first time she had ever taken dick there, and Ross wasn’t small.

“That’s right...good girl. Good girl...”

He rocked inside her deep. His mind was in a turmoil but his body knew exactly what it wanted. No use, reaching for logic and reason. No man could think calm rational thoughts while buried deep in pussy like that. Her soft, pretty cunt squeezed and milked the whole length of his big dick. His better angels— Angel— were roaring, telling him to stop. This was insane. A strange girl dumped in his living room, telling him her sole purpose for existing was to breed his child.

*Let me breed her, then.*

Ross wanted Angel more than he had any other woman in his life. It could be the perfect arrangement.

Hell, Manny had promised to find him a wife. The perfect woman. Wasn't Angel perfect? Perfect...He slid out and turned her over. "How does it feel?"

"So good," she cried.

He grabbed her thick hips, squeezing them firmly before getting two handfuls of her juicy ass and plowing her into the bed. She was so wet the sounds of their fucking came nearly louder than her cries. She moaned his name in her sweet husky voice, tensed her cunt around him, tugging him deeper as he pulled out to thrust back in a deep rhythm that overwhelmed her.

At one point she looked over her shoulder. Her soft lips slightly parted, her huge eyes stared up at him in fascination. From that alone he nearly blew his load. His heart thudded. He leaned down and kissed her, putting every bit of tenderness he was capable of into the soft embrace. Hell, if she didn't taste like a goddamned candy cane. Ross felt the orgasm coming, a big load to put inside her.

"Don't run from this dick, babygirl."

She wrapped her legs over his hips and crossed her heels. Somehow he slid deeper, and she screamed. He tried to slide out but then realized it was a scream of pleasure. So he made her lose her voice from screaming, every thrust pushing him closer to the edge, but he held on. He made her cum rivers all over his dick, and then it was time to seal the bargain.

His balls tightened up. Almost like she sensed it, she did that thing with her hips again and Ross felt the head of his dick pummel the soft cap of her cervix.

"Uhn," she moaned deep inside her throat. A desperate feral sound. "Ross..."

*My seed inside her, now.*

Grunting, he pumped eight creamy loads inside the former virgin. He did it knowing it would knock her up with a baby and tie her to him forever. He did it intentionally. He impregnated her knowing that it gave him all the power in the situation. Knowing that her womb would grow big with his child, that her fertile body would swell and produce milk. That she would be in his bed from now on. For the next nine months...

*Or forever. I'll keep her pregnant if that's what it takes and she can run me bankrupt.*

It didn't matter what people said now. The baby was there; or would be very soon. His name and influence would protect her, and if society shunned him, he had plenty of money to waste taking Angel all over the world. He stroked her stomach possessively and she tilted up her head, her eyes warm with desire for him. She wanted him damn near as bad and she knew that she held the real power over him. He stroked her stomach and french-kissed her the way she liked.

He liked her dancer's body, her strong thighs and fat ass and soft titties.

"I want to spoil you," he said.

"You already do."

"Take my card and buy you anything you want," he said, sucking her dark cinnamon nipples, playing with the adorable piercings.

She gasped. "You are crazy."

"I don't give a fuck."

"Mmmm...Mmmm Ross." He mashed and stroked her titties together.

"Get my phone," he said. "It's in my coat."

"You're not serious."

"Go on."

When she climbed out of bed he smacked her ass and he did it again when she climbed on top of him and dangled the

phone in his face. “You are crazy-crazy,” she laughed. He pushed her down on his dick, using his own cum as lube.

“Tell me what you want,” he said.

“What? *Ross*...”

When he took the phone he unseated her and flipped her into doggy style. As he thrust inside her he laid the phone down next to her. Angel stared wide-eyed at the screen.

“You’re not seriousss....”

“I said whatever you want, darlin’. Spend my money on whatever you want,” he said, fucking her. “Anything. Earrings. Shoes.” His thumb teased on her asshole as she moaned and shivered on his dick. “Go.”

Angel was shaking down through a deep crazy orgasm when her finger slipped against the CONFIRM PURCHASE button. Ross pumped another thick load inside her, strained to his limit but needing her to understand what this was.

A glob of cum chased his dick out when he slowly withdrew. Groaning, he used the tip to push it back in, and he fucked her lazily, watching her dark pussy gulp down his cock. Her pussy gripped his tip nearly to the point of pain. Oh, he was gonna love fucking Angel for the rest of his life.

“You’re crazy,” Angel moaned.

“Show me what you bought.” He flipped her over.

She showed him as he stroked her clit with his thumb. “I like these,” he said. “Wear these when you suck my cock.”

“Oh...I will.” Angel saw the look in his eyes and thought: *this man is a freak*. He crossed her legs and pulled them over his lap, but kept playing with her clit until she came again. Nearly crying from her multiple releases, she reached up for him. Ross leaned down and they kissed for a long time. His strong muscled body pushed her deep into the bed. She ran her hands up his hard forearms, his bulging biceps, down his robust chest. She twirled her fingers through the hair there, and then skimmed them lower...

“Again?” Ross murmured. “Angel...your first time...”

“I can do you with my mouth again,” she whispered. Ross saw a desperate need to please him. He wondered if Tina being here had anything to do with it. Did she feel like she had to compete for him?

He stroked her lower lip. “You’re perfect. Let’s make you cum one more time...”

When he lowered his lips to her pussy she moaned like a she-cat and Ross smiled to himself. *She’s the only one. I never ate Tina like this...*

Noise outside. At the bottom of the hill an engine revved. They looked at each other in confusion before it dawned.

