

5-16-2008

Claiming Iris

Dawn Lenz
University of New Orleans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

Recommended Citation

Lenz, Dawn, "Claiming Iris" (2008). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 657.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/657>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

Claiming Iris

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing, Fiction

By

Dawn Leslie Lenz

B.A. Missouri State University, 1997

May 2008

Copyright 2008, Dawn Leslie Lenz

Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
Keywords.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One.....	1
Chapter Two.....	11
Chapter Three.....	24
Chapter Four.....	33
Chapter Five.....	46
Chapter Six.....	60
Chapter Seven.....	70
Chapter Eight.....	77
Chapter Nine.....	84
Chapter Ten.....	96
Chapter Eleven.....	101
Chapter Twelve.....	109
Chapter Thirteen.....	116
Chapter Fourteen.....	124
Vita	134

Abstract

Iris Fitzgerald struggles to make it day to day after she is raped and stabbed while out on an early morning run. Her story is told through her relationships, not only with her new, scared self, but also with her overbearing mother, her best friend, her rescuer and her antagonistic roommate. She has just moved to a strange city and still has not found a job. So, she has the overwhelming stress of the attack to contend with and the added pressure of running quickly out of money in the expensive city of San Francisco. She uses her painkillers as an escape from her stab wound as well as her emotional pain. Claiming Iris is about self-preservation, relationships, addiction and continuing on with life.

Keywords

Rape, Stabbing, Relationships, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Percocet, Addiction, Mother/daughter relationships

Introduction

This Thesis consists of the first fourteen chapters of the novel Claiming Iris. Since it is only a portion of a greater whole, a resolution will not be reached in reading this work, but rather insight into the characters will be gained as well as an understanding of the conflicts the characters face.

Chapter One

Seven days ago I almost died. I remember nothing about the rape and everything about the subsequent stabbing, though every day I try as hard as I can to act like it didn't actually happen. The problem with this approach is I have a stab wound in my side to remind me of it constantly. And these flashes of memory have been invading my mind unexpectedly all week that I've been working vehemently to forget. People say the mind is a powerful thing. I believe it.

I leave San Francisco General Hospital for the second time in so many days and feel lost standing on the front steps. A few people wait at the bus stop in front of me, so I hang back, pulling my sweater tighter around me. Wind whips my hair against my face and I wish I'd worn a jacket. Even after a

month, I have yet to adjust to San Francisco weather. I try to think of something besides being cold, besides the constant pain in my side, besides the session with the hospital-appointed therapist which I am leaving. The therapist is a man and during the entire fifty minutes in that small office, I could have climbed out the window. I'm not going back. It's a miracle I made it all the way here alone in the first place. I forced myself. He isn't going to win.

God, what a mess. I almost sit down on these steps because I feel a little dizzy, but it creeps toward evening and I need even more to get home before dark. My first two attempts at leaving the loft alone were unsuccessful. Miserably so. I came home crying and shaking from taking a letter down the block to the mailbox where I'd passed a homeless man asking me for spare change. The second time I went to the market across the street to buy wine for dinner. The person standing behind me stood close, too close. Inching away, I kept moving until I was almost too far down the counter to pay the cashier. Grabbing my change, I ran out of the store.

Today I made it to the hospital all right. Now, the fog rolls in. All the buildings loom over me in stale grey. The sidewalk is grey. The bus that stops in front of me is even grey. My intention is to get on it and I move forward,

searching my bag for money. Then, I look up. The bus oozes people out of the front and back doors. Riders switch seats, move back and attempt to get on with standing room only. I imagine being on that crowded bus, my knees touching the knees of passengers sitting down. My arms, shoulders, back and hips squeezing together with the people standing up. Breath seizes in my throat. I take a couple involuntary steps back, trip on the bottom stair of the hospital steps behind me and fall backwards. My hands break the fall. Even though I don't hit my head, it throbs in memory of this same fall last Monday. My head had smacked the concrete, knocking me unconscious.

Suddenly, the man's dark eyes flash through my mind and I almost cry out. But they are quickly gone and I am left half lying on the front steps of General, clutching my lower right side where that man stabbed me.

I dig in my purse for my phone to call my roommate, Sini. She should be driving home from work by now. God, please let her hurry.

"Iris, what happened?" she asks, immediately using her big-sister tone.

"Come soon," I say. "I'm at the hospital."

"Would a cab be faster? I can get you a cab right away."

"No!" I yell. Then, quickly add, "I'm sorry. I'd rather you come. Where are you?"

"I'm on my way," Sini says and hangs up.

As I wait for Sini, the sky darkens to a deep blue that frightens me and I think about going back inside the hospital, but my side hurts too much. I root around in my bag yet again, this time for the Percocet I've been given. My hands shake as I read, "Take one tablet as needed for pain." I swallow two pills without water.

Twenty excruciating minutes later--what took her so long?--Sini drives up in her new little red Mini Cooper. I stare at the car. She just bought it to celebrate her job at Microtech. Sini parks, facing the wrong way in the bus lane and rushes over to me. Her blonde hair flies in all directions. She could have just stepped out of a movie, an albino catwoman. Well, she's not exactly albino, but she does have the fairest skin and hair of anyone I know. She also has the bluest eyes--framed by blonde eyelashes that she hates. She buys expensive mascara to make them anything but pale. I try as hard as I can to focus on her eyes as she leans down to help me.

"What the hell happened?" she cries.

"It's nothing. Nothing. I tripped," I say, trying to get up, still holding my side. I can't stop looking at the car. Sini supports me, holding my free arm under the elbow. She throws my purse over her shoulder. We walk slowly towards the Mini. My eyes are closed.

Sini opens the passenger door and as I slide awkwardly into the low seat, she says, "Oh my God, Iris!"

I look down and pull my hand away from my body. Blood is on my sweater. I pass out.

The next thing I know, I'm back in a goddamn hospital bed, with Sini beside me. My eyelids sag heavily. My mouth feels full of too many tongues. "Get me out of here," I whisper.

Sini squeezes my hand. She goes off to see about my release.

As soon as she leaves, I bite down on my bottom lip. My side is uncomfortable despite the Percocets I took. Where is the morphine? I writhe on the hard bed. My heroic veneer is cracking and I don't think I can wait any longer for something to make it stop. I hit the nurse's call button.

After a while, a nurse comes in. I ask for morphine.

"I can get you some Tylenol 3," she says.

I am floating too much to pay attention to what she says next. She gets me some Tylenol 3.

My eyes open and the nurse stands over me, taking my blood pressure. "She's a quiet one," she says to another girl coming on duty. I have the sense she has not stopped talking to me since she walked into the room.

"How are you feeling?" New-nurse says.

I am too tired to answer. I nod.

"We're going to check your bandage," Chatty-nurse says, pulling the paper-thin blankets back.

Oh God. Here it comes. I am actually going to see it-- again. After I regained consciousness last Monday, the doctors said I was lucky to have been found before I bled to death. I shiver just thinking about it. The blade was small and missed major organs. They say that as if it comforts me.

"You cold?" Chatty-nurse asks, lifting my hospital gown, revealing the heavily bandaged stab wound. I can't answer, can't look away. New-nurse places fresh gauze, tape and a few other supplies on a cart beside the bed. I wish that I could separate from my body and go somewhere else while she exposes that hole in me. It doesn't belong to me anyway. It is someone else's. I am just reading about it or hearing the story recounted by a friend.

The friend could be Sini. Just as the nurses leave, she walks into the room. She doesn't have any answers for the time I can leave. But, a little while later, New-Nurse comes back in and says, "The doctor is letting you go. We'll get things ready."

I don't belong here and I don't feel like I belong at my new loft either. All I know is I'm ready to leave this place.

I make it through the car ride with my eyes closed and, once we're home, sit thankfully in the living room. Sini looks glad to be back at the loft, too. We both slouch down on the cushions of the steel blue couch. I push the throw blanket off the backside onto the floor.

"Let's get rid of that thing," I say.

"Your mom just gave it to you."

I look at Sini out of the corner of my eye. It's true. My mother did send the throw the week after we arrived. All I said to my mother was, "It's cold here," and a blanket arrived by FedEx in three days. A pink blanket with red flowers. Even though I told her our couch was blue. Sini knows it makes me crazy. She knows how particular I am about color. I say for the tenth time, "It clashes." I hit the couch. "What more do you need?"

"She's going to be pissed."

"When isn't she?"

We both mull over our own thoughts and I try not to think of my mother. Unfortunately, Sini distracts me with my therapy appointment. "Hey, what happened at your session today?" she asks.

"Typical psych stuff," I say. "Sini, why didn't you get the blue Mini?"

"I know. Weird, huh? You should talk to your therapist."

"He's weird."

"Why?"

"He asks a lot of questions."

Sini laughs. "What did you expect?"

"That, I guess. You still should have gotten the blue one. You almost did." Sini's favorite color is blue. Needless to say, she owns a great many blue things: clothes, shoes, purses, sheets, blankets, you name it, Sini has it in some shade of blue. She comes by the color choice honestly. Her name means blue. She's of Finnish heritage and her parents enjoyed giving her a traditional Fin name.

Sini sighs. "I do love it. So, what's the problem with this guy?"

"That is."

"What is?"

"He's a man," I say.

"It's good for you to talk about it, Iris."

"Says who?"

"Well, me for one. And researchers for a hundred others.

What else do you need?"

"I'm fine."

"But you're not fine."

I shoot her a hard look. Mostly because I know she's right. Also, because I don't want to hear it. The seriousness shows in her face. Her lips purse. Her eyes search mine. I try to find a way out. "Can't I just talk to you?" I ask.

"Fine, but I can't guarantee any results," Sini teases. Then her face becomes serious again. "Of course you can always talk to me. But a therapist is actually trained in this stuff. Like it or not, a professional can help you deal with the trauma. Call and ask for a woman."

I don't say anything.

Guilt creeps through me for not telling her what happened to me yet. I've never kept things from Sini before, never not told her something that is going on with me. She is my very best friend. Hell, we moved halfway across the country together

on a whim--on the shared dream of adventure, new experiences, exciting jobs, new friends, new boyfriends, new everything.

And I ruined it on week three. Running at six o'clock in the morning in our sketchy South of Market neighborhood. Even our landlord warned us against going out alone at odd hours of the day and night. "You never can tell around here," he told us. We didn't take much stock in his warning because the couple that Sini knows, Marge and Jim--her connection--lived in the city for years, in our neighborhood, before moving to the east bay a year ago to raise a family.

Every morning as Sini and I would go running, we passed the same things: the Chevron gas station with the same high gas prices; the same parking lot beneath the freeway; the club called The End Up. Except for a few homeless people, the streets were deserted that early in the morning. We did, however, see this interesting guy who looked like he was on his way to work. Every single time we passed him, he smiled. He had longish, straight, dark hair and handsome dark eyes. Always a black suit and tie. I wondered what he did for a living. I pegged him as an architect or banker or CEO of something. Surprisingly, this turned out to be the man who saved my life.

Chapter Two

What am I waiting for? If not now, when? That's what I keep asking myself as the days tick down. If I don't leave now, will I ever do it? Twinkling lights blink on in my stomach every time I think about the change. I am actually moving. Sini and I bought our tickets to San Francisco a few weeks ago and we both cried we were so happy. We will make two trips. The first, this trip, is to job and apartment hunt. The second is the final move.

I am sitting on the top of my suitcase waiting for my mother to pull up. My cotton shirt clings in wet pools to my back in the July heat. Record 100-degree temperatures top the news stories every day. I fan myself with my folder of important travel information--flight, rental car, hotel. It isn't helping. Gathering up my thick hair, I twist it at the back of my head, securing it with a pencil I find in my purse. I should have waited inside, but I don't like looking at all the boxes still left to pack. A cross-country move proves difficult to pack for. It isn't like moving across town. Sini and I are going to have a yard sale to get rid of some stuff before we leave. Everything isn't going to California.

"San Francisco is a fresh start," Sini says.

I agree. So, we have boxes to take, boxes to sell and boxes to give away.

My mother arrives in her usual fashion, slow up the driveway to our duplex and honking the horn, despite having seen me sitting out front. "Hello, honey," she says, rolling down the window. Cool air hits me in the face. "I thought Sini was going with us?" she asks.

"She's meeting us." Her parents are taking her to lunch before she leaves, so they will drop her off at the airport.

"Oh, good. Then we're early. I'd like to stop by the house."

I look at my watch. "We're not that early, Mom."

"Of course we are. I'm always early."

"Didn't you just come from there?" I ask.

"No. Stop being obstinate."

I've heard that word before. Only while speaking about the move and my attitude toward it. I've never done anything quite this rash in my life, but I've decided it's high time I did, despite what my mother thinks. Can't she just let me make my own decisions? Thirty birthdays make me well past the age that my mother can stop me from doing what I care to do with my life. It just doesn't stop her from trying.

Sini's parents are the best. They fully support their daughter's decision to move. They offered to drive us out there in a U-Haul caravan. As tempting as that sounds, we finally decided to fly and send all of our stuff by truck to meet us. That means packing up all our worldly possessions in advance of leaving. Our apartment is transforming into a shell with boxes lining the walls.

If my father were still alive, he would help my mother see reason in this move, this adventure of mine. He would have understood my need to explore what's out there in the world. He gobbled things up every chance he got. Like I do. Travel. Music. Literature. He gobbled up my mother, too, like she was candy. I saw him sneak up behind her while she made brunch one Sunday. He didn't scare her like I thought he might. Instead he wrapped his arms around her waist and laid his head in the soft crook of her neck. He said something to her I couldn't hear and she turned until she kissed his head.

After my father died of a heart attack, the light went out of my mother's glances. The soft edge to her voice disappeared. She clung to me as if I was the last person left on this earth; and maybe I was--to her.

I was a senior in high school and barely participated in any of the senior parties, sometimes even if they were school

related--like the Senior Homecoming Float. My mother made me stay at home with her. I didn't mind. I was grieving, too. But, instead of sitting in the living room with her like she planned, I always left the table right after dinner. I went straight to my room and slammed the door; inevitably, a "Stop slamming doors, young lady" reprimand came from down the hall. I organized my CD collection by genre and then by artist like my dad taught me. After finishing that, I'd sit for hours listening to music, singing along, remembering the variety of music my dad loved most. If I didn't have music playing, I would read. I checked out a bunch of books at the library and had a stack on my nightstand. The times my mom wouldn't let me go out with my friends, I'd lounge in my room with a book, remembering how my dad used to read voraciously every chance he got. I lost count of how many books I read that year.

My mother never understood my needs, even before my Dad died. There is no hope of that now. I just have to deal with whatever she dishes out for the next hour and then Sini and I will be on a plane to San Francisco.

In the weeks leading up to my move, my mother asked me, "When are you moving?"

"The thirteenth, Mom." Shall I stamp it on your forehead? I almost added, but didn't. It would only start a fight and that wasn't my intent.

We pull up to her small two-bedroom bungalow in University City. I am twisting strands of fallen hair around my fingers to occupy myself.

"I really need to get that porch repainted," Mom says.

"Red," I say.

"What are you talking about?"

"The porch."

"No, no, no. Green." My mother bites at each word.

