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## The Trash Collector

Cara E. Duryea  
UNO, caraduryea@yahoo.com

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# The Trash Collector

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

by

Cara Duryea

B.A. Baker University, 1997

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## Acknowledgment

This book is dedicated to my writer friend Tom Ryan, who read the first draft of *The Trash Collector*, and who was a source of support, encouragement, and my tether to sanity during the writing process for this book: I miss you. Rest well my friend.

April 25, 2014

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**I.**  
**SALVAGE**  
**VALUE**

Behind every exquisite thing that existed,  
there was something tragic.

Oscar Wilde. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Chapter 1.  
Triaging the Watermelon

Kansas City, Missouri.

*December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2004.* 4:53 a.m.

She lit a cigarette with a shaking hand. The shaking came and went. She didn't have to stay until the end, she decided. Or maybe she'd stayed past it.

Several of the firemen and cops had noticed her, alone among the other onlookers, in her coat and boots and hat. She caught one of the cops watching her drag on her cigarette. She threw it down, half-finished, and crushed it with her boot.

She walked to her car parked a block down, trying not to limp, to walk normal, to think about what came next. She counted her steps to focus on something.

She sat in her car, easing into the seat. Started the engine, letting it warm up. She looked out at the predawn.

A tap at the driver's window a few minutes later interrupted her thoughts. She looked up to see the same cop she'd caught staring. She rolled it down, looking at him innocently, calmly. He was baby-faced and clean-cut.

"Everything all right, miss?"

She thought about how to answer that. But there was no other answer.

"Yes, Officer."

"Did you know the building occupant?"

"*Oh*, no, I was just on my way to pick up a friend from the airport. Stopped to see what all the commotion was about."

"I see."

He glanced over her attire.

"A *special* friend."

She caught him looking at her bare thigh exposed from under the trench coat and smiled as best she could without breaking open her lip, wondering why the cop couldn't see the mess of her through her outfit, before realizing the outfit was all he could see.

"Okay. Well then, be safe."

He waved her on.

She thanked him, smiled at his choice of words, and rolled up her window.

The clock on her dash said 4:53 a.m. What a perfect time.

She thought of picnics on a grassy knoll, a lazy summer afternoon with someone she hadn't yet met, the stars on a clear night in Mexico. She drove south on the interstate, away from the airport. She turned her phone off. She threw it out the window after the fifty-mile marker.

###

3:47 a.m.

One detail at a time.

Minute then expanding — the hot pain shooting through a hipbone, the tightness in her abdomen — she remembered herself as a physical being, felt her body again as she stood shivering, whether from the cold or from her night, it didn't matter. Hovering above, the feeling of sinking into herself again, remembering how the physical and the mental worked together, feeling various sections of herself, and then a core connecting those parts into one, a human.

The heat from the flames warmed her front-side. Draw a conclusion, a line in the sand, in the snow, cross it out again, cross over to the other side. It was her legs, mostly, her knees and ankles clacking uncontrollably together.

Watermelon, watermelon, she muttered in her head, the word she came back to when she was keeping her emotions in check, whether at a funeral or watching a burning building with her dead lover inside.

The December air sifted a mixture of snow and ash onto her hat-clad head, shoulders, boots, and she exhaled, watching her breath puff, dampening her eyelashes, dissipating in front of her. The noises – of sirens, of men shouting, of the buzz around her, of news camera crews –



came into a point of her reality then blended together, creating a melody, a cacophony of distant harmony around her bubble. Just another onlooker in the crowd, nothing to see here.

She'd taken off the tutu and ankle-strap stilettos earlier, the first time she'd left. Exchanged them for the mid-thigh-motorcycle-boots she'd worn over in the snow. She hugged herself tightly, wrapping the trench around her panty-clad body, not having bothered with clothes, socks, a bra. She'd been compelled to come back.

Salt stung her left eye, and she realized from the stinging it was a tear, not snow-ash. The flashing lights distracted her, churning red and blurring her vision, mixing with the metallic taste of blood she sucked down the side of her throat in a spiral with a string of mucous-saliva. If she swallowed any more blood she might vomit.

She swiped the tear away and caught the eye of a grizzled, middle-aged black man watching her. He looked her up and down. She met his look evenly then looked away, not slow, not fast, to the younger Mexican man on her right in his overcoat full of holes and smelling of smoke but with a lighter scent over the smoke, slightly metallic. Her nose was aware now of such almost indiscernible distinctions between the chemical, detergent smell of meth or the arid, metallic-dust smell of crack layered over cigarette smoke. Turning back to the scene in front of her, she watched the firemen fighting the fire, the black smoke filling the air, felt the heat burn away some of the dampness on her cheeks.

Across the street was City Mission, one of the city's homeless shelters, and a small crowd of dirty men in various states of dress, toothlessness, and sobriety had gathered to watch the circus, thankful the red lights blockading traffic were for someone else tonight.

"Hey blanca, you see what happen?" The Mexican was talking to her.

She shook her head, focusing on her breath between her teeth so she would stop shaking.

It was December, not October. Where did November go?

She was still feeling herself out, going over her body from head to toe. The check-engine light was on, diagnose the machine – what seemed to be working, what didn't. Concentrate on the squeakiest wheels, the worst pain first, as she became aware of it. A self-contained field triage. Later, other pain would surface.

The camera crews from the local news stations had set up and were filming from various angles, their bright lights reflecting a dark rainbow from the black smoke mixed with the water being sprayed on the building.

She didn't care. She was staying until the end.

Some of the men from the City Mission were passing flasks around in bags. No one paid attention. Better that they were here than other places.

Her skin hurt from its vigorous scrubbing in the hot shower at home. The wind carried her scent to her nose, and she thought she could still smell him on her skin, even after the shower, even over the hair dye. She wondered if she looked like the crazy person she was under the coat, hat, and boots. She wondered, not for the first time, if crazy people wondered whether or not they were crazy. She looked around at other people, in various states of attire and pajamas, watching the commotion. Everyone else around her *was* crazy – the only reason she didn't stand out, she thought.

Her body had adjusted to the temperature, or her adrenaline had kicked in; either way, her goosebumps were from the electricity of her skin, crawling, trying to feel herself from the inside out again, wanting to eject her soul from her body.

She couldn't start screaming here; she'd already done that. Never again. They hadn't been able to get inside to find anything yet. Not after the second explosion that collapsed the ceiling.

That was now.

She wondered if she would go home later. The word 'home' caused a slight giggle that she shut down before it escaped and became maniacal laughter. What was home anyway, a place with four walls and a roof? A place that housed people you love, a lover, family? Home is where the heart is, right?

She didn't know who to call. Maybe no one. Maybe she should just get in her car and drive somewhere – else. But later. She was here now. This was happening *now*.

She watched the firefighters emerge with Gray's body covered on the gurney. She really didn't have to go home again.

Watermelon, watermelon, she repeated to herself as images from the night flashed through her mind.

\*\*\*

3:19 a.m.

"Tonight's off the ship's log, not recorded, didn't happen."

The sound of her voice startled her in the silence of her apartment. She wondered how long she'd been sitting here inside her head.

She noticed she was smoking before she actually realized she was doing it, saw her left hand with the lit cigarette draw close to her mouth, and she tasted the tobacco as its own air puff

within her mouth until she exhaled it, intact. She followed it with a healthy slurp of whisky she'd poured herself earlier.

“Don't you fucking stop,” Gray's voice flashed through her. “When I cum, I'm going to grab your hair and cum all the way down your throat.”

Suffocation, the memory of not being able to breathe choked her, and her right hand threw itself against empty air, pushing at nothing, pushing it away from her. She heard her breath become shallow, rapid, and wanted to start screaming.

“So, what are you going to do, sit here and think about it?” she asked herself out loud.

She shivered in her robe, still wet from the hot shower but clean, finally. There was no memory of driving home; she only remembered closing the door to her apartment behind her and locking and unlocking to relock the door her usual seven times. Flashes of her body in the shower with its smeared body make-up and glitter, the bruises already showing on her knees and elbows, invaded her thoughts, and she kept shaking her head, trying to shake her thoughts out, the images out. She checked her call logs to make sure she hadn't called anyone. She wondered if firefighters were there now, if the building was still standing, if anyone had found him yet. If he was still dead.

She walked into her bathroom and flipped on the light, startled by her image in the mirror. Instead of her long, red hair, there was long, dark hair. Her aquamarine eyes popped with the newly dark hair, highlighting her high, wide cheekbones and emphasizing her feline resemblance.

“Whoa. Except for the hair, I look like – a total freaking stranger – *wow.*”

She peered into the shower to find the empty hair-dye box on the ledge just inside the curtain, but didn't remember actually doing it. Well, she looked different to the outside eye, at least.

"Maybe you should go watch it burn," she suggested to herself.

"Yeah, maybe I should. Although, I think I already gave him a proper shove off, you know."

"You're a twisted slut."

"Maybe I *will* go."

She suddenly didn't feel like she could stay another minute in her apartment. Springing up from the couch, she grabbed a few items of clothing and shoved them in her backpack along with some make-up, her toothbrush, a towel, and some other essentials. As she gathered a few more items she wondered why she was packing, if she'd already made the choice to leave town, but it didn't matter why – she felt better taking these things with her. Just in case.

A pair of red panties and her motorcycle boots later, she was ready. She wrapped the trench coat Gray had given her around herself and tied it. She checked her clock to make sure her alarm was off. She turned the switch to OFF and then turned it ON again to turn it OFF again. She did this seven times. She checked to make sure the stove was off, and it was, but when she got to the door she walked back to make sure she hadn't turned it on in her confirmation to make sure it was off in the first place. She did this seven times to satisfy herself.

"I'm in my motorcycle boots and the trench coat. I'm checking the stove and it's off," she said out loud, to make sure she was really doing it, not just thinking about it.

In the hallway outside her back door, she locked the door and turned the handle to make sure it was locked. She unlocked it, opened the door, shut it again, relocked it, tried to open it,

found it locked, and turned away. She repeated this six more times. She walked up the stairs, counting her steps in her head, 1, 2, 3.... She knew there were 13 steps. She counted them every time.

Everything was still at this time of night, everyone asleep during the hours between the time the bars close and the sun rises. She walked out to her car, threw her bag in and followed it. She started the car and turned on the windshield wipers to swipe off the coating of snow that had accumulated since she'd been home.

“Get a grip, Clyde,” she said, her breath mocking her in the cold.

She buckled her seatbelt. Looking at her face in the rearview mirror, she watched the dark-haired stranger staring back at her.

“You’re crazy, going back.”

“What’s crazy? Everything that happened tonight was crazy. I’m going.”

She shifted the car into reverse.

“You’re so tight. Arch your back like you want it,” Gray’s voice echoed in her head. She shrank from it, pounding on the steering wheel.

“No. No! Nononono...No.”

Her horn beeped and she collected herself again.

“Don’t think about anything right now. Just drive.”

Push in the clutch, shift into first gear, release the clutch and give it gas, second gear, clutch, neutral, apply the brake. Stop at the stop sign. One-one-thousand. Blinker on, turn left.

She pulled up to Gray’s studio seven minutes later. She parked a block away, the flashing lights and cones preventing traffic from driving further, and got out of the car stiffly, her body

out of survival mode and starting to beg for her attention. She walked toward to the shadowy figures huddled in groups or walking purposefully with equipment.

Counting her steps as she walked to distract herself, she traced the number in her head, making the number equal to its numeric value. The number 1 was drawn with one line, 2 was drawn with two lines, 3 with three and so on; 17's lines were broken down into mini-lines with added serifs so that seventeen lines created the number 17.

She nearly got to the number 14. Or, more approximately, 101 actual steps.

Skirting the light and central action, she loitered on the outer edge, glancing around at faces to see if anyone she knew was there. Not yet, but she was sure they would come.

“I love your tears. You look so beautiful when you cry.”

She wondered if she would ever be able to forget his voice, his face when he said those words as he choked the life from her.

She moved closer to the burning building.

One detail at a time.

**II.  
ART  
VALUE**



## Chapter 2. First Friday Gallery Openings

*October 1<sup>st</sup>.*

Ryan was the first person Clyde met in Kansas City, only because she broke into his gallery/loft to dye her blonde hair and he came home as she was emerging from his space, catching her red-handed – or red-headed. She promised him she hadn't cased the place, and he invited her back inside for a beer. Ryan, upon hearing her story of being a runaway since she was seventeen, invited her to crash at his place until she got on her feet. She decided to stay, to put down roots again, and get back to her one passion in life: acting. Friends from this awkward beginning, they had seen each other through a bad break-up with an alcoholic (hers) and an overdose of pills (his), sealing their bond.

A year and two months later, it was First Friday gallery openings in the Arts District, but Clyde wasn't supposed to be here, at this particular gallery, tonight. She thought she and Ryan

were headed down the block from the 3.14 Gallery, where he lived, to catch her favorite local band at The Tap Room. Instead, he walked her upstream from the yuppie crowd to a gallery she hadn't been to before called The Pistol Social Club.

She heard a clamoring outside just before she walked into the gallery with Ryan, heard a man's baritone rumble say something possibly directed at Ryan or her, but she'd shared a joint with Ryan and was too high to acknowledge people she might know, so they wandered in and upstairs. Ryan led her through the art on display, through the personal space of the gallery owner who lived upstairs, saying hi to various folk then back outside to the beer garden to find his friends.

“Are you a healer?”

She heard the question penetrate her cloud as she was within eyeshot of the keg, a desert oasis to a sand wanderer high on marijuana. She looked to find the owner of the same baritone voice she'd heard walking in, the sexy rumble of it baking in its golden overtones of smooth persuasion, demanding to be heard. Ryan looked back at her as she discovered who was talking to her. She was sucked into a pair of reflective, almost-black eyes surrounded by dark ropes of thick dreadlocks peppered with the occasional strand of silver, and a sideways smile sitting on a bench behind a table. Ryan, seeing her progress halted, left her for liquid.

“Maybe. Yeah, maybe I am. Why? Do I look like a healer?” she asked, cocking an eyebrow, her voice going up in pitch as she picked her way through people's feet and sat beside him on the bench.

“Oh yes. Definitely.”

“What do you need healed?” she asked, thinking he'd say his heart, or something else...male.

Instead, he pulled out a leg encased in a cast. "...tibia...compound fracture...wheelchair for four months."

She watched the words form conversation bubbles from his lips.

"I don't think my healing abilities extend to broken bones," she said, half-flirting, half-apologetic, mostly curious.

Gray. He said his name was Gray. Ryan came back at that moment to check on her, walking down the steps at the back part of the deck that ran the length of the building to the middle roundabout, where Clyde sat with Gray and others.

"You mean you two haven't met?"

She looked at Gray, and they both shrugged.

"I don't think so."

"Well, you haven't told me your name yet. So we haven't met," Gray pointed out.

"I'm Clyde. Nice to meet."

"Is that your real name, Clyde?"

She nodded.

"Can I call you Bonnie? I've never met a girl named Clyde."

"No, you cannot call me Bonnie because my name isn't Bonnie."

"I love *Clyde*, I love it; I was just teasing."

"Because I haven't heard that one before. And yes, my parents wanted a boy."

"Christian!" Gray addressed the pale man with the dark, under-eye circles sipping on a clear drink sitting across from them. "Please vouch for me; give me some points with this woman. Tell this beautiful woman that I'm harmless or, better yet, that I'm an amazing artist and lover who worships women. He's one of my art buyers."

“I think you just vouched for yourself,” Christian replied dryly.

Ryan snorted some beer up his nose and choked on it. He walked back toward the crowd around the keg.

The electricity in the air between them had people watching curiously, turning into an interested audience as they listened out of the corners of slightly turned heads and in between sentences of their own pallid conversation, surmising conclusions of what was happening in front of them.

“How can we not have met before?” he asked after they’d both said hi to several of the same people passing by.

“Maybe we have and just weren’t paying attention,” she suggested. Not to be completely thrown off course and overcome with sudden thirst, she changed course: “So I was on my way to the keg. Can I get you something?”

“No, just come back. Promise me you’ll come back.”

She caught the undercurrent of something deeper, darker in his voice.

“Okay. I’ll come back,” she said, amused.

He leaned over to his friend Christian, stage-whispering, “We might have to go to Vegas tonight. I’m going to marry that girl.”

“How’s Gray, bird?” Ryan asked her a few minutes later at the keg.

“I think he’s a little drunk.”

She felt giddy and wondered about that as she pumped the keg for liquid to quench her cottonmouth. She heard something like disapproval in Ryan’s voice but dismissed it as she concentrated on filling her plastic cup. Her heart flip-flopped, but she felt amazingly calm,

although she couldn't feel her legs. She took a sip, looking back at the group in the middle roundabout of the deck.

She squeezed Ryan's shoulder, then heard Gray's baritone above the others.

"I'm going back to talk to Gray."

"Oh thank God you came back," he said, his voice rushing over itself in his relief. "If you'd have made me chase you down it would have ended so awful, been so embarrassing to me, probably put me back weeks, but I'd have done it ..."

"I came back," she said, smiling to stop his gushing.

"That smile is going to give me a heart attack. You smell so good, so are you here with Ryan? Are you dating? How do you know Duncan?" he asked, his black eyes burning a hole into her as his words surrounded her.

"I – no, Ryan and I are just friends," she said slowly, trying to sort out which question to answer first. She was suddenly aware of Ryan's ear to their conversation from his position on the edge of the stairs by the keg. "I thought we were going to The Tap Room, but here we are instead."

"Hey, Gray, I'm bringing the car around and we're leaving if you want to catch a ride," Christian interrupted apologetically.

"Pull up and I'll meet you out front," Gray answered, without looking away from her. "So, I'd like to continue this conversation with you. Can I call you? Would you like to go on a date? With me?"

"Um, sure, why not. Okay."

"I can meet you somewhere, or you can come over, or I can have my driver pick you up," he said, indicating his leg. "I'm kind of limited, right now, as far as driving goes."

“You have a driver?” she asked, taking a swig of beer. “Well, I think definitely I’d like your driver to pick me up.”

“I forgot to add, he’s my crack-head driver.”

“Oh, well then that settles it. For sure, I want your crack-head driver to pick me up for our date.”

“When should we have our date?”

Ryan was rallying the troops.

“Um, Tuesdays and Thursdays are generally good for me?” Suddenly the air had changed, departure was imminent.

“Tuesday. I’ll call you. What’s your number?” His phone was out and she gave him her number, and he called her phone so she had his number. He sniffed her obviously as they hovered by each other and she looked sideways at him, a sideways smile on her face to match her look. He exhaled loudly, looking up at the sky through the latticework overhead.

“Oh my God, you smell so good, I’m guessing that you are either ovulating,” he began, his eyes swooping back down to catch her eyes.

She felt a series of emotions cross her face: offense? desire? admission? Her blush reached her smile and eyes.

“Or close to it,” he finished.

He closed his eyes and inhaled her again.

“I’m not sure if I should be offended or applaud you for your perceptiveness, but, honestly, I think you may be right,” she said, her hand at her chin, her fingers hovering over her mouth, settling down around her lips as she was forced to admit something taboo out loud.

He smiled at her, nodding.

His ride was ready. “I wanted to make a graceful exit, but I’m afraid that’s just not happening tonight,” he said, bowing to her as Christian took his wheelchair to the bottom of the steps and another, solidly built guy lent a shoulder to assist Gray with hopping down the five or six deck stairs to the sidewalk.

She sat looking after his lumbering, ungraceful exit – beauty and the beast – then added him to her contacts.