“Tina,” Ross said, rolling off the bed.

“She ran off?”

“Looks like it.” Peeking through the window, Ross’s mouth became a grim line. “Angel— my phone.”

Angel handed it to him. They both looked down the drive at the retreating car.

“Did she take that little statue thing?” Angel said, squinting through the other window, which looked out to the entrance of the house. Ross’s head shot up. His gaze followed where Angel was pointing.

The whites of his eyes showed. “Oh, hell no.”

“Damn,” said Angel, impressed in spite of herself at the woman’s nerve. “You must have pissed her off bad.”

“Unbelievable,” Ross gritted.

“How much did you pay for that statue thing?”

“A fortune.”

“I’d rather the wedding ring,” Angel said. Ross was not in a mood to appreciate the joke. The *Jean-Christophe* was the most treasured work of art in his entire collection. But he looked at the empty base where his statue had once sat and felt nothing. He was more irritated with Tina showing up to disturb the precious thing growing between him and Angel than her actual theft.

A *Jean-Christophe* was nothing but iron and bronze at the end of the day.

The living woman next to him meant far more.

“I knew she’d try to pull some shit after Elroy’s,” Ross said grimly.

“What do you mean?”

“The night you came I was out at a friend’s, and she was there. I made a mistake...” He trailed off. “Damnation.”

“What?”

“We fooled around that night, me and Tina.”

“Oh?” Angel said with a flash of jealousy. “Well it’s done now, right? You’re through messing with her?”

“Of course,” said Ross. “But I should have got tested before you and me did anything. Hellfire...that was careless. I’m sorry, Angel.”

“Maybe we both should get tested.” Angel said, her eyes belying her steady voice. “I mean, it’s only fair, right? I don’t know what happened before I came to you.”

Ross tugged her close against his chest. He knew what she meant. “Don’t think that. Not for one minute.”

“I didn’t until just now.”

“I’ll make it right,” he vowed.

“Okay.” Angel nodded. “But I’m sure it’s nothing. She’s married, right?”

“To the most faithless man in Tidewater,” Ross said with an ironic smile. “Tomorrow I’ll take you downtown to the clinic, you have my word. We’ll both test.”

“You think she gave you Herpes or what?”

Ross squeezed his eyes shut. “Don’t say it.”

“Ross, I’m not scared. I know everything’s gonna be okay,” Angel laughed.

They smiled at each other, Ross's emerging more slowly than hers, but with the same sincerity. He tugged at her messy hair.

"I'm more concerned with that thieving ass hoe taking your thing. I mean that statue was ugly as hell, but I liked it better than the paintings. How did she even leave that room? I thought you locked the door."

They soon found out— Tina had broken the bathroom window with the shower rod.

"Oh my God," said Angel.

*Five thousand dollars*, Ross thought.

ROSS CALLED TINA.

"Threatening me won't get me to fuck you again," he said.

"Go to hell!"

"And you're paying for that window. Or Charlie is, I suppose—"

"Charlie left me," Tina choked. "And if you want your statue then come and get it. I'll be at the auction this weekend."

"Keep it," said Ross. "It's all yours. Throw it into New River for all I care."

"WHAT AUCTION?" ANGEL ASKED WHEN ROSS TOSSED THE phone back on the bed. He stared at it for half a minute before replying.

"Rowanville High Society hosts it every year. I'm one of the charter members, and so was Tina's dad," he explained, glancing at the clock.

"How do you become a charter member?" Angel asked.

"You waste money on a membership. Sweetheart, can you get me a white shirt from the closet?"

“What do they auction? Damn, you got a lot of clothes!”

She brought the shirt.

“It’s an art auction,” Ross explained.

“What!” Angel’s eyes lit up. “Can I come?”

Ross said, “No.”

“Why not? You think I’ll embarrass you?”

That was exactly what he’d thought. Ross bit his tongue. His brothers often accused him of being a snob and forgetting his roots. Maybe he should bring her— even if it would be playing right into Tina’s hands. Without question she wanted to make a scene with him and Angel.

Ross was in no way threatened by Tina. He hoped she understood their past connection meant nothing now and if she tried anything shady he would destroy her.

He mourned the past, but the future was here, with all its promise and beauty. Seeing Tina next to Angel drove home that all he had ever wanted was the pure, true thing. He felt zero attraction to Tina. In contrast, all he wanted was to spread open Angel every way imaginable on every surface of his house, and every house he owned...And bring her into his life, showing her the finer things she’d never experienced. Almost like Manny had planted a suggestion in Ross’s mind, his thoughts continued the course to marriage, children, a lifetime of happiness.

*Fool. She hasn’t been at your house for three days, you’ve already tried to get her pregnant and now you’re talking love and marriage.*

“Please. I won’t talk or anything,” Angel promised, still badgering him about the auction.

He cupped her chin. “But I love when you talk. Give yourself more credit for the way you thoroughly dragged my taste.”

“Ross! I’m serious— please take me with you. Please— I’d love to see some more art.”



More so than Elroy's, the Auction separated the wheat from the chaff when it came to Ross's corner of the Southern Elite. A somewhat older, stricter crowd who ran some of the biggest businesses in Virginia and her neighbors usually attended. These people were generally intolerant and racist. Angel would cause a stir. Her hair alone would draw stares—many unwelcome—and Ross would be a feature in their gossip until someone else did something mildly different from their standards and they seized on the new target.