I say nothing. She can have green if that's what she likes. It isn't my house. Thank God. She knows I'm a graphic designer and work constantly with color. Granted, I'm no architect or interior designer, but I know what colors look good together. Her front porch in green with red shutters on the sides is all the makings of a Christmas home year round. It isn't working for me. I think about telling her to have the shutters painted green as well, but change my mind. The last time I offered advice to my mother she shot it down instantly.

"I've enjoyed the porch being green," Mom says, getting out of the car.

I nod, still saying nothing. I get out, too.

"Green is such an intense color. Forest," she continues, looking from me to the porch.

I nod.

"All right," she says. "Why do you think red?"

"Mom, the shutters are a beautiful brick red."

"I thought we needed contrast."

"Harmony," I say.

"I just don't know, Iris."

"Try it."

"It's not a pair of pants."

"You can always paint over it," I say.

"I'll make you do it," she says.

"I move in two weeks."

"You're dead set on that?" she asks.

"Red?"

"San Francisco."

"Yes, Mom."

"You can always come back here whenever," she says.

Oh, Jesus. So, that's how she is going to play, before I even leave, the comeback card. I laugh and quickly put my hand over my open mouth because it rings out so loudly. I know I've made a mistake. Her lips are practically invisible.

"You're never coming back here?" she asks.

"Mom, it's just that--that's not it."

"I'm sure you're never coming back to see me." Her voice is hard, controlled.

"I really want an adventure," I say.

"You'll be out there with Sini." Mom says Sini's name as if it should be her I am moving with instead of Sini.

I don't know what to do with her jealousy, so I say, "I have to experience places besides St. Louis."

"The two of you will just forget me."

"It's about dreams," I say.

"You'll forget all about me," she says.

"What?"

"What?"

"Mom, are you even listening to me?"

"Me," she says. "Are you listening to me!"

"This is pointless. We need to get to the airport." I look at my watch. I am going to miss my flight.

Mom fumbles with her keys and disappears inside the house. Great. She is going to be in there forever. I pace the porch. Five precious minutes pass. The door is open a crack, so I call in, "Mom, my flight!" No answer comes.

My teeth grind together, giving me a headache. Time is running out. As I am going in after her, she steps out the

door, locking it behind her. She holds up the black jacket I always ask her if I can have because it's a little funky with long, full cuffs, an Asian-inspired collar and fun hooks down the front. We are both sweating in the heat, but my mother says, "You'll need this in San Francisco." I don't do anything. She picks up my hand and drapes the jacket over my arm. "Trust me," she says.

I follow my mother back to the car and hold the jacket, folded on my lap. As we drive to the airport, my headache intensifies and my mother makes small talk.

"What are you going to do while you're there?"

I've already told her the purpose of this trip. Jesus, she can't remember anything. "I told you already."

"I thought you might do some other things, too."

"We're not going to have time for sight-seeing, Mom."

"You've got to see the bridge," she says, incredulous.

I sigh and rub my temples. "It's hard to miss." I check my watch.

"You better be safe," my mother says.

"I will."

Then as she drives right under the speed limit, she does what she used to do when I was a teenager, talks about how dangerous big cities are and how to always go out at night with

someone else. She calls it the buddy system, as if I'm in second grade going on a school field trip. I hate to shatter her illusion about the big city, but I'm going to.

"Mom, San Francisco is safer than St. Louis."

I think she's going to stop the car in the middle of the highway. She looks at me a little too long and swerves into the other lane.

"Mom, watch out!" I slam my hands on the dashboard.

"What are you talking about?"

"According to statistics," I say, settling back into my seat.

"Whose?"

I can't remember. It's from the newspaper recently. There was a big write-up because St. Louis is considered one of the most dangerous cities in the country--in the top ten--in crime. San Francisco doesn't even make the top 100. I say that to my mother and she says, "That's ridiculous."

"You must have missed the paper that day," I counter.

"You don't read the paper."

"Someone at work showed it to me."

"Be safe, Iris," my mother says, stubbornly.

"I always am."

Signs for the airport appear up ahead. My mother makes no indication of moving over into the exit lane. We're going to miss it. "Mom, get over!"

"Right." She puts on her turn signal and waits for a car to pass. Another car is coming, but she has to move or we'll miss the exit.

"Go, now!"

"Stop yelling." She eases the car over, cuts off the oncoming car and makes the exit by passing over the double white lines.

"Fuck," I whisper and loosen my grip on my legs.

"That's not ladylike." My mother heard me.

"Neither is your driving." I'm not playing around.

"Don't be ungrateful."

Shit. My stomach turns. "I'm not. But that plane isn't going to wait for me." Then I think of it. She is trying to make me miss my flight.

"You're not going to miss your plane." She taps the clock on the dash. "There's plenty of time."

I am tired of arguing with her. She knows there isn't plenty of time and we get stopped at the light just before we enter the departing flights area. We finally make it to the

drop off point. I pull my bag out of the trunk as fast as I can. "Bye. Thanks," I say.

"Bye, honey. Good luck." She bends to put her arms around me and I let her, my own arms full of my stuff. I look back as I race inside the terminal. She still stands by her car, her arms folded, watching me.

Of course, I wait in line to get my boarding pass. The agent hands it to me and says, "Your plane is boarding now." My heart pounds. Despite the air conditioning in Lambert, sweat trickles down my back. I run with my carry-on bag to the security checkpoint line. It's long. My watch, belt and jewelry all come off in advance to make certain I pass through security without a hitch. I send my bag and plastic bin through the x-ray machine and the guard motions me through the scanner. It beeps. Why? I've taken everything off. I hold my arms out, questioning.

"Anything in your pockets?" the guard says.

Oh my God. I pull out my cell phone. The guard frowns. "I need a female attendant over here," he says.

"Wait," I plead. "Please." He isn't even looking at me. "My plane is boarding right now." Nothing. "Please, I thought you got three passes," I say, knowing I shouldn't be arguing.

He looks at me and asks for my boarding pass. I hand it to him. "Go through again." This time the scanner doesn't beep. "Now, go." The guard hands me my boarding pass.

I thank him, grab my stuff and run barefoot, my luggage trailing behind me toward gate A-32. My feet keep hitting my suitcase and a couple of times it flips over on me. I dodge other travelers saying, "Excuse me," as I run. There's an attendant at gate A-32, and the door is still open as I arrive. I stop, out of breath, "I'm on this flight."

The woman looks up. "Your boarding pass, please."

I step closer to her so she can get it from me. She takes my boarding pass from the hand that is holding my shoes, too, and sends it through the machine. "Thank you," I say and walk barefoot down the empty gangway, meeting two stewardesses at the plane door. "You look like you hurried," one says.

I laugh.

"What seat are you in?" asks the other.

I hand her my ticket.

"Luckily that's an aisle seat. Let's get your bag put away." She motions for me to go ahead down the aisle and takes my suitcase. As I march down the aisle carrying my sandals, everyone stares. It is with utter joy that I see Sini's smiling

face near the back of the plane and I sink down in the seat next to her.

"I know it's hot out, but barefoot?" Sini says.

I put my head on her shoulder.

Chapter Three

We have to wait in line to look at our first apartment in San Francisco the next day. I hold my breath until I am able to swallow again. Maybe this is just a fluke, an exceptional apartment. Although the description of a two-bedroom, one bath with eat-in kitchen doesn't sound overly exciting to me unless these other prospects know something I don't. We get inside and it's clear none of us are knowledgeable. The water heater sticks out openly in the kitchen while the sink is in a closet in the back. Sini giggles while we both look on in surprise at the five pairs filling out applications for the place. We walk out.

The next three showings result in the same outcome. They are all crowded with people and we decide, either too small, too dirty or out of our price range. We retreat to the hotel to investigate our options.

Craigslist.org brings up several new two-bedroom listings. One listing especially catches my attention. It's for a loft, which I've always wished I could live in. I click on it.

"Sini, look at this one."

"What's it doing in the two-bedrooms?"

Loft apartment in SOMA neighborhood. Hardwood floors. Nice kitchen with dishwasher. Two full baths. Three bedrooms on mezzanine level.

"Where's SOMA?" I ask.

"Three bedrooms?"

"Let's go look at it." I want to see it. For fun.

"You're crazy," Sini says.

"Great, so I'll call," I say, picking up my phone. The building manager answers and I am able to set up an appointment for the next evening. I feel a little guilty for wasting his time, but I'm really looking forward to seeing the place.

The next day, we find an apartment we both like. It's in a three story Victorian near Golden Gate Park with the famous Haight Street only a couple blocks away. We put an application down and cross our fingers that being second in line will land us the apartment. We keep our other showings just in case.

By the time we arrive at the loft, it is six o'clock and we've put in another application, though we like that one less. The loft owner, Harold, is younger than his voice sounds.

"Here it is," he says, making a grand entrance, spinning back around to look at us as we follow him just inside the door. I really like Harold. His easygoing attitude is contagious. "Make yourselves at home," he says and then chuckles. He says

he'll wait here for us while we look around. He gets out some paperwork and spreads it on the kitchen counter.

Sini and I gape at the beautiful loft. It's just like I pictured it. Everything's open--the kitchen, living area, dining area. I want to say we'll take it, but we haven't even seen the mezzanine yet.

Upstairs are three bedrooms and a bathroom. Sini whispers to me, "I know we can't get it, but..."

"Who says we can't get it?" I whisper back. I tell her we can get a roommate and it will be perfect.

"You think a roommate?"

"This place is amazing," I say.

Sini and I are both smiling as we get back downstairs. Harold turns, clasping his hands together. He pulls stapled papers out of a folder and hands us each a set. The top sheet is information about the loft, including rent, statistics and building facilities. Behind that is an application. He tells us we'll be the first ones. "Your roommate can give it to me tomorrow," Harold says, indicating a third packet.

Sini and I exchange glances. "We don't have a roommate," I say.

"Hmmm." Harold lays the packet down. He asks us where we are from. He tells us people find roommates in San Francisco

all the time. "Unless you can manage the rent between the two of you?"

"No," I hurry to say.

"Then find a roommate," Harold says.

We fill out the applications and leave them with Harold along with copies of our credit reports, which we have previously learned is the standard procedure in this city. Now, Sini and I are on a mission to find a roommate. Harold's last words are, "Get busy. I can't hold it for you." He tells us to try Craigslist.

We scroll through a mass of roommate listings. Most of them we eliminate immediately. First of all, our preference is to live with a girl. That really narrows our choices. One girl seeks to commune with other vegans who never drive or take public transportation--only ride bikes. One woman, a painter, asks for an extra space in the apartment to do her work. The loft isn't that big.

Then, right after the Satan worshipper who likes to hold meetings at the apartment, we find the Japanese-American woman in her late twenties. Her listing says she's a graphic designer. We call her and meet for coffee.

Miaka suggests a coffee shop close to our hotel. Already we like her. She is showing signs of conscientiousness. Sini

wears her blue pageboy hat so Miaka can recognize us and as soon as we enter a young woman walks up to us. She has long black hair with wisps falling around her delicate face. She motions toward a table where she's already gotten three coffees.

"I'm so glad you called," Miaka says, sitting down as we all gather around the small table.

"I'm a designer, too," I blurt and immediately wish I hadn't because she asks me where I work. "I'm interviewing."

"That's a hard gig," Miaka says. "You guys moving from out of town?"

"St. Louis," Sini says. "The place we found is a great loft."

"Do you have any pets?" Miaka asks.

"I guess we should have thought to ask on the phone," I say. Harold doesn't allow pets. "Do you?"

"No. I'm allergic."

I let out the breath I've been holding.

"Iris and I aren't into loud music or loud anything at all hours of the night," Sini says.

"I'm the same way," Miaka answers.

"Where do you work?" I ask, still curious about her design background.

"Este Design. It's small. Downtown."

"Well, this place would be close," Sini says.

"Where is it?"

"South of Market Area," I say, spelling out the acronym.

"Nice. A loft in SOMA," she says. "How trendy."

"Do you have a boyfriend, Miaka?" Sini asks.

"Please, all my friends call me Mia."

"That's pretty," I comment.

"My mother hates it."

"And your dad?" Sini asks.

She explains how her mother is Japanese and likes everything the old-fashioned way. "My dad is American. He calls me Mia just to annoy her." Mia looks down often. Maybe she's nervous.

"Do they live here?" I ask.

"Yes. And my older brother."

"Did you always live here?" I continue. I feel a little like I am grilling her, but am not sure how else to get to know her better. She grew up in New York until her dad was transferred to San Francisco for work. She had been in junior high, her brother in high school.

"So, you stayed," Sini says.

Mia hasn't answered our question about a boyfriend yet and I begin to worry that we've made a huge assumption that she is

straight. That's a San Francisco faux pas. So, I say, "Do you have a significant other?"

The corners of her mouth turn up. "No, I don't have a boyfriend."

I laugh. "I was afraid of insulting you."

"You didn't."

"I could have. Whom did you live with before?"

"A boyfriend. Ex."

Sini asks how long they were together. Mia says it was a long-term relationship that ended badly. She'd been cheated on, like a cliché, she says. So she is looking for a new place as quickly as possible.

"You mean you're still living there?" I ask.

"I don't have a choice yet."

Sini and I ask her a million questions about her current situation and how to get her out of it sooner. She doesn't tell her family about her boyfriend cheating because her brother will probably beat him up.

We like Mia and, with the raised eyebrow questioning of one another across the table, mutually decide to ask her to be our roommate.

"I'd love to. Can I see the place?" she asks.

Wasting no time, we call Harold. Sini and I both have interviews the next afternoon, but think we can see the loft earlier in the morning. Harold is already booked. We try a few other times before Harold says, "What about now?"

I whisper, "Now," to the table. The girls nod vigorously. "Absolutely," I say. "We'll be there as soon as we can."

"I knew you'd find someone," Harold greets us. We introduce Miaka and he sends her to look around the loft. "I must say I was hoping you girls would call," he says.

"Did we pass the test?" Sini asks, referring to our application.

"Flying colors."

After a few minutes, Mia comes down the stairs. She pulls some papers out of her bag. "Here's my credit report."

"Do you carry that with you everywhere?" Harold asks.

"In case they wanted to see it." She motions to Sini and me.

"What do you think of the loft?" I ask.

"When can we move in?" Mia responds.

"I need an application from you." Harold hands her a packet and pen. He says he'll process everything and let us know if we get the loft. If so, we can move in anytime after a couple of weeks. The timing is perfect for Sini and me.

"I'm sorry, Mia," I say.

"What's going on?" Harold demands.

Mia's cheeks flame red, but she tells him her situation with her ex-boyfriend and all the girls he brings over.

"You must get out!" Harold exclaims. He looks at Mia's credit report again. "This looks really good," he says. "You girls can have the loft. Feel free to move in anytime after the end of the week."

I suck in my breath in disbelief. Sini's hand finds mine and we squeeze.

Mia says, "Thank you!"

The three of us sign a lease and pay our deposit and first month's rent. Then, for the next two and a half days, before we fly back, Sini and I concentrate on interviews so we can afford to pay our rent.

Chapter Four

The Mini Cooper salesman offers his hand and a seat in the car on the showroom floor. We take them. I sink into the leather bucket passenger seat. Sini gets in on the driver's side. She immediately begins playing with all the buttons and knobs on the console and door.