“Are you ready? We’re heading to The Tap Room.”

It was Ryan, entourage in tow, beckoning her, edge in his voice.

“Of course. I’ve been ready since rock-n-roll,” she drawled, abandoning her beer cup, standing and moving to exit.

Later – drunker, braver – at home, she sent a text message to Gray:

I think you’re totally weird. Liked meeting u. Call me sometime.

### Chapter 3. First Date

*October 5<sup>th</sup>.*

“Okay, so I called my driver, and I forgot he’s off for the night but I could call you a taxi or a limo,” Gray started on their phone call setting up their date.

“Or you could give me your address and I could drive myself,” Clyde responded.

She doodled notes on a lime-green sticky pad as they talked: Gray. 14<sup>th</sup> and Circle. 2<sup>nd</sup> garage door. 8:00ish.

She’d stuck the sticky note onto her passenger seat along with a gift, the contents of which were wrapped in bubble wrap. She was slightly nervous and hating it because nervous equaled emotion which equaled vulnerability which equaled power struggle.



She thought about driving past his place once she'd turned onto the street, thinking she might drive back home, pretend she couldn't find him, forget about him. But she pulled into the parking lot the second time around the block after seeing his outline in the wheelchair against the open overhead-garage door and the lighted space behind him, watching her car circle his block again.

She waved at him as she climbed the stairs and he watched her from his wheelchair.

“How do I do this?”

She indicated his position above a loading and unloading dock about three-and-a-half feet over from the door in front of her.

“Go through that door in front of you, come down the hallway and around to the right, and then follow it all the way back this-a-way.”

She threw a leg between the stairs and the garage door once she was up far enough to use the wall for support and, hugging the outside wall, she half-leapt, half-swung herself into the room beside Gray.

“Or you can do that.”

Clyde grinned. “So, hi there.”

“Hi there, how are you? I've missed you, can I tell you something?” he asked as he grabbed her hand and kissed the top of it.

“Sure.”

“I couldn't wait to see you, but I was nervous before you got here. You make me nervous. Butterflies.”

“I almost drove right past you and back home.”

The truth came out before she could stop it, like an automated response.

“So, you make me nervous, too. Apparently.”

“Can I get you a drink?” he asked, looking over his shoulder at her as he wheeled to a metal work table with a bottle of scotch and a plastic cup.

“Sure, a drink would be great. Thanks,” she said, following his lead, still looking around.

“You have nice teeth. I’m sorry about my teeth,” he said, rolling from one sentence to another, spinning from one conversational point to another.

She looked around the warehouse space, awestruck.

“I hadn’t noticed your teeth, silly, but I *do* think you’ve got the sexiest lips. I like how they’re both poufy and pulled in tight at the same time. You’ve got Heath Ledger lips.”

“See that scar?” he asked, pointing to his upper lip.

She looked closer.

“Maybe – yes, I guess.”

“I got hit in the mouth with a two-by-four once.”

“So your sexy lips are the result of being hit in the face?”

“It’s why they kind of suck in like you say, but pouf out.”

“You’re telling me all your secrets already,” she said, running her hand over his dreadlocks as she stood beside him, watching him pour scotch into a plastic cup.

“How do you take it? If you’d like ice or tonic, we need to head to the back room – to the break room.”

His question took its time penetrating her consciousness; she was too busy taking in the art surrounding her: huge paintings on white matted boards hung on walls; two dozen sets of praying ceramic hands on brown paper lined one wall along the floor; a canvas with vivid colors esoterically forming a woman lay on a table; long strips of white material twisted around into

knots and odd shapes were hanging up to dry in front of an industrial fan. Above them was a hoist with a pulley that could take them up to a mezzanine level she now noticed. Everywhere she looked, there was more – a visual explosion, vying for full attention.

“Scotch is great. Rocks, fantastic,” she finally responded. “Give me the tour. Wow.”

Shelves ran the length of the hallway, along a supporting wall that separated the garage space. Shelves filled with everything imaginable. Various crates with tools, rollaway carts with drawers hiding their cargo, dishes, china, glasses stacked in boxes, Catholic animal tallow candles, crosses, lamps, household items, car parts, signage, a skeeball machine, canes behind doors, helmets hanging on hooks – motorcyclists’, welders’, construction hard hats, others – the place was overflowing with anything and everything.

“Oh, this is just a small part of it. I’ll take you to the back. This is the back part of the artist studios I run the residency program through. It’s a non-profit. I’ll show you the studios, too,” he said as he wheeled in front of her.

They passed one corner with a taxidermied crow on a white pedestal with foliage and leaves and grass.

“That was for an exhibit we had a few months back,” he said, pointing at the crow. “So how old are you? I’m 47. Virgo. September 11th.”

“No way are you 47,” she said. She had been guessing he was in his mid-thirties.

“It’s the clean life I’ve lived,” he said, looking backwards to wink at her. “Does it bother you? My age?”

“I like older men.”

She walked past work tables with various tools, implements, artistic pieces and paintings in various stages of process, past a long, industrial table that ran the length of one side of a partitioned space in the room.

“You didn’t tell me how old you are,” he persisted.

“I’m 7-going-on-80-going-on-17-going-on-33-to-the-8th-power. Or 24,” she answered.

“That’s some kind of genius math. When’s your birthday?”

“February.”

She ran her fingers along some dusty gargoyles.

“February what?”

“Ha. Actually, February 29<sup>th</sup>. I’m a leap year baby. So February 28<sup>th</sup> the other three years. See? I’m really only 6.”

“So *that’s* why you’re so hard to pin down. You’ve managed to escape the age realm and can exist simultaneously throughout time as one person. Wow,” he said. He stopped wheeling for a moment.

“And now I’m telling you my secrets. So what is all this stuff? How’d you get it?”

“I collect it. I create art through various mediums; I paint but I also do sculpture and mixed media, exhibits, you name it – I don’t label it, I just create it. And I’ve got 8,000-square-feet to do it in.”

“I was guessing around 6,500.”

As much as she kept looking, there was more: layers into the shelves, stacks of books and vinyl records, equipment and, as much as there was, it was all somehow oddly organized. And he seemed to know where things were. As she asked questions, he answered in detail or

pointed things out: “this over here was from an estate sale up north,” and “that’s from an auction” or “I’ve got someone interested in this, so all this will probably go.”

Clyde wondered if this was what was called hoarding.

She ran her fingers along some crates with unopened packages of various blades and replacement saws. Spotting a four-foot-tall plastic tube half-full of lighters, her face lit up.

“Hey! I collect lighters, too.”

“Those are dead lighters. What do you collect lighters for?”

“I collect dead ones, too, throw them in a drawer. You know, for the flint, in case the shit hits the fan or the apocalypse happens or something,” she said, laughing at her own weirdness reflected back at her. “I’ve heard even dead lighters have useful flint for starting a spark. I’ve never really thought about it consciously before. I just do it.”

“I just collect those for art. Nothing cool like you.”

“I don’t know if it’s cool or just weird. A lighter, duct tape, peanut butter, a magnifying glass and a sharp knife. That’s my post-apocalyptic kit,” she recited.

“Listen to you, MacGyver,” he teased as he led her past part of a carousel, an elephant, with a built-in ladder running up its back so one could sit on its head.

“Actually, I know I look puny, but I’d bet on me in a survivor show. I surprise myself in a pinch,” she said, flexing a bicep.

“I believe you,” he said. He reached out to feel it.

She noticed the top of his finger with no fingernail and realized it had been cut off.

“What happened?” she asked.

He held up his hand, showing her his first three fingers.

“Chopped them off with a band saw years ago. One of the risks of the trade.”

They walked and wheeled down a long corridor connecting two buildings. Rounding a corner, they arrived at the ice machine and break room with a door marked RESTROOM in front of them.

“It’s unisex, but clean – there are stalls,” he said in response to her glance. He got ice for her glass and indicated another door. “That leads to the day studio. We’ve got eight artists-in-residence and three interns. I’ll take you in there later.”

She stood in front of him, sipping her drink and looking expectantly at him for what came next.

“Okay, now that I’ve given you the introductory tour, I need to give you something. Follow me please.”

“What are you doing?”

She followed him into a hallway that led into an adjacent room full of racks of clothing.

He wheeled directly to one rack in the middle of the group and stopped in front of it, reaching into the overstuffed rack and pulling out a short, black tulle tutu.

“I feel the need to paint you. Right now. Would you try this on? I will do anything you ask if you let me paint you in this. *Anything.*”

“Serious, you want me to wear this? So you’re not really giving it to me...it comes with strings attached.”

“The tutu’s yours...I just want to paint you in it first. And, doesn’t everything have strings?”

“How long are we talking here?” she asked as she sipped her drink and held the tutu at arm’s length.

“It won’t take too long. Just long enough. Pretty please? You inspire me. We can talk while I work.”

“Okay. I’ll just ask for a future favor. Deal?” she asked, her eyes squinting into narrow slits.

“Anything.”

“And if you sell it for a million bucks or any bucks, I get twenty-five percent.”

“Deal. Meet me in the warehouse where you came in. Do you remember the way?”

“Sure. I think.”

“Take a left out of the bathroom and head down this hall. Don’t turn off into any rooms, and when it ends take the hallway that leads you left. Always go left. That’s the rule.”

“Aye, aye, Cap’n,” she said, mock-saluting him.

“No, no. Commander.”

He whirled his wheelchair in an about-face and wheeled off.

Gray was grabbing supplies when she returned. He was at a low table with a stretched canvas over stiff backing when he spotted Clyde standing, watching him. He wheeled over to a folding chair.

“Put your boot up. My black angel. I want to dress you and paint you so many ways. My muse,” he said. His energy crackled off his body, emphasizing his already animated gestures as he patted a place for her combat boot.

She sniffed his scent in the air he disturbed. It was different now; a dry, metallic smell on top of the cigarette-and-concrete smell. It had a whisper to it: Ssshh, everyone has secrets, file it away with the others, don’t ask, don’t tell and it won’t matter.

“If I’m your muse and you paint me, you’ll capture my soul. Can you be responsible for that?”

She sat down and lifted her leg with its boot to where Gray’s hand waited, knowing her ass in its g-string was hanging out of the tutu. Her lingerie strap, hooked to its thigh-high hosiery, too.

“Every artist takes a piece of his subject’s soul, but he also gives a piece of his soul in return, so there’s an exchange, not a captive situation.”

“Says you.”

He moved her leg gently. “Comfy?”

She nodded.

He held a protractor to measure the angle.

“Perfect. Don’t move,” he said as he swiped the canvas. “Diga me, mamacita rica. What are you working on right now, Bonnie?”

“Okay, I told you once.”

“But you’re my bonnie Clyde, Bonnie.”

“Well maybe I’ll just call you Blue. My Gray is Blue. How about it, Blue?”

“I’ll answer to whatever you want to call me, pretty Bonnie. So you working on any creative projects right now?”

“Funny that you should ask. Are you familiar with Oscar Wilde?”

“Intimately but not physically, you know, because he *is* dead and I’m not really gay, only maybe bisexual, plus I don’t care for sex with skeletons.”

“So much more than I *ever* wanted to know,” she said, lifting her drink to her lips.

“You were saying?”



“So I’m in practice right now for a play. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I’m playing Sibyl Vane as well as several other female minor characters.”

“So why’s it funny?” he asked.

“Funny?”

She’d forgotten what she’d said.

“That I should ask. What you’re doing,” he prompted.

“Oh, because I suddenly feel like you are Basil Hallward and I’m Dorian Gray.”

“So, don’t listen to the devil on your shoulder, and you won’t be Dorian Gray,” he shrugged, his hand busy applying broad strokes to the canvas.

“Let’s put it to the test. We’ll make as much sin happen as we can, and see if we can make art imitate life imitating art. You in?” he asked. He dropped the brush, wheeled over to her and kissed her. “Besides, it’s not a portrait of your face, my dear.”

“Mmm, I’m in, you charmer. My soul – or butt – is yours to capture.”

He went back to work. Clyde watched him paint her, his furrowed brow and half-smile. She counted in her head how many sips she took to finish her drink while he painted. 36. She wondered if Gray ever counted things.

The painting was roughed out. Gray said he would let it dry before adding other colors to it, foreign objects to build layers, and then it would be done. Clyde changed back into her clothes and they chain-smoked, garage doors open, talking over the music.

“I believe in that fine line between genius and insanity, and I can tell by the way your mind jumps around that it works like mine,” she said, working up to her question.

They were on round three of drinks.

“So how often do you cross that line? Between genius and insanity?”

“Constantly.” The word shot out like a bullet between his lips.

“Ever been institutionalized?”

“Five times.”

“Right. Nice. I crossed that line a few times myself. A lot of creative people do. Never institutionalized, but doesn’t mean I shouldn’t have been, right? Nervous breakdown? Check that off the list. You grow as a person. As an artist,” she said.

“I almost forgot,” he said, pulling a small wooden box from the air.

“What’s this?”

“Open it, senorita.”

Inside were four Mexican Catholic animal-tallow candles.

“Pretty sweet. Thank you. Oh, I have something for you, too,” she said. She jumped up, walked to her purse and picked up the bag she brought with her.

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” he responded, his pleased expression belying his words as he dug through the bubble wrap. He pulled out a small, silver replica of a human leg and a heart, and looked at them closely.

“So. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of ‘milagros’,” she began, squatting down so she was looking up at him sitting in his wheelchair.

“*Los Milagros, si, que se utilizan como amuletos de protección o para la salud – pequeños, muchas gracias, senorita.... Corazón del Cielo...*I’ve spent some time in Central and South America, it’s the perfect gift, you don’t even know. Thank you.”

“They’re for your leg. To help it heal.”

“That’s the sweetest thing, come here.”

They kissed, scotch and cigarette smoke mingling in the air between them, cutting the lust with vice. She inhaled his smell. He smelled familiar, whatever that meant.

“What do you know about them?” he asked her in between kisses. “Milagros.”

“Oh. I found these in my backpack with a note that said ‘San Miguel de Allende, MX. May 2000.’ So I asked this Mexican guy I know who washes dishes at Crema de la Virtud about them, and he said they were prayers, miracles, used as offerings on a shrine, or to wear, to pray for, totems, to manifest God’s help.”

“Have you heard about the Patron Saint of Vices, San Simón from Guatemala? Maximón?”

“Oh yes, Maximón! Will hosts that Maximón celebration around Halloween at Spiderhouse every year, right?”

“Well, I actually own the official traveling Maximón shrine that he uses. It’s one I brought back from Guatemala. I was the Patron Saint five years ago,” Gray said, his chest puffing up a little.

“Crazy. I’ve worked at Spiderhouse since last September. We’ve had to have met before, you know that, right?”

“Maybe it’s like you said – we weren’t paying attention before,” he said, pushing a piece of her hair gently behind her ear. “Well, and I haven’t been to Spiderhouse in maybe a year. Come on, I want to show you my piano and my urban garden.”

“Whoa, there – piano. You have a piano?”

“That I even play.”

“And you have a garden. Throw in the artist and you’re a triple threat. Where’s your piano and urban garden?”

“Just around the corner. My place.”

He set the building alarm before they left and she watched him punch in the numbers: 901147. They walked out of the front of his studio so he could wheel down the sidewalk.

Clyde counted her steps in her head, tracing the number, starting over at the number one with each number traced. She got to almost 11, or 63, steps. She knew the calculation of the equivalency of her step-counting, up to 20 (10=55, 11=66, 12=78, and so on). After that, she repeated in 10s or 20s if she wanted to calculate the real number of steps taken and she was walking any distance.

Gray talked about the history of the studio he ran, its patrons and mission as she counted steps in her head.

At her car, she climbed in her open trunk to fold her backseat down flat, converting her trunk and backseat into one to accommodate his wheelchair.

He folded it up and handed it to her, balancing on one leg with her open passenger door while she hoisted the heavy chair into her car.

“You got it?”

“Got it,” she confirmed, the alcohol and adrenaline adding strength to her muscles. His place wasn’t far, just a block up and two or three blocks west of the studio.

“How cute!”

He’d found her sticky note on the passenger seat.

“I’m keeping it. It’s like a little love note.”

“You’re ridiculous. You weren’t supposed to see that,” she said, embarrassed. She thought about taking it from him then dismissed the thought. “If you really want it...”

“Oh, I’m keeping it. What’s this?” he asked, taking a hair band she had wrapped around her stick shift.

“One of my hair bands,” she responded nonchalantly. She was nervous now, feeling exposed; he was taking in too much of her, he perceived too much from so little. Her eyes darted around her car to see what he was seeing, what secrets were exposed.

He slipped it on his wrist.

“I’m wearing you until the next time I see you.”

She was uncomfortable, feeling like he’d just stolen one of her hairs for voodoo purposes.

“It’s for my shrine,” he said, reading her thoughts.

“Weirdo.”

“Takes one to know one,” he said, mimicking a third-grader’s retort.

“Hmph!” she said, turning up the music.

When she pulled around his block, he had her park outside a nondescript, white building with an empty parking lot on one side and an empty warehouse on the other side of it.

“I have to go in the front – no steps. I usually park in the back, but I’ve been letting my day guy use my car.”

“Your ‘day guy’?” she asked, turning off the car.

“He’s my mechanic, runs errands for me, cleans the place, helps me with whatever I need here.”

“Oh, is this your crack-head driver?”

“No, that’s my plumber. My mechanic’s the meth head,” he said, opening the car door.

“Meth head?” she called after him, opening her door.

“Oh meth heads are great,” he reassured her while he balanced on one leg. “They like lists – they get things done and want more, they can’t stand not being busy. Crack heads are a different story, never sure which side of the crack head you’re going to get, talk your ear off while they all shuffling around ‘ma’an...those some nice scissors, can I have those, ma’an, ohh, a used toothpick, can I have that ma’an?” He mimicked a black man’s urban dialect. “Yeah, you’ve got to watch everything around a crack head, or it’s gone: your wallet, your lighter, anything lying around, you got to keep an eye on. The toothpick in your mouth. Doesn’t matter what it is.”

She climbed in the back of her open trunk to lift the wheelchair out of the car as he talked and handed it to Gray. He opened it and closed her car door, sitting in his chair.

She couldn’t tell if he was serious.

“Sounds like kleptomania to me.”

“Or a crack head,” he said, his eyes unreadable but deep, like a well.

His building was situated across from the City Mission. Several men were sitting on a ledge outside a wire fence smoking. She wondered if the men were listening to their conversation.

“There’s always someone out here,” he said in response to her glance across the street. “They’re supposed to be out getting jobs during the day, but nights... You know how that goes. It’s why I use the back entrance.”

She locked the car, and he rolled up the sidewalk, inserting his key in the lock. He turned to her.

“Okay normally I’m really organized at my home, but the front room is full of this guy’s shit. He asked me if he could temporarily keep some stuff here and I said yes. I didn’t know he was going to fill the entire room. I’m sorry.”

He opened the door, and they walked through the dark room, full of black trash bags of someone’s stuff piled on top of each other. Art on the walls behind the bags. An upright piano in the corner.

“Who’s stuff?”

“Oh, this guy who’s in between gigs I know, passing through.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask if he was a junkie of any kind but she was afraid of the answer.

“Ah, the piano…”

“I’ll play for you, I promise.”

He rolled past an open stairway leading to a basement on the left. The space was long, more gallery than living space, segregated by walls with large pieces of art.

“Watch out for the open stairs,” he threw over his shoulder as he carefully navigated a tight corner between the stairs and the second room. “I missed with my chair a week ago and caught myself about a third of the way down.”