The devil on Ross's shoulder urged him on. Why not take Angel? The girl wasn't an entire ignoramus. In fact she was a damned good artist who made blunt and honest assessments. She could hold her own with the pretenders—she wouldn't let them intimidate her, though she lacked confidence for now.

A scheme began to hatch in Ross's mind as his eyes fell on her old sketchbook where it rested on the marble nightstand.

He looked at her from the corner of his eye. "You really want to come?"

"Of course. Please?" She looked away. "Unless you wanted that to be part of our agreement... Me staying here with my legs open."

"I haven't ruled that out."

Her lashes fluttered.

"Which reminds me, darlin'... We'll need a contract."

"I gave you my word," Angel said. "My word is bond. I said I wasn't gonna run, I was gonna take your deal. I even let you fuck on me without protection." She dipped a hand between her legs and brought it up shiny and sticky, showing him.

Ross grabbed her wrist and kissed the inside.

Her hand slipped inside her panties again. Was she using his cum to stroke herself? *Christ I could spend all day with her...*

"You never talked to me about no contract when you were rubbing this dick on my backside."

*Taking advantage of her ignorance. You knew what you were doing.*

“I trusted you. I still trust you. That’s enough, right?” Angel finished. “What do I have to do to prove it to you?”

“Angel, you don’t have to prove your loyalty to me. I already trust you. If anything it should be the other way around.”

“Okay, Ross.” She stood up and looped her arms around his neck. “I trust you, too.”

“Then trust when I say it’s for your own protection, and we’re getting a contract. Open your legs...Oh Christ. I’m crazy for this pussy.”

“So can I come to your auction?”

“Yes.”

Their kiss was hot and unbridled. He realized it would be easy to fall in love with her. It was in that moment— or maybe a thousand moments between the moment she woke up in his bed and now— he decided to fix himself to winning her heart in return.

He carried her into the shower. They undressed under the hot steaming water. Ross took his time to pleasure her, their bodies writhing and sticking together until they were both gasping for breath, barely able to see each other through the white hot haze.

AFTER THEY DRIED OFF, ROSS BROUGHT ANGEL A PEN AND paper. “Make a list of whatever you need while you stay here.”

“You mean whatever?”

“Yes.”

“I just need something to do,” she said, pushing the paper back firmly. “I don’t need you to spend money on me.”

“Then you’ll be bored,” he warned her.

After some strong encouragement she picked up the pen and carefully wrote out a list of groceries. It read,

CHICKEN

BUTTERMILK

FLOUR

EGGS

VEGETABLE OIL

SEASONINGS: PAPRIKA, SALT, PEPPER, OREGANO,  
ONION POWDER, GARLIC POWDER, TOM  
CHACHERE'S...

"I have seasoning," he said, looking up.

" 'Steak dry rub' isn't seasoning," Angel countered.

At the bottom of the list she'd scribbled some clothing items. Ross folded the list and tucked it in his pocket. "You know how to cook?" He asked curiously. "That didn't go with the rest of your memory? Like riding a bike I suppose."

"I can make other stuff with those cookbooks you have out there."

"Oh, those?" Ross folded his tie. "Never even opened 'em."

"I can see that," Angel said. "So what's the point of having them?"

"Pretense. That's what makes the world go 'round.'"

He met her eyes in the mirror. She suddenly looked very young and his cynicism fell harsh on his own ears.

He said, "Don't feel like you have to cook. You can order whatever you need. All the Rowanville restaurants deliver here."

"Big man, huh?"

"Something like that." He snapped back his cuffs, adjusted his collar. "Angel?"

"Yeah?"

“Can I borrow your sketchbook today?”

“Why?” She took it off the nightstand and clutched it protectively.

“I’ll bring it back to you. Promise.”

“Okay... You still haven’t told me why.”

“It’s a surprise, but you’ll like it.”

“Okay then. Surprise me.”

She walked him to the door, and he turned and kissed her. She kissed him back eagerly, with no restraint or affect. Her lips were soft and warm and her body vibrated towards his.

ROSS LEFT ANGEL THE RUN OF THE HOUSE. HE SPENT THE entire day chasing down leads for Roman over the theft of the gold. He found nothing.

“Your man’s long gone, Roman. I need boots on the ground and I have none to spare right now,” he told his brother when Roman came by, making the drive from Florin into Rowanville.

Roman nodded grimly. “I can send some boys out on the trace. Just let me know anything you found. I thought it might come to this. I’d have preferred to handle Sebastian myself. Now I got to leave it to the grunts, and they always make a mess.”

“Didn’t his wife just have a kid?” Ross asked mildly, flicking through the file.

“So did mine. We all take risks.” Roman rubbed his jaw. “I’ll tell the boys not to harm her.”

“Right.” Checking a reply to that, Ross wrote a few details down and handed it to his brother. Roman examined the paper. “I pay you for more than this,” he told Ross, looking up.

“I’m a little occupied at the moment, and your little gold-stealing thief Sebastian clearly isn’t a fool. A shame you couldn’t hang onto him longer.”

Roman said, “While you’re dressing me down for my follies, reckon you ought to know that your ex-girlfriend is running with a claim that you’re making love to underage Jack Bottom prostitutes.”

“She left my house three hours ago,” Ross growled. “If Tina’s got so much damned free time—“

“She *left your house three hours ago?*” Roman raised an eyebrow. “Did she run into the prostitute on the way out? Is this why you’re so, ah, occupied?”

“Bleeding Jesus, Roman.”

“Well hell, Ross! With all that fuss you made about hypnosis I have to wonder.”