We have been in San Francisco now for almost three weeks. Sini has landed a job from one of her interviews on our first visit. I, on the other hand, am still looking for a job. At one firm, I had a second interview after we got back out here, but they decided to go with another candidate. The other interviews I went through amounted to nothing. No job. No calls back. I call them, but they say my skills don't match what they need right now.

Finally, the Mini salesman asks, "Would you like a test drive?"

Before he can even get the words out, Sini's up from her seat saying yes. He takes copies of both our drivers' licenses and asks if we prefer a manual or automatic.

"In San Francisco?" Sini asks.

"Automatic," he says, handing her some keys. "It's the blue one right there."

"Blue!" I exclaim. "Your favorite."

The salesman begins rattling off some features of the Mini of which I only catch auto-dimming rearview mirror, rain-sensing wipers, heated seats and sunroof. The rest is too technical for my ears. I let Sini handle it. Besides, it's her car, not mine. I check out the sticker price. A \$30,000 car. If and when I find a job, this car may be a little far-reaching for my pocketbook. But the second Sini pulls over, I get in the driver's seat, and we begin zipping through San Francisco's zany traffic, I know I have to find a way.

"What do you think?" I ask as Sini plays with the radio. Classical music blares.

"It's mine. It's totally mine." She switches her attention to the knobs on the console. "It gets cool really fast."

I giggle.

"And hot."

The car is filling up with warm air very quickly. I roll down the window. "You're smoking me out."

"Sorry." Sini turns off the heat and focuses on the heated seats.

While Sini can't stop talking about her new car, I can't stop thinking about my job search. I've been researching firms

for weeks. Making calls. Trying to get in to show my portfolio. Sending resumes. Answering the ads posted on various websites. Trying to get on with placement agencies. What's it going to take to land a job here? Is it just time?

"What's wrong?" Sini asks, changing gears from a soliloquy about the sunroof.

"Job stuff," I answer. I know my head hangs lower than usual.

"You'll find one, Iris."

She means well, but her words ring sour as I run through all the places I have resumes out. No calls have come in. No interviews fill my calendar.

As we're walking back into the dealership, Sini stops. "Look at that one." She points to a red Mini parked in the corner that hadn't been there before.

"So?"

Back in front of the salesman, we hand him the keys. "How was it?" he asks.

"I'll take the red one," Sini says.

"That one just came in. Let me get the details on it." He disappears.

Honestly, I wish I could tell the salesman that the red Mini is mine. I want my job search to be over and everything in

my life to be finalized and complete. The only thing that seems complete is going to be this Mini sale for my best friend. But, to look at the bright side, we've gotten our loft, found a great roommate in Mia and we've moved to an exciting new city. The only way it could get better is by me getting a job.

After a long absence, the salesman returns. "Is that the one?" he asks.

"Does it have all the things you explained before?"

"And then some."

"I'll take it."

Sini drives us home in her new chili-red Mini.

We drive to North Beach with Mia to have an Italian feast. The three of us stroll down the street reading menus and looking in windows. Columbus Avenue bustles with people passing us. Diners sit at tables under heaters along the sidewalk, enjoying their food. We stop in City Lights Bookstore to browse the three levels of books. We get back outside the store and each of us surveys the surroundings.

"I think we're out of the restaurants," I say. The street life diminishes to just a few people.

"There's a cute place down there." Mia points down the hill.

"Let's go," Sini says.

The restaurant, Macaroni Sciue Sciue, is tucked into the streetscape almost hiding itself in its smallness. They sit us at a table by the window. We order a bottle of Merlot that's brought out with impressive speed. "Here's to your new job," I say. I raise my glass in a toast.

"And your new car," Mia adds.

"Cheers," Sini says. "To your search, Iris. May it be fruitful."

Clink.

Sini pours more wine in my glass. It's already full enough. "That's not what I need," I say.

"That's exactly what you need, sugar. Drink up." She pushes my glass toward me.

Obediently, I sip my wine. It tastes smooth, so I take another drink. It makes Mia smile.

"Good girl," Sini says.

"Are you always this bossy?" Mia asks.

"Ha! Only if she needs it."

"Are you sisters?"

"Sometimes I think so," I say.

"We might as well be," Sini answers.

"We've known each other a long time." I sip my wine trying to calculate the number of years. The waiter comes to take our

food order while Sini and I are telling Mia how we first became friends. What's funny is we had to travel all the way to Spain to even meet. Through Washington University's Summer Language Institute our first summer, we flew to Madrid and met at orientation. A week into the program, we'd figured out the lunches in the cafeteria were indigestible. We found ourselves sitting next to one another at the deplorable meal the day they served fried chicken patties, fried cheese balls and another unidentifiable fried side dish.

"How old do they think we are?" Sini said.

I stabbed at the dried out chicken on my plate. "It's disgusting."

"We should protest," she said.

"Let's go."

We were both runners and planned out mornings to go running together. By the end of five weeks, the two of us had run all through the historic streets of Madrid, soaking up the scenery on those early mornings. That's when we got the idea of rooming together after we got back in the fall. We've been best friends ever since.

Our meals arrive, presented to each of us with a dramatic intensity as one waiter holds the plates and our waiter serves the dishes. They smell succulent. Sini orders another bottle.

I know she's trying to get me drunk. My resistance fades as soon as the second bottle hits the table. Fuck it.

Just as I'm about to tell Mia about my old boyfriend Patrick, I hear my cell phone ringing. Fumbling around with my purse, I struggle to locate my phone in the dark depths. There. I don't recognize the number, but answer anyway. Too late. Later, vibrations indicate I have a voicemail.

"Probably a wrong number." Sini waves it off.

I agree with her until I listen, stunned, to the message. The call comes from a placement agency to set up a time to meet with me. An agency. For placement. Finally. The woman has apologized for calling so late; she is playing catch-up this weekend. I'm thankful for her catching up and for my not answering the call in my current fluttering state. I will call her, all fresh tomorrow. I sigh.

"Who was it?" Mia asks.

"Wrong number," I say. I don't intend to spoil Sini's big night out by making it about my news. In fact, I might not tell Sini until after the call tomorrow. A surprise. By the time she gets home from work, I'll have an interview date. In the meantime, I relish my new possibilities. I sip more wine.

After dinner, we leave Sini's new car in the parking garage and take a cab to Divisadero to a bar called The Page. I like

the place a lot. The bar is long in the narrow front space. Opposite the bar is a single row of round tables surrounded by plush burgundy leather chairs. I love them. I'm even trying to compete with some guy for the last table so the three of us can sit down in them.

"Awe. Were you here first?" I ask. He's a tall, muscular guy with sandy brown hair that he wears tucked behind his ears. I whisper to Sini later that I think he's cute. I should ask for his number.

"I think I was here first," he says.

"But it's just you. I have friends here."

"Actually," he leans in and says quietly, "I have a whole army at the bar."

I laugh. In spite of myself, I ask, "Ladies first?" My flippant question must annoy him because all he does is nod to our group in response. Then, he turns around and walks over to a bunch of guys at the bar.

The three of us sit down at the table, ordering even more wine. Flutters begin to give way to floating as I tip each drink to my lips. Sini keeps disappearing. "Where are you going?" I ask her as she gets up from the table once again.

"To the bathroom, sugar. Be right back." She leaves.

"She's been going to the bathroom a lot," I say.

Mia agrees. "She's been getting our drinks, too."

Sini returns in a few minutes asking to buy another round. She always yearns for more when she drinks. She can hold her alcohol better than me. "You have to stop, Sini," I slur.

"One more." She holds up her finger. I can't focus on it.

"No."

"How do you always know?" she asks.

"Know what?" Mia looks confused.

"That she's over her limit. I get all stupid, drinking even more. She just shuts off." Sini draws her hand across her throat.

"Don't you mean this?" Mia pulls her finger and thumb along her lips, closing them tight.

Sini points at her. "That's it!" They both laugh. I do too, only quieter.

I go home drunk and wake up hung over. I can barely move. I press my aching head further into the softness of my pillow. No sound comes from the other side of my door. It means Sini isn't up yet to run either. Then, I remember the phone call. Ms. Johnson. I need to run before I make that return call. It will relieve stress. Calm my nerves. Really, it might help sweat out some of my hangover. With a deep moan, I pull myself off my pillow.

In the bathroom, I gulp two Advil with water cupped in my hands. The water feels good on my throat so I keep drinking. By the time I get dressed and tie on my running shoes, the headache pushes back some. I'm hopeful the run will do me good.

Downstairs in the living area, I stretch and wait for Sini. I smooth out my loose-fitting pants as I reach for my feet. Sini comes down, but instead of wearing her slick running pants, she has on dress slacks and a blouse. She looks hung over.

"You running in heels?" I ask.

"Can we skip today?"

"Not feeling well?"

"That and I thought I'd go in early," she says.

"You? Early?"

"I know. But, I'm new." She grabs her purse and walks toward the door. Then, she turns back. "You should skip today, too."

"Yeah. I probably will," I answer. "I'm a little hung over, too."

Sini blows me a kiss. "Feel better," she says as she walks out.

As soon as she leaves, I do sit-ups. More stretching. Finally, I decide on a short run just to work out my nerves. Thirty minutes tops. I relax a little just knowing I'm going.

I put my watch on, put in my earphones, clip on my iPod shuffle and leave the loft.

The pavement feels good beneath my feet. I direct my run away from Market Street into the heart of SOMA so I can be alone with my thoughts. My day has the potential to be so huge and this I can't screw up. Truly, this is the call. The call. I thrill over speaking with the agency and being placed in a firm in the city.

I get stopped at a light, so I stretch a little. It's working; the run is loosening my muscles. After a while, I begin to get thirsty. Probably the hangover. Figuring I better head back, I arc around and cross the street. There is no real traffic this early. I run down the opposite side of the street, my usual path home. As I pass a corner storefront and an alley, someone jerks me back by my hair.

An arm cinches my waist, pinning my arms to my sides. My earphones rip out of my ears. I watch my feet kick, just above the gravelly concrete and I can't get them to touch the ground. His grip crushes my stomach and ribs. I see black pant legs and black casual shoes. I kick his shins hard and hot breath rolls along my neck.

"Please don't," he says politely as if he's not attacking me at all. I stop kicking and every muscle in my body tenses as I feel something sharp press firmly into the flesh of my neck.

I scream as loud as I ever thought I could. He presses the knife harder into my skin. "Please stop or I'll kill you," he says. His voice penetrates low and thick. I stop screaming. My legs fall limp, my feet still not touching the ground. I'm hyperventilating. Tears roll down my face.

Suddenly, he lets go. My feet hit the ground. I lean forward, ready to run, but he grabs my arm with a vice grip and spins me around to face him. He's huge. Probably six feet tall. Broad muscular shoulders and chest. His eyes are dark, wild. Brown hair falls to his shoulders. He is clean-shaven. His skin is pale. He holds a switchblade in front of my face.

"Look," I say between sucking breaths, "I don't have any money on me."

"I'm not looking for money," he says softly. With his strong grip, he maneuvers me away from the road, back into the alley. There is a dumpster there and he keeps pushing me until we're on the other side. He lets go of my arm and shoves me backwards beside the dumpster. I try desperately to break the fall with my hands. It isn't enough. My head smacks the concrete. Everything goes fuzzy.

I can hear the ripping of my t-shirt. I can feel him grabbing me. He struggles with me. I want to pass out, but can't. He undoes his jeans and I punch at him. His hand holding the knife punches me back. I feel cold there, then heat. When the pain really starts to come, my brain finally allows me to disappear.

Suddenly, he collapses on top of me. I can barely breathe and feel blood, smell urine and garbage all around me.

Then, he's up. He picks up a thick wad of my hair that has come loose from the ponytail and slams my head into the concrete. Him bending over me holding the bloody knife is the last thing I remember before darkness swallows me.

Chapter Five

I wake to white. An IV drips beside me. My body is eating itself alive with the biting, aching, pounding in my side, head and between my legs. I feel around for a call button and my fingers hurt where I've scraped them raw. Finally, I find the button and press. After what seems like ages, a nurse comes. "You're awake." She must see the twisted look on my face because she says, "I'll be right back, honey," and hurries out. She returns with morphine for the IV that trickles down to my arm and soon I begin to float.

The staff transfers me to an examination room where a female doctor comes in. She introduces herself as Dr. Clark. "I'm going to do the rape exam."

I don't say anything. My mind is already veering away.

"I'll walk you through everything I'm doing, all right?" She puts on some rubber gloves, pulls out two arms from the bottom of the bed and folds up some stirrups, locking them in place. She asks me to scoot down so I'm at the end of the bed. I try, but my side is so uncomfortable, tears spill down my face. The doctor and nurse both have to help me get in position with my legs spread open.

For what happens next, I lift myself outside of my body. It's too much. He has been there. Now they are there. I want to be left alone, to close my legs. To be dry of blood. To be home. Dr. Clark pinches and dabs, scrapes and swabs. I almost scream at her, however nice she might be, to get her instruments away from me. Enough unwanted things have invaded me now. Too many.

I watch the exam from beside the bed. A shell of me lies in the bed. I look on as the shell keeps trying to close the legs until finally the nurse, apologizing, pulls them open at the knees. "I'm sorry. But try to keep them there."

Everything feels numb. Numb as if that body is truly dead. I stare at numb fingertips and can't remember why they're raw. My mind trips over the memories that made the tips of my fingers bleed, but the morphine somehow blocks a full on attack. I go back to the shell, become me again and am present for Dr. Clark to announce she's finished. Her instrument tray is slightly smeared with red.

My side begins to feel as though the knife is still in it. I ask the doctor for more morphine.

"I'll check on it." She hesitates. "You're very brave," she says and leaves.

The nurse still stands in the room, so I ask what I have waited to since I woke up, "Can I take a shower?"

"Not yet, I'm afraid. Not with the stint and all that."

I start to cry. Uncontrollably. "I have to get him off me. He's on me. I have to get him off. Off." I keep talking and crying, not making any sense.

At last the nurse comes over to me and leans down. "Maybe we can do a type of sponge bath. I'll find out."

"Can you find more morphine, too? It's awful," I say. My hands hover over the wound, shaking.

"I'll see what I can do."

I wipe my eyes. How am I going to get him off of me? She doesn't even say how long I won't be able to shower. What if it's days?

"Hello." A knock at the door. A plain-clothes policewoman comes in. She wears her badge on her belt loop. "I'm Inspector Taylor Meyers."

Grabbing another tissue, I wipe my face again. "I'm Iris," I say.

"Your friend, Sini, is very worried about you. She tried to file a missing person's report."

"Oh," is all I can say.

"I'm going to ask you some questions now." Inspector Meyers has a recorder with her and asks my permission to tape our session.

"Will it help you catch him?" I ask.

"Yes, it could."

"Tape it."

Inspector Meyers pulls up a hospital chair beside the bed. The height forces our eyes to meet. I look away, fearful of what she will say, remembering him saying please over and over. She addresses me in a patient manner, her tone quiet and soothing. She asks me about his eyes, hair, height, weight, build. I answer her as clearly as I can through the fog of pain.

"Do you think you could work with a sketch artist on his face?" she asks.

"I'll never forget his face."

"I'd like you to tell me what happened, Iris. You can take your time."

I tell Inspector Meyers everything in a monotone. I relay all the facts from the time I left the loft to losing consciousness in the alley. She returns in kind by telling me how I'd been saved. A businessman on his way to work saw my

feet sticking out from behind the dumpster in the alley. He ran back to find me and called 911.