“You’re a total masochist, aren’t you?”

They walked into a second room with a concrete floor, no furniture, large pieces of art on the brightly painted walls.

“Yours?” she asked, admiring a painting.

“No, I don’t display my stuff here.”

A door to another room was closed.

“Bedroom, it’s a mess,” he answered, seeing her look.

The bathroom was right beside his bedroom, a brand-new tub with a handicap rail still in plastic.

“No running water hooked up to the tub yet – I’m still working on it. Toilet and sink work.”

“Where do you shower?” she asked, curious about the details.

“Duncan’s.”

There was a third room from which he pulled out a metal folding chair and set it up for her, dusting the seat off. It smelled of gasoline and other metallic, dusty smells.

“Here’s a chair. Sorry, I shoved all my furniture into the extra rooms or storage. Easier to get around in this,” he said, indicating his wheels. “And I like my space spare. Everything else in my life has clutter.”

“No, that’s okay. I’m a floor sitter anyway.”

“Yeah but this is concrete, and you don’t have much padding, baby. Wait, don’t sit yet, I told you I have a garden. I want to show you the garden.”

She followed him into his kitchen, and he pulled out some scotch to mix with tonic and ice in plastic cups.

“I don’t use real plates or glasses. Everything’s disposable. Makes life easier that way,” he explained.

“Sounds metaphorical to me.”

“Everything’s metaphor,” he answered, stirring their drinks with his finger and handing her a glass.



They toasted with their plastic cups and took a drink. He opened a large swinging door chained around a post. An overhead garage door was already open. She walked out on the concrete landing, where steps led down to a garden. To her right, a fountain. She walked down the stairs, Gray watching her from the landing.

“It’s so great. Perfect.”

She walked around carefully placed stones and art, a birdbath, a small, decorative metal table and chairs. Various sizes and heights of mostly dead flowers and stalks surrounded her. She closed her eyes and saw herself sitting at the table on a Sunday morning with a cup of coffee and a cigarette.

“It’s in sad shape right now. No, really. You should see it when I keep it up. I haven’t been able to get down there at all for months, so it’s really neglected.”

“I love it, though. I can see what you mean. It’s a great space. Just perfect,” she assured him. A fence lined the perimeter, beyond which were a parking lot and a tall, white building.

“It’s an urban oasis.”

“The back entrance to the garden is here,” Gray said, pointing at the gate, then to a door under the building with a padlock. “That door leads to the basement.”

They sat outside on the landing, he in his wheelchair, Clyde in a chair beside him, talking, kissing, talking, kissing. Some cigarettes and drinks later they meandered back inside to cool the flames.

His phone rang, a slinky tune, a song that played for a woman, she thought.

He silenced the ringer.

“Sorry, I usually keep it on vibrate. I have to keep my phone on – business.”

“Do you need to take it?”

“Oh no, that’s not business. That’s an old friend of mine, long story. See this tattoo?”

He pulled up his shirt sleeve.

“Yeah, that’s her name. Her father just died.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Should you take it?” she asked again.

“Not right now.”

His phone beeped with voice mail notification. It had been beeping all night with notifications, she realized.

“I want to play for you,” he said.

He led her to the piano in the front room, and she stood beside him at a ninety-degree angle, his wheelchair the piano bench, watching him close his eyes as his fingers conjured music from the keys, pounding, rolling across them. Beethoven, she thought, with his dreadlocks mimicking Beethoven’s crazed coif and the dark passion with which he played, the weighted heaviness that dripped from the notes.

He played her body over the notes, feeling her throb into his fingertips over the keys.

“I’m calling it *Wilde Clyde*,” he said of his improvisation.

Finally, he looked up at her and she slid her body over, turning to face him, interrupting his right hand with her right hip. Her ass slid across the keys, making a rumble of disjointed music and she giggled, inserting herself between his legs as she slid down the scales.

“Now I’ll play for you,” she said, as she intertwined her hands in and around his dreads, mussing them further.

His hands dropped to her hips. They trailed their mouths over each other’s faces and down necks, the sounds from the piano darkening as her body slid down the keys. He grabbed her legs under her knees and pulled her onto his lap in the wheelchair, letting her elbows hold her

up on the piano. Her legs were bent over his arms and his hands ran over her thin t-shirt up her spine, one grabbing a handful of her hair and one reaching around to fondle a breast.

“I want to fuck you in your wheelchair.”

“So that’s it – you’re just into kinky handicap sex, aren’t ya?” he growled.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Will you still like me when I’m standing?”

“Mmmm-hmmm,” she affirmed as she shook her head no, smiling.

Her legs were up over his shoulders now, the heat from their bodies building, and she arched her back, teasing him, grinding her crotch into him on the chair. His phone buzzed in his shirt pocket with another notification.

He pushed her abruptly off his lap, saying, “Oh no, that’s it!”

And she was suddenly standing against the piano, balancing herself, bemused.

“I really like you,” he explained. “I want to take it slow with you. And I’m about to lose control and tear your clothes off you.”

“I really like you, too,” she said, arching her eyebrow, wondering who was on the other end of his phone notifications.

“You must leave now,” he said, suddenly in a hurry, laughing, maniacal about her leaving. He slapped her ass through her jeans when she bent to kiss him.

“I have to get my purse.”

“Hurry before I attack you. I’m going to play for you as you leave. Wait,” he called as she started to leave the room. “Come here one more time.”

He grabbed her and kissed her ferociously.

She tasted blood in her mouth when she backed away this time.

“Ow, vampire! You drew blood.”

“Sorry. Can I taste it? Kiss me again.”

He seemed on a rush, giddy, high. She pulled her hand away from her mouth, a smear of blood on it.

“No way. I’m getting my purse.”

She followed his piano playing back into the room.

“Hey, I’m really sorry about drawing blood. I want you to do me a favor, will you?” he asked, continuing to play.

“I think *you owe me* the future favor, remember? You’re building up a tab.”

“I always make good. Promise. I want you to touch yourself. I want to taste you before you leave.”

She laughed. He was serious.

“You’re ba-ad…” she exhaled softly. Eyes on each other, she snuck her right hand down her jeans and reached her middle finger inside. She withdrew it and brought it to his lips, her eyes never leaving his, the prey caught in the hypnotic snake dance. He licked her finger, closing his eyes. She felt the pull of his mouth on her finger and the rush below in her groin; he started playing the piano again, the heavy music flowing. She walked backwards toward the door, watching him bent over the piano in his wheelchair. He took one hand off the keys to wave at her.

“When will I see you again?” he called to her halfway out the door.

“I don’t know. I’ll call you.”

“When will I see you again,” he repeated, turning back to the piano.

“Soon.”

She closed the door behind her to the music, drove home on adrenaline and fell asleep after masturbating, the sound of his phone vibrating creeping into her thoughts, the smell of secrets that can't be forgotten once recalled.

## Chapter 4. The Birthday Party

*October 12<sup>th</sup>.*

They had their second date a week later: a birthday memorial dinner to celebrate the life of an artist friend who had died from AIDS three years ago.

She met Gray at his home this time. Her phone beeped with a new text at a stoplight.

Gray: Charlie Parker's grave = sadness.

Parked out front on the street, she noted the men watching her from the City Mission across the street. He met her at the door on crutches, beaming. She reflected his smile.

“Yay, you're up on your feet!”

She let herself fall into his tall, bulky frame now that she realized his full height – at least a full foot taller than her.

“Just so you know, the crack head has been called about his shit. He’s coming to get it tomorrow. Then the front room will be clean again,” he said as they walked back to the kitchen. “It’s my first day up on the crutches. I wanted to greet you on my feet.”

“Take it easy then. Don’t overdo it, right? So what was up with Charlie Parker’s grave? You’re talking about Charlie “Bird” Parker, yes? Why is it sad?” she asked, leaning against his kitchen counter, taking a sip of the drink he handed her.

“Oh, the text message. Yeah, I visited his grave this weekend. I’ll take you one day. It is sad, so sad though, it’s really sad, sad, sad,” he repeated it under his breath, smiling, his eyes locked on hers, rubbing one of his hands up her thigh. He had this trick of not moving his lips when he spoke rapidly, like a ventriloquist.

“I’d love to visit Charlie Parker’s grave with you sometime.”

Cruise’s birthday dinner was at The Pistol Social Club where they’d met on First Fridays. After a drink and fighting off primal urges, she drove the short distance to Duncan’s place.

She’d been vague in her answer to Ryan’s text asking her what her plans were that night, not telling him she was going out with Gray. For some reason she wanted to keep this on the down-low, fly under everyone’s radar, feel it out first. Gray, however, had been gushing to apparently everyone about her, including his interns, he told her as they walked in together.

She was surprised to see Ryan at her side, asking her who she’d come with.

She stammered slightly as she replied unevenly, “I’m here with Gray.”

She was surprised at the uncertain tone of her voice in her attempt to make it sound natural, as if he would know this already. She caught Gray watching them as he talked with

someone else at the table around which they congregated. He winked at her. Ryan caught their interaction and moved on.

“What happened to your leg? I haven’t seen you around in a while,” said the guy to Gray’s right.

“Oh, I was dumpster diving for art, and landed on it – compound fracture. I have to visit the surgeon weekly.”

“Dumpster diving?” Clyde asked, leaning in to hear better.

“It’s where I get a lot of my art and stuff for collecting. You ever been dumpster diving?”

She shook her head, her eyes widening a little, leaning back.

“It’s so much fun, you have to go with me. I’ll take you sometime. I’ll take you picking, too.”

“Picking? What’s picking?”

“You know the bags of trash along the highways?”

“Yeah...” she said dubiously.

“So much trash. Picking. I mean, I don’t pick off the highways, but in certain neighborhoods... You wouldn’t believe the stuff I find, that people throw away. Most of my art comes from trash. I also sell about \$2,000-\$3,000 of other people’s stuff each month. From the trash,” he said, throwing his hands wide to emphasize his words.

“Truly, one man’s trash is another man’s treasure,” she said, cocking an eyebrow with this new aspect.

The birthday party dinner had turned into just a party, having spilled over to the outside garden when Gray took her upstairs, wanting to brave the stairs on his crutches for her. She let



him take her on the tour she'd had before with Ryan, although Gray steered her in a different direction, into the bedroom. He plopped down on Duncan's bed. She stood looking around at the walls covered in various art depicting naked men.

"I call this 'the penis room,'" he said.

"Wow!" she giggled, laying on the bed beside him.

He ran his hand up her side over her clothes. Her hand wound around his neck, and she pulled him to her, kissing him. She hadn't wanted a man like this, maybe ever. She could feel their pulses intertwine, and she knew he could get inside her head, read her soul, her body.

And she wanted to let him.

He pulled back, exhaling loudly, slapping her rump.

"Do you know what you do to me? Oh my gawd, girrrrl, I'm jacking off like a twelve-year-old. Usually when you're a guy my age, you're going off visual things in front of you or things that have happened... but I'm fantasizing about things that haven't even happened with you yet – that's what you do to me."

She wanted to kiss his lips, his Heath Ledger-by-face-smash lips. She traced the wrinkles in his forehead and watched them smooth out a bit from her touch, trailing her fingers down his cheeks to the laugh lines around his mouth, ending on his lips. Their eyes looked into each other and she realized she hadn't really ever looked into anyone's eyes before this moment.

She rolled over onto him, straddling him, kissing him, twining her fingers into his thick mat of chest hair that curled out of his shirt that she had unbuttoned and opened slightly.

"I think we should leave the penis room," he said, his hands on her hips, holding her to him.

She rubbed her crotch back and forth on him, teasing them both, feeling her heart pound out of her chest, the heat build between their pelvises. Her breath started coming in raspy gasps.

“No...not yet,” she panted, rubbing herself faster on his crotch bulge, her tight jeans providing friction. Her hands found his on her hips, and she laced her fingers into his, holding her hips over his hands, rubbing faster, concentrating all her energy, bringing his hands up over his head and pinning them down. His head came up to kiss her, and she leaned her brow to his, sweating.

“Yes – yes – ohmygodyes–”

“You gonna cum for daddy? Huh, are you, dirty girl?” he whispered as he kissed her to muffle her sounds.

She swallowed her screams, her legs trembling as she sank onto his chest, his hand reaching to grab her hair gently, to pull her up so he could kiss her again.

“Did you cum, baby?” he asked, still hard.

“Yeah...yes,” she sighed, kissing him, “and I want more.”

“Oh, this isn’t even started yet.”

They made out for a few more seconds, then he lifted her off of him gently.

“We ought to leave before Duncan finds us in here and gets pissed. ‘Gray, Goddamnit, you take those sheets you just got your love stink all over off my bed right now and I want new ones on before the end of the night!’” he said, mimicking Duncan’s voice.

She giggled and jumped off the bed, handing him his crutches.

“That was totally inappropriate behavior, and I blame you entirely,” she said as she looked back coyly, opening the door.

He was right behind her, adjusting himself.

“And I will take that blame and then some. I think it’s time for us to go home, what do you say?”

“Definitely.”

And then they were at the stairs, steep stairs, and she looked down, then back at Gray on his crutches.

“Um, maybe I should get someone to help you down these stairs, what do *you* think?”

“Nope, I’ve got it. The trick is – see, just turn a bit to the side and go down – like – this,” he said, sliding one foot down at a time.

“If you fall, I’m letting you go,” she said, staying one step ahead of him. “If that’s the test of true love or something, then sorry, man, I’d flunk.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s why I had you go first, so you could provide the pillow,” he joked.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

“Don’t. You’re distracting me.”

They took a breather halfway down. He was sweating with his effort, having been wheelchair bound for four months. He’d bitten off more than he could swallow, but she kept talking and distracting him, and they made it. Goodbyes were exchanged, and she looked for Ryan among the motley crew of poor artists, wealthy entrepreneurs, eccentric art enthusiasts, and trust fund babies of all ages who supported the artists. He was gone.

Once inside the car, Gray instructed her to drive to the Valero gas station down a few blocks on Grand Boulevard.

“Oh, the old ‘Crack Total,’ right? I dubbed it Crack Total, you know, because it was scary.”

“Trust me, it still is,” he answered. “But it’s just down a few blocks.”

“Still is what? Scary or Crack Total?”

“Uh, both.”

“Where’s Jeannie tonight?” Gray asked the old woman behind the counter as they walked in.

“Called in.”

Clyde grabbed some mixers for drinks while Gray used the bathroom. Ryan walked in as Gray emerged from the bathroom.

“Ryan!” Gray shouted, slapping him on the back. “Now it’s officially a party.”

“I didn’t see you leave Duncan’s,” she said.

Ryan shrugged it off, visibly uncomfortable. “Yeah, I needed to call it an early night. I’ve got two paintings I’ve got to get done for tomorrow. Forgot my smokes and ran out of beer.”

Gray requested a bottle of bourbon from behind the counter, and, seeing Ryan’s Boulevard Pale Ale beer, said, “Hey man, I’ve got that.”

Ryan protested, but Gray insisted on paying. Ryan pushed his beer over for the cashier to ring up, and Gray paid for it and the cigarettes along with his purchase but opened Ryan’s case of beer, taking two beers out. “But I’m taking two beers, okay?”

Ryan didn’t say anything, but his eyes met hers, and she felt something inside her squirm uncomfortably, although she couldn’t pinpoint it.

“See you,” Ryan waved, not looking at her as he left.

As they were leaving, another car pulled up. It was Gray’s friend Christian she’d met the first night.

“Hey you guys,” Christian said, looking over Gray at her.

Gray was giving the finger to a man walking into the Valero. “Hey, you’re not supposed to be in this neighborhood, fuck-head.”

The man looked nervously back over his shoulder at Gray, who flipped him off again, loudly saying, “Yeah, you heard me, asshole.”

She and Christian both stared at Gray, who glanced at her, explaining, “He knows he’s not supposed to be running these blocks.”

“So what are you guys doing?” Christian played it off.

“We’re headed back to my place now. Cruise’s birthday dinner was tonight at Duncan’s.”

She was glad to be driving, to be able to have something to focus on while she let the scenario tumble around inside her. Gray’s words – the words he chose – didn’t sit right. Even his buying beer for Ryan ... but taking two of them for himself, kind of like the Godfather... She finally pinpointed her source of squirm.

“That guy’s bad news. I don’t just go around flipping people off. I’m kind of like the neighborhood whatchacallit, guard dog, you know? He’s not supposed to be in this neighborhood and he knows it.”

“Okay,” she said, shrugging. She didn’t want to know.

By the time they reached his place, she had shelved it in her mind to take out and examine later. She dug through their bag of libations on the counter in the kitchen, pulling out the two beers he’d taken off Ryan.

“Want one?”

“No, I don’t drink beer. I’ll take some of that bourbon though. And I think I need to sit back in the wheelchair for a bit.”

Several drinks and many cigarettes later, their game of Truth or Dare ended something like this:

“Your turn.”

“Truth or dare?” she asked, wondering what to dare him to do if he answered dare again.

“Truth.”

“Hmmm, okay: What drugs do you do?” She asked the question she had wanted to ask since they’d started the game forty-three minutes ago.

“Historical or current?”

He templed his hands together, facing her in his wheelchair.

She shrugged, not having delineated it into time lines, then thought, who cares about historical?

“Current.”

“Okay, well, when you answered that question earlier, you know?” he prompted.

“The worst thing you’ve ever done sexually?” she finished. Her butt was numb from sitting in the folding chair in the middle of his space.

“Yeah. And you prefaced it – it made you nervous didn’t it?”

“But I don’t really believe in *good* or *bad*, per se, so ... that didn’t make me nervous. That’s why I prefaced it – because I don’t think I was bad.”

“No, agreed, but I just meant I thought you were ex-Catholic like me – good and evil, sin and redemption, all that?”

“Buddhist now. It’s all about karma, compassion and celebrating life,” she clarified.

“But you don’t tell everyone what you told me tonight, right?” he asked, pushing his point.

“No, I don’t usually get asked that question, so it’s easy to avoid, really. But this is Truth or Dare, and I’m being honest with you.”

“So, that’s how I feel with this question. Okay? Makes me nervous. But I want to be honest with you, too. So, if it’s okay, I’d like to preface with historical first, to give you the bigger picture, then answer your question.”

He swallowed the last of his bourbon.

“Sure, okay.”

“So, historical drug use: From my early twenties until about five years ago, I used to be a heroin addict, a coke addict, a junkie in every way someone can be a junkie. I’ve been homeless, I’ve lived on couches, I’ve been institutionalized five times, I’ve used intravenously, I’ve shared needles, and at one point I was doing an eight-ball a day.”

He waited for it to sink in.

“Oh, okay – wow. So. You weren’t joking the other night about five times? Gray, you’re lucky to be alive.”

“You’re right, I am...so, I don’t touch needles anymore. I don’t touch heroin or do that shit anymore. I don’t have any use for anyone who lets drugs run their life. I’ve been through it all, I have been an addict and I know my demons, seen the bottom of the hole.” He said this earnestly, and she almost believed him.

“That’s good. That you know your demons, I mean. Because everyone has them,” she said.

“You’re right about that. Want to see the marks? They’re scars now.”

“If you want to show me, yes.”

He rolled up his sleeve and showed her his arm. She held it tenderly, running her fingers over the puffed-out scars in the crook of his elbow, looking up to meet his eyes.

“I want to be honest with you. Now: current use. Sometimes, every once in a while, I smoke crack on occasion.”