“Mind yourself. You should be worried about those pending Federal charges, brother, not my love life.”

“Just be careful. You know where such talk can lead,” Roman advised.

Ross tapped his fingers on the desk. “What dress size is your wife, Roman?”

“I beg your motherfucking pardon?”

“Relax you fucking walnut. I’m not buying your wife a dress.”

Roman eyed him suspiciously. “She’s a size two. She was, before the baby. She’s around a four now.”

“Thanks.”

“You plan to explain...?”

“No,” said Ross. *Angel’s around Serena’s size. Same height and all.*

“If I go to prison, Ross,” said Roman with narrowed eyes, “You do not have permission to move on my wife. I know you’ve had an interest before—“

“Excuse me?” Ross hooted.

“Well, nevermind. You know where I stand on that.” Roman cleared his throat. “Still coming tomorrow?”

“Something came up. I’ll be over next week.” Ross rubbed the sleep from his eyes. His pelvis and thighs ached from his lovemaking with Angel, something he planned to commence as soon as he got home. He had a whole night planned just to spend more time with her. After committing to this crazy course, Ross burned with the need to fulfill it. The truth was that Roman and his missing gold were far from his mind.

Roman looked down his nose at his baby brother. “Ross,” he said.

“Mm?”

“I love you, brother.”

Outside, a bluejay and a squirrel fought over the birdfeeder.

“Disgusting,” said Ross finally. “I love you too.”

They both laughed.

Through the high window Ross watched his brother leave, shaking his head.

AFTER ROMAN LEFT, ROSS’S ASSISTANT CAME IN WITH THE file on Saturn Heights. Gertrude was a sweet middle-aged lady, related to one of the Baileys back in Florin.

“You should go home, lovey,” she told Ross. “Look at the state of you! I told you that Japan was going to make you frail. The Japanese don’t know how to feed strong Southern boys, I’ve always said so.”

“I’m fine, Gert.” Ross reached for his reading glasses. “Somewhere you want to be tonight, eh?”

“Me? No,” said Gertrude. “It’s you I’m worried for. You need to get out more. Bless your heart, all you do is work, and you’re a millionaire, you don’t even need to.”

She shut the door and left him to it. Ross went through the file on Saturn Heights with a fine-toothed comb. It seemed Angel’s old neighborhood had quite the reputation. Every word confirmed what Ross had already suspected. As he was

leaving the office he gave the folder back. “You can shred this one, Gertrude, thank you.”

“The carbon footprint,” she tutted.

“That reminds me— I need these framed.” He handed her Angel’s sketchbook. “Give them to our friend Mr. Willis, he’ll know what to do. I trust his taste. Rush orders, if you have to. I need ‘em by this weekend, documented and photographed.”

“Anything else?” Said Gertrude, scribbling furiously.

“No, that’s it.”

“Is this for the auction?”

“Yes.”

“Rush orders...Procrastinating as usual...”

Ross smiled to himself as Gertrude flipped through the sketchbook curiously. “These are good, honey. How nice.”

“It’s for a lady; they’re not mine.”

“Oh my,” said Gertrude, lingering on one specific page. Ross knew exactly which one. “Is this you?” She squeaked.

“Can’t be— this sketch was made before our friend met me,” said Ross with a grin.

“But it looks just like you, Ross! He’s even got your freckles.”

Ross pretended to take the sketchbook back. “Alright, that’s enough ogling.”

Gertrude’s quivery face went pink and she laughed good-naturedly. “You’re too much. Take care now, sir. Noon tomorrow, I’ll have the frames.” She frowned. “The cost. Are you sure you want to do it all at once?”

“The cost is not an issue.”

“Alright then. Have a good night— Mind, don’t catch a cold in this weather.”

The thermometer on the Rowanville Bank, which was next door to Ross’s building, read seventy-nine degrees Fahrenheit.

“One more thing,” Ross said, remembering. “Can you order a dress? Size two. A blue one.”

“Mmm. For the auction? I’ll see what Howl’s Boutique can do, but it’s short notice,” Gertrude said, jotting it at the bottom of her list.

“Thank you for tolerating me, Gerts.”

“Ha! Yes, Ross, tolerate is the right word.” She laughed; Ross had put her grandson through college, and she loved the young arrogant McCall with all her heart. “I’ll get to it right away.”

WITH GERTRUDE ON HER MISSION, ROSS RESUMED HIS OWN. He stopped by the florist on the way home, then drove to a strip mall, a place as foreign to him as the surface of Neptune.

He entered Hobby Lobby with a shopping cart, thinking to himself what Quinton would say at the sight of him. After grilling a sheepfaced employee about paintbrushes and thinners and mediums, he filled the cart with acrylic paint in every color. Next he saw about the brushes, which required rustling up another employee since the first one had fled.

“Which ones would you recommend?”

“Er— this is our high end, for oils, sir.”

“Thanks.” Ross picked out every brush from the section. Some of them cost thirty dollars. For one brush. Ross never looked too closely at the price of things, but he made a note to remove the stickers before giving them to Angel. He didn’t want her reading into it. It gave Ross a sexual thrill to spoil women, but sometimes an exact dollar amount stirred up the wrong feelings. People were strange that way about money.

As he waited in line he worked the soft bristles of an angle brush over the pad of his thumb. Ross himself was no artist— just a collector. His lifeless art that “didn’t move”, according to Angel. He smiled to himself.

Brushes, paints...Ross looked around with a critical eye. Hobby Lobby...didn’t he know the owner? A Christmas Gala,



maybe...