"You'd lost a lot of blood. He kept you calm until the ambulance arrived," she said.

"He saved my life."

"Yes, he did."

"What's his name?"

"Salvador Perez."

I'm not sure what to say now. "That sounds Spanish," I say, stupidly.

"He looks like he might be from Mexico or something," she says. "Well, if you think there's nothing else you can tell me, I'll show in your friend."

"Thank you." The words are out there. I wonder if I will ever smile again.

Sini rushes into the room and I burst into tears. She does, too. She runs over to the bed, saying my name like a mantra. She tries to put her head next to mine, but it reminds me of his head. I push her away. "I'm sorry. He—" I break off.

"It's OK." She sits on the bed with me, gently holding my hand. We say nothing, simply crying together. The sobbing

begins to slow its pace and Sini ventures, "We should call your mom."

I shake my head. I want my mother, yet it frightens me.

"We can do that later," Sini says. "You should rest." She turns my hand over to look at my fingers. The ends are bandaged.

The nurse comes to bathe me. I ask her if Sini can do it. The thought of a stranger seeing me naked terrifies me. Sini gives me the sponge bath, scrubbing as hard as she can, under my instruction. She won't press any harder, so I take over and smash the sponge into my skin until it feels raw. Later, when I ask, Sini tells me I have bruises and cuts all over my back and hips. I know she wants to know what happened, but I can't say it out loud twice in one day. My mind will break in a thousand pieces, all tiny bits of the seconds he was raping and stabbing me and I will cease to exist.

I need to scrub harder. I need to shower. That's all. I beg Sini. She comes back saying I have to wait four days. The wound. It's because of him I can't wash him away. Now he will be on me for four more days, smelling of sweat and piss. "I don't think I can make it that long, Sini."

"We'll do the sponge baths every day until then," she offers.

A nurse comes in with morphine and after a while, the magic sweeps through and releases the grip of pain. I drift up, my eyelids heavy, in a warm trance.

Vaguely, I can hear Sini talking, but the words muffle in my ears. My mother stands beside the bed, though I know she can't be here. I haven't told her about the rape and stabbing yet. A phone rings. My mother's voice on the other end of the line.

"I have some news, Mom," I say.

"You found a job!" she says, her voice trilled.

"I was raped and stabbed."

Silence. Heavy breathing on the other end. Then she says, "Oh, dear God, Iris. What were you doing?"

"Running."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"I've tried to tell you a thousand times how dangerous that is," my mother says.

"I know."

"You need to come home." Her voice is firm. Matter of fact.

"I live here now, Mom," I say.

"Come home, Iris. I'll take care of you."

"You will?"

"Will I what?" Sini leans in closer to me. She still sits in the hospital room, in the chair beside the bed. I look at my hands. I'm not holding a phone.

"Nothing," I answer. "Nothing."

"Should you call your Mom now?" Sini asks.

I answer truthfully. "I don't think I'm up for it right now."

"Would you rather I call?"

"No, she'd hate that. I'll call later. I can't face her at the moment."

"I understand." Sini knows my mother well.

I shut my eyes and sink back into a fog.

The day I see the male therapist turns out to be the day I shower for the first time after the rape. It still doesn't wash him off me no matter how hard I scrub. I've already been released from the hospital a second time and still haven't gathered enough courage to call my mother. Childish fears of her overreacting stop me every time I punch in her speed-dial number.

Finally, Sini confronts me.

"Why haven't you called, Iris?" We're both still sitting on the couch after returning from the hospital.

"I'm not up for it!" I say too forcefully.

"She's your mother."

I let that one go without comment.

"What's the real reason?" Sini knows I'm hiding behind my excuse. I'm angry with her for knowing.

"She'll be angry!" I yell.

Sini leans back, surprised at my outburst. She recovers and scoots closer to me on the couch. "I don't think she'll be angry. And if she is, she's still your mother. She deserves to know. Let me see your phone." She holds out her hand.

I blink at her, unmoving.

"Your phone."

"You don't have to do this," I say. Despite what Sini thinks, I know my mother will be upset with me for getting raped. She'll find some way to launch an attack on me for going out running in the first place. I can feel it. I wish Dad were alive for me to call instead.

"It has to happen sometime," Sini says. "She's going to be angrier the longer you wait."

Sini's right. She will be less understanding the longer I wait. I pick up my purse, sitting beside the couch, and get out my phone. "Number three."

Sini dials.

"Wait," I say, holding out my hand to stop her from finishing the call. "You'll wake her."

"You can't keep waiting." Sini dials again. "Constance? It's Sini. I'm sorry to wake you." A pause. "I know I'm calling on her phone. She's right here with me. We need to tell you something." Another pause. "Constance, Iris was attacked on Monday. She's been raped and stabbed." Silence. Sini holds up her finger to me. "She's all right. She's safe now." Pause. "Of course." Sini puts her hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. "She's ready to talk to you, Iris. She's not angry. I'll be sitting right here." She passes me the phone.

"Mom?" My voice shakes.

"Iris, honey, are you all right?" My mother's voice drips thick with worry.

"Yes." Tears overtake me despite my best efforts to hold them back.

"You're not all right. Where were you stabbed?"

"In the side."

"Oh my God. Honey, I'm going to be there as soon as I can."

"You're coming here?" I ask.

"Of course I am. The first flight."

"You don't have to, Mom." But as I say it, I want her to come.

"The first flight," my mother repeats. "How bad did he hurt you?"

"Mom—" I can't say anything else. Sini grabs my hand.

"I know, honey. I'm coming." She says she'll go get her plane ticket and call me right back. "Will you be all right?"

"Yes."

She calls back in fifteen minutes. She's booked a flight for the next day at six in the morning. My mother will be here tomorrow. "Get some rest," she says to me. "I'll be there to take care of you. See you tomorrow. Goodnight, honey."

"Goodnight." I squeeze my legs up as close to me as I can get them without hurting my wound further. The pulsing agony intensifies and I know it's time for the Percocets. My legs uncurl slowly.

I pad into the kitchen in my socks for a drink of water. On my return, as I pass by the door, I glance at it to make sure it's bolted and chained. Then, my eyes sweep down and catch

sight of my extra pair of running shoes. I feel the sudden release of his grip around my waist and my feet hit the ground. I lean forward, prepared to run, but my shoes are robbed of traction on the gravelly concrete. I nearly fall forward, but he catches my arm and jerks me around to face him. The glass of water I hold slips from my grasp and crashes on the hardwood. Water and glass spew in all directions.

"Iris!" Sini cries, jumping up from the couch.

I fume at the running shoes on the floor. Walking over, unheeding of the broken glass, I snatch up the shoes and stuff them in the trashcan, slapping the lid closed.

"Watch out! The glass," Sini shouts. I limp to a dining chair. My socks peel off and I pick out the bits of glass that have gotten through the fabric. Sini still has shoes on, so she gathers towels from the kitchen to soak up the water. Once she retrieves the broom, she asks, "What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Something happened. You threw away your shoes." She watches me as she sweeps.

"I can do that," I say, offering my hand for the broom.

"You can talk to me, you know."

"Let me help. Seriously." I get up.

"Don't move!" Sini keeps sweeping, but stops questioning me. I realize I'm holding my side and jerk my hand away. He isn't going to have the satisfaction anymore. Sini and I get back to the couch. My whole body quivers.

I take two Percocets out of my purse.

Sini reaches for the bottle. "This says to take one every four to six hours." She runs her index finger along the directions.

"The doctor said I could take as many as I needed," I lie. She raises an eyebrow. "As many?"

"You know what I mean." I throw the two pills in the back of my throat, take a swig of water and swallow.

"I guess." She hands back the bottle. "Are you glad your Mom is coming?"

"Yes, I actually am." My expectations of my mother's visit are uncertain. She has not been good at the whole mother thing since my dad died. But I chalk it up to her own grief over his passing. Maybe I've been giving her too many excuses over the years. I should have demanded more from her. In my own way, I do. By being independent. Not giving in to her demands. She called for me to go to a state school like she did, even though I got scholarships to Wash U. She urged me to study something in the sciences instead of in a creative field like I chose.

For the money, she said. She always encouraged me to date a nice boy, not the rogue guys I continually brought over to meet her. On that point, I couldn't fault her. Parents would probably care for the same for their daughter, but the bad boys seemed so much more dangerous. Now, I wish for the safety of my mother's demanding personality.

In my room, I can't think about my mother's visit anymore because my mind floats away. I get in bed and put my head on my pillow. The pillow feels stories high. I'm hovering and wait for sleep to come.

Chapter Six

A few hours later, and I am awake. Since when has my mouth become the Sahara Desert? My clock reads two a.m. "Well, at least I'm consistent," I say out loud to no one. This is the fourth night in a row that sleep has abandoned me at this hour. By now I know the futility of trying to capture it again, so I head downstairs to the kitchen for some water. My mother will be here in the morning.

My stomach swells and the hole--that's how I refer to it now--throbs after two full glasses of cold water, but my mouth still tastes like sawdust. I carry a third glass into the living area along with my messenger bag. What I'd really rather do is go back up to my bedroom and watch television--basically do nothing. I guess I can even watch TV down here, but that will probably wake up Sini and Mia. Both work tomorrow. Reading comes to mind, but only briefly. Books haven't been able to hold my attention lately, which is unusual. I'm always reading the latest memoir. Those are my favorite. I just can't get past a couple of paragraphs now.

My fallback, which I perform with slow, mechanical movements, is to get out my Mac and look for a job. As terrifying as finding a job sounds to me right now, I can't

ignore the fact that I'm running out of savings. Ms. Johnson, from the placement agency, had been forgotten about for three days after the attack. I remembered, but my embarrassment kept me from calling. Despite my obvious excuse, I resist telling her about the rape and stabbing, so she will view me simply as unprofessional. Not worth her time. I keep the call and my not returning it to myself. It makes me nauseous to think about. The goal--to push it out of my mind.

Craigslist's job section has a subcategory for design. Slowly, I navigate my way there. This is the first job hunting I've done since the attack and a dread engulfs me until I'm nearly immobile. The text on the page blurs before my eyes. I randomly click on one of the listings. Nothing. Again and again nothing, until the name Este Design stands out in bold. If I remember correctly, that's Mia's firm. They're looking for an Art Director. The qualifications match my skill set perfectly. Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design with seven to ten years of creative experience. OK. I have seven. Thorough understanding of design, web design and typography. They have to say that by default. Expert use of creative software. Check. Demonstrated ability to work collaboratively with designers, writers, editors, brand managers and account executives. A long way of saying must play well with others. I

wonder if Mia will hand deliver a resume to her boss for me. She says they're a pretty small, tight office. That can be good for me. Getting jobs is all about who you know anyway, even more than how much experience you have. Sad, but true. So, if Mia can be my in at Este, I might have a chance.

I scan the application requirements and pull up a blank Word document so I can begin writing a cover letter. What shall I say? I go back to the job listing and reread it. Let's not reinvent the wheel. Searching my documents for my most recent cover letter, I figure I can make modifications rather than start completely from scratch. The fatty introduction trims to a more concise opening. As I look at the words on the computer screen, all the letters begin to jumble together into a messy blob. Blinking, blinking, blinking to try and focus, my eyes finally readjust. I add to my skills paragraph to encompass all the things the firm talked about in the job listing. I'm unhappy with the way it all flows, but honestly, I don't quite care enough to do anything about it. Wow them with my skills, give them my degree and make my past experiences sound top notch, even though they aren't all amazing. A breath. Focus disappears. Enough?

My mind keeps wandering. I try to reread the letter several times. The sentences prove a hindrance to my focus.

Enough. I resign myself to being finally happy with the Este cover letter as is. It will do.

I rub my forehead, close my eyes and sigh. The air catches in my throat as I see the switchblade, long and thin, in his thick hand. A lion insignia snakes up the side of the handle. The image vanishes.

My hand flies to my mouth. For the thousandth time, AIDS invades my thinking. He has given me HIV; I just know it.

My hands quiver. I blame it on the pain medication and gulp more water. Shakiness has been with me a lot since the attack. At the hospital, right after I woke up, I remember having tremors. They lasted the entire time Inspector Meyers took my statement. Had I been more coherent at the time, I might have asked her why she didn't call herself a detective. Instead, I shivered and tried hard to remember him.

"Did you see his face, Iris?" she asked me.

"He had brown hair," I said.

"All right. Was it short?"

"No. To the shoulders. It brushed his shoulders."

"Straight or curly?"

"Straight."

"What color were his eyes?" she asked.

"Scary. He had dark, scary eyes," I said.

His eyes appear in front of me right now as I look at my computer screen. He stares at me.

I need a tissue to wipe my face, but don't move. My pajama sleeve suffices. The tears darken the violet fabric to a deep purple. Two Percocets later and I'm so tired that maybe now I can sleep. I move my Mac to the coffee table and lie down on the couch, wishing for a blanket.

My body aches as I sit up, scanning the room. Shadows loom everywhere as I strain to see in the dim light pouring in from the street lamp outside. Fear keeps me from checking the bathroom although I think I am alone downstairs. I move up to the mezzanine and toward Sini's door as fast as I can. Without knocking, I slip in and close the door behind me. My eyes adjust slowly. Sini keeps her room dark at night. Only a sliver of light peeks through the curtains.

Before I move from the doorway, I make sure the room is empty except for the two of us. I can see all the corners. He's not here. I twist the lock on Sini's door and go to her. "Sini?" I whisper.

She doesn't move. I'm surprised since she's a light sleeper. I shake her gently, "Sini?"

She sits up with a start. "What?"

"He's here," I say.

"What are you talking about?"

"He's here."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

"Where?" Sini grabs me and pulls me down onto the bed beside her.

"I don't know," I say.

Sini is quiet for a moment. Then she hugs me to her.

"Iris, were you sleeping?"

"Yes, but—"

"He's not here," she says firmly.

"But I can feel it. I feel it. Sini. I feel it." My voice rises and I stop, shaking again.

I cough uncontrollably. Alone. On the couch where I lay down earlier. I put my hand to my face. My cheeks are wet and I can't stop crying.

A door opens upstairs. "Iris?" Sini's voice. I can't answer her. I would try to take a drink of water, but am afraid to pick up the glass with my shaking hands. Sini rushes to my side in seconds. She puts her arm around my shoulders. "Are you all right?" She wipes my face with her thumbs, gently, like a mother. "Oh Iris," she says. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm fine," I manage to say in a croaking voice, and then cough again.

Mia's bedroom door opens slowly and she steps out onto the mezzanine. "Is everything all right?" she asks.

Sini turns to her. "Yes. But would you mind getting a wet washcloth?"

"Sure." Mia disappears into the bathroom upstairs.

Sini smooths long strands of brown hair away from my face. Somehow, the slow, methodical movement has a soothing effect on me that she notices. She pulls me into the crook of her shoulder so that I'm leaning on her and continues to play with my hair, sweeping it between her fingers and thumb as if to straighten it. Mia appears holding out a washcloth. Sini takes it and wipes my face. The cool cloth feels good on my skin.

"I'm fine," I say again.

"I know."