He watched her closely. She struggled to maintain a neutral expression.

He continued, “It doesn’t run my life you know. I have a business to run and I can’t fuck up.”

“I tried it once.”

“I’ve been tested for everything – HIV, hepatitis, all good. And seriously – I like you, so much that if you say it makes you too nervous, then I’m done, no more, I’m not kidding.”

She heard a puzzle piece slide into place deep inside the back alleys of her mind; heard the echo from the reverberation but she wanted to believe him. After all, she wasn’t perfect. Who was she to judge anyone? He had a Master’s degree. She was a runaway. He’d taught college courses; he owned and operated a successful not-for-profit. She was an actress working in a coffee shop. What was she doing that was any better?

She needed to distract herself.

“Kiss me,” she whispered. Truth or Dare left behind for now. Enough Truth for one night.

As she leaned in to kiss him, she spotted a hole in the concrete floor. Jumping out of her folding chair, she peered into it, calling out, “Hello? Anyone down there?”



Then she pulled back, thinking about the unknown down below just as Gray said, “Oh, yeah probably. I do have a possum.”

“What?”

She recoiled from the hole.

“Ugh – possums! I’m actually terrified of them. Spiders, all good. Mice, no worries. Possums though...they’re the only animal I hate. I’d actually swerve to hit a possum.”

“That’s not very Buddhist of you. I saw it the other day. Don’t worry, it was a small one.”

“Don’t worry? It was a baby. Oh my God, you have a nest of them don’t you?”

She glanced around the room, expecting possums to pop out from dark corners.

“It’s downstairs.”

“And that makes you feel better?”

“Not better, but I can’t get down there, so,” he said, shrugging.

“Um, have your ‘day guy’ handle it?”

“I’m on it,” he said, unzipping his pants, and stroking himself. “I want you to pull down your pants and sit on my face and let me lick you.”

“It’s – you know – that time. I’ve got a tampon in.”

“So. Please?”

“Seriously?”

“I’ll lay down,” he said, hoisting himself out of the wheelchair and laying on the floor. “You don’t get it yet: I want to smell you menstruating. I want to smell you ovulating. I want to bathe you and smell you freshly bathed, smell your original scent, smell you two days camping without a bath. I want to smell you in every way possible.”

“You are so...primal,” she said, her lips curling into a snarl, drawn in.

“I want you. I want to taste you now.”

She stood up in her heels and looked at him lying on his back on the concrete floor, holding his dick. She turned around and unbuttoned her jeans, pulling them down, looking over her shoulder at him.

“You have the tightest ass I’ve ever seen,” he said, looking up at her.

She slid her panties down over her thighs to let him see her tampon string.

“I don’t care, get it down here,” he said as his cock sprang to attention and he stroked it faster, his mouth open, waiting for her to come down on his face.

She squatted over his face, letting the string dangle down on his mouth, his lips closing over it and tugging on it gently until she was within reach of his tongue, letting her slide up and down over it, until he couldn’t stand it and grabbed her hips to pull her down on his mouth, holding her up with his hands like a chair as he licked her from front to back, his tongue rimming her.

“You taste so right.”

“This is out of control,” she managed, shaking in her makeshift chair. She stood up, unbalanced for a moment. Then she dropped to her knees, bent over his cock and licked the pre-cum off it, taking over his stroke with her hand. She slapped her face with his cock as she gave him head. He watched her, pants around her knees, bent over him on the floor, and dragged her ass around, pulling her leg over him until he had one thigh on each side of his neck and could again reach her with his tongue.

She felt his cock surge and knew he was getting close. She changed her rhythm, faster, harder, rubbing one finger under his balls as she tugged on them.

“Harder.”

She tugged harder.

“Put your finger in my ass,” he ordered her.

Her finger slipped inside his ass, sucked into its depths.

“Oh yes – I’m gonna cum. I want you to watch me cum.”

He took over as she moved off to the side, stroking his cock with his hand while her finger stayed inside his ass. His dark eyes met her blue eyes as he shot his load all over his stomach and hand with a yell. She took her finger slowly out of his ass and licked it.

He trembled, shouting, “Ohmygod, you’re so dirty, you drive me crazy!”

Pulling her to him, her mouth open, their lips crashed mid-air, devouring each other, his cum-covered hands coming up to rub it all over both of their faces and in their hair.

“I really like you,” he said.

“I – really like – you, too,” she answered in between kissing.

“No, I mean – I really like you. Okay?”

He stopped her kisses to look her in the eyes.

“Okay.”

“And I want to take it slow with you, even though you drive me crazy.”

“Okay. Me too,” she agreed.

“What are you afraid of?”

“Being vulnerable. I don’t think I’m ready for you.”

“Everyone is. I mean, look at me,” he said, looking down at himself. “You met me at a weird time in my life. I’ve been in a wheelchair for the past four months. Not exactly at the top of my game.”

She looked at his body lying on the concrete floor.

“Yeah, but you’re intense. I’m scared you’re going to suck me in,” she said, lacing her fingers with his, holding his hand in both of hers.

“I am intense,” he agreed.

“And I can’t get sucked in. We have this amazing energy and passion, but it’s – it’s overwhelming. You know what I mean?”

“Not really. Energy yes, I get that. You’re nervous because you like me, aren’t you?”

“Maybe. Maybe yes,” she admitted, her eyes narrowing.

“Can I see you again?” he asked from his prone position, his hand pulling her hair down to him.

“Yes,” she whispered, hovering over him.

“When.”

“Soon.”

“When,” he repeated.

“Soon,” she said, smiling.

“I just want one thing. I want you to be open to love. Are you open to love? With me?”

She looked into his eyes, looking into her eyes.

“Yes.”

She exhaled a long breath.

## Chapter 5. Picking

*October 16<sup>th</sup>.*

Saturday after play practice Clyde ran home and pulled on a pair of old jeans, a little white t-shirt, her motorcycle boots and a jean jacket. It was a beautiful 65-degree day in the middle of October, the sun was shining, and she and Gray were going picking in the ghetto.

He met her at his door on his crutches in paint-splattered jeans, a black t-shirt, a long trench coat with a scarf and hat. Pulling her in for a kiss, he said, “Like my picking outfit?”

She surveyed him thoroughly. “I do. What character are you playing today, sir?”

“I’m a mixture of Sherlock Holmes and Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin. What about you, who are you today?” he asked, inviting her into his play.

“I think today I’ll be Bonnie. For real.”

“Okay, well, just so you know, I do have six warrants out for my arrest, so let’s stay away from banks today, my little partner-in-crime.”

“Oh you do? For what?”

“Silly things. It’s why my driver picks stuff up for me sometimes. When I can’t. So, Bonnie, I’m excited to take you picking, show you what it’s about. You ready? Can you take this for me?”

He handed her a long metal pole with a hook at one end. Grabbing a stuffed crow from behind the door, he held it up with a flourish.

“I usually stick him on my truck when I go picking. My mascot.”

“I’m not sure my car is pimp enough to pull that off. Maybe we should take your truck and I’ll drive,” she said as she put on her sunglasses, walking to her car and opening the passenger door for him.

He placed the crow on the dashboard and threw his crutches in the back.

“Today, where we’re going, your car is pimp and you are Bonnie, pretty Clyde, so let us journey to the liquor store for some R&R to loosen our tongues and other parts.”

A man was loitering outside the City Mission. He teetered to his feet and pointed at her, shouting something she couldn’t make out as she walked to the driver’s side of the car.

“I think he’s cursing us in Swahili. What do you think?” she asked Gray, starting the car and buckling her seatbelt. “So, where to?”

He was looking over at the man still yelling at them. “Did you feel that? I think you’re right; he threw some voodoo our way. It’s okay, I know this woman who performs exorcisms, and if that doesn’t work, I know a witch doctor, but he lives about three hours away.”

“But if we’re both infected, how will we know if we both need exorcised?” she asked as she pulled away from the curb to the next cross-street and waited for traffic to turn east.

“Maybe we should record ourselves and then have a friend review our interactions.”

“No way am I involving video in my life. I’m already on the stage or practicing for the stage a good part of my waking life. I don’t need to be on video for the rest of it.”

“Turn right on the next street. We need to go south until we hit 31<sup>st</sup>.”

“There’s a liquor store ahead. Want me to stop there?”

“We have to go to the one over in the neighborhood we’re picking in. They sell single Styrofoam cups with ice for ten cents. I want to give you the whole experience.”

“Take the crow down. He’s kind of freaking me out.”

Gray pulled the crow off the dash and rubbed its beak up her arm to her hair as she shrank away, shrieking. He balanced it on his right shoulder.

“Yeah, like I was saying, when I used to come over here for dope, I’d strap this guy on my truck – you’ve seen my truck, right? My work truck, and it usually has shit in the back of it or tied to the top of it from picking or sales I stop by or dumpster diving, like right now it’s got three chairs tied to the top of it – I never stop doing what I do, you know, I’m always looking out for things to collect – and I had this paraplegic’s crutch, you know, the ones that wrap up your arm? So I’d be all gimpy on that crutch, playing loud, old-school rap music and I wore a fedora hat with this trench. My dealer said I was O.G. with that crow.”

“So pimp and so fresh,” she joked.

He directed her to turn left onto a road that took them over a bridge east of downtown, and then down into some project housing.

“Well, when I was a banger...I called my brother once from a dumpster, wearing only a tuxedo jacket and flip-flops.”

“No underwear, nothing else?” she asked, air-gagging.

“Nope. I was high and giggling over the phone and he was all, ‘Gray, you’re high, go home,’ but it was the most fun experience. I did some crazy shit.”

“I don’t know, that sounds gross, dumpster diving with no clothes,” she said, stopping herself from gagging again, thinking about bare toes in flip-flops touching rotten food and filth.

“Yes, but I was involved in the experience of it, right? Trash comforts me in a way. The raw honesty of an object after being used for a purpose – perhaps its original purpose or perhaps another, or even not at all – and discarded to progress to the next stage...there is the concept of ‘letting go’ with trash...A memory, a habit, love, hate...Trash is representative of emotion. There’s energy to it, manifested in the trash. I don’t know. I feel it.”

“That’s so deep. I feel like I need some drugs to absorb what you’re saying,” she said drily.

“It can be a spiritual experience. We do things, too, to trash as trash becomes trash – we tear up pieces of paper, to hide, to protect; we crumple things into the past; sometimes we gleefully deconstruct or burn something...trash is us cleaning out our houses, our psyche. If all humanity could be more open with accepting their trash and what it represents, everything would become too honest for us to handle,” he said, looking at her for her response.

“You’re scraping away layers and getting into the core of it all. But most people can’t get past the muck to the seeds underneath, so they’ll never be open like you’re talking about. They smell the stench of trash, and it’s just trash to them.”



“And that’s why I recreate it into art, into something palatable for the masses to digest. But really, I do it for me. People’s discarded lives inspire me.”

“This is fun,” she remarked.

“Listening to me jabber on about trash and picking?”

“Getting to know you better. What inspires you. How you perceive the world, yourself.”

“You talk old for a 24-year-old.”

“Hanging out backstage with theater people makes one interestingly wise and naïve and old and young all at the same time,” she said with a wink.

“You’re right. This is fun, getting to know you better,” he said, settling back into the seat.

They passed the projects, turning east on 31<sup>st</sup> Street.

“Are we looking yet?” she asked.

“Not yet. I like to pick in the ghetto, I guess you call it. The projects have nothing that I look for. I look for four things when I’m picking: I look for things with architectural value, such as columns or concrete. Then there’s the art value, things that I could use personally as art. I look for things with antique value – you’ll see, but I’ve got antique dealers interested in everything from dishware to birdbaths and furniture to art or books, you name it. And I look for salvage value – for instance, copper wiring off things that can be sold for its salvage market value.”

“So the projects aren’t the ghetto?” she asked. She had so many questions.

“Not really. The projects are temporary units for a lot of the occupants, lots of turnover but nothing that I look for. The ghetto, though ... the old neighborhoods that are part of the bygone era and have seen better days, that’s where people have lived in the same house for many years but don’t always have family around, and so when they die, or are evicted, or have to move on for some reason, their stuff they’ve spent years or decades accumulating is just dumped out

on the lawn and left for anyone to pick through. Bibles, family photo albums, antiques, clothes – everything, full drawers tossed.”

“What about the trash collectors? Big item pick-up days? Don’t they take that stuff away?”

“Yes, but that service can be random in the ghetto. So in the meanwhile it gets picked through and dumped out on lawns. You’ll see.”

“That’s kind of sad,” she said. She thought of her life dumped out on the front lawn, or, more precisely, her lack of a life: stage make-up, costumes, wigs, other items to create different personas or characters, a closetful of the now-moment; nothing meaningful. No childhood memories in boxes, no family photo albums. No history.

No family to come get her boxes. Midtown or the ghetto, some problems span geography.

“It is. So I try to repurpose the problem into a different solution. I started doing this about ten years ago. I found this random list in a park when I was visiting a girlfriend who’d moved to Austin, and we re-enacted this bizarre list we found, and since then I was hooked on found art, on finding other people’s trash.”

“What was on the list?”

“Oh, I can’t remember it all now,” he said, waving his hand in the air. “Stuff like: Kinkos. Check in for flight. Call Dad. T-shirt logo for band. Return car. Salvia. Airport. So, we had a silly afternoon pretending we were this person doing what was on the list, even marking up some white Hanes t-shirts with markers for our band t-shirts.”

“What was that one word? Salvia?”

“Hey, up here on the left. That’s the liquor store, pull in there,” he said, pointing. “Salvia Divinorum. It’s a natural drug, kind of a cross between an acid and a mushroom trip, but it only

lasts maybe 15 or 20 minutes. It's got its shamanic uses. You smoke it in a pipe, like pot. It was legal in some states for a while. I'm not sure now."

They parked and walked into the liquor store. Gray asked the clerk for two Styrofoam cups with ice and a bottle of R&R. He placed his cash into the retractable receptacle, and the clerk counted his change from behind bulletproof glass, then deposited it into the top receptacle for Gray, his purchase deposited into a larger drawer directly below the change receptacle.

Back in the car, he poured the cheap whisky over the ice and she took a sip, shuddering.

"Now it's a Saturday afternoon picking date in the ghetto with you," he toasted her.

"Okay, we'll turn left out of here, and when we cross Jackson we'll start looking."

The cars on either side of her drove slowly, their music shaking the cars, with some hydraulic shows as they waited at stop lights.

Gray looked over at her, saying, "We're fine, don't worry. You're with me."

"I'm not."

They passed Bennington, and she remarked, "This is the furthest east of downtown I've been off the highway."

"We're almost where we want to start looking. This street is old but not much turnover. Great houses though. But we'll keep going," he said as they crossed a street with large, art-deco, non-working fountain roundabouts in the center of the street, left over from the neighborhood's heyday, back in the 1920s-30s.

"How do you know all this?"

"You get to know your streets on the route – which ones have lots of turnover, which ones are good for picking. Which ones you want to stay away from. Gang territory."

She took another sip of her R&R and shivered again.

“God, I want you right now. Let’s pull over and fuck in the car.”

“Are you crazy?” she asked.

“I think we’ve already established that. Yes, I am. And I still want you. Does that make me crazy? Okay, we’re passing Norton now, let’s start watching. So when we come to a cross street, slow down a bit, and look both ways, up and down the street. You can see for two blocks each way.”

“What exactly am I looking for? Trash bags?” she asked. She needed exact direction; this was a whole new world to her.

“No, not trash bags. We’re looking for piles of stuff, dumpsters, houses being torn down, fences and demo crew set-ups, all that. You develop an eagle eye for it, great peripheral vision, so you can drive and scan at the same time.”

She slowed down and they looked, and he said, “Keep going.”

The next cross street they came to had a pile down one of the blocks.

“Now, don’t turn here, go up two more blocks and we’ll keep looking like we have been,” he directed.

“Why?”

“We’ll cover more ground this way. You’ll see. So remember where we saw that pile, and let’s go down two blocks and take a left.”

She did, keeping an eye in her rearview mirror.

He continued his geographical logistics explanation.

“We saw the pile about a block down, so we actually need to go three blocks this way, and that’s a one-way street, so it works out. We’ll check these streets as we cross them, too. See how it works? By the time we get to our pile, we’ll have covered 36 blocks visually.”

She kept driving, passing houses with kids playing outside and grown-ups eyeing the car suspiciously.

“Slow down, girl. Kids playing. Don’t hit a kid, for God’s sake.”

She slowed down.

“There’s a pile up ahead. Should I pull over?”

“No, keep going. See those old men up there, sitting on the porch?” he asked, directing her with his eyes.

She looked. The old men were staring at them.

“Yes.”

“We’re outsiders in this neighborhood. If people are outside – kids playing or like those guys, I usually just make a note of the pile and drive by it. Try to see it from their point of view. They’re used to being manipulated or taken advantage of, so their attitude when they see us in their neighborhood is, “What are you taking from me now?” So, I’m sure if we stop those guys would come down and start in on us, “Why you picking my stuff, son? That’s my stuff!” And so I just wait and come back.”

“Is it their stuff?”

“No, but it’s not mine either.”

“Point taken,” she said as she drove past the second block.

“There’s rules to picking. I don’t stop to pick if others are there picking. If there’s some stuff that I want, I might stop and give them a card and tell them to call me if they want to offload some of it.

“Besides picking and dumpster diving, I get a lot of stuff from estate auctions. I buy and sell over ebay, and I’ve got buyers who know me now, so they call me first when they get stuff

in they know I might be interested in. Other pickers, too. There are guys who do this one-hundred-percent for a living, and they know me. So when I get the call, even if I don't want it, sometimes I buy from them anyway, so they'll keep me at the top of their list, right? So I get the first pick, first call. Turn here."

"I had no idea this whole...subculture...existed," she said, turning back toward their pile.

"Okay, up ahead, there's our pile. Pull over."

She parked, and he handed her the metal picking stick after she'd gotten out of the car. He pulled his crutch from between the seats and hobbled outside of the car until he balanced himself.

The house had a fence around it with some demo equipment in the yard. Gray took note of the name of the demo company.

"We can't go inside the fence – that's all off-limits. But this stuff outside the fence is fair game. So I'll call that demo company to see if maybe they want to get rid of anything," he said, scanning the pile, assessing the contents of boxes, crates, and items strewn over the grass and sidewalk.

"I usually spend less than a minute at a pile. If there's one thing that I want out of a box or crate, I'll usually just take the whole thing with me. Sort through it later. I don't dump shit out either – that's just adding to the problem."

He shoved some things aside with his picking stick.

"See the shattered glass?"

She skirted a jagged piece that shot out of the pile a foot into the air, still attached to its mirror's backing.

"Be careful. That's why I use this. Okay, there's really nothing here. Let's go."

They finished their square and crossed their original street to head south. A few blocks over there was a yard sale going on. They stopped. A woman was overseeing the sale while her husband was smoking some pork.

“Hi there,” Gray greeted the woman. “Smells good. Say, I’ve got a friend who deals in parts and would be interested in those Mercedes if you are looking to get those off your hands.”

She hailed her husband over. Clyde listened as she looked through some racks of clothing, pulling out a green military jacket with a fur-trimmed collar and leopard-print cuffs. The woman wandered over to her.

“Sweetie, look over here. I used to be thin, but you’re tinier than I ever was before married life got to me. But that jacket, try it on.”

“I dig this jacket,” Clyde said, trying it on. “How much?”

She looked at herself in a small, cheap mirror with a yellow-gold frame the woman had lying on a table.