His mind wandered. This was a generic hobby store, nothing of premium caliber. Angel deserved the best. He'd replace these supplies with better ones, but expediency was the key. For now she ought to have some real materials. The girl was a genius and with the right environment she might become a sensation. Ross was excited for her; he sensed in Angel a genuine spirit, a strong character that drew his heart like a magnet to its opposite, a force that could not be denied.

AT THE LAST STOPLIGHT BEFORE CROWN VISTA, HIS CELL rang. Ross answered it and held it against the wheel. "Manny?"

"Ross...I have a situation."

"What situation? The one where you come to America and get your ass whupped?"

"No, Ross. This is serious." Ross heard distress in Mangjeol's always-sober voice as he said, "The Kazakura found out about Angel."

"Oh, shit."

"They kidnapped my wife. They tell me if I don't give Sook-Jae's daughter back, they will kill her," Manny panted. "Ross...I'm asking for your help."

"Fuck, Manny!"

"I didn't think they would go this far, I thought the girl was safe. You'll have to send her back to Korea. Men are on their way to pick her up."

"Wait a minute. *Send her back?*"

"They have my wife! Do you know what they will do to her?"

Someone blew their horn at Ross. Cursing under his breath he passed the light and turned into the gas station. In his rearview he saw the pile of stuff he'd bought for Angel. Flowers, groceries, paints.

And in his ear, Mangjeol all but breaking down.

“Manny, you have one hell of a nerve,” he said. “You are one bold motherfucker. You brought her all the way here for me to just send her back like dirty linen? Well it’s my pleasure to tell you no.”

Mangjeol’s voice cracked in rage. “Ross. I need the girl returned.”

“You should have protected your wife,” Ross said. The words were like ashes in his mouth, but he said them anyway because they were his true feelings. “What do the Kazakura want with her anyway? She wasn’t even part of the war! She’s American!”

“It’s the principle. Sook-Jae’s lineage must be destroyed.”

Ross had a thought. “What about you?” He asked Mangjeol. “Where do you fit in all this? I find it funny that your life has never been a question to the Kazakura. Considering you share Sook-Jae’s lineage...”

Manny was silent. “Ross, you don’t understand the position I have been in,” he said tightly.

“I see,” said Ross. “You ratted on your brother.”

He could hear Mangjeol breathing. “I had to do it.”

“And this thing with Angel was just your guilty conscience. But now that your ass is on the line, she turns back into a pawn.” It had never really been a question, but over his dead body was he returning Angel to anybody.

“So you won’t help me?” Mangjeol said. He was never one to waste words. He acted decisively. Ross knew that to Manny now he was an enemy.

“How long until your men get here?” Ross asked.

“It’s not my men coming,” Manny said, but just then Ross hit a Virginia Pothole and his phone went flying from his hand and dropped between the seats. He heard Mangjeol curse. Ross didn’t bother to try scooping the phone up from the floor. Dangerous and pointless—he knew what to do. He gunned it through Crown Vista until he reached his hill. Manny had

dropped the call. No flood of texts— that wasn't Manny's style. But it was really very simple. Mangjeol would have to go back to Japan empty-handed. If he wanted Angel he would have to take her by force.

ANGEL MET HIM AT THE DOOR, FLINGING IT OPEN AS HE CAME up the path. "Ross!"

"What is it? What happened?" His body reacted as she wrapped herself around him, pressing her small feminine body against his. He gripped her ass and tasted her sweet mouth. "Did anyone come up here? Did anyone call the house?"

"I have a surprise," she said excitedly.

Confused, he allowed her to lead him into the house. Immediately he sensed a foreign presence.

"Look!" Angel said, falling back to see his reaction, her eyes glowing. "Look, Ross. Isn't he cute?"

Ross stared down in disbelief at the scrappy, shivering little animal Angel had placed on top of his *Jean-Christophe* leather couch.

"I think it's a chihuahua," Angel said, scooping the creature up adoringly.

"That's a *dog*?"

"He's so cute, right? Look at his little paws! Look at his little ears. Look at—"

"He probably belongs to a neighbor. Did you see a collar?" Ross went into the bedroom and took out the Desert Eagle. He threw some things into a bag and returned to the living room, where Angel was kneeling in front of the animal, scratching his ears.

"A miracle the coyotes didn't make a meal of him." Ross gingerly put a finger towards the beast, who tried to rip it off.

"Can we keep him for now, Ross?"

Ross looked at the door, then at Angel. Angel held her breath. She sensed he was distracted about something and she

wanted more than anything for him to say yes.

“Sure,” he said, his honest brown eyes returning to hers. “Do you want to meet my family?”

ROSS TOOK A DIFFERENT CAR DOWN THE MOUNTAIN— AN ALL-black Challenger. It looked hot as hell to watch him drive over the crazy hills that made up this place. The more she saw of the brilliant green mountains and the misty blue tops, the more in love she fell. Angel leaned back and smiled, Ross’s quiet mood putting no damper on her joy since she knew she was not the source of the disturbance in his thoughts. It must be something with his work.

Ross had bought her more presents, but then rushed her out of the house before she could really look at them. Art supplies — really nice ones. He was so thoughtful. She managed to take the new sketchbook and some pencils— a habit she would never break.

He squeezed her thigh. “Are you happy, babygirl?”

“I am. Very. This place is *gorgeous*.”

“The Blue Ridge,” said Ross softly. “Most mystical place on earth. This place is a paradise for a lot of people.”

“For you?”

He looked at her. “It is now.”