Mia sits down on the floor in front of us instead of going back to her room. My stomach sinks. We barely know Mia and here I am balling my eyes out in the middle of the night. What an impression I'm making on her. She might never hand deliver a resume for me now. She's seeing a complete basket case, not a well put together creative person. Lovely. How can I salvage some of my image? There is no way I can tell them about the

crazy dream or whatever it was. I can't go there. Not right now. Especially not with Mia. Maybe I can ask her something about her new boyfriend Sini told me about. That probably won't go over. So, what do I tell them? They're both looking at me, expecting me to speak. I decide on half-truths.

"I was job hunting because I couldn't sleep," I say. "I took a drink of water and it got caught in my throat. It must have gone down the wrong pipe. I'm fine now, really."

"I hate that. It can be really scary," Mia says.

Sini says nothing. She recognizes the lie.

"Go back to bed, you guys." Perhaps my dignity is salvaged.

"Any luck on the job hunt?" Sini asks.

"Actually, your firm is hiring an Art Director," I say, looking at Mia.

Mia's eyes stay steady on me as Sini says, "That's fabulous! Maybe you can take Iris' resume in?" Sini and I always think alike. It's one of the reasons we've been best friends for so long.

"I just finished my cover letter," I say. "If you would hand deliver it, Mia, I might stand a better chance."

"Awesome," Sini says, but Mia just looks at me for a moment longer. I have to look away, choosing my hands in my lap.

What seems like minutes later, Mia finally says, "Of course I'll take your resume to my boss. He's a hard nose, but I'll give you a super recommendation."

Hard nose is not the impression Mia has previously given of her boss. I wonder why she is changing her story now. Does she not like me? Does she not care to work with friends? Are we considered friends at this point? I'm not quite sure. Maybe not, given this particular reaction. She'll think something's wrong if I pull out now. Besides, I really need the job. Would I really like to work full time with Mia? Oh, who cares? I have to get a job. Mia or no Mia.

"It's late. You guys have to get up early," I say. "I'll have my resume and cover letter ready in the morning."

"And your portfolio," Mia says.

"Huh?"

"My boss will ask what kind of designer you are."

"Of course."

Mia goes back to her room and closes the door. I know what's coming. Sini is looking for the truth and I still can't give it to her.

"What really happened, Iris?"

"You heard it."

"You're lying."

"I'm just so tired. I'm not sleeping. The past four nights. It's too much." I try to give her a little drama and the truth.

She searches my face for fabrications. She finds none and hugs me. "I know you're worn out. Talking to the female therapist will help, Iris. Call tomorrow."

"Go back to bed," I say.

"You, too."

"I'm just going to print out the cover letter."

Sini makes me promise I will try to sleep after I finish with the letter. Only after three solid pledges does she go up to her room. After she leaves, I start to shiver. Once five minutes pass, I trudge up the stairs to Sini's room and tap on the door.

"Come in," she calls. She holds out her arms and I fly to her.

"Why don't you sleep here for the rest of tonight?" she asks.

Instead of answering, I turn around and curl up on the bed with my back to her. She puts her hand on my arm for a moment, then covers me up.

Chapter Seven

I arrive at the new therapist's office huddled inside my coat and scarf, refusing Lynn's offer to hang them up.

"Are you going to sit down, Iris?" Lynn asks. I've been ignoring her for the last few minutes as I stare out the twenty-third story window of her downtown office. It shocks me to be here the day after I promised Sini I'd call my caseworker. My mother has arrived. She sits outside the office in the waiting room.

Turning from the window, I say, "Of course. Sorry." I sit in an overstuffed armchair across from her without taking off my coat. The cushions threaten to swallow me up. I gasp.

"Are you all right?" Lynn asks.

"The chair. It's big."

Lynn nods, not smiling.

I lean back uneasily. So, that's how it's going to be. Got it.

"Do you remember what happened?"

Wow. She's delving right in. No niceties here. "Some," I say. Silence.

"What were you doing before the attack?"

"Running."

"With Sini, from St. Louis?"

Why is Lynn asking these questions if she already knows the answers? She has the police report. I thread my fingers through the fringe on the throw pillow beside me, not meeting Lynn's gaze, hoping she will say the session is over. Not with my luck.

"Why was Sini not running with you?" Lynn asks.

"Work. Sini's trying to make a good impression on her boss."

She seems satisfied with my answer. "How do you feel about her not running with you that day?"

This is a strange question. I mean, I feel fine about it. I say so. "Fine."

"You're not angry that she couldn't make it?"

This is an even stranger question. "Of course not."

"Why?"

"Her job is important. I have no reason to be angry." Is she trying to turn me against Sini? "Why would I be angry?" I ask.

Lynn starts to talk about the importance of expressing anger and being open about my feelings. She says something about resentment, but by now I've stopped listening. She finally quits talking and looks steadily at my face.

I clear my throat, stalling. I don't know if she's waiting for me to answer a question or not. Regardless, I know it's my turn to say something, so I came up with, "It was my choice to run alone. Without her."

"Absolutely."

"I don't see how you can blame her."

"I'm not blaming her. I was trying to find out if you feel any resentment. I can see that I am wrong."

"You are wrong."

"I'm not trying to upset you."

Gazing at the floor, I count the brown squares on the rug. The entire office is brown--rug, walls, furniture. Even the print hanging above the desk is in hues of beige. It registers with me for the first time that Lynn's hair glints light brown. She wears a cocoa sweater and skirt. I should feel soothed in this neutral environment, but it makes my mouth dry. I keep looking out the window in search of color, but all I see are dark buildings amidst fog.

Lynn tries to draw me back in. "Have you spoken with your mother and father?"

"My mother. She's worried." I fear I might have flinched at that question. Perfect. All I need is to give her a reason to go into more detail.

"Does that upset you?"

I'm right. Details. Think fast. "No. She worries about everything. Like it's her job."

"Is it?"

"No." This seems to be my word of the day.

"Are you worth being worried over, Iris?"

Here comes the psych-talk. "Sure. She just tends to overdo it."

"How so?"

"I'd rather not get into that right now." Really. My mother sits right outside the door in the waiting room, ready to ask me a thousand questions just like Lynn. Mom arrived from the airport just in time to accompany me to my appointment. There hasn't been time yet for much talking. That will come later. I wonder how long it will take her to ask me to move back to St. Louis.

I am tired. My head aches. A sharp pain splits through my side and I fight the impulse to put my hand over the hole.

"I'm proud of that boundary you set for yourself. That's often difficult for people. We can discuss your mother whenever it's comfortable." Lynn writes something on her notepad.

I wonder what it is. *Sets boundaries. Mother issues.*
Doesn't like to talk. Difficult. I decide to ask. "What are you writing?"

"Just a few notes."

I shift uncomfortably in the massive chair. Lynn writes for a moment longer before I say, "Is it a secret?"

Her eyebrows rise. "Well...no. Not to you, I suppose. They are, of course, classified to anyone else." She puts the notepad and pen on the desk beside her and folds her hands in her lap. "That means you can tell me anything, Iris."

Nice twist there, Lynn. She's good. As I try to decide whether or not she's being manipulative she says, "Inspector Meyers indicated you saw the man's face." She pauses. "What?"

"Me," I say. "Me. Me. Me." My voice inches toward hysterical.

"What about you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't?"

"It's nothing," I say.

Lynn looks at me, pausing again, then tries a different approach. "Iris, how are you sleeping?" Her forehead wrinkles as her eyes open wider.

An easy one. "Not much."

"And if you are able to sleep?"

"I just said I don't sleep much at all."

"But you sleep some? Or not at all?" Lynn asks.

"I don't know."

"Why don't you know?"

"Because it's not really sleep."

"You mean you dream?"

"Or have nightmares." About him. I can't believe I'm saying this to her. This entire session feels like a train wreck. "May I go?"

"Do you want to go?"

Is she kidding? I'm going to crawl out of my skin. Percocet calls to me from its bottle in my bag. My resistance to putting my hand over the hole ends. I apply a little pressure and wince. Then, I say to Lynn, "Yes, I do."

"We'll end a little early today. You've been through a great deal." Lynn watches me hold the hole. "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Remember, Iris, I'm here to help," she says, standing up. For a moment, I think she's going to give me a hug and I stay seated. Then, she holds out her hand.

"It's getting dark," I say stupidly, knowing it's only three in the afternoon. I stand and shake her hand while looking out the window. "I'd like to get home."

Lynn opens the door to see me out. The second I hit the waiting room, my mother stands, her face pinched and pale. She touches my arm, asking in a rushed manner, "You're finished so soon?"

"It's not worth it, Mom." I swivel to go, but my mother heads straight for Lynn's door, which is closed again. She knocks.

Lynn answers and my mother says, "I'm Constance Fitzgerald, Iris' mother. Shouldn't she get a whole hour session?"

Lynn acknowledges Mom with a smile. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Fitzgerald, but I'm not able to discuss your daughter's care. She has patient confidentiality."

I join the two of them and put my arm through my mother's, an attempt to get her moving toward the exit. I tug at her arm. "That's right," Mom says to Lynn. "I forgot about that. I'm just worried about her is all. You can understand."

"Mom, I can't be in here anymore," I say. "Let's go."

Chapter Eight

Mom and I are quiet the whole ride home from Lynn's. A man sits down next to me on the bus, so I slide closer to her. She puts her arm around my shoulders. It feels good to be in her safe arms again, like the Mom before Dad passed away.

That lasts about another twenty minutes. Nurturing-mother leaves and Overbearing-mother reappears the second we begin talking about the attack. She has a desire to know what happened. I give her the gloss over. Running. Assaulted. Raped. Stabbed. She knows the whole story lies below and I've confessed only the surface details. She thinks it will be therapeutic if I tell someone. If I tell her.

"Not my mother." I drop into a dining chair and place my arms on the table.

"Especially your mother. If you can't tell me, you can't tell anyone," she says, sitting across from me.

"Then I can't tell anyone."

"Iris, you can't keep it bottled up inside."

"Are you a therapist now?" I ask, sarcastic and mean.

"I'm a mother," she answers, irritated by my tone. She gets up from the chair and paces the small distance from one end of the table to the other. "You told the police."

"Then why don't you get the police report?" My voice rings out louder than the conversation warrants.

"Why are you getting so belligerent?"

"This isn't belligerent, Mom."

"You used to tell me things," she chides. She sits down again. I'm glad. Her constant movement makes me nervous.

"When did I tell you things?"

"You were in high school and before."

"I never told you anything," I argue.

"About the boys you liked."

"You were always too focused on yourself," I tell her.

"About fights with your girlfriends."

"After Dad died you shut me out!" I yell.

"You leave your dad out of this," Mom says evenly. "I tried to keep you close."

"Without letting me in, Mom. How does that work?" I get up and take two Percocets. Then, I abandon my mother and lie down on the couch.

"You're tired," she says, following me. "You rest for a while, honey." She smooths her fingers across my forehead. I almost slap them away. "I haven't gotten much sleep either, Iris," Mom continues. "I think I'll go upstairs to rest. Come get me if you need something."

I ignore her. My mood confuses me. I close my eyes on my anger. Exhaustion overwhelms me and I welcome the euphoria the pills will soon kick into my system. Nightmares loom on the periphery of my brain, vultures ready to pick my flesh. Determined to dream of sheep and green pastures, I drift up into a surge of intoxication.

Sini is there, wearing a dark blue camisole and jeans. The air hangs thick and hot around us. We've stopped, breathing heavily, leaning against the cool wall of the Music Building at Washington University. The dorm is close. I put down the projector I'm carrying. Sini sets the film screen we've stolen against the wall and whispers, "Whose idea was this?"

I look around the corner. No one is coming. The moon wanes, bathing the plush green lawn in a thin veil of blue. The path is lit, but we are hidden from view in the dark shadow of the building. "The coast is clear. Go," I say. The idea is hers. She has the media room key. She concocted the idea of a movie theatre in our dorm room with the huge screen and projector. I just did the planning of it. "Now," I prompt.

We pick up our goods again and hurry across the parking lot toward our dorm. Shit. Someone's coming. Who is that? It's too dark to tell. Oh my God. It's Carrie the RA. Calm down. It's no big deal. Act cool.

"You have a big load, guys," Carrie says, stopping in front of us. We're right by our door.

"Big project for class," I say.

"Nice," Carrie says.

"These are heavy," Sini says.

"OK. I'd like to see your project," Carrie says. We almost walk away. Then, she adds, "You sure are borrowing them late."

Shit. "First chance we've had to get over there. Busy day," I say.

"School." Sini rolls her eyes.

"Right." Carrie waves as she walks away.

We watch movies for the rest of the night, eating microwave Kettle Corn and drinking white wine. I am lying on the futon we have set up in our room and I feel Sini put a blanket on me.

"I shouldn't have had so much wine," I say, sitting up.

"You had wine today?" Sini asks.

I am not in our dorm in St. Louis, but our loft in SF. A navy blue blanket that matches our couch falls from my shoulder to my lap.

"No. That night we stole the film stuff."

Sini laughs. "You saved our asses from the RA that night." She sits in the chair, curling her legs under her.

"Thanks for the blanket," I say.

"Your mother sent it."

"You're kidding."

"I'm kidding," Sini says. We laugh. I stop first because I know she's going to ask me about my session with Lynn. And she does. "Did you talk a lot today?"

"No."

"Who did?"

"No one," I say. I wish I were a liar.

"That must have been a short session."

I shrug.

Sini untangles her legs and puts both of her feet on the floor, sitting up straight. "Iris, therapy isn't going to be a breeze. You've got to work through this stuff."

"I will," I say. "I am." I pull the blanket closer around me, covering up my arms.

Sini just stares at me with a furrowed brow and piercing blue eyes, speechless.

"She tried to blame you," I say.

Instead of looking incredulous as I thought she would, Sini averts her eyes. Shit. What have I done? I search for a way to fix it.

"Not really," I say. "She was only asking if I resented you for not going running with me."

Sini looks directly at me. "Do you?"

"No! No, Sini, of course not."

"Maybe you should."

"And I told her that," I say.

"I didn't go with you."

"It's not your fault, Sini. I shouldn't have gone alone."

"I should have gone."

"You left thinking I wasn't going."

"I'm sorry, Iris."

"What for? I already—" I stop talking because Mia walks in. She puts her purse and bag on the table and joins us in the living area. I don't return to our conversation topic, but ask about my cover letter and resume.

"My boss said he loves getting referrals from employees," Mia says.

"That's wonderful," Sini says.

"Thanks for being my messenger."

"I'm not sure if my recommendation carries much weight."

Mia sits on the edge of the couch.

"What is the atmosphere like in the office?" I ask. She has already said some about this, but I feel compelled to talk

to her about her work since she is nice enough to do the favor for me.

"It's tough sometimes. We work hard."

That was not the impression I got from Mia the first time I met her. She said she loved her job, that she and her coworkers had a great time. Oh well. Maybe I need "tough" so no one will bother me. My desire to know more about the firm extinguishes. I don't ask any more questions.

"What are you doing tonight, Mia?" Sini asks. "Iris' mom is in town. Maybe we can all go to dinner."

Mia's eyes get wide for a moment, then, "I can't. I'm having dinner with my boyfriend."

"Maybe another night," I say.

"Well, I better go change." Mia jumps up from the couch and rushes upstairs.