“Five dollars. Girl, you *wearing* that jacket.”

Clyde searched her purse.

“I’ve got four dollars on me. Take four for it?”

“No, but for you, sure honey, sure thing.”

Gray shook hands with the man, and she took the jacket with her. They got back in the car.

At another pile a few blocks away, he pulled some toilet bowl lids’ brass, antique hinges to take with them, some antique Pyrex bowls to sell to his antique dealers or at flea markets.

“Ding them with your nail, and if they hum, they aren’t cracked,” he said, letting her hear the

hum. He spotted some photo albums and took those as well, stacking them in a crate with the bowls.

“If we had my truck, I’d take those chairs, but we don’t have room.”

He picked up a box with drill replacement parts still in their packaging.

They stopped several more places and then came to the end of his usual route.

“Turn here, we want to turn around.”

She veered off the main street to a residential pass-through street that met the next block at a diagonal, and drove the block until they were headed back.

“Notice how the neighborhood’s changed? This is the Dogpatch. There won’t be anything we want here,” he explained.

“What’s the Dogpatch?”

“It’s the white trash and poor Mexican neighborhood. We need to turn around and head back.”

His phone beeped with a text message. He checked it.

“Actually, I need to head to the studio. I’m meeting a guy there to help me out with a project. Do you mind dropping me off?”

“What if I do mind? I should just drop you off right here and let you hobble back, cutting short our afternoon together. Shame on you.”

“Seriously, you are superhot when you’re mad. I’m sorry, baby. I forgot I had to get this done tonight for a delivery tomorrow, and it’s already almost five. Time flies when you’re living.”

She stopped at a stoplight and looked over at him.

“Time is the same always. It’s us who either fly or slow-mo through it.”



“Ohmygod, I think I’m in love with you. I know I’m crazy about you.”

“Love is transient. It’s an emotion, it isn’t real. And crazy is a state of mind, it isn’t real either.”

“Let’s go to Vegas right now and get married,” he said, rubbing his hand along her thigh.

“What about your project? That you’re cutting our date short to get back to?” she reminded him.

“Baby, I’d sacrifice a limb for forever-happily with you.”

“I think that’s the R&R talking. I’m obviously not drunk enough yet. Turn here, right?”

“Left. I mean, yes. That’s right,” he said, slugging the last of his drink.

As she drove up Grand Avenue nearing Gray’s studio, he said, “Hey, pull into the Valero if you don’t mind. I need to run in real quick. Do you need anything?”

She shook her head and pulled into the station, staying in the car while Gray hobbled in. She watched him through the glass hail the woman working the counter and head to the back, under the sign that said “No Public Restrooms” and “Employees Only.”

She needed something to count, to distract herself, to submerge what was going on. She settled on counting the patrons in and out of the Valero or getting gas. She tracked them by gender. She stuck to her counting until Gray came out. Men, 13, Women, 1.

At the studio, she parked in the front gravel lot. She helped unload their booty, taking Gray’s picking stick and a bag filled with the photo albums and other things. He fumbled with his keys at the door, balancing on his crutch and holding a carton in the other hand, finally getting the door open. They entered the dark, concrete space to the beeping of the alarm.

“Hey, the security box is to your right, see it? Can you punch in the code for me?” he yelled over the beeping.

She deposited her load on the floor, hurried over to the box, released the cover and waited, even though she remembered it.

“9-0-1-1-4-7,” he shouted. She deactivated the alarm as Gray turned on the lights, illuminating the office.

Gray sank into a chair by his computer and exhaled.

“I haven’t walked around this much on my leg since the accident. I’m feeling it. What about you?”

Clyde walked over to him and straddled his lap, throwing her arms around his neck and grinding into his pelvis.

“I’m feeling you, yeah,” she said, kissing him, twining her fingers into his hair. “You are a man of many layers and full of surprises. I can’t even imagine what comes next with you.”

“Gray!” a male voice called.

The front door to the studio banged shut. Clyde froze on Gray’s lap, looking sheepish as Gray’s hands wrapped around her hips, holding her to him for a second before gently lifting her off his lap.

“Hey there. I want you to meet someone,” Gray called to the man.

Clyde stood as a short, burly, red-headed man crossed the room.

“Sean, this is Clyde. Sean’s helping me with the project.”

“So what have you kids been doing today?” Sean smelled of whisky, pot, and four-days-plus unwashed body odor. He carried a brown paper bag in one hand and a spit cup in the other. His hand holding the bag shook and Clyde heard what sounded like pills in prescription bottles.

“I took her picking.”

“Excuse me, I need to visit the little girls’ room. Be right back. Nice to meet you,” Clyde said, walking out the door that opened to the break room and unisex bathroom.

When she re-entered the day studio it was empty. She walked outside the front of the studio but didn’t see anyone. Walking back through the front room toward the bathroom, she saw the brown paper bag Sean had brought with him and glanced inside. It was empty. She listened for sounds but heard nothing. A light was on further down the hallway that led to the warehouse where they’d hung out on their first date. She followed the hallway and picked up the sounds of objects being lifted and tossed down on a concrete floor off to her right, through a door she hadn’t noticed before.

It opened into a different part of the building, a cavernous workshop with machinery for cutting wood or plastic, a laser-jet machine that cut glass or aluminum or steel, and other large equipment. She peeked around a corner and saw Gray through the wood dust, his long dreads now tied up in a huge bun around the back of his neck, and Sean in the back of the long room, picking up 2x8 boards and pushing them through a cutting wheel.

Gray saw her and hobbled to a shelf. He pulled a pair of safety goggles off a rack and a bag of unopened ear plugs from a dispenser and limped toward her.

“Here, put these on.”

“Well, I should leave, maybe. You’re busy.”

“I have to get this done now since he’s here. But I’ll call or text you later, okay?”

They kissed.

“I’ll see myself out.”

“I would walk you out but I should stay on task. You good, we good, all good?” he asked as he kissed her again.

“All good,” she said, clinging to him a second before letting go.

“If I don’t talk to you before you go to sleep, sweet dreams.”

“Back atcha.”

“I don’t sleep. But I will think of you.”

She shut the door behind her and walked the hallway back to the day studio, stumbling out the front door into the bright daylight of the afternoon.

**III.**  
**ARCHITECTURAL**  
**VALUE**

Chapter 6.  
Coming Down/Winter Weather Advisory

*October 21st.*

And just like that, the weather changed. An early winter weather advisory. Snow in the forecast.

Gray had texted her earlier:                    Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow if I am not in hospital. Coming off meds and having violent reaction.

It was something, or it was something else. She wasn't sure what to say, and she was tiring of everything being over-dramatized, so she didn't respond.

She had two parties on the radar tonight. Britt's band was making its debut performance at the first party of the night, along with a lineup of five other bands.

The basement of the four-story house they were in was crowded, warm, with the smell of marijuana. When the lead guitarist jammed, the lights flickered from the amp wattage. The second band came on and a mosh pit began in the tiny, concrete basement. She clutched her drink and shoved shoulders, backs, and arms out of the way when they fell against her. Someone rammed into her from behind, throwing her against a pretty, blonde girl from Britt's band dressed as a Viking, and she caught herself on the wall.

Clyde ducked outside for some air and a cigarette on the next song. It took ten minutes to push her way up the stairs through the crowd that streamed downstairs in an unstoppable army.

"Hey, bird," Ryan hailed her from the wooden stairs leading up to a deck where he sat, smoking a joint. She sat down a couple of steps below him and laid her head on his knee. He offered her the joint.

"Thanks. I didn't know you were going to be here tonight," she said.

"This guy I did a painting for invited me. His girlfriend is in one of the bands playing tonight."

"Which band?" she asked as she took a hit and held it.

"Oh, I can't remember the name of it. Something... Addiction?" Ryan said, taking a swig of his beer.

"Appropriate Addictions?" she asked, exhaling.

"That's it."

She dragged on her cigarette.

"That's Britt's band. Yeah, I just got thrown against the wall in there. Mosh pit. I don't know why people like them."

“It’s a socially acceptable way to hurt people? Why were you in the pit if you don’t like them?”

“Not my fault. I was an innocent bystander,” she said as she passed the joint back.

“So how’s Gray?” Ryan brought it up casually, but she knew better.

“He’s okay I guess. We’ve been hanging out on a regular basis, kinda,” she admitted.

“Why do you have the worst taste in men?”

“What?”

“First the alcoholic, now this one. What’s your game?”

“I’ve got it under control, Ry.”

“What are you getting out of this?”

He wouldn’t look at her.

“I’ve got some wild horses inside of me to tame, and Gray appeals to the part that wants to run free, I guess,” she shrugged, looking up at him.

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt again,” he said, looking down to catch her eyes.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Is he a player? More than the normal guy, I mean?”

“No, it’s not that. Gray’s talented – he’s a genius artist; his mind is incredible. He could have been a politician – he has that air when he enters a room, everyone stops what they’re doing and listens,” Ryan started.

“That’s bad?”

“I said he could have been. But he’s too far into his lifestyle.”

“Lifestyle?”

“Drugs, bird. I think he’s off the hard ones now, I hope so at least. But I know for a while there, a while back…”



“I know about that,” she said, cutting him off.

“He had this girlfriend before you. I’d get a text in the middle of the night from one of them and have to break it up between them. Just, you know, not something I’d like to see you go through.”

“What do you mean, ‘break it up?’ Things got violent?”

“Look, I don’t want to bring all that up. I know you can handle it. He’s a good guy. He’s just a little...out there. He surrounds himself with his people now, so he’s protected from the world. He doesn’t really ever leave his bubble-world he’s created. Just be careful, that’s all I’m saying.”

She was silent, inhaling the joint and thinking about Ryan’s words.

“Is that bad? Creating our own world in which we can live, I mean?”

“I don’t know. I think you can to some extent. But you have to be able to exist within the world at large, too,” Ryan countered, taking the joint back to finish it.

“I see your point. Maybe I’m too immersed in the fiction of it. We have had a fairy-tale time together. We don’t enter into the real world, I mean.”

She dragged on the last of her cigarette and threw it onto the concrete below the stairs to burn out.

“It’s easy to do, with artists like Gray,” Ryan agreed. “You can carve out an existence. It’s just...there’s a lot of sorting, a lot of balancing and juggling that goes into that life. It doesn’t mesh with the rest of the world’s schedules, responsibilities, exchanges. Get me?”

“But that can be appealing, Ryan. To people like me, who don’t want to live in the real world with others. I want to be immersed in my world all the time. I mean, c’mon, I’m an actress, right? So how does that work in the real world?”

“I don’t know, but it does. You’re friends with other actors who incorporate their art into their life and make it work, aren’t you?”

“Yes. But somehow they don’t seem as...evolved...as Gray. It’s like they can only live their lives to the extent of their art to only a point...so far...and then they get scared and try to be chameleons and fit in. I’ll say this about Gray: He’s committed.”

“You say you’re in control, but are you? I can’t pick up the pieces, bird. This time I just can’t. You know I love you. But this one’s on you.”

“I understand. And I love you for caring so much.”

Gray called her a little after 11 p.m. She was feeling a little sad she wasn’t in costume tonight. But there hadn’t been time if she wanted to make Britt’s band, so she just went as herself tonight. Which, I guess, is a costume anyway, she thought. Britt was urging her to go to the second party, but Clyde was exhausted, and now her shoulder hurt from getting slammed into the wall.

She walked to her car, catching her phone vibrating on the way. Voicemail. Gray’s missed call. She called him back without listening to the voice mail.

“Hey gorgeous,” Gray started.

“Hey back atcha. I didn’t think you’d still be up,” she said, spotting her car ahead.

“Oh, I’m never going to sleep tonight. I’m not well, my dear, not well at all,” he drolled, all sighs and self-deriding laughter.

“What’s wrong? Do you need anything?” she asked as she reached her car and opened the door to get in, letting it warm up.

“Oh honey, I need things you can’t get me. I just – this medication I’ve been on for the past fifteen years, well, they ran out of it, and no one can get it, and so I’m off my meds and –” he cut himself off, his voice changing smoothly to humor. “Can you get your hands on some methadone?”

“Methadone? Are you going through heroin withdrawal?”

“I just thought anything would help at this point.”

“So this is medicine you need to be on, that you’re supposed to be on?” she asked.

Somehow, she didn’t think this was legally prescribed to him. Sean and his brown paper bag full and then empty flashed through her mind.

“Yeah, it’s a prescription, but there is no more, so I’m going through withdrawal and I’m having violent reactions and I think I may die unless you come over and convince me I’ll make it through tonight.”

His voice still held that teasing tone, but Clyde heard the underbelly of it.

“Sounds awesome. What kind of reactions are you having?”

She wanted more information before she committed to saving him from himself.

“It’s not at all awesome, sweet Bonnie. You know anything about people coming off heroin?”

“Sure.”

“Like that. Chills and fever, sweating and freezing, hallucinating. I’ve thrown up about sixty times, I’m starving and can’t eat or sleep,” he rattled off.

“Well, I’m just about to blow this party anyway, so yeah, I could come over and keep you company. I’ve got some whisky,” she said, shifting the car into gear and pulling out from her space.

“Oh I want some butter pecan ice cream...with wood cream...”

“Wood cream?” she asked, confused.

“You know, the kind that come in an aerosol can,” he said, slurring his words.

“No, I *don't* think I know,” she said, pissed he wanted her to pick up something for him to huff.

He was patient, humored by her misunderstanding.

“At the grocery store, you know when you buy ice cream and you want that stuff that comes in the can to go on top of it – shhhhhh, shhhhhh,” he said, imitating the sound of it.

“Oh, *whipped* cream.”

“Yes, whipped cream, whipped cream,” he agreed. “And can you bring me some pizza? And my Grandma, can you bring her back from the dead with you? She was the only one who ever listened to me.”

“Aw, I wish I could. You sure you'll still be up when I get there? You sound sleepy.”

“I'm coffee grinding. I'll be awake.”

“Coffee grinding, huh? Okay then. I'll pull around back to the alley and then...call you? Is the gate unlocked?”

“Yes, both.”

She called him as she locked her car and walked to the back gate of his space. The back door was wide open, with just the chain on the decorative, metal gate to act as a barrier against the 30-degree, 35-mph winds.

“I'm sorry if I act discombobulated,” he said when he answered the phone. “I'm not myself tonight. Are you here?”

“I'm here.”

“I’ll let you in.”

As they hung up she saw his silhouette in his red, Japanese wrap standing at the metal gate, unlocking the chain around it. She let herself in and walked through his garden up the stairs.

“I apologize for the mess in here,” he said as they hugged. His dreads were half tied back, disheveled, and the corners of his eyes wrinkled in pain. “The light hurts my eyes... come in, I’ve been in bed trying not to throw up again.”

He surveyed her.

“You look so pretty.”

“Thanks. I’m sorry you’re going through this. What can I do to help you feel better?”

“Come lay down with me in bed. I’m so cold.”

They walked into his bedroom. He lay down in bed and wrapped himself up in his covers, sticking a hand out from the covers to turn off his computer.

“I’ll turn off the porn...it’s not helping anyway; I’ve jacked off twice already, it doesn’t matter.”

She threw a sideways smile at him as she mixed herself a whisky and coke, then took off her jacket and sat down in bed beside him. His window was open.

“It is cold in here. Why don’t you close the door?”

“Because I keep going from cold to hot,” he said, his body trembling under the covers.

“I’ve got the electric blanket on. Come snuggle with me.”

“So. What might you need to go to the hospital for?”

“If I just can’t handle it. I’m on a Class-1 narcotic, a methamphetamine which calms me down.”

“Calms you down?”

“It has the opposite effect on me. Everything does. But the pharma companies only make so much of it a year and there isn’t any more. They’ve run out. And I’ve been on it for 15 years.”

She took a drink.

“So...what are you going to do?”

“Just try to hang on. Come here, talk to me, tell me things, distract me.”

His eyes were half-open, but his face was squinched in pain.

She held up a Snickers bar she found in the bed sheets.

“What’s this for?”

“That’s for when it gets really bad. That and the coffee grinds.”

“You *are* on a heroin withdrawal, aren’t you? How long has this been going on?”

“It started yesterday. I’m in the worst part of it tonight,” he said. “Why are you here? You’re so nice, why aren’t you out having fun?”

“I’m not nice. I had parties to go to tonight, and I didn’t respond to your text,” she told him.

“But you’re here now...why?”

“Oh, because, well, people have been there for me when I was in a bad moment, and I understand that feeling of wondering how the hell you’re going to make it to the next one.”

“How did you make it? I know I’ll make it but it’s bad right now, so bad, I don’t know. I’ve got a studio opening tomorrow. My interns are over there setting things up...and I’m not there to oversee them... Something’s going to get fucked up. I’m so behind now.”

“You’ve got to let that go. You can only control what you can control. Sometimes I screamed into a pillow. I distracted myself. You know. I did what I had to do. Whatever. You’ll make it. It’s just a bump in the road.”

He squirmed under the covers, his legs rubbing against each other and he groaned, rolling from side to side.

“Talk to me. Tell me anything – anything.”

She told him about the party, distracted him with stories as she thought of them. She talked about anything that came to mind and watched him start to drift. His eyes closed, and he stopped fidgeting except for the occasional full-body twitch. He’d occasionally gasp for breath, forgetting to breathe for a few minutes as he drifted. Her bracelets jangled on her wrist. Gray inhaled sharply, sitting up in surprise.

“Who’s there?” he asked. Then he saw her bracelets.

She jangled them again.

“Just me.”

“I thought it was Santa Claus,” he said, nuzzling down in the covers again. “I owe him some money so I’ve been avoiding him.”

“Speaking of Santa Claus...you ever read David Sedaris? He’s got this chapter in one of his books about the traditions around the world about St. Nick.”

“Why do you make me love you more with every moment you speak? Who brings up David Sedaris?” he asked, looking at her from the covers.

Her hand was draped over his side and his hand was on her thigh and kept wandering between her legs in her tight jeans. She was about to answer him, but he was wandering between his two realities.

“I had these two dreams about you. The first one, we were at this ski resort and we were picking out gear, and I had all of my hopes and dreams and desires and emotions in my hands, holding them as tangible objects, and I was trying to show you, but no matter what I did, you wouldn’t see them, you looked at me like you didn’t know what I was talking about, like I was speaking a foreign language, you were more interested in the ski gear so I kept them to myself.”

His eyes were half-open again as he drifted, his voice getting softer and slurring again.

“Aw, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, it was – it made me sad. The second one was better. I was laying down, and you were riding my face but facing away from me, and I wanted you to stick your ass in my face and let me smell it, and you were teasing me...Just as I was about to smell it you’d pull away, so I started getting rough with you, slapping you around and making you sit on my face, and then somehow we transitioned, and I pounded you from behind after you begged me.”

His fingers found her crotch, hot from her tight jeans and his dream, and he rubbed it, hard, over the seam in her jeans.

Her head bent back and her eyes closed.

“Ohhhhh...baby.”

“I wish I was your jeans. There’s no one in the world happier tonight than your jeans. Maybe your panties. What kind of panties are you wearing?”

“Who said I was wearing panties?” she asked, unbuttoning her jeans and pushing them down over her ass to her mid-thighs.

“Take them all the way off, I want to lick you and make you cum.”

“No, I want to leave them on.”



She lay on her back with her legs up in the air, exposing herself to him from behind. Gray lay crosswise to lick her pussy, grabbing her hips and pulling her to him. She was concentrating and silent, shaking, and he slapped her lips with the palm of his hand, then touched her ass as he licked her from side to side, burying his face in her.