Angel smiled to herself and settled back in the comfortable seat.

“I think you’ll like my family,” Ross said.

“What are you going to tell them about me?”

“That you’re my girlfriend. You want some coffee?” He asked, swinging into a gas station. “I’ll be having a late night with work.” He glanced around before parking, though the place was empty. A black car passed and he put a hand on his waist. Did Ross have a strap on him? Damn.

“You look nervous,” Angel said, flashing back to her old life.

“I’m not,” he said. “Are you?”

“Not when you’re with me,” she said.

He smiled. “Stay in here; I can see you from the window.”

“Okay, Ross. It’s not like I’m gonna run off.”

But that wasn’t what he meant, she realized. Was someone targeting him? Troubled, Angel clutched the little chihuahua closer. He had fallen asleep wrapped in one of Ross’s designer towels. Ross only looked down his nose at that, but he hadn’t said anything.

The dog was so cute. She needed to think of a name...

Ross came back with coffee. “Rotten stuff. I got you a hot chocolate.”

“Oh, *thanks*...”

The dog said, “Grrrrr.”

“He hates me,” Ross said as he buckled in again and set his coffee down, spilling some of the piping hot liquid over his hand. “Ah, fuck. Angel, you better not teach that animal wicked habits.”

“Me? Never.”

“Hmm.”

“He’s a good boy, aren’t you? No, don’t bite Ross’s hand, baby.”

Ross hid a smile at the sight of her happy face. “I wonder who his owners are,” he said aloud. “Probably some scrappy little bastards. He doesn’t look full chihuahua to me.”

“If nobody claims him, can we keep him?”

“We’ll have to take him to my sister-in-law. She runs a vet practice. If someone owns him maybe they have him chipped. It’s like a digital dog tag.”

“What if he doesn’t have a chip?”

“Then we’ll have to put up posters,” Ross mused. “Call some shelters...”

“And then? If nobody comes for him then?”

“We return him to the wild,” said Ross decisively.

“No! Ross, no, you can’t.”

“He can fight it out with the coyotes and eagles and buzzards. He’s a tough little bastard, he’ll do just fine out there.”

“Ross!”

“Maybe you can leave food for him, sometimes,” Ross allowed. “Dry bones, fish guts, old leather shoes...”

“Ross.”

They both laughed. Ross carefully raised the coffee to his lips as he turned a corner. *I wonder what he’s working late for.* A memory swam through her mind at the smell of it. “I used to use coffee for paint,” she said.

“Oh? There’s a woman in Germany who does that. You never struck me as a watercolor person.”

“I’m not. I’m happy for everything you bought me today.”

He flushed with pleasure. “Good. Just don’t let ‘em sit in a drawer somewhere.”

“I wish I still had those paintings.”

“You’ll make more,” said Ross confidently. He took an aside look at her. “Actually, Angel, I have a confession.”

“What?”

“I submitted your sketches for the auction.”

Angel’s eyes widened. “What?”

“You can keep all of the proceeds— it’s your art, your money. But it will put your name out there. Use what those supplies to start a real portfolio...”

Angel opened her mouth but couldn’t speak.

“Hell, don’t cry,” said Ross. “I wanted to make you laugh!”

“Ross!” She covered her mouth tightly and looked out the window. She didn’t speak for the rest of the drive to Roman’s house. But as they rolled over endless green hills she formed an idea in her mind for a painting. Using real color this time.





## EPILOGUE

### SIX MONTHS LATER

ANGEL SAT ON THE EDGE OF A HIGH WHITE WALL CARESSED BY overgrown bougainvillea vines. She wore a pair of silk panties and a breezy top. Even this time of day the heat of the sun was no joke.

A cool trade wind caressed her face and brought the smell of hibiscus flowers and salt to her nose. She closed her eyes and inhaled. The bougainvillea vines spoke to each other in rough, excited whispers. She liked the wind, even though it made her puffy hair try its hardest to escape her scarf.

In front of her was a many-faceted Caribbean sea, and glimpses of its true color were beginning to emerge as the sun rose up over it to make another day. Ross was asleep— she'd woken up at the crack of dawn and had been here ever since with the tea she now drank every morning.

She put a hand on her heavily pregnant stomach and watched the great waves pounding at the edge of the beach. The baby turned over inside her and pushed at her flat palm with its hands and feet. Angel had no woman in her life to tell her what to do, but she accepted this challenge without fear, holding onto her faith above everything.

Every new experience expanded her mind, and in the last few months she had so many of them she could barely process

it all. Sitting up here was a new experience, too.

She stared down at the water, hypnotized. She had never seen something so giant, but so *alive*. Each motion, the sea attempted to reclaim the land. Sometimes it made it as far as the retaining wall of giant stone that kept Ross's villa from plunging into the sea. Ross said that with the state of the world it might not be long before that happened. But for now each effort fell short; the separation between them would never be overcome.

*Well, little baby, I tried to give you a better life than what I had.*

All her life living in L.A she never went to the beach. Now she was in Aruba, the Caribbean. This was better than anything she could have imagined. She had nearly cried the first time Ross brought her to this place, where they would be spending the next three months. Three months had become six...

She loved it here. Unlike Virginia it was hot all the time, something she missed from Cali. Mostly though, she loved the beach. The beach here was clean and empty as the first day God made it. The sand was white, and the water was blue and fine.

She could strip naked and run down there without a care in the world. Today Ross was going to teach her how to swim, baby and all.

“Up early?”

Ross came through the glass doors, surprising her with his soundless movement.