Sini and I don't go back to our earlier topic. I feel awful that Sini thinks I blame her for the attack. That hasn't been my intention at all. Lynn and I really haven't talked about that much and Sini has been a major part of it, so all I'm trying to do is make conversation with her about my session. She seems like hearing about how it went is important to her. I've really botched that up royally.

Chapter Nine

Inspector Taylor Meyers calls while Sini and I are watching a show about Amsterdam. I like the evenness of her voice. It sounds reassuring. Patient. Genuine. Too bad she's not my therapist. She asks me how I am.

"Fine," I say. People don't really care to hear the truth if they ask that question.

"We have a suspect matching your attacker's description," she says.

"Suspect?" I whisper.

"Can you come to the station?"

The air leaves me. No words come out, so I hand the cell phone to Sini. She talks to Inspector Meyers for a few minutes. A rushing sound floods my ears so I can't tell what Sini's saying.

"Iris? Iris." Sini shakes me.

I open my eyes. "I didn't expect them to catch him."

"You gave a description."

"I just...I mean..." The sketch they drew so vaguely. How can they arrest someone off that picture? What did I say? Now, I second-guess what I actually told the sketch artist. I second-guess the blinding flashes I've had since then. Everything

converges in my mind and I can't settle on any clear picture. The face in my memory balls up in a big, blurry mass of darkness and shadows. I recognize nothing at all.

"I'll go with you," Sini says. She already stands in the middle of our loft holding her coat.

"No. I'll be all right."

"You shouldn't go to the station alone."

"I can't live in fear." This comes out more dramatically than I intend, but I can see Sini with one hand on her hip.

Her voice does not betray the frustration I know she feels. "You don't have to do it alone."

"I'm not. The police will be there."

Sini stares at me, her blue eyes like steel shards. "You might as well forget it, because I'm going." This time steel embodies her voice, too. I know there's no use arguing with her now. My mother might as well go, too. She'll be pissed off if she gets up and we're gone. She rushes down after I call up to her.

"I'll drive," Sini says. "The inspector gave me directions."

Sini's red Mini Cooper flashes in my mind. "Let's get a cab," I say.

Inspector Meyers, a tall, stocky woman, has worn her dishwater hair in a short ponytail both times I've seen her.

"Please, call me Taylor," Inspector Meyers says, greeting the three of us at the front desk.

"When did you get him?" I ask. My body shakes and I need to say something. I position my left side against the tall desk beside me for support, trying to look casual by propping up my elbow. It isn't fooling anyone. Sini takes a step closer to me and presses her hand into the small of my back. Her shoulder touches mine. At first, I jump at the contact, but then I lean gratefully into her.

"A couple of patrolmen picked him up few hours ago," Taylor says.

"Wow." Jesus. What a profound response. Say something intelligent. I don't. I stare at the worn tile floor.

"There's someone I'd like you to meet," Taylor says to me. "Follow me."

"Just a minute," I say, turning to Sini and Mom.

Sini holds up a hand to stop me from talking. "Go. We'll be here." She motions behind her to a row of grey plastic bucket chairs apparently serving as the station's waiting area. "Go," Sini says again. "We'll read magazines." I notice not a single *New Yorker*, *Vogue* or even *Enquirer* lay anywhere in sight.

I linger. Has Sini said go again? I'm positive I heard that, so I ask, "Are you sure?" I half want her to say no and come with me.

Taylor leads me down a narrow hallway. Grey doors are closed on each side. The whole place reminds me of a mental ward, not the glamorized crime show police stations on television that have been in my mind on the taxi ride over here. The hall is dimly lit and I wonder if the police choose this lackluster ambience over stark lighting for a reason.

I'm starting to feel claustrophobic in the darkness, but Taylor turns into a room filled with desks and other plain-clothes police officers. They all turn to watch us come in. Taylor leads me to a small room adjacent to the large open space. A couple of old file cabinets are shoved into the far corner. A single metal table fills the center of the room. It's too large for the cramped space and only two chairs fit around it, one on each side. Florescent lights magnify the compactness of the room. I think this is the theory behind the bleak halls--to disconcert the people brought here for interrogation.

A man in a black suit sits in one of the chairs with his back to the door. Black hair brushes the top of his jacket collar. He turns as we enter.

"It's you," I say before I can stop myself. I cease moving forward.

"Will you excuse me a moment?" Taylor retreats and I have to shift further into the room as she opens the door all the way behind her. I fight the urge to spin around and follow her.

"I'm happy to finally meet you." The man rises, moves a step toward me and holds out his hand.

I recoil. Suddenly all my saliva disappears. I wave my hands and shake my head stupidly. My tongue slides along the back of my teeth to generate moisture in my mouth so I can speak. "I'm so sorry," I manage to say.

"No. I apologize--for starting off on the wrong foot." He holds out his hand more slowly.

I take it, not looking at his face. We shake hands lightly. "Nice to meet you while I'm conscious. And fully clothed."

He laughs. "Oh, don't worry."

I am at a loss, but say, "Really?" Because I do worry. The police--well, Taylor--told me in the hospital how I'd been found. From that information, I gather there was nothing left of modesty by the time Salvador saw me in that alley. The hospital had given all my clothes to the police for examination to see if any DNA could be found.

My cheeks burn.

"My thoughts were on getting help," he says.

"For saving my life, you mean."

"It was nothing."

"Not to me," I say.

"Well, I'm just glad I walked by that alley."

"I am, too," I say, aware of all the people behind me. I wonder if they're listening, figuring they probably are.

"Would you like to sit?" he says, gesturing toward the table and chairs. His voice rings clear and assured, but he speaks in a soft, leisurely manner. Where is he from? The way he speaks with such equanimity reminds me of my dad's relaxed personality.

I slip through the narrow gap between the table and wall to get to the other side. We sit across from each other. He puts his hands on the table. Only a silver watch peeks out from beneath his starched white cuff.

"Salvador."

"What?" I say, looking up into his face. He has defined cheekbones. His lips are pale next to dark olive skin. He has dark brown eyes. My hands start shaking and I put them on the chair, under my legs, to stop them.

"My name. It's Salvador Perez."

"Oh. I'm Iris Fitzgerald." I feel so weird introducing myself to someone I've seen almost every day, at least every weekday morning, for the first three weeks I've been in San Francisco. I should know him already. I should have met him already. Somehow. Some way other than this.

"Yes, Taylor told me your name. At the hospital," Salvador says.

"She told me your name, too."

"You can call me Sal." His black hair falls across his forehead and into one eye. He brushes it quickly away.

"I had no idea it was you," I say.

"No?"

"Your name didn't mean anything to me since we've never actually met."

A stilted silence hangs between us. What is there to say? Sal finally breaks it. "I came to see you."

"See me?"

"At the hospital, but you were sleeping."

"Ah, the morphine," I say. "That's good stuff," I add and immediately regret it. Now he probably assumes I do drugs or something.

"I didn't want to wake you," he says.

"I would have been glad." I look down at the table.

The quiet grows between us again for a few moments. I start to feel even more nervous with only the buzzing sound of the florescent lights overhead. I ask, maybe a little too loudly, "So, what do you do? Sini and I guessed a CEO or banker."

"Sini is your running partner?" Sal ignores my question.

Shit. I've insulted him. Or pried too much. I'm always saying something to humiliate myself. Typical. "She's also my roommate," I say.

"My job is not as glamorous as a CEO."

"Oh," I say, relieved that I haven't gone overboard with questions already.

"I'm a financial advisor for Donnell and Hart."

"Not so far from a banker." I am impressed, as I expected to be.

"No, not so far."

"I've heard of them," I say.

"Are you in the financial field?"

"Hardly. I applied to their design department."

"You're changing jobs?" Sal asks.

"You could call it that."

"What would you call it?"

I'm silent. A week ago I would have answered that question in a heartbeat. I would have said, "You could call it an adventure," or something equally dramatic and romantic. But, for some reason, as I contemplate a response, none of that matters anymore. There is no rush of adventure every time I think of the move here, the new loft, or exploring the city; no pulse of excitement about landing a stellar graphics position; in fact, there's no kick at all. Numbness permeates the places these thrills took up.

"I didn't mean to pry," Sal says.

"No," I say and pause. "No. I would call it a mistake. That's all."

It is glaringly obvious that neither one of us is talking about the reason we've been summoned together. Maybe we should have started there and stayed there. Suddenly, drawn out of my introspection, it finally occurs to me that Sal is here to see the line-up, too, and I can't help asking, "Did you see him?"

Sal's mouth opens slightly then closes. His lips hover in a half smile, a very forlorn expression that makes me sad. "I don't know."

My heart sinks. My rescuer doesn't know if he saw my attacker or not. I fear I might become one of those people who hates to leave his or her own house. Agoraphobic? Is that it?

Is that the right phobia? I've never had a phobia before. I even love snakes.

The disappointment must be evident on my face because Sal says, "I may have seen him fleeing the scene--down Folsom Street. I can't be sure. The police say it's all circumstantial."

I start to ask something, but my mind draws a blank. Sal looks like he's going to say something else, but Inspector Meyers appears in the doorway. "We're ready for you both."

I feel like throwing up. I want to crawl under the table.

Sal stands. He waits for me to go first before exiting the room. We walk down the dark hall together. My rescuer. Part of me wishes I could ask him a million questions, but the silence of the police station is oppressive. I've never imagined a police facility could be so void of sound. Where is everyone? Another part of me has a needle and thread and sutures my mouth closed.

After what seems like a maze of hallways, Taylor stops next to a solid metal door. She doesn't lead us into the room like I expect. She knocks twice and a uniformed officer opens the door. They speak in low voices. What they say escapes me and I don't try to make it out. I am trying not to throw up.

The door shuts and Taylor turns to Sal and me. "You'll go in one at a time," she says.

My head feels fuzzy so I put my hand on the wall. Taylor and Salvador both reach for me. She grabs hold of my arm first and Sal backs away.

"Why don't you go first, Salvador? All right?"

"Yes," he says.

"The officer inside will explain what you need to do."

The next thing I'm aware of, Sal disappears through the metal door. Taylor turns her attention to me and holds me up by gripping my shoulders. "This will be really quick, Iris."

I force myself to focus on her steady face. She looks at me so intently, willing me to have the strength to go into that room. "Quick," I repeat.

"All you have to do is go in, look at a row of guys, pick out the one who attacked you and you're done." She says it so matter-of-factly that she almost convinces me it's that easy. Until I feel the weight of him pressing down on me, pushing, crushing, smashing me into the concrete. I push back, but it's not him I'm pushing; it's Taylor. My body goes slack in her grasp. She calls my name, tells me to breathe.

At last, the blur dissipates. I have to consciously tell myself to stop holding my breath. The metal door looms over

Taylor's shoulder. Again, I fight the urge to vomit and taste bile at the back of my throat. Taylor says more encouraging things to me and motions to another officer standing in the hall. I shake my head and keep shaking it.

"I can't."

Chapter Ten

Someone gets me a chair and I fall into it. "I need Sini," I whisper. "My mom." I lean forward with my face in my hands talking to myself. "I can't do this. He's in there. I can't see him. I can't face him." After a while, I hear my mother talking to Taylor. Moving my head over so I can just see, Sini runs toward me. She grabs my wrists and presses her head against my head.

"Iris, you can do this."

"I can't. He's in there." Doesn't she see? If I go in there, he will see me. He will have power over me again. I'll be stuck in there. Trapped by the four walls. There will be no escape.

"But if you do this, he stays in there." I like her reasoning here. I need, more than anything, to have him off the streets. Yet...

"I can't face him again."

"He'll be arrested. Locked up."

A hand rests on my back. My mother's voice in my ear telling me he will never be able to see me. Only a mirror, not faces. There is no other way to get him behind bars. I can do it. She knows I can. "I know how strong you are."

It's the first time she has said anything like that. She thinks I'm strong. I straighten up a bit.

The door to the line-up room opens and shuts. Salvador must be finished. I raise my head. Mom, Sini and I are like a little prayer circle on the opposite side of the hallway. Taylor ushers Sal away from me. It makes sense if we aren't allowed to communicate now. My turn arrives. Taylor returns. "All right, Iris. You're going to be completely safe in there." She explains I'll be with a police officer, the District Attorney and the lawyer for the defendant. None of the suspects can see my face through the glass.

"He can't see me?" I ask. "He can't see me." I let go of Mom and Sini's hands and step forward. Taylor shows me through the door and closes me inside. The lights burn brightly to my left, but I focus straight ahead. A police officer introduces me to a male lawyer and female District Attorney, but I immediately forget their names in my nervousness.

The officer explains that I should pick out my attacker from the row of men and mark my choice down. He keeps talking, but the words jumble together as I struggle to stay on my feet. I feel the presence of bodies standing on the other side of the glass and try to keep my attention on the officer's face, his moving lips.

I've seen line-ups in the movies and really can't believe I'm standing in front of one now. "All right, Miss Fitzgerald. Whenever you're ready." The officer steps back out of my way. The entire area in front of the glass provides unobstructed views of my attackers. I think of them this way because right now, before I look at them, it can be anyone. Right now, it's all of them.

My eyes drift over to Attacker No. 1. My body quakes. Deep breath. Eyes up. He has brown eyes and brown hair that falls to his shoulders. He looks vacant; or is it boredom? I can't tell. He keeps balling his hands into fists and letting them go. The man has a single thin scar along his right cheek. I let out the breath I've been holding. It's not him.

Attacker No. 2 is too slight of build to be my attacker. His shoulders kind of hunch forward as he stands there. I pass over him as rapidly as I can because he's smiling. My hand goes involuntarily to my brow as I move on to Attacker No. 3. Dampness balls up in tiny beads on my forehead. I wipe it with my sleeve. No. 3's eyes are dark, like my attacker's. I have to look away. A gasp escapes my mouth and I hear movement behind me.

"Take your time, Iris," says the District Attorney.

Forcing myself to look back, I see those eyes again, boring into me, but he has high cheekbones and his cheeks sink in below as if he's sucking them inside. Not him. I look over to Attacker No. 4. I know immediately it's not him. He's short and has a roundness to his belly that my attacker doesn't. Still, I linger on him.

Deep breaths. Only two more. It means he is one of those two men. My mouth becomes dry as I gather the courage to move on. I stand there for what feels like an eternity, trying to build up my defenses for seeing him again. At last, I shake my head to wrestle off the fear. Attacker No. 5 looks a little like him. My heart races faster. Then I notice a large mole on his neck. There had been no mole. That I would have remembered. His neck was too close to me not to remember something like a mole. This is not my attacker.

It means only one thing. He is Attacker No. 6. Both arms cover my chest, my hands at my throat, as I gulp in air. The District Attorney comes up to me and puts her hand on my shoulder. "You're safe in here."

"Safe," I repeat, but don't believe her. I have to get out of this room, this place, this station. Go home. But I still have to identify him. The District Attorney encourages me to continue. I stand rooted to my spot.

I pray they're right and he can't see my face. I have little faith in the glass. I avert my eyes to my feet. My legs feel wobbly and the sweating continues. Nausea rises like sour milk from my stomach. I look at him. I raise my eyes and see him full on--his broad, muscular shoulders, his pale skin, brown hair and his dark eyes. My knees buckle beneath me. I hold onto the officer's arm for support and say, "He's not the one."

"Who's not, Iris?" the District Attorney asks.

"No. 6."

"So, you mark which one of the others was," the officer says.

"But none of them are."