“Yes, yes just like that, side to side, yesss—ohmyGod—” she screamed as she started to cum, and he licked her from ass to clit as she came, kicking her legs and shaking.

He pulled her to him when she tried to get away.

“Get back here, I’m not done with you yet.”

Later, exiting the bathroom, she caught sight of his painting of her hanging on his wall. She walked to it, naked, cold on an even colder concrete floor, and leaned in to examine it more closely. She was pleased that he had brought it to his place, when he’d told her he never displayed his art here.

Crawling back in bed, she lit a cigarette and looked over at Gray. He was restless, drifting away again into a semi-sleep state. She dragged on her cigarette and sighed, wanting to leave.

“I know, I’m sorry, I forgot, it wasn’t ready,” Gray mumbled in his in-between state.

Clyde thought he was apologizing to her.

“Sshhh, try to sleep. Everything’s going to be all right.”

He continued a flow of indiscernible verbiage in his state for a few minutes. She wondered if he was praying or speaking in tongues.

“This isn’t where I’m supposed to be. You’ve taken me to the wrong place.” He enunciated it clearly, loudly, to someone who wasn’t there, his eyes open, staring at nothing.

Clyde eyed him, wondering whether she should interfere or move closer to the door.

Gray shook himself half-awake and said, “I need some cereal. I need to move the cereal and dry goods in here so it’s within reach.”

“You want me to get you some cereal?”

“No, I – I think it’s gone, I think I ate it earlier... I don’t think I have any... I think it was a dream. I don’t know anymore. I have astigmatism, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know. Do you need some water?”

“I just need to sleep. I’m sorry I’m broken.”

Clyde watched him. Everyone’s broken, it just depends on if their broken matches your broken.

Chapter 7.  
The Studio Opening

*October 22<sup>nd</sup>.*

*Tap-tap-tap-tap.*

She looked at Gray through the car window, waved goodbye to him, but he wasn't quite done, pressing his lips to the driver's side in a puckered kiss. His lip print stayed when he withdrew, and she thought it fitting that their parting was separated by a barrier. That she would take layers of his skin with her when she left. She started the motor; his eyes searched hers for an answer through the glass. She blinked and exhaled, shifted the car into gear and waited for him to back away so she could pull out of the parking lot.

He stood under a streetlight, his tall frame and dreads casting light shadows in the darkness, watching her departure. A couple walked by him, the woman's arm in the man's crooked elbow, turning to stare at Gray as they headed from his studio opening that was winding down.

She looked in her rearview mirror at him as she drove away. She wasn't sure why she was driving away from him, and she was *exactly* sure of why she was driving away from him. Her emotions evaded capture as she tried to pull all the pieces from the night together into a semblance of cohesiveness so she could sort through the dirty laundry.

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She'd arrived late to the studio opening on purpose, looking for him and figuring she would eventually run into him, walking from exhibit to exhibit. She stopped to watch two videos, one a gritty, surrealistic film intertwining women, seeds that bear fruit, and sex filmed disturbingly like *A Clockwork Orange* time-and-space she couldn't quite comprehend. She wandered through the main hall with its larger-than-life organic art and was given a brown bag with the words TAKE ONLY WHAT YOU CAN GIVE. There were seeds atop a wooden-barrel-based table in the center that one could scoop into the bag and a large trough that hung above the table holding more seeds. There was an urban garden made from steel and other found objects in the middle of the room. People milled about with drinks, dressed in various attire from hipster to posh. A photographer wanted to take her picture for social media purposes. She gave him a fake name.

Gray was nowhere to be found.

She became lost, having come in through a different entrance than the back part of the warehouse where she'd traditionally spent her time with him. There was a set of stairs to walk down, and at the end of a long, concrete hallway were freight elevators barred from use and another set of stairs leading up, with multiple exits she never knew existed in the building. She couldn't place herself inside the building – an entirely different, secret yet public, part of his building. She felt his warehouse had been pulled open and its insides exposed, allowing her to wander through its arterial architecture into secret hallways and levels that were not accessible before. Up until now, she'd been the back-door girl.

She was about to abandon the art opening since she had texted him fifteen minutes prior and hadn't gotten a reply when she followed a gaggle of young girls through another door and suddenly found herself in his day studio, realizing where she was in the building.

He was there, sitting at his computer, surrounded by several other girls who apparently knew the gaggle she had followed. She gave wide berth to the crowd around him, unwilling to breach the barrier of females between them even after he said, "Come here and give me a kiss."

He had told her before she'd arrived he had to schmooze with people at his studio openings and therefore couldn't give her undivided attention, but she realized upon seeing him that by 'people' he meant his young female interns. Just as with everything else, *his* truth and *the* truth didn't necessarily know each other.

She feigned interest in the art on the walls she'd seen a dozen times before. He got up from his seat at his computer and walked to her.

"Hi, gimme a kiss, *you*," he said as he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to him, planting a kiss full-on.

She softened, becoming noodle-like in his grasp, and allowed him to kiss her.

“I texted you a while back. I was about to leave.”

“Sorry baby, I was busy trying to get this expense report done and turned in to one of my board members who’s here tonight. I haven’t checked my phone,” he said. Then, catching onto her mood he added, “It’s also my interns’ last day. I want you to meet them.”

The girls had gathered, giggling, about to head out together like an insect which has gathered all its antennae or limbs and can move as one, now that its parts are all reconnected.

She waved at the group. “Hi,” she said, smiling knowingly at them, these girls in their short-shorts and teeny tanks. Nineteen at most.

They all smiled, waving back, saying, “Hi!” in unison.

“We’re leaving, Gray. See ya later!”

They left together en masse.

“Give me five minutes and I’ve got to finish this and get it turned in tonight. Just hang out in here, okay? I’ll be right back.”

She shrugged, slightly deflated.

He whirled out of the room, on his mission to find the board member. Left alone, Clyde explored. At the front of the room on a side table there were books on the various artists-in-residence, and she found his, opening it to read through the different biographies, articles and artist statements, becoming fascinated with him again as she read his thoughts on himself, wondering again at his brilliant mind that seemed to verge with crazy.

Her eye caught a paragraph from an article written about him:

“I was so obsessed that my health, money, everything, became secondary to art.

The questions started when I began waking up on the floor of the gallery. I would ask myself: ‘What are you? Are you art? Do you exist because of art? Do you

exist without art? What is art? Is art God? If you are art, are you God?' I started stamping my hand every morning with GOD=ART=GOD."

He came back to find her still reading his book.

"Snooping?" he asked as he nudged her, making a joke of it, but she knew he wasn't kidding.

She turned wide, innocent eyes on him, her right brow cocked, asking, "Am I? It was out in the open."

A few minutes later they went into the unisex bathroom together to pee. Different stalls, and he was ahead of her, his strong stream stopping as she sat in her stall continuing to pee.

His phone rang.

"Hello?"

The tone of his voice made her stop and listen.

"I'm peeing. What are *you* doing?..."

She heard the stall door bang shut and the door to the bathroom close immediately after, cutting him off as he exited quickly, still talking with that tone of voice...that tone that catches the outsider listening up short, feeling like an intruder, that tone recognized as intimate. For some reason she wanted to burst into tears, sitting on the toilet seat. She finished peeing and caught her sob in her throat, breathing it out normally.

Exiting the bathroom, she bypassed everyone with her head down and bee-lined back to Gray's warehouse, to be alone for a moment, to think.

Her phone beeped with a text message from Gray: WHERE DID YOU GO?

She lit a cigarette and sat in a metal folding chair smoking for a few minutes before she texted back. Less than a minute later he rounded the corner.

“Let’s go upstairs to my office. I want some alone time with you.”

They climbed the stairs and sat in his mezzanine space above the melee.

It was the first time she’d been up to his “office” since he’d been able to access it now that he was out of the wheelchair, and she wandered among his art as he sat on a brown leather couch with a broken leg and observed her. She trailed her fingers along a painting of his.

“You can have that if you like it,” he said, indicating the bold, red painting with its blackness spilling onto the three-dimensional raw edges she was touching.

“I love this piece. But I can’t take it,” she said, turning to look at him across the distance of the room.

He stood up, walked over to her and the painting, and pulled it off its stand.

“Why not? I want to give it to you. It’s called Broken Love,” he said, taking out a black felt-tipped marker and signing it. He handed the wooden frame over to her.

She stood facing him, torn between wanting to have the piece and not wanting to take it with her.

“How appropriate,” she murmured, “the title, I mean. Fits, yes?”

“It was inspired by you. If you want the truth. It was meant for you. Take it.”

“I do want the truth. Tell me the truth, Gray. How often do you smoke crack?”

“I don’t smoke it that often. I only use it to mellow out. I’m on so much daily medication, you know, Lorazepam and six others, that the crack helps me even out. It’s the only drug I do anymore. I take my medication seriously these days. Well, you’ve seen what happens when I have to go off it – if I get off it, my friends know the signifiers. When I start wrapping things



around my wrists up my arms, they know I'm off my meds, and they have instructions on who to call and what to do. I've got a directive with certain instructions depending upon the scenario."

She looked at his wrist that had silver chains wrapped around it.

He ignored her glance.

"Crack is the only drug I do now. Seriously, I'll smoke it in front of you," he said, overriding her protest. "No, I want to – I want you to see it doesn't make me hyper at all. I become so focused and mellow when I smoke it. I don't want you to be afraid of me."

He searched his pockets and, not finding anything, walked back to the couch, digging around for something and pulling out a tube.

"Ah-ha! Here it is," he said, sitting on the couch and pulling a vial from his pocket, shaking some white slivers in the tube.

She realized then that he carried it on him and didn't have to get it from any special place, confirming that he smoked it more than occasionally. He inhaled swiftly, continuously, as she thought the truth and the lie were the flip side of the same coin for him. She crossed the room and sat in the chair opposite the couch.

"What else do you want to know?" he asked in an exhalation of smoke, leaning across the small space, staring intently into her eyes.

"Surprise me. I don't know," she said. She felt flat, detached from emotion.

"I'm not a jealous person at all. At all. I used to like to watch my ex-girlfriend get fucked by another guy, you know. But it just occurred to me, I think *you* could make me jealous. That's a first for me, I don't even know why I'm telling you this. I bet you've had sex with more people than I have," he said as he took a swig from his beer and pointed a finger at her.

"I don't give out my number."

He told her he'd had sex with what could be counted on two hands but then recounted stories of past escapades on various drugs: "I was on ecstasy and broke into this ex-girlfriend's house to make coffee, then I walked nine miles to fuck this hot redhead in the ass whom I knew." ... "The first time I tried acid, everyone was so beautiful, and I met this couple who were so beautiful I told them I wanted to marry both of them, and later on we were in this bathroom at this house party, and I was directing this porn, and the fluffer was the ex-girlfriend of the guy whose party it was..."

She inherently didn't and probably would never trust anything that came out of his mouth. And did she even care? Where was this going to go, anyway? The only place it could: the trash. Why was she even here, after last night? She was confused.

"I should think about calling it a night," she said.

"I'm having all these dreams about you, which is odd, since I normally don't sleep," Gray said.

She held a smile in place, not sure how to end the conversation when he clearly wasn't going to cooperate.

"Maybe I'll tell you another time. Nah, no time like the present. So, this crazy dream I had the other night, you were wearing this strap-on and I was on my knees in front of you, and you were dominating me, telling me to suck your cock," he said, his eyes intently on hers.

Knowing he was watching her reaction, she maintained eye contact while throwing up an internal barrier, protecting herself from whatever he might say that could pierce some emotion while she was holding wills with him.

"I had a dream with you in it the other night as well," she answered. "We were in this log cabin, this ski lodge, and I'd just met your mother and sisters, we were eating dinner together and

then we were in my car ready to leave, and I was driving. And we were at the top of this steep hill, pure ice – I mean, like a black diamond ski mountain or something. And we started sliding backwards down this thing, and I had all my weight on the brakes, standing up in the car to make us stop, and we just kept sliding down the icy hill’s drive, roller-coaster fast. And I thought we were going to die. And you were completely calm.”

“That’s a good dream. I’m a dream interpreter, and I promise, that’s a good dream.”

She continued with her pasted-on, porcelain smile, not believing him.

“Do you think so? That wasn’t the first dream I’ve had. In the first one, a week ago, I walked into a convenience store that was being held up, despite this nice Arab man outside in a turban warning me, ‘Don’t go in there!’ and I told him, ‘I always go in here, it’s okay,’ not realizing what he was saying to me, and I got shot and taken hostage, along with a six-year-old girl who, I can’t say for sure, but may have been me.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“Metaphor, darling,” she said, looking around at anything but him now.

“I feel like I’m never going to see you again. I really like you. When am I going to see you again?” he asked, his voice in between cajoling and pleading.

“I don’t know. Let’s play it by ear. I need to go now. I need some space.”

“Please tell me what’s wrong. What changed tonight. I really like you.”

His smile was also frozen on his face, but his eyes drooped at the corners, betraying his true emotions.

“I really like you, too. Please stop saying it.”

“But I want to say it. And I think it’s good for you to hear it,” he said, his hand touching the side of her thigh.

She stood and walked away from him, looking at the art on the walls.

“I don’t want to talk about it right now,” she said over her shoulder.

“Remember, we talked about this – open communication? That’s the only way to get past these moments.”

“That’s not my M.O. I leave. I don’t want to talk about it.”

In truth, she didn’t even know how to begin putting all the pieces she’d picked up together in a way that would make sense to him, and she didn’t want to expend the energy trying to do so, because she already knew she needed to end this and was afraid if she tried to articulate it, he would just come up with answers and she would concede, because she knew he was good at bending truths to himself as well as others, and he was too smart for his own good.

She wondered if he had a girl waiting for him at his place, the one who called him in the bathroom.

“Well, I think I need another drink. Can I get you something? Wait, you’re not drinking tonight are you – water?” he asked, pushing himself to a standing position.

“No...I think I’m leaving actually.”

“Wait a second and I’ll walk you to your car.”

He led her to the pulley and let them down to the first floor. He reached for her hand, and she let his large, rough one with its first three fingers missing the last third of their digits swallow hers, pulling her along with him down the corridor toward the front door.

He carried her, Broken Love painting and all, over the gravel in the ridiculous high-heeled shoes she’d worn, overriding her protests, and deposited her gently in front of her car. He leaned in to hug her, inhaling the scent of her neck, and she hugged him back tightly.

“Don’t be a stranger,” he said.

She nodded but didn't look him in the eye as she smiled, opened her car door and slid into the seat. He closed the door when she was settled in, but he wasn't done saying goodbye.

*Tap-tap-tap-tap.*

Chapter 8.  
Rose-colored Glasses

*October 23<sup>rd</sup>.*

Gray called her at 8:38 the next morning.

“Hello?” she croaked, her still-half-asleep greeting barely audible.

“Hi, it’s me. Wake up sleepyhead!”

“It’s –” she looked at her alarm, “8:38 in the morning. On a Saturday. This is why we’d never work out.”

“I’ve got 8:39 actually. This is not why we’d never work out. I’ve been up for four hours. You know I don’t sleep. Wakey-wakey!”

“Why are you calling me at this ungodly hour? If it’s not a life and death emergency, I may make it one by killing you.”

She stretched, looked down at herself and realized she was wearing a shirt of his, having taken it because it smelled like home to her, and she’d slept in it every night since.

“I’m sorry I woke you up. Truly. I’ve been thinking about you, can’t get you off my mind. You left last night, and I just had this feeling I’d never see you again. And I want to know why. I miss you.”

She struggled awake with his words. All she could envision was his tone of voice in the bathroom, wondering if he had a girl waiting for him in bed at home while he was romancing *her* by smoking crack in front of her.

“You can’t just call someone up and wake them up and expect to have a deep conversation about love and life.”

“I get it. I don’t want you in a bad mood when we talk. I just wanted to call and see what was going on. See if we could get together and figure this out. I really like you, Bonnie Clyde.”

“I like you, too, Gray, but I mean, where should I start? You’re right. This isn’t a good time. I’m still asleep.”

“Well, if you’re free, come over later. I just got some steaks that I’m going to grill.”

“Let me go back to sleep and dream a while, and when I wake up later I may call you.”

“I love you. Oops, I meant, go to sleep and call me later.”

She ignored his purposeful lapse.

They hung up and Clyde sat up in the middle of her bed, unable to go back to sleep. She liked that he called rather than texted her. A dating detail that had become cherished in the internet age, actually speaking to one another, the exchange of voices with their cadence and

inflection. Perhaps it was his age. Well, she liked that he was older. She snuggled into his shirt, sniffed the collar to smell its imbedded smell of his sweat and body, and fell back down into her bed, curled around his scent and words, a blanket of love to use at her whim.

She woke up finally at 11:27 to his voice mail: I love that I crave your sex so deeply...given...taken...or placed in a bag and sealed for prosperity...A crack of the bag's seal and too short a hit and I think of a boxer brought back to life with a snap, the breaking glass, the smell of ammonia...God I lust you.

Another nebulous voice mail that she was sure she didn't get half of his meaning. She didn't respond. She took her time making coffee and getting around instead. She didn't have any food in the place, so she pulled on some clothes and a hat to hide her messy hair for the walk to a café a few blocks away.

Exiting the front of her building, she waved at the old, severely retarded man who lived on the third floor with his brother. He seemed excited when he saw her, pointing and talking to her in his slurred speech.

He came up to her and reached out for her hand, saying, she was sure, "Come with me."

He took her around the back of the building where the cars were parked. As they rounded the side of the building she saw what he was excited about. A bright bouquet of flowers lay on the hood of her car, held in place by a corner of her windshield wiper.

"Did you see who it was?" she asked, knowing the answer before she picked up the bouquet. The old man shook his head, talking again in his gibberish language that she didn't understand.

"Well, thanks for letting me know. Do you want them? You can have them."



He smiled and seemed to want them but shook his head shyly no, indicating they were for her.

“I should go put these in water. Thanks again,” she said, waving goodbye. She entered her apartment from the back to throw the flowers in the trash.

She called Gray as she walked to the café.

“Hello?” he answered. His voice was mellow, Cheshire cat-like.

“I guess I didn’t tell you I hate flowers.”

“Nooo, you didn’t. What’s the story there?”

“Boyfriend in high school ruined them for me. He used to bring me flowers once a week at my place of work and drop them off. After I’d broken up with him.”

“I see. That does add another dimension to things, doesn’t it? Is there anything I can do to make everything good between us?”

“Just let me have my time. Maybe you can be my date to Maximón.”

“Okay, space is good, but talking’s good, too.”

“Everything’s got its time and place. Goodbye, Gray.”

Chapter 9.  
Maximón  
(a/k/a San Simón: the Patron Saint of Bad Habits and Sexuality)

*October 28<sup>th</sup>.*

On Thursday, Gray called her to meet him for drinks at his place in the garden.

“8:27 p.m. sound good? Pull around back,” he instructed.

“Maximón’s tonight, remember? So if I meet you at your place first, then you have to be my date to Maximón. Deal?”

“Shit, I forgot about Maximón. Okay, yeah sure, I can figure out something to take to the Patron Saint. I’ve got all kinds of vices at the studio. We’ll stop there before we go, pick up stuff to take for penance. There’s so much to repent for...Get your ass over here so we can make more sin happen before we go.”

“Okay. I have to pick up some horns first,” she said, hoping he would say he had some on hand.

“Can’t wait, see you soon. Pull around to the back when you arrive.”