His thick curly hair stuck up in every direction, and his mean-mugging face had tired lines under the eyes, but he was the most handsome man she'd ever seen. She had agreed to lay down and make a child with him in exchange for money but somewhere along the line it turned into real feelings.

“That's my boo,” she sang. Ross grinned and scooped her up into his arms; she nuzzled his neck. For a moment they just

stood like that. The ocean waves made a slow and steady music.

“I thought you’d like to know that your dog is a vicious creature who won’t give up the blankets,” Ross said into her hair before he set her down. “How’s my son?”

“Or daughter,” she waved a finger at him.

“Mm. Did he or they keep you up all night? Is that why you’re out here so early?”

“No...I was just thinking.”

He took her empty teacup and went inside for a minute. He returned with piping-hot mint tea. “Thanks,” said Angel gratefully.

Ross half-smiled and took a stance next to her. Quietly he drank his coffee— straight black, no cream, no sugar.

She could tell something was weighing on his mind. By now she knew Ross’s moods well. Coming into the eighth month of her pregnancy, she felt even more attuned to his energy. He had expressed the same to her.

“What do you think of the view?” he asked.

“I love it,” she said. “I thought Florin was the most beautiful place I ever seen, but this is everything. I was out here for the sunrise. You were sleep and I didn’t want to wake you up,” she explained in apology.

“I’m just glad you enjoyed it while it lasted.” He put his arms around her, cradling the growing child. “Sorry I was up so late.”

“You like to work, Ross, I know... but if there’s too much of a good thing...”

He nuzzled her neck back. “But then how would I afford my habit?”

“What habit?”

He fanned open her right hand. On every finger Angel wore a gemstone ring she had chosen. Not all of them while he fucked her, but most. Four out of five. On her wrist was a

diamond bracelet, and two diamonds gleamed in her ears. Ross had a fetish. He liked her to buy jewelry while he had her ass-up in the bed.

Angel now had a small fortune in diamonds, rubies and pearls.

When the baby started showing Angel feared he'd lose interest in the bedroom.

He didn't.

"You don't have to get me more jewelry," she said, putting her foot down. Ross tickled her sides. "No?"

"No. I have enough, Ross...I'm not greedy."

"I love seeing you waste my money," Ross rumbled in her ears.

"You're too much."

"Do you know how sweet your pussy tastes now that you're pregnant?"

"I think you told me maybe a hundred times..."

He mashed her titties together. Since day one of her pregnancy they had swollen, and when he crushed them gently between his big hands it made a painful delicious pleasure that could nearly make her cum if he did it right.

He always did it right.

Angel's thighs rubbed together under her maternity dress. He sucked under her ear and started working the dress up over her hips. She mumbled something.

"What?" he growled.

"You promised. I want to paint you here. With this behind you. Uhhn...Ross."

"Fuck. Angel I got some meetings in an hour."

"No..."

"I need you to take care of this for me, babygirl."

“Take care of what?” She teased. He liked when she played innocent; Ross had a perverted side. “Take care of what?”

He spread her pussy lips apart with his thumb. “Remember what your job is?”

“No...*Unh....*”

“Yes, you do, darlin’...bend over.”

He knelt down and ate her pussy from the back until she was moaning and riding his face. Then, rising up, he filled her pussy with his big white dick. His thick head breached her lips slowly. At the entrance she felt the first burn of pain, since Ross had a monster dick, but then...Angel stood on her tiptoe to receive him, leaning over the high wall. She moaned and arched her head back. The big red sunrise sky spun in her eyes. Ross thrust. *Big. So big. I feel so tight. I feel so free.*

He didn’t care that they were right there in the open. No neighbors, wasn’t that nice?

“Your job is to take this big dick when it gets hard,” he said.

“Yes daddy.”

*Thrust. Thrust.* “Let me worship this tight pretty pussy every day. Let me come inside it and make you pregnant ”

“Pay me,” Angel moaned. “Give me my fucking money.”

“How much you want for this pussy?”

“Hundred racks.”

“Done. Give me another baby after this one you get four hundred. I’ll breed you for years, Angel. That’s what you want?”

“Oh *my God*...Ross!”

Ross hissed and cupped her swollen stomach.

“Oh– Ross!”

“Fuck, Angel...Fuck...”

Dirty talk made Angel's pussy turn into a sweet flood, and Ross had no limits. He'd said some fair depraved shit to Angel, but what could he say? It wasn't like she didn't love every word. Seemed like the more psychotic his words, the harder she came on his cock.

Women.

They stumbled into the house. Did she wobble, or did he carry her? He got her in the bed, missionary, a position that made him slaver with lust the more her body filled with his child. He loved her body like this. Maybe a little too much. It would be hard not to be selfish with her body. As long as she would let him, he didn't mind getting her pregnant again and again...

*We'll call it quits at five, he told himself. But if she wanted six...*

He stroked her round, tight stomach. "What happened to you, huh? Did I knock you up, babygirl?"

"You put a baby in me." She slipped his dick inside her and shallowly fucked herself on the tip— something she started doing on her own. For a virgin, Angel proved a fast learner and her wide imagination kept him satisfied.

"That's right. I stuffed you with this cock, babygirl. Your first cock got you pregnant. Made your ass and titties grow... Made your pussy so sensitive...show me..."

She moaned incoherently.

"I said show me."

Her quick little fingers played in her pussy, delving into the secret place under her bulging stomach.

"Let me see your clit..." He sucked and licked between her fingers, taking the little jewel on a ride through rough electric pleasure. Angel went wild, gripping his head to keep him there...Not like he was getting up anytime soon.