"Are you sure?" asks the officer.

"Iris, you must be very certain about this," the District Attorney says.

"I will never forget his face."

"You did nearly pass out at No. 6," she reasons.

"He looks similar," I answer, "but his eyes are wrong. Too--"

"If she can't identify someone, then she can't identify someone," the defendant's lawyer breaks in.

"I'll show you out, Miss Fitzgerald." The officer escorts me to the door and out. I rush into my mother's arms.

Chapter Eleven

Mom rocks me back and forth and I have to make her stop. Sini hugs me, too. She whispers, "I knew you could do it," in my ear and her phone rings. She answers it, which isn't like her if something's going on. She lifts her finger and backs away to take the call. I try to listen to the conversation, but my mother starts in with questions.

"Was he in there?"

"Actually, no."

Mom's face falls. She no longer knows what to say to be helpful. The police have caught the wrong man. I will walk out of this police station knowing he still walks about freely out there somewhere. Every day I fear running into him. Think that other people are he from afar.

Sini comes back over after a couple of minutes. "Who was that?" I ask, eager to talk of something else.

"No one." She tucks her phone inside her purse.

That really piques my interest. "It had to be someone."

"A work thing, that's all."

"You talked a while."

"Work stuff." Sini smiles. "Did you identify him?"

"He wasn't one of them," I repeat.

Sini's smile disappears. "I'm so sorry, Iris."

Taylor comes up and tells us they arrested the guy on a partial plate an elderly lady had gotten off a car she saw driving away the morning of the attack. From that, they narrowed down the possible suspects and one actually fit my attacker's basic description. So, they arrested him. I thank her for her work. My hope is she will continue to hunt down my rapist and would-be murderer until she finds him. The reality is I know my case isn't the only one she has. It's probably one of many.

On the cab ride home, I take two Percocets. Home and water are too far away to wait for. I shake as if from cold, even though I've bundled myself in my black jacket and scarf. The pills counteract the tremors as well as the pain. By the time the cab pulls up to our building, waves of euphoria flood through me. My feet tingle. Rest is all I'm looking for.

I can't rest yet. The bandage needs changing. If Mom hadn't said something, I would have forgotten. I carry all the supplies into the living area and dump them on the coffee table. Mom rearranges them in order of necessity, all in a row. It frustrates me that she helps change the bandage. I mean, I barely look while she does it, but I really want to do this on my own. Sort of. So, I let her help. Besides, I tell myself,

it makes her feel good to do something for me. Whether it does or not is a different story.

She tells me to lie down. I undo my jeans and tug them down slightly to make it easier to change the bandage. Mom gets right to work. She peels off the old dressing, taking care not to pull my skin. It won't hurt much anyway, with the two pills I took earlier, but I appreciate her thoughtfulness. The next thing I know, I'm staring right at it. The hole. The black stitches are ugly next to my skin. The edges of the hole are pink and curved in. Blood pulses just below the surface like hot lava getting ready to erupt. My breathing grows shallow, my head light--even lighter than before. Mom notices the look of horror on my face. "Look away, honey."

I tear my gaze from the hole and focus on the ceiling. Steel beams have been left exposed below the wood ceiling. So has the large venting system, painted red. It makes me cringe, so I look instead at my mother. Her light brown hair that she has colored because it becomes peppered with grey, falls along her cheekbone, accentuating her pretty features. I forget how beautiful she can be when she isn't angry or overbearing.

She arrives at the ointment step. She swabs on the goopy liquid, cool on my skin. Next comes the square of gauze, placed gingerly over the wound. She tapes it on. "You're all done."

I sit up and button my pants. Sini has joined us in the living room chair. She helped me change the bandage before my mother came. She probably cherishes the time off.

"Where's that throw blanket I bought you, Iris?" Mom asks from the kitchen, putting away the dressing supplies.

I knew she was going to bring this up eventually. "We put it away," I answer. Sini and I give each other knowing looks. I feel like I'm sitting two feet above the couch on a cloud. I don't care to deal with her and the throw right now.

Mom returns to the living area. She puts her hand on the back of the couch. Her fingers touch the blue throw Sini bought. "Why?"

"I'm sorry, Mom." Maybe it will end here.

"But why did you put it away?" Not that lucky.

"It didn't match."

"I thought you liked red."

"I told you our couch is blue," I say.

"You told me to paint my porch red."

I'm stunned to silence. Sini brings her hand to her face and tries to nonchalantly cover her mouth. My mother bought me a red throw blanket because halfway across the country I told her to paint her own porch that color? It makes no sense to me.

Her logic failed for the simple reason that I told her my couch was blue. Either she didn't hear me or she wasn't listening.

"I need to go to bed," I say.

"We're having a discussion, young lady," Mom snaps.

"After all this about a throw blanket?"

Mom starts to say something else and I can tell it would have been something like "You never respect me," or "After all I've done for you." But she stifles her words and settles for putting her hands on her hips. In that way, the throw blanket incident is grudgingly dropped. I try again to go to bed.

Mom insists I have my own bed to myself so I can get plenty of sleep. In my heightened state, I find her mismatched linens to make the couch into a bed and say goodnight to her and Sini, thanking them for going with me to the station.

"Of course."

"There was never a question."

I glide to my room. Feeling around for the light switch on the wall, I abandon the search and decide I like the room better dark. Some street light filters through the thin curtains, giving the bedroom a soft glow. My body is the last thing I want to see in the light anyway. Stripped down to my underwear to change into pajamas, I can see the hole. Bandaged up. Mom did a good job of redoing it. I halfway need to rip the gauze

off and see the wound underneath again, but I know it will make me pass out. It nearly has every time. The stitches will disappear, but the straight line will still be there. A scar. A perfect line. A symbol of his power over me. Something I will never be able to get rid of. It is forever. The doctors told me the ointment would decrease some of the scarring, but obviously, there's no way of making it go away completely. I fantasize about some magic spell that will zap the hole right out of my body. The fantasy vanishes rapidly.

I need some alcohol. That will help. And I'm across the street at the Go-Go Market buying vodka. A big bottle. I decide to go for a walk to drink some of the liquor, taking big swigs and wiping my mouth each time. It burns my throat, but my stomach warms. Thank God I'm drinking because I'm not smart enough to have brought a jacket. I am only wearing my running clothes.

It's late. Not many people walk by me. No one pays attention to me drinking from my bottle hidden inside the brown paper bag. The Burger King gas station combo comes up. I walk on, see the Out of the Closet resale shop and keep going. I've walked a long way. Farther than I intend. My teeth are chattering, so I drink more. As I turn to go home, I notice it. The cat near the overpass. Another drink and my eyes blur for a

moment. Rubbing them helps. I stumble forward toward the skinny tabby cat. A shopping cart blocks the sidewalk as I cross the street and try to get to the animal that turns in the other direction. The cat maneuvers under a chain link fence that spans the length of the overpass. The fence encloses several parking lots in front of me. With my fingers curled around the chain link, I bend down to try to find the elusive animal under several cars parked near the fence. It's too dark to see anything in the shadows. Crouched down, I hear a low whistle to my left.

"You are fine," he calls from the down the block. He walks steadily closer to me as he speaks. "You liked it so much, you came back for some more."

I hold the vodka bottle by the neck as I stand up and let the bag fall to the ground.

"Oooh. You're going to throw something. Come on. I like when you play."

I throw the bottle with all my strength. It crashes to pieces right at his feet.

"Nice."

Adrenaline pumps as I turn and run. He pursues me, fast. Leaning in to make the crosswalk, I don't raise my foot high enough and it catches on the curb. My body flies forward. The

sidewalk rushes up to meet me and I brace myself for the landing. But my outstretched hands bounce back. I open my eyes to my bedroom, having fallen on my bed, still in my underwear. My eyes flit around the room. Empty. I throw on my pajamas, fling back the blankets and crawl under them, tucking them up to my chin.

Chapter Twelve

Another week passes and I count down the days until I can go for the HIV test. Fourteen. My caseworker has told me where I should go, so that question is answered. Now, is he going to succeed at killing me? I'm sure of it. One way or another, he will. I make an appointment at the clinic for the soonest possible day. It's a Monday.

I drink my Diet Coke from a straw and watch the traffic go by on Gough Street. Mom and I have gotten accustomed to walking over to the Crepe House in Hayes Valley to have a soda and relax in the afternoon. Well, try to relax. After a couple of days, the young woman behind the register stopped asking us what we'd have and just makes two Diet Cokes in to-go cups. She has them ready for us at the counter by the time we get there. Today, there is another girl at the register. Our young woman comes from the kitchen to wait on us herself. I mean to ask her name.

"I'm hot now," Mom says. She takes off her jacket. Everyone says to dress in layers in SF. It's cold on the walk over. The wind blows so hard along Hayes in places it feels like we're pushing against it just to move forward. My hair is always a mess by the time we get here. No matter. I've been twisting it up in a clip lately anyway.

The past week with my mother has been anything but easy. I've forgotten what it's like to live with her. I come downstairs. She asks what I'm doing. I go upstairs to my room and she asks what I'm going to do. I feel like a teenager again having to report to my parent every move I make. The worst part, she has no place to get away. Downstairs at the loft is one big room. The only place to escape--the bathroom.

Last week, we'd both been on the couch. I had been looking for jobs on my computer while she read a book. Already I struggled to stay focused on the search as intruding thoughts kept forcing themselves into my head. They spiraled from the attack to AIDS to running into him and back again. My mother kept interjecting comments about her book: "You'll never believe what the main character just did, Iris;" "This author is brilliant;" and "I'm so glad I picked this up at the airport." Each time she said something new I got angrier with her until finally, I blew up.

"Mom, will you be quiet! I can't concentrate!"

This started a fight. She told me harshly not to yell at her, she was my mother. She should be treated as such. It was too late. I was off the handle. She didn't understand anything I was going through. How could she? She'd never been attacked. This really pissed her off because a mother always understands

and I had no idea what I was talking about. "If you understand so much, why are we fighting?" I screamed.

"Because you need to calm down," Mom answered.

That shut me up. I knew she was right. The blame fell solely on me for this one. I lashed out at her, but all she tried to do was...what? Be closer? Stay engaged? It only annoyed me and made me push her away. Since then, I've been trying to be more tolerant of her personality quirks. After all, she's come to SF to be with me.

Mom is hungry, so I take her to Frjt's, also a restaurant in Hayes Valley. We trade one crepe house for another. At Frjt's, we order the Belgian fries and get roasted red pepper mayo dipping sauce. Mom makes fun of me that we have crepes since we've just come from the Crepe House, but I tell her these are better. Sini and I have already tested them both.

My concentration falters on what my mother jabbars on about.

Finally, she says, "OK. What's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've been distant since we got here. Well, before that, but especially since then."

"It's nothing."

"You can tell me, honey."

If she touches my arm, I'm going to scream. "I'm just thinking. That's not a crime." I know that won't do, that I'll be forced to say something personal or start a fight. So, I make it about her. "Why haven't you dated anyone since Dad died, Mom?"

"Are we back to that? What's going on with you?"

I wait. The waiter comes to give us more water. Mom isn't going to reveal her love life to me and I'm not going to tell her anything she craves to hear. But I should have known Mom would carry on whether I care to or not.

"You can't be that concerned about me, Iris."

Why can't I? She never tells me about anyone she's dated in the twelve years since Dad's death. She has every right to move on with her life. I just don't see it happening. "Why don't you date?" I ask.

"I have dated. I just haven't broadcast it to the world."

"I've asked you before!" Her response is always that there's just no one of interest right now. So, she either lied then or she's lying now.

"Well, honey, I didn't think my love life was any of your business."

"You think *my* love life is *your* business," I retort.

Mom breaks down and tells me about a guy she's been seeing since I came out to California. They met at her gym. Gary. He asked my mother out for coffee. Mom blushes.

"Is he nice?" I ask.

"A perfect gentleman."

"Don't rush into anything, Mom, if you just met him."

"Hush. It's not like I'm going to marry the guy."

"I'm not saying you can't get remarried," I say. "Just take your time."

Once we arrive back at the loft, I retreat to my room, leaving Mom to fend for herself, which she's good at anyway.

Sini comes up to get me for dinner about seven-thirty. I've been doing a bad job of pretending to read about the life of Jeannette Walls. The same page eludes me for hours. All the words might as well be in Greek for all I understand them.

"Ready to eat?" Sini asks.

"I'm not really hungry," I answer.

"You have to eat. Come on. Your mom made a roast."

"We didn't have roast."

"I guess she went shopping."

"How long have I been up here?"

"Too long." Sini starts to leave, but bends down and pulls a small slip of paper from under the corner of the bed. "You dropped--Hey, what's this, Iris?"

"What is it?" What? I can't tell.

"Call placement agency back tomorrow." Sini flips the paper around for me to see.

Shit. How can I explain I haven't told her about it all this time? "That's old." I wrote it the night before the attack as a visual reminder to call.

"How old?"

"Before."

"Did you call?" Sini asks.

"I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Sini." Don't make me say it.

She understands. She comes to sit beside me on the bed. I make room for her. "You could have called after. They would have understood."

I shake my head, looking down at the open book in my lap. It humiliates me that the whole situation happened. The attack. Forgetting about the call. Although at the time, I had a thousand other things going through my head. No one would have

been expected to remember to make that call. Maybe I should have called after the three days. Too late now.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Sini asks.

"I don't know."

"Maybe you can still call," she offers.

"And say what?"

"Tell them the truth."

"It's not that simple," I say.

Suddenly, Sini moves on. "Well, you'll get others. Mia turned in your resume to her firm. You have options."

"I'll keep sending stuff out," I say. There has to be other places to send my resume.

"Maybe you can resubmit to the placement agency under a different name," Sini jokes.

"You may be on to something," I say. I like the idea of becoming someone else. Living someone else's life. I can be a Jane Davis or a Mary Smith. Someone to blend in with the crowd.

Chapter Thirteen

Talking floats up from downstairs as soon as I get to my doorway. My assumption is Mia and my mother are having a discussion, but halfway down the stairs I see that someone else inhabits the dining room. Salvador. He stands by a chair and smiles as my mother talks and brings dishes to the table. About to speak, he closes his mouth again because Sini and I enter the dining area. He wears his suit, as usual, as if he's come straight from work.

"It's about time you two," Mom says. "Dinner will get cold." She holds a serving dish filled with buttered potatoes. She already laid out the table with our cerulean plates that Sini found at a Moroccan store tucked away in Hayes Valley. The matching napkins fold neatly on top. "Iris, you remember Salvador?"

"Yes, of course I do. Hello."

"Hello again," he says, bending his head forward in a greeting.

"I invited Sal over for dinner," Mom says.

I can see that, Mother. He's right here. But how? The only thing I can think of is she got his phone number from

information. Unless she actually asked him for it at the police station after the line-up. I wouldn't put that past her.

"I was happy for the invitation," Sal says. "I didn't get a chance to say good-bye at the station the other night."

With the line-up burning in my mind, I only nod.

"Sit, everyone, sit." Mom holds out a chair and waits until we all take our seats before she does. Sal and I sit across from each other and Sini takes the chair next to me. Mom hands the roast to Sal and tells us to start the other things. It's like we've all never been to a dinner party before and are learning the etiquette for the first time.

"Where's Mia?" I ask.