He hung up on her. She looked at the phone, then continued applying glitter to her naked body.

She pulled up an hour later to the noise of sirens, an ambulance and several police cars blockading the entire block in front of Gray’s place. She drove around and parked in back. He had the door to the garden unlocked and was sitting on the terrace in a white fedora and a button-down white shirt.

“I’ve got a devil-angel at my back door. Which one should I let in?” he called out upon seeing her exit the car. Horns adorned her head, gold bracelets up and down her arms, a white Greek slip-wrap with gold string tying it together, her heart-shaped ass cheeks peeking out the bottom in white panties, white fishnet stockings and high heels. She let herself in the gate and up the stairs to where he was getting up on his crutches. They looked at each other for a moment, taking in the physicality of each other.

He pulled her in close, kissing her head, her lips.

“I was going to say it’s been an eternity, but it was worth it. You look stunning, beautiful.”

“It’s a white party this year. This was what I had, minus the halo and wings – too big – and I picked up the horns tonight. So it works then, cool. Thank you.”

She backed away and curtsied.

“It works,” he said, applauding.

“What’s up out front?”

“Yeah, that’s why I said to pull around back. City Mission craziness,” he said, waving her words away, looking at her panties under her wrap and reaching a hand between her legs.

“We have some catching up to do.”

She drove them to Spiderhouse after a stop at his studio warehouse so he could pick up a vice offering to bring to the Patron Saint.

“I’ve had some gambling issues this year, San Simón,” he said upon finding a bag of poker chips and confetti.

Catching her shivering in her small coat, he led her to a rack of women’s coats, pulling out a vintage, 1970s, burnt-sienna trench coat.

“Here. This might be a bit small through the shoulders. You’re right in between a petite and regular size through the shoulders.”

“You know way too much about women. You scare me.”

“I appreciate the female form and love women, physically and artistically. You’re about five-foot-two-and-a-half and ninety pounds soaking wet. And you’re tiny, but your shoulders are right in between a petite and regular women’s. I am the gayest straight man you know,” he said proudly.

“Five-three. And, you shouldn’t guess women’s weight. Didn’t your mother tell you it was impolite?”

“I’m right,” he said, holding his ground.

She slipped it on. It just fit, a bit snug in the shoulders as he had guessed.

“Cool. I’m wearing it.”

“Take it. It’s yours. A gift. Let’s go.”

In the car outside Spiderhouse, Gray produced a gold-tipped cane he’d also found at the warehouse, and they sat for a minute, observing the partygoers in costume, the decadent chaos going on in the streets.

“You ready?” she asked.

“I just haven’t seen a lot of these people in a long time,” he replied.

“So, who cares. All good things. It’s a pagan night.”

They walked up the alley, him throwing confetti over the crowd, over them both, confetti falling into her eyelashes and hair, passing people lounging against both sides of the alley’s brick buildings, tables further up with a vendor stand selling hamburgers and sides. The entrance to the space was canopied with white cloth and a deranged mime-clown, all white, sat atop the canopy, waving at Clyde to get her attention. The clown waved and blew a kiss at Clyde, miming hearts at her.

They entered the space, passing Will, dressed in white silk robes and a three-foot-tall feather headpiece made of doll heads and coins.

“Hey, I know this little devil!” Will said, looking her up and down. “Oww! You’re in good hands, baby.”

He shook hands with Gray, saying, “She’s all right, this one, treat her right.”

They winked and moved on, talking to people dressed in circus-meets-sex, bizarre costume attire. Music played in the front room. Toward the back a woman sat at a table with incense, reading palms and tarot cards. A room to the right led into the Saint’s shrine. They waited in line to pay homage to the Patron Saint, making small talk, drinking from the bottle of bourbon she’d brought as her offering. Finally, the door opened and they were next.

Inside the smoky room was the shrine, filled with every smell imaginable, the walls draped in various tapestries and silks. Gray threw confetti on the attendants upon entering. The Patron Saint sat atop a throne, wearing sunglasses and a headpiece, draped in cloths. He sat silently as Gray walked up the stairs to the altar and tossed the chips around them, saying, “San Simón, I’ve had a gambling problem this year, I give you my offering. Please accept my gift.”

He stepped down, and it was her turn.

She walked unsteadily up the stairs and looked at the Patron Saint’s sunglasses hiding his expression. She lifted the bottle to his lips, and he drank from it, and then she drank from it. She took a cigarette out of her pack, placing it between his lips, lighting it for him; he took a drag, and she took it back from him and took a drag, crushing it out.

“San Simón, please accept my offerings of my vices this year and accept my repentance.”

She stepped back down. The Patron Saint blessed them both.

The room next to the Patron Saint’s room had pot vaporizers they each took a turn with, then, on their way out of the second room, someone danced by holding out a spoon with chocolate on the end.

“Here you go – have some of this!”

“What is it?” she asked.

“Chocolate-covered mushrooms,” the girl replied, sliding the spoon over Clyde’s tongue.

She held the spoon for Gray.

He declined. By the time they whirled outside to have a cigarette and get some food, they were both a little altered.

“Want some pot?” a guy asked, wearing a white button-down shirt and tightie-whities, his hair crazily sticking out every direction, model-hot.

“We just had some inside,” she said.

“Not this stuff. It’s really good stuff,” model-hot guy said, opening his coffee canister lid.

She smelled it.

“Yes, please!”

The guy loaded a pipe and handed it over to Gray, who looked at her.

“I don’t usually smoke pot,” Gray said, which struck Clyde as hilarious, and she almost burst out laughing.

Gray continued in earnest, “I don’t like doing drugs in public, but...it *is* Maximón.”

He took a hit and coughed.

She smiled at his words, consumed in his cloud of smoke.

Gray looked at the guy, saying, “Hey, you want to come home with us tonight? More for her than me...”

Model-hot guy looked at her as she looked at Gray, her eyebrows arching, surprised.

“Oh, okay,” she returned, challenging him.

“Thanks, yeah, I would, you’re totally gorgeous, but I’ve already got an offer with two girls I met earlier,” the guy said, winking at her as she took a hit.

“You do have a really nice ass,” she said, exhaling. “Can I squeeze it?”

He turned to let her fondle his ass.

“Cool,” she said, looking at Gray.

Gray toasted her.

When the guy left, he said, “I’d love to see you get fucked by another guy. I used to watch my ex. I’m not jealous at all, I will do anything you want me to do in order to please you. Look at me, in the eyes, I’m serious – *anything*. I’ll play any role for you. Name it. As long as it

doesn't hurt anyone else. Diapers, yes. Diapers with a seven-year-old boy in the room – no. You feel me?"

"Wow. Okay, cool...right on. Usually guys are the opposite. I think I'd do the same for you, I don't know. As long as it didn't hurt someone else, like you said."

"I want to please you. And I'm open to anything. Just so you know."

"I can see that," she said, looking over at model-hot guy talking to his two-girl hook-up.

Back inside, Britt found her.

"Have you been to the Goddess room yet?"

At the shake of her head, Britt took her hand.

"I'm taking her to the Goddess room," Britt informed Gray, who was engaged in conversation. He nodded and waved at them.

"Have fun. See you later."

Clyde was led down a long hallway, to the left and through another long hallway until they came to a smaller room.

"It's for women only," Britt said as she walked in and started dancing in the middle of the room.

"Where are we? Is this part of Spiderhouse?" Clyde asked.

She looked around the dimly lit room. A blindfolded man sat on a chair playing guitar, and another blindfolded man sat in the middle of the floor while women danced in various states of undress and lounged in the corners, eating chocolates and fruit. She wandered in, drawn in by the music and the women. She found herself dancing with Britt and the other women, free from any influences but her soul rhythm, and let herself go, finally becoming aware again, realizing she was the only one left dancing around the blindfolded man whom she tantalized without him



knowing, him only catching her scent as she gyrated around him in the middle of the room.

Finally, exhausted, she slowed, ending her dance.

“Don’t stop dancing, come back!”

“Aww, don’t leave.”

But the spell was broken. She bowed in a Buddhist Namaste posture to the voices calling her back before she left. She felt herself drawn into the hallway again, hearing the muffled noises from different rooms colliding in the quiet hall, following the light back to the main room. She rounded the corner and was distracted by the music, watching the band play on various, altered instruments with extra mouthpieces and functions until Britt saw her standing in the doorway and left the dance floor to grab her. One of the women from the other room joined them. They danced until she realized she hadn’t talked to Gray in a while and left without a word. The floor was under her knees – she had no legs beyond her knees, no feet. She followed the floor’s hills and valleys as she walked the funhouse before she realized the mushrooms might have something to do with her new perception.

“Come on, I want to show you something.”

The woman’s voice was a low growl with a Spanish accent in her ear, and she recognized it as one of the voices who’d asked her to keep dancing in the Goddess room, the woman who had just been dancing with her and Britt.

“You were so good, your dancing, do you know that?” the woman said, pulling her along.

It helped, holding onto someone.

“No, I was just playing around,” she answered, maintaining but pliant as the woman ducked into a bathroom and pulled her into a stall. The woman kissed her, crooning to her in Spanish.

“You’re so beautiful, I want you, you turned me on. You turned the whole room on in there.”

The woman was kissing her breasts, and her fingers slipped inside Clyde’s panties. She was immersed in the moment, in being kissed, and the woman dropped to her knees in front of her.

“I want to taste you, can I?”

“Yes,” she whispered it from another voice, not hers, as the woman pulled her panties aside and went down on her.

“Such a pretty girl, pretty devil kitty,” the woman crooned in English and Spanish.

“Wow, you’re so good...at that,” Clyde managed, wanting to orgasm in the bathroom stall standing up with this Spanish stranger, a woman in a costume going down on her, getting off on this surrealistic moment and recognizing it from a distant, drug-induced reality.

“I’ve had practice,” the woman stopped long enough to look up at her and say.

She heard Britt outside the stall, knocking.

“Get out here. You’re holding up a line. Gray wants to dance with you.”

The two women giggled in the bathroom stall. She helped the costumed stranger to her feet.

“Wow,” Clyde repeated, kissing the woman one last time.

They exited to a line of men standing at the door, applauding them. Holding Britt’s hand, Clyde looked back as she was being dragged back to the front room.

“Oh, we were in the Men’s room!” she giggled. “Wait. I need to take a minute. Did that really just happen?”

“Yes. You were making out with a woman in the men’s bathroom,” Britt said, her face stern.

“Yes – yes, I was!” she agreed drunkenly, shrugging. “Well, it *is* Maximón. Okay. Let’s go find Gray.”

“Hi, baby,” Gray greeted her with a hug. “Your friend Britt’s looking for you.”

“She found me. I was in the bathroom making out with some woman I don’t know.”

Clyde clapped her hands over her mouth to stop anything else from coming out of it.

“Well, did you have a good time?” he asked, amused.

“I did, yes,” she said, uncovering her mouth.

“Well, that’s all that matters. Want to dance with me? I’m actually a good dancer.”

He spun the cane.

“I’m kind of – really messed up. I’m not sure I’m steady enough to dance now.”

“Sit then?”

“Yes.”

They sat by the entrance, people watching until they became absorbed in each other.

“You’ve smiled fifty different smiles tonight,” he said, his fingers coming up to trace the edges of her smile. “But the truth lies in your crooked ones...the inches in between here –” his finger touched a spot to the right of her nose, “– and here,” touching another spot to the left.

She swayed drunkenly into him, throwing her arms around him, kissing him.

“I’m having so much fun tonight, with you. I haven’t had this much fun since, ever.”

“Oh yeah? You about ready to head? Give me your keys, I’m driving.”

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After nearly an hour of sexual antics, she was too drunk to orgasm, so he pulled the condom off, stroking himself to orgasm on her stomach and rubbing his cum into her skin.

Drunk talk after, draped around each other in his bed, going over the night's stories.

"So tell me about the one who broke your heart. Everyone has the one who got away. Tell me about yours," he said, his fingers drumming on her stomach.

"No," she said, bolting upright, hands out in front of her, "you can ask me about anything else, but you can't ask me about that. That's off-limits."

"Why?"

"Everyone has *something* they keep private."

"Not me. I'm an open book. You can ask me anything and I'll tell you. Like the time I road-tripped with a Russian ballerina to go crocodile hunting in the Louisiana swamps in the middle of the night with a flashlight."

"You'll tell me about that one another time, yeah?" she asked as she lay back down wearily, remembering his talent for exaggeration.

"I'm not forgetting about this," he said, snuggling into her armpit.

"Yes, you are," she replied, squirming under his grasp.

He fell asleep, snoring, a heavy arm over her. She threw it off, feeling claustrophobic. Restless, drunk, and unable to sleep, she searched her purse for her earbuds and turned on her iPod to cover his snoring.

She hit the pause button a while later, sitting up in bed. Again the chain rattled on the large door to his space in the back. She pulled her earbuds out and shook Gray beside her.

“Wake up! Someone’s trying to get in!” she whispered fiercely.

He was still mostly asleep.

“No, go back to sleep. That’s why the chain’s on.”

His hand searched for her to pull her down again.

“No! Someone’s trying to get in, Gray!”

She elbowed him solidly to get his attention. He looked over at her, a look of rage crossing his face. She cowered, thinking he was going to go physical on her – don’t poke the sleeping bear.

“Someone’s trying to get in,” she repeated softly.

Just as quickly as the look flashed across his face, it disappeared, replaced by detached blandness.

“It’s okay,” he said, rolling over on his stomach, away from her.

“Graaay!”

The girl’s voice was mournful, a wailing, drunken call.

If voices had faces, this one sounded young and tall, artsy-alternative-modelesque with bangs, she decided. She sat up beside him in bed, understanding from his lack of reaction that this wasn’t out of his ordinary.

“She’ll go away. She’s the psycho I was telling you about earlier.”

He had, in fact, mentioned this earlier to her, only because his phone vibrated constantly until he had finally shut it off. She’d been too drunk at the time to pay attention.

“She’s the tattoo on your arm.”

“No, different one,” he said, rolling back over on his elbows.

“She’s the one from the bathroom,” she said, still hearing the tone of his voice that had made her want to cry on the toilet.

“What?”

“So, should I get dressed? I don’t like being confronted naked.”

“She’s not coming in,” he said, sitting up in bed.

“Or would you prefer that I let her in? Naked,” she said, smiling at him hatefully.

“No. I would not.”

“Gray! Let me in!” the drunk girl called again.

“No! Go away!” he yelled back, clenching his hands into fists.

“Wow,” Clyde said, standing, gathering her costume strewn about everywhere. “This is ridiculous.”

She put on her shoes, finding only one of her fishnet stockings, and who knew what happened to her devil’s horns.

“Listen, I’m sorry. What can I do? She’s psycho.”

“Your truth is so very flexible,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Look, I’m really sorry this is happening right now. What do you want me to do, what should I do? How can I make it better?” he asked, his eyes blinking innocently, looking at her from the bed, finally, fully awake with realization.

“Oh, I don’t know, Gray. I’ve only dated several psychos. And one thing I *do* know about psychos is that once you give them defined boundaries, they stop coming around. And you and *that girrrl*,” she said, drawing out her words, emphasizing her assessment of the girl’s youth, “are not on the same page. Obviously you have not clearly defined your boundaries with her, ‘psycho’ or not.” And now I’m using air-quotes, she thought.

Remembering his reaction to being jolted awake, something in the back of her head said run and don't look back again. Be grateful this happened. This just made it easy.

“You're right. I'm sorry.”

Her glitter sparkled on his face.

“Look. I wasn't asking for monogamy, but, I mean, clean up your shit.”

She wanted to laugh at the whole scenario, her in partial costume leaving his place in the middle of the night, the entire night of craziness – maybe she was asleep.

“I will. I'll clean up my shit, and then I'll call you?” he asked, attempting to salvage the situation.

“No!” she snorted, letting a partial laugh escape. “Clean up your shit, yes. But *do not call me* ever again,” she said, exhaling, looking at his nakedness in bed. A beautiful train wreck, she thought. A stranger to her now. Reality to her now.

“I'd like to see you out.”

“No. Do not see me out. Goodbye, Gray. It was a nice interlude.”

She was wide awake, on all levels now, out in the cold, slamming the heavy door behind her, walking through the garden to her car, and if she was still drunk or altered she didn't feel it. The anger overpowered everything else but more than that, a feeling of relief that it had happened.

In the car, she shook her head. Confetti fell out of her hair and landed on her lap.

“Oh Maximón. Forgive me for all my sins.”

The City Mission across the street was quiet now, no one out in the cold.

Chapter 10.  
Rabbit Holes

*November 14<sup>th</sup>.*

There is a moment of death in each breath of life.

It was the third death in two weeks, this Sunday memorial service.

These things happened like this; they seemed to follow one another. The first death had been one which stunned the community: the suicide of a 43-year-old wife and mother of two children under twelve who was a prominent name in the arts scene. The local NPR station did a piece on her the weekend after her death. Clyde remembered meeting the woman exactly one week before her suicide at a film opening because she remembered how rattled and spasmodic the woman was upon their introduction.



On the heels of the first one, the second death was an overdose of a 27-year-old musician who used to come to Spiderhouse almost daily – bipolar, she found out, through her infrequent, but lengthy, talks with him. He would go off his meds while he was creating new music or touring with his band because the meds took away his creative juices, even though his moods were stabilized, he told her. He liked the highs, he had confessed. And the lows had to be experienced to appreciate the highs most people couldn't feel, or were too afraid of the lows to feel.

And now this one.

Ryan.

They hadn't found his body for several days, so was the word around town. They were awaiting toxicology reports, but it appeared to be another suicide. Pills. They'd found a note. No other details were being released at this time.

There were too many people crowding the small chapel, and Clyde took one of the last seats by an older gentleman who sat stiffly upright. A video montage of photographs from Ryan's life played on a large screen throughout the service.

People stood up to speak, and people broke down. Clyde leaned to whisper to the old man next to her, "Intense, huh."

He nodded and crossed his arms over his chest.

Watermelon, watermelon, Clyde repeated to herself over and over again. She fixated on the memory of the woman on her knees in the bathroom at Maximón, remembering what the woman's hair felt like, gripped in her palm. How her lips felt on her, how hungry the woman was

for her orgasm. Anything to distract her from what was happening right now, and counting didn't work – she needed images to draw her out of the moment.

While people cried around her, Clyde heard her exhalation between parted lips as she crossed her legs, aroused.

Clyde didn't attend the party after. Instead, she snuck out the back while everyone was still giving goodbyes and drove herself home.

At home she opened a bottle of wine, pouring herself a full glass. Rummaging through CDs, she came across one that Ryan had burned for her, a compilation of various clips from radio shows and 1970s easy-listening tunes. She couldn't seem to escape him. A tear formed.

“No crying, bitch!” she yelled at herself. She swallowed a long drink of wine. Thought about the woman again, the bathroom stall, two strangers in costumes. She slid a hand between her legs.

Drinking was the only way to become numb, to erase herself.

About halfway through the bottle she put the CD on repeat. She searched the contacts in her phone to find Ryan's number. She called it, holding her breath. It rang twice and went to his voice mail. She listened to his voice, wishing she could record it. As soon as the message was done, she exhaled, hung up and called back. To listen again. Hold onto his voice that she would never hear again.

She did not count how many times she did this.

Seven-eighths of the way through the bottle, she texted Britt. She waited. No response.

She called Gray. It went to voice mail.

She didn't leave a message.