Her pussy tasted like fucking mango juice. Pregnant it was even better. Ross tongued her down, his lips catching on the many rings on her fingers. It filled Ross with satisfaction to

see her wearing jewelry he'd paid for— he wanted his stamp on Angel so the whole world knew she was his.

“Take this dick again, baby...”

She sucked him in; he was lost, lost...He came inside her hard and rubbed the excess nut into her skin. Angel's body had changed incredibly, but he hungered for it every single minute of the day. He would never stop.

“HOW ARE YOU FEELING ABOUT THE BIRTH?” ROSS ASKED once they had made it inside. They were lying in bed, exhausted. Outside the mourning doves cooed love-words to each other.

“I feel fine about it.” She squeezed his hand where it rested on top of her bump. “I know everything is gonna be fine.”

“I meant...after.”

Angel took a deep breath. “I haven't signed your contract, Ross. If you want me to go, I'll go. I don't need a contract to be happy with what we have. If you want to keep the baby and make me go—” She bit her lip and couldn't finish.

“It would break you if I did that— and I would never do that. I'm so in love with you.” He never said these things to her face-to-face. His head and shoulders were above her, and she couldn't watch his face change as the vulnerability revealed itself. But she listened to his heart pounding and knew the truth.

“Ross, I'm getting somewhere with the painting,” she told him.

“You can see the sun set from the other side of the villa,” he said. “If you're interested. But tonight I have plans for us. We're going to dinner on the water.”

“That sounds real nice.”

The sun struck across Ross's hazel eyes and he shaded them. The arm holding Angel gripped her closer.

SHE AND ROSS SPENT THE DAY ON THE BEACH WITH TACO Bell, the chihuahua. By noon, Ross was brown as a walnut with gold streaks in his red hair. Angel herself felt hot, happy and extremely tired. Her back ached, but only when she stopped moving.

After putting Taco back in the villa, he fell asleep. Angel changed clothes and walked barefoot with Ross up the long strip of sand until the villa disappeared and they came to more hotels. At one o' clock they ate at one of the many restaurants lining the shore outside of a hotel.

It was peaceful and pretty. Reggae played from the bar speakers and a local served up sweet and spicy drinks. Angel stuck with fruit juice while Ross had for himself a strong Dutch beer.

The roof of the restaurant was thatched with palms, and birds flew in and out. The place was so alive; that was what Angel loved the most. She hoped Taco Bell wasn't too lonely.

Framed against the tropical backdrop, Ross's tanned, freckled skin and wild surfer hair looked at home. He was smiling.

"I would never get tired of a view like this," she told him.

"Me neither."

She had grilled fish, ceviche, local rice, cucumber salad, and a kind of fried dough pastry drizzled with condensed milk. Tasted like heaven. Ross didn't like sweets, so she ate his too. These days she was always so hungry.

"Some day I'd like to move here," Ross admitted, watching her the way he'd been watching her all morning. Like he never wanted to take his eyes off her.

"You could," she said. "You got money. You can do anything. You could move here forever."

He smiled. "You'd come with me?"

"Of-of course."

"I'd like that."



“I’m glad you’re here with me. It makes all the difference.”

“I...I know. I’m happy to be here with you, Ross.”

“When I first laid eyes on you, I thought you were the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. But it was your sweet nature I came to love...Your personality came through anyways, Angel. That’s the truth. You’re still that woman. I love you,” he said.

“Oh. Oh, Ross.”

He broke off as the waitress came with the check. He paid with the black credit card.

“I’m happy, Ross.”

“That’s all that matters to me,” he said. He took her hand and massaged it, his giant thumbs digging into her muscles and bones. “And for the rest of our lives I will look after you.”

Then he took something from his pocket and handed it to her. “It’s yours from the auction,” he said. “Keep every penny of it. I can recommend some good investments. In a few years you can pretty much live off it.”

Angel tore open the envelope. Her eyes shrank. For the rest of the afternoon she couldn’t speak at all. But every few minutes she would turn and give Ross a tight hug around his waist, and he knew what she meant.

THAT NIGHT ANGEL GOT READY WITH ESPECIAL CARE. SHE washed her hair and styled it up elegantly. While Ross banged away on his Macbook in the master bedroom, she dressed herself and put on some makeup. Angel wore a silky taupe dress and a pair of sparkling diamond earrings Ross had bought for her from the Colombian Emerald Jewelers. She tacked on her sandals and put only a few things in her purse—a shell, a comb, some of the makeup. These days her life was so simple and beautiful.

Ross looked up from his work as she slipped out of the bathroom.

“How do I look?”

“You could wear a flour sack and I would still be struck dumb by you.” He stood up and caught her hand. “Turn, let me see...”

She turned and the dress floated around her legs. He grinned at her, the two dimples making her heart ache. “If we weren’t already late...”

Their driver took them twenty minutes to another part of the shoreline. Angel stepped out into the beautiful hot summer night, gasping as a flock of flamingos suddenly took flight overhead.

“Where do they go?” She asked Ross.

“I have no idea.”

Ross took her hand. “Hungry?”

“Not really,” she admitted, stepping carefully over the fallen pink blossoms of a tree as she crossed the pavement. Soon her feet were sinking in pale white sand. She shucked off her shoes and walked through it with Ross.

Ross held onto her hand tightly, the other going to the pocket where the diamond Cartier ring sat nestled in its sleeve, a promise of the future he intended to give her. He stared down at his loving Angel, his future wife.



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