"She couldn't stay," Sini says. "Her boyfriend's?" She looks at Mom.

"Yes. She's a very strange girl."

"Don't say that," Sini says. "She's getting acclimated." Whatever you say.

Everyone dishes his or her food and pours the white wine, so Mom makes a toast. "To our guest."

Sal bows his head, embarrassed by the attention.

Sini comes to the rescue. "So, where are you from, Sal?"

"My family comes from Spain, but I was born here." He grew up in Los Angeles with teacher parents. They both worked at UCLA. His father in economics. His mother in Spanish language.

I feel awkward sitting across the table from him again, listening to him. Somehow, I ache to go back upstairs and put more clothes on even though I know the sweater and jeans I'm wearing cover my body completely. That's something I will have to get past if Sal and I are going to continue to run into each other. The fact that a complete stranger has seen me naked continues to shock me.

Sal came to Berkeley for college, studying business. He ended up finding a job at Donnell and Hart in San Francisco after he graduated. He moved up in the company until he got to his current position of financial advisor, which he likes. He's been in the city ever since, traveling back to LA to visit his dad. His mom died of cancer five years earlier.

"Does your dad ever come up here?" Mom asks.

"He has a few times. He likes it."

"Have you always lived in SOMA?" I ask.

"Not always." He got a job and was unfamiliar with the neighborhoods in San Francisco. One of his college friends recommended a place, so he moved to Lower Haight. After he

saved up some money, he eventually bought a loft in SOMA, not far from ours.

"I'd enjoy seeing it," I blurt, not thinking how that sounds until too late. My shoulders slump forward. "Sini would, too," I continue in a ridiculous attempt to fix my blunder. "We love lofts."

"I'd be happy to show you my place," Sal says. "Although I don't think I'll be cooking a meal quite this good, if at all."

The food is good. Mom always knows her way around the kitchen. Sini scoops up a second helping of potatoes. I still work on finishing my first.

My side begins moaning. The last Percocets I took must be wearing off. Honestly, that bothers me less than the mulled wine candle lit in the center of the table. A deep burgundy, the candle stands as a little red pillar amidst all the food. It seems fitting to me that it should be on fire. Whatever its power, it continually draws my gaze. So much so, that my mother comments on it. "You're fascinated with that candle, Iris."

"I don't like it," I respond.

"Why not?" Sini asks. We picked the candle out together at the Z Gallerie.

I shrug. Looking at it makes my stomach turn. As a result, I haven't eaten much of Mom's dinner. She's going to say something to me, I bet.

She looks straight at my plate, then at me and says, "You better eat before it gets cold."

"It's really good, Mom. I'm just not hungry."

"You need your strength," she says. She has seen how little I eat at most meals. I don't need to lose any weight. My body has shed enough weight already that even my old clothes hang loose now. Food doesn't interest me. The flavors of things seemed to have disappeared. No one knows anything about it because I've never said that aloud. I don't understand it so I'm not sure quite how to put it into words to explain it to anyone else.

"Your cooking is so good, Constance," Sal offers, unsure of how to participate in the conversation.

"Thank you," Mom says.

"She's always been a good cook," I say. I move my food around on my plate, hoping they will think I have eaten more.

A key moves in the lock and the door opens to Mia. She sets her bag down by the door and walks in. Apparently, she met Sal at his arrival, so introductions are unnecessary.

"Are you hungry?" Mom asks.

"No, I've eaten. Thank you." Mia leans on the end of the table almost as if to steady herself.

"How's your boyfriend?" I ask.

"My boyfriend? Oh. He's fine. We went to Sushi Groove."

"Did you get a reservation?" Sal asks. "That place books up."

"No, I sat at the bar." Mia makes eye contact with no one.

"Marge told us about that place," Sini says. "It's where you get to watch the chefs make the sushi?"

"That's right." Mia looks up and gives a hint of a smile to Sini, then looks back at her hand on the table.

"It's one of my favorites," Sal says.

"In SOMA or the city?" I ask.

"Restaurant in SOMA. Sushi in the city."

"That's good to know," Sini says. "Now we have to go there, Iris."

Normally, I would have been thrilled at this recommendation. Sushi is one of my food loves. But the way it has been going lately that doesn't seem to matter much. Then Sal proposes we stop by his loft for a drink on Friday night and go to Sushi Groove afterwards for dinner.

"Wonderful," Mom says, answering for all of us.

"I can't on Friday," Sini says. We all look at her, waiting. After a moment, she says, "I have a work happy hour."

"Saturday, then," Sal says. He holds out his hand over the table, getting everyone's agreement. We all shake our heads, except Mia.

"You guys go without me. It's too much sushi for me."

"Are you sure? We can pick a different restaurant," Sal says. He starts to name off some others in the area.

"No. No. Go." Mia insists. She quickly excuses herself and goes to her room.

We look like a going away party as Sal leaves the loft. The four of us stand in a circle by the door, shaking his hand. "Don't forget this." I pick his jacket from the coat rack, handing it to him. He grabs his bag by the door and slings the strap over his shoulder.

"Thanks."

"See you Saturday," Mom says.

"See you then."

I close the door behind him, locking all the locks and putting on the chain. As I turn away, my eyes sweep the floor, catching sight of Mia's bag she dropped there as she came in. A ribbed white envelope sticks out of one of the pockets. I bend down for a closer view. The envelope sticks out only a quarter

of the way. No writing shows on the part I can see, but I expect to see my own handwriting on the face further down. Este Design. My resume envelopes are made of ribbed white paper. What's the probability that Mia has another envelope just like mine in her bag? Or is it my resume, a week after she told me she already delivered it to her boss? How can that be just a coincidence?

The next morning, I come downstairs before she leaves for work. Mia is grabbing breakfast. I ask her about it. "Mia, you delivered my resume to your boss, right?"

She half chuckles. "Yeah. Last week."

"I'm not sure how to bring this up, but I noticed an envelope in your bag. It looks like mine."

"That...that," she stumbles, "is from someone else. Those envelopes must be popular." She glances down at the croissant she holds, tearing it in half over her plate on the kitchen counter, not meeting my gaze.

I remain unconvinced. "Someone else gave you a resume, too?"

"No. Not a resume. Just a letter."

"I see."

Chapter Fourteen

Sini calls on Friday at seven thirty to say she and some coworkers from the happy hour are going to dinner. "Don't worry about me." I worry about her because she came downstairs that morning buttoning up a grey cashmere cardigan over a low-cut red camisole. She continued to button over the camisole for work, but tonight it would be out on display, along with her lifted C cup breasts. That used to be my dress of choice, too. Not anymore. Even the jacket Mom gave me feels too tight. It hangs on the coat rack, unworn since the attack.

On Friday morning, Mom asks about it. "Why aren't you wearing the Artisan jacket?" Mom calls it Artisan because she bought it at the Clayton Art Fair last year.

"It's too tight."

"Don't be silly. It fits you perfectly." Mom retrieves it and hands it to me to try on. It fits evenly in the shoulders, loosely in the sleeves. It gets snug buttoning it up. I show her. The jacket lays across my chest and down my stomach like a fitted shirt. It has gotten looser since I've lost weight, but is still too snug for my taste right now.

"It's beautiful on you."

"So fitted," I complain, twisting around inside it.

"It's supposed to be, honey."

It makes me squirm. I get out of it as fast as I can.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't understand. You loved it so much." Mom takes the jacket back, trying it on. It fits her, too, of course. She bought it for herself. "If you're not going to wear it, I will."

"Maybe we need to go shopping, Mom." New clothes. More loose-fitting clothes. Everything in my closet hugs my curves despite my weight loss.

"Some of your clothes are a little racy."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I snap.

"Nothing. I'm stating a fact." Mom rehangs the Artisan jacket.

"You have no right telling me what I should wear!" I yell this to her back as she stands at the coat rack.

She spins around. Even though I want to wear less "racy" clothing, I still don't like her telling me she thinks that's how I dress. Her eyes squint into tiny slits. "I wasn't telling you what you should wear, Iris. I was telling you what you are wearing. There's a difference."

"And you were insinuating something."

"You make out of it whatever you want," Mom says.

"I did." I walk away into the kitchen for a glass of water to take the Percocets. I can't handle this. Besides, time has come in the day to look for a job. I always feel hopeless searching for jobs. The pills make the hunt somewhat more bearable, if slightly difficult to perform.

I begin to wonder if I should start looking for jobs other than graphic design. I've blown the placement agency possibility and Mia is potentially sabotaging her firm's possible job. Other options remain hidden from me.

The drugs kick in and I hover over myself on the living room sofa surfing for jobs. I get bored and reminisce about a graphic designer's networking event held at the same time I moved to the city. We all met at the 111 Minna Gallery, a bar and art gallery. A low bar curved along one wall where patrons ordered their favorite cocktail. A couple of high tables and cubes scattered the main floor for people to lounge. Mostly, the crowd stood, intermittently changing groups or going to refill their drinks.

Event coordinators gave away the drinks at the start of the evening. There must have been a cap. The email I received said free drinks, but I must have arrived too late for that because I had to pay for my mojito. I was glad I had cash with me. DJ Simba spun house music with a Latin flair.

I perused the art collection first, probably because of my jitters. The mojito soon helped with that and I began working the room. My goals for the evening: 1) make as many contacts as possible for work; 2) make some friends.

I stood with a new group toward the end of the night. The vibe struck me differently than with all the others. This group talked more personably. On the hiring question I held off like I'd been doing for a while now, which seemed to put the people more at ease with it by the time I finally did ask. They knew me some by then. Not much, but a little. This group laughed more, told jokes and interacted more seamlessly. This group I wished would be my friends.

"Why don't cannibals eat clowns?" Jacob asked, searching the circle of faces to see if any of us had heard the joke.

"God." Jen, his girlfriend, rolled her eyes.

"Because they taste funny!" Jacob bent down with his hand on his knee, laughing. The rest of us laughed, too, as much at Jacob being tickled as at the joke itself.

"Don't encourage him," Jen said. "He's got a million more like that."

Jen and Jacob met at work. Grey and Co. A firm in the city. Also standing with us--Melissa, a designer from Grower

Design. She sat on the committee that planned the event. She confirmed my suspicions about the drinks.

"They gave \$500. After that, it's a cash bar."

"It's so unfair to people who arrive later," I said.

"They should give out tickets," Jacob suggested.

"Good idea. Two tickets per person." Jen squeezed his arm.

"I suggested that," Melissa agreed. She gave a thumbs down.

"So, the early birds get trashed and we literally pay the price," Jacob said.

We went on complaining about the drinks, trying to come up with another solution, but found none. A lull popped into the discussion, so I took the opportunity to change the topic. To jobs.

Melissa directed me to a database called Creative Hotlist. I thanked her sincerely.

"I'm not sure if my firm is hiring," Jacob said, "but I can check for you."

"You'd be a godsend, Jacob. Thank you."

"We just hired someone a few weeks ago. I can still check," Melissa offered.

"You guys are great." I lifted my glass to them. "Since I'm new in town, maybe we can go out for drinks sometime."

"Happy hour would be nice," Jen agreed.

"Here. Email us." Jacob took out his wallet and a business card. Jen and Melissa gave me one, too.

I wrote my home email on old work business cards and handed them each one. "You can let me know what you find out."

They all assured me they would.

We noticed we were one of the last groups left at the event. Melissa downed the last bit of her cocktail and said, "I better help gather some things up."

"We better go, too," Jen said.

The party dispersed. I sauntered out, feeling a tingling in my stomach and didn't think it was from the mojitos.

By the following week, I haven't heard from any of them. Sini assures me not to worry. Why not send them an email? A nice to meet you type note. So, I do. I write a short paragraph about how much fun I had talking with all of them. None of them respond. Not one. I don't even mention the job thing or happy hour. I'm not asking anything of them. All they have to do is hit reply and type, "Me, too." Nothing is happening.

"They're lazy," Sini comforts me.

"Or they don't like me." I check my email for the hundredth time. No new mail.

"They liked you."

"I rushed the email," I say.

"They thought it didn't need a response."

"Anyone who liked me would have replied."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Sini says.

"I'm more confused." It boils down to mixed messages.

"Stupid people," I say. My email, which I've been staring at, turns into a job listing on Creative Hotlist.

"Who's stupid?" Mom asks from the chair. She lounges back, flipping through channels on cable.

Sini isn't on the couch next to me. "People," I answer.

Mom flips to Jacques Pepin's cooking show and loses interest in finding out more about these people. I dismiss them in my head. If that is how they act to potential friends, I don't need them. I zone out to Jacques slicing delicately through a ripe red tomato. It jars me back to reality and I look away, closing my eyes. The oozing vegetable in my mind's eye gives way to blackness, then dim light, as if my eyes are barely open. And I see him on top of me. He huffs and huffs in his effort to satisfy himself. My vagina screams with him forcing his penis

in and out as hard and fast as he can. The light begins to fade and blackness comes again.

"No!" I scream as I sit on the couch with my eyes still closed. I sob uncontrollably.

"Iris?" Mom rushes to my side. She puts her arm around my shoulders, but I shake her off violently.

"No."

She holds my hand. I let her because I'm tired of fighting.

"What's wrong, honey?" She tries to inject soothing into her voice, but fails. It comes out as a whine instead.

"I thought I was unconscious," I say. "I thought I was unconscious."

"For what?" Mom doesn't know, because I still have told her none of the details.

"The rape," I cry, covering my mouth.

"Oh dear God." She encloses my hand in both of hers.

"I thought I was at least free from those memories," I say between sobs. "He was inside me, Mom. Inside me," I cry.

"Shh. Shush, now, honey. Don't say things like that. You'll make it worse."

I choke, coughing for a minute. She pats my back. How can she actually say that to me? Shush me? Make it worse? "I thought you asked me to share things with you."

"I did...you are..."

My strength evaporates. I can no longer handle my mother. The fact that I remember the rape crushes me back to lying beneath his switchblade. I need to find a way out. That way comes through another Percocet sliding down my throat. The drugs hit my belly and disperse, rushing through my veins like little messengers whispering to my sensitive body to slow down, relax, take it easy, everything's just fine. My head elevates, pulling at the very top, as if someone is picking up my puppet string. My eyelids grow weighty. They sag as I go up the stairs. My skin itches.

In my room, I turn on the TV, flip stations until I find The Daily Show with John Stewart. I flop carefully into bed, ignore the hole and zone out. My legs stretch out before me on the bed as I prop myself up on a fluffy pillow, my head and shoulders resting on the headboard.

The waves of hate and fear continue to crash on me. The thought of hating someone so completely grows in my mind; I let the bloom manifest itself into a full-fledged flower complete with its own army of sister stems. His face, blotchy and

contorted, appears like a ghost next to mine. I realize my eyes are closed again and they fly open. He vanishes. But not from my memory. I know he lies dormant now in my memory, waiting, cultivating the right moment to emerge, rape me all over again. How many times has he done it now? How many more times will he do it? How can I make him stop? I bury my face in my pillow and scream. Then I lie down sideways on the bed, curl up and stare at the television. It doesn't matter what's on. I only see the moving images, not caring about faces or words, my vision unfocused.

Vita

Dawn Leslie Lenz lives in San Francisco, California with her husband, Jason. She received her B.A. from Missouri State University. Though she was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, she grew up in Hillsboro, Missouri, a small town outside St. Louis.