The only way to alleviate the pain was to inflict pain upon herself. She sat on the floor of her apartment and pounded her left fist repeatedly into the floor as she swallowed the last of the wine in the glass. It only abated the overpowering rage a minutia. She grabbed a pillow and screamed into it as loud and as long as she could. She bent over and pounded her forehead to the ground. That jarred her when her teeth clashed together, and she sat up, breathing heavily. She stood in front of the mirror and slapped herself across the face. Then the other way.

As she headed back to the kitchen to empty the bottle of wine, she saw one of her steak knives. Something dull, not for an easy slice of the artery but for the jagged pain of the cut.

Her phone rang on the coffee table. She rushed to answer it, stumbling and almost tripping over her feet.

It was Gray, but he hung up before she could answer. She waited a minute. When he didn't call immediately back, she dialed his number. Voice mail.

“Gray, everyone's dying, and it's breaking me tonight. I'm sorry to call you, but I just needed to talk.”

She hung up and through her drunkenness berated herself for leaving such a vulnerable voice mail.

She heard a loud knock on the back door to her building. She waited and listened. Again, loud knocking. She opened her door to investigate, leaving it open and walking up the 13 steps, using the railing to pull her up the stairs.

Gray was standing outside the door, looking through the small, glass window. He smiled when he saw her and held up a bottle of wine and a box of chocolate. Clyde wanted to burst into tears, seeing him there. She opened the door only after she controlled her tears.

“What are you doing here?”

“Don’t I rate a hug?”

His arms opened up, and she let herself fall into them. The door closed behind her.

“Shit, we’re locked out. I never do this, I never lock myself out. It usually takes me seven times to leave,” she said, straightening up to look at him. “I’ve been drinking wine already, but you’ve got perfect timing. I just ran through my first bottle.”

“First bottle, huh. Funeral get to you?”

“It was rough. You weren’t there, I noticed.”

“I don’t do funerals.”

“I think if we walk around to the front we can have someone else buzz us in.”

As she finished her sentence, her upstairs neighbor appeared on the stairwell. She waved at him, and he smiled and nodded, chin up in acknowledgment. His black curls bounced as he hopped down the stairs with a young, hip-musician cadence. He opened the door for them as he exited, a flash of hair, sunglasses, white teeth and full lips in tight jeans.

“So that’s your upstairs neighbor, huh?”

“Him, me and the old, handicapped, crazy people. It’s a madhouse here.”

“How old is he?”

“He’s 19, I think. He’s a musician. I listen to him play guitar and sing sometimes. He leaves the window open. He’s improved a lot since I first heard him,” she said, looking back at Gray with a wink.

Gray followed her inside, dropping his jacket on her couch while she locked the door behind them.

“This is the first time I’ve been inside your place.”

“I guess it is. Thanks again for coming over.”

He surveyed the CD playing, the opened albums and empty wine glass.

“So you’ve been drinking alone since after the funeral today? Why didn’t you call me earlier?” he asked, walking into her kitchen.

“Because. You know why, because we aren’t seeing or talking to each other now,” she replied. She stood by the stove, watching him.

“But I still don’t like to see you hurting and drinking alone. By all means, call me to drink with you. I would never pass up an opportunity to do that.”

He located the bottle opener on her kitchen counter and opened the wine.

“Glasses?” he asked, opening cabinets.

She pointed and he pulled out a glass. He poured himself a small glass and refilled hers, walked back to the couch and set the bottle of wine on the table in front of them beside the box of chocolates.

“These are artisan chocolates from this new place downtown. I just got an assortment.”

“That’s so sweet of you,” she said, picking up the box to look at the description.

They sat down on her couch and she slid into the crook of his waiting armpit.

“So, spill it, tell me about it,” he said.

“No, just – I don’t know. I mean, I can’t believe it. Ryan’s gone, and I’m sick of death, I’m tired of people killing themselves and doing stupid shit that kills them. And Ryan, of all people. I just can’t believe he’s gone,” she said, pausing to sip her wine. “And yet, before you got here, I was in so much pain all I wanted to do was dig a dull steak knife into my arms and hurt myself.”

“Please don’t do that. There are a lot more pleasurable ways to cause pain than a dull steak knife to the arm.”

“Gray, I’m being serious.”

“So am I.”

“You’re incorrigible,” she said, slapping the top of his hand gently.

He switched gears.

“Death is hard sometimes. Creative people, I think, often struggle with that pull between life and death more than most people, traipse that gray area in between, for experiences or for stimuli for creativity, and sometimes...death is the result. I know, baby. There’s been some death in my life, too.”

“Seriously, like half the musicians and actors I used to know are waiting on the other side,” she said when she had swallowed the last of her wine.

“Not really,” he said.

“No, not half, but a lot. Too many.”

“More than half of the artists I know should be on medication. But they won’t do it, says it takes away their creativity, fucks with their head somehow. So they go through these highs and lows, and I get these manic phone calls from them when they’re on a rampage with their project or art, or I see them, shaking from too much coffee and too many cigarettes and not enough food, homeless-looking and unkempt because they haven’t showered in days, because they’re obsessed about whatever they’re working on, but – shit, you should see some of the stuff this one dude Panama creates when he goes on acid binges...amazing shit... and then you won’t hear from them and they’ve gone underground, to recoup from that manic period. But they fall down rabbit holes in the dark by themselves sometimes, and I don’t hear from them again. Until I get the phone call,” he said, looking out at the room.

“But you’re on medication, and you still make art.”

“Yeah. But everything affects me in the opposite way it affects normal people. Like the methamphetamine that calms me down – that sort of thing.”

“Shit, every actor I know is on at least two scripts,” she snorted. “See, that’s what Mark said. He would go off his meds to make music. And he fucking OD’d last week.”

“Who’s Mark?”

“Oh, he’s a musician who used to come into Spiderhouse. I think his last band was Cinderfellas. Hipster stuff for the gay men.”

“That’s what I said – sometimes they fall down the rabbit hole, pretty Bonnie.”

**IV.  
ANTIQUE  
VALUE**



Chapter 11.  
The Portrait of Clyde

*November 27<sup>th</sup>.*

What are you thankful for?

People had been asking her this since it was the season of Thanksgiving. One of the regulars at the Spiderhouse asked her this morning.

“Today, Ben, I’m thankful that I get to see your shining, smiling face three times a week,” she responded cheekily.

She knew the drill, knew the answer to give, rather than the one she wanted to give. Any of the ones she wanted to give, like: I'm thankful our interaction lasts for all of a minute and I don't have to smell your breath again for two more days.

It was the holiday weekend, and the Spiderhouse was hopping, both with regulars and out-of-towners. Clyde and Britt worked the morning shift on Saturday. It was a brisk morning, the sun boldly shining down on those who braved the 42-degree weather to sit outside at chipped formica tables on chairs that teetered on the uneven sidewalk. There was no break until Will took over for a few minutes. The girls disappeared out the side door to the alley. They didn't feel the cold; it felt good for the moment.

Clyde pulled out her cigarettes and a lighter. She handed Britt her phone.

"Gray's been leaving me crazy voice mails. I don't know what to do."

She lit her cigarette and inhaled.

Britt lit hers and listened to the voice mails. "Go-odness," she said after two minutes had passed.

"There's more," Clyde said. "Twenty-three, to be exact."

Britt stared at her with an open mouth.

"Damn, he's got it baaaad," she said as she handed the phone back to Clyde. "And weeirrd."

"So, what should I do? I can't see him again, not after he went right back to everything that's going to kill him. He told me he's been having seizures. And he went to the hospital because he had a heart attack. He's only 47!" Clyde pulled at her ponytails.

“Exactly. He’s 47. And he’s been abusing his body for a long time from what you’ve told me. I mean, choose happiness, girl, and that don’t sound too happy-happy, joy-joy to me. *You’re* only 24,” Britt said, leveling her gaze at Clyde.

Clyde nodded and ducked her head to the side, looking up again, focusing her gaze down the alley, avoiding Britt’s eyes.

“Why do you date these ... intense, crazy guys? I mean, I don’t know much, but that stuff I heard on your voice mail – that doesn’t last. That’s pop love. It’s that whole artist and muse roller coaster ride. I mean, that doesn’t sustain in the real world.”

“I know this. Maybe it’s me. I keep ending up in these situations.”

“Who knows. All I’m saying is, there’s other guys out there. Normal ones,” Britt said as she dragged on her cigarette.

“That’s my problem. I don’t like normal,” Clyde said, looking up at the sky between the buildings then over at her friend.

“Then good luck, girl. Sounds like a lot of heartbreak to me.”

“We should get back in there and relieve Will.”

“You brought it up.”

Clyde screwed her face up and shrugged in a what-can-you-do-about-it mockery of herself. Britt snubbed the butt of her cigarette out on the brick wall of the building and threw it in the dumpster beside the back door. Clyde flicked hers into the alley.

“Thank God you girls are back. It’s a madhouse. Take the power back,” Will said as he grabbed four plates and headed to duck through the line. “Keep that line open! Full Power.”

“Full Power!” Britt yelled from the grill, brandishing her spatula.

Clyde pumped her fist in the air, repeating, “Keep that line open!”

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“Hey, want to go on an adventure with me?” Clyde said as she passed the joint to Britt, who took a hit, exhaled, and passed the joint back to Clyde without answering. The girls were off work, sitting in Britt’s white beater van she’d squeezed off to the side of the alley a bit further up.

“I don’t know. Tell me more first,” Britt said, fidgeting with the radio.

Clyde took another hit, feeling it massage her temples now. She was definitely high.

“Hey, where do you get your weed? This is good stuff.”

She handed the joint back to Britt.

“This dude I know, Vet. He’s dialed in.”

“No doubt,” Clyde whistled.

“Ryan used to buy from him. Speaking of Ryan, how are you holding up?”

“I should have loved Ryan. He was normal, and he loved me.”

“Stop wasting your time on crazy artists like Gray,” Britt said. Her voice held a note of exasperation. “Musicians get a bad rap but I’m telling you, writers and artists are crazier than we are. Writers – manic-depressive; painters are the purest crazy achievable to humans without being God; industrial artists are all raging alcoholics, and the fabrics people – bipolar.”

“*Brilliant* artists,” Clyde countered.

They passed the joint between them.

“Still. Crazy as bat shit. Most of them. Is it worth it?”

“I used to like the roller coaster ride of being the artist’s muse. And I liked being an object to them rather than a person. It was easier for me to...gain the upper-hand, detach myself and leave when I wanted. Compartmentalization is key, right?”

“I hate roller coasters. And I like being the creator, not the muse. Compartmentalization sounds like a lot of energy to me,” Britt answered, passing her the joint.

“Nah, I’m good. All you, girl.”

Britt licked her fingers and stubbed out the cherry. The rest of the joint was thrown into a baggie inside an empty cigarette pack hidden in her consul.

“Oh, so, you know Gray painted a portrait of me, me in that tutu with my combat boot... it’s really a painting of my butt, the tutu, and the boot, right?”

Britt shrugged.

Clyde was disappointed she didn’t seem to remember and tried to stay focused on her point.

“I feel like the painting has my soul in it, like Gray painted my soul into that painting and I’m empty; I can’t feel anything anymore. I don’t know how to explain it. It’s like he reverse-compartmentalized me into that painting. He’s bleeding over into other parts of my life, or maybe he’s sucking all of me into one compartment. I need that painting.”

“What are you talking about? How fucking high are you?” Britt asked.

“I know how to get into Gray’s place, and I know exactly where it is. Come with me – help me take my painting back. It’s the only way I can break free of him. Please. Please come with me, Britt.”

“So this is the adventure? Stealing a painting? To help you off the roller coaster ride? I feel so *Thomas Crown Affair* right now. All right. I’m driving.”

It was high noon, and the block was empty of cars, deserted this holiday weekend. Even the City Mission across the street seemed despondent, dingy, sad.

She had Britt drop her off a block away, and gave her directions as to how to pull into Gray's alley parking lot before she jogged away.

She knew Gray kept the back door to the garden unlocked, or at least she could climb the gate or possibly squeeze in between the wooden post and the side of the building next door. After that, if he was gone, the back door would be chained and the gate down, but he usually left his bedroom window open because it was high up off the ground and too tiny or out of reach for most people to crawl through. Unless one stood on the top level of the concrete veranda, hoisted oneself up and through the window from that vantage.

All in all, he was pretty loose in his security, and he relied on both his reputation and on obscurely fitting into his landscape so he was unnoticeable.

Clyde wasn't worried.

His truck was gone. There was music playing, but that didn't mean anything. He often left music blaring. But he might have just run out for cigarettes or alcohol, and, in that case, she didn't have much time.

She approached the outer wooden gate that surrounded his garden – the chain was on. Looking across the garden through the space between the post and the gate, she noted the metal gate was closed, but that the overhead door to his place was open. So he was probably out but just for a minute.

She texted Britt:        Pull around back now but keep running. Going in. Meet u w/ it.

She didn't wait for a response, sliding her phone into a back pocket and slithering through the small space between the post and the building.

She walked through the garden and up to the veranda, peering into his open space. She heard nothing but the music. Luckily for her, she was in tennis shoes from work. Perfect for climbing over decorative, metal gates.

Tennis shoes were also quiet on concrete floors as Clyde tiptoed through the kitchen, hugging the corner, peering around to the next room, noting the bedroom door was closed. Around the corner and past the basement stairs, down his long hallway to the front room with his piano.

There it was. Her painting. She glided to it, lifting it off the wall. A solid shift in her balance and she was in control, hugging it to her as she tiptoed back the way she'd come in, skirting the open stairs, keeping her eye on the closed bedroom door.

At the back door she slid the painting through the space between the gate and the post, crawling over the gate as she'd done to get in. She heard the crunch of a vehicle's tires on gravel outside the gate. Britt, she hoped. The car shifted into park. Clyde grasped the painting and headed down the stairs to the back gate. The car shut off and a door opened, and then closed. She heard the unbalanced walk and crunch of a cane or crutch where a step would normally happen, and froze two feet from the gate. There was nowhere to hide. Footsteps on the gravel. She looked around wildly, wondering if Britt's van was somewhere close – she couldn't spot it through the cracks in the gate.

Gray unlocked the gate. Clyde stood there awkwardly, foolishly, as he appeared and saw her. Stopped short.

“Clyde, what are you doing?” he asked, grabbing his chest in mock agony. “I almost stroked out.”

“I’m taking my painting.”

She held onto it, smiling and defiant.

“Fine, you want it that bad, it’s yours. But how did you get in?”

“I squeezed through the gate and climbed over the metal gate. You left the place kind of open.”

“So, you broke in?”

“I didn’t actually *break* anything. I just – dropped in, uninvited,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Why didn’t you just ask me?” he asked, amused.

“Because I didn’t think you’d let me have it.”

“Well, now. I didn’t say I’d let it go for free.”

She shifted her posture. The atmosphere changed from sheepish defiance to sudden flirtation.

“What are you asking?”

Britt opened the gate at that moment. “I couldn’t find you,” she said, catching her breath. She waved at Gray.

“Hello, Britt,” Gray said, turning to Clyde. The interruption defused the sexual tension.

“I’m disappointed you brought a third party into this.”

He held out his hand for the painting.

“I’m afraid I can’t part with it at this time.”



She propped the painting against a wrought-iron chair-and-table set so that she was relinquishing it without literally handing it to him.

She glared at Gray.

“The only person you care about is yourself! I told you when you painted me it was a bad idea.”

“Why? I told you it was an exchange, not a captive situation.”

Her face crumpled in on itself as she changed her tactics.

“Gray, I thought you loved me,” she said, letting the tears fall for effect, letting her lip tremble.

He glanced at Britt, who stood frozen, an unwilling witness to the scene, before answering, “I do love you. And the painting is mine. I’m not selling it. I’m not giving it away. I’m keeping it.”

Clyde rushed him then, pounding her fists on his chest, rage taking over. She heard herself screaming but had no control over what came out. Gray caught her wrists and shook her until her teeth chattered in her skull.

Britt stepped up to them, using her stage voice: “Okay, guys, let’s take the crazy down a notch.”

“I agree,” Gray said, holding fast to Clyde’s wrists.

She continued to scream at him, trying to throw him off balance and relinquish his grip on her wrists. Britt inserted herself between the two of them, putting her hands on the outside of Clyde’s arms, backing her away.

“He is – *you are* – such a control freak! Always needing to control the situation, no one else matters, only you, you narcissistic bastard,” Clyde said, spitting at him.

“Tell me how you really feel,” Gray laughed at the sky. “Fuck! Finally, for once, tell me how you fucking *feel*, Clyde.”

Clyde shook off Britt’s grasp. “I hate you forever,” she said coldly, meeting Gray’s eyes. Then, to Britt, “Let’s go.”

Chapter 12.  
Bad Things

*December 24<sup>th</sup>.*

Bad things happen in threes.

It was her line. The actor playing Dorian Gray stood there awkwardly, waiting for her protest.

In addition to the female roles, she was a stand-in tonight as artist Basil Hallward. She knew the entire play backwards and forwards, but now, in the moment, she stood there, having completely forgotten where they were in the scene and who she was supposed to portray at the moment.

He repeated his last line, urging her to pull it together. She did, picking up her lines at his prompt. The smell of her sweat was suddenly palpable, the desire to count things overpowering.

Watermelon, watermelon.

The play went on, her Basil Hallward wooden, at best.

At home, Clyde broke a glass. Slipped right out of her hand, wet with condensation, and a sliver of it got stuck in her foot.

What a waste of whisky. She pulled the glass out of her foot and cleaned it despite thinking the alcohol probably did a better job, placed a bandage over it, and cleaned up the broken glass and liquid on the floor.

This wasted 13 minutes, and she was already pressed for time, having gotten home late. She'd wanted to leave her place in time to stop by the liquor store before it closed on the way to the Holiday Glow Party at Poe's Loft in the West Bottoms.

Her hair wasn't the problem – it was under a long, platinum wig. Her costume wasn't even holding her up – she opted for scantily clad rather than opulence, with a bare torso, a tutu, some stockings and ankle-strap stilettos. It was her body make-up. Even with her skills and experience in creating a stage persona, it still took time. Time to dry, too, which, if she wanted to run by the liquor store, she didn't have much left.

The West Bottoms was a destination the masses only visited once a year when the haunted houses were open. The rest of the year only those in-the-know attended the parties or patronized the cash-only and BYOB bars, if one knew where they were and when they were open. Backed up against the Missouri River, the Bottoms was an industrial, lowland district that

existed in the river floodplain. The warehouses and buildings that survived the floods of various years since had been around since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and stood proudly, silent, brick overlords of their domain.

As she cruised the edge of the winding, outer road that led to the concrete bridge under the interstate, Clyde wondered if Gray would be there. It was only natural their paths would cross again. She just hoped it would take 10 years and by then she'd be gone to a different city, so it would never happen.

Red lights ahead, from the railroad crossing at the bottom of the bridge. She turned one street before and drove around. Blocks from Poe's Loft, cars lined the streets. She pulled around the six-story brick building to the gravel parking lot and found a space in the far corner. She counted her steps in her head as she followed a group of gay men and female models through the front entrance in the dark to the back of the building, where the freight elevator would take them to the fourth floor. She counted seventeen steps from the car to the elevator shaft. Someone was operating the elevator tonight, which helped to at least minimize the number of times it might get stuck between floors.

Clyde heard the music before the elevator stopped. The operator pulled up the wooden-slatted inside doors and then parted the outer elevator doors to let the passengers step into the hallway to the loft. A group of people switched places with them for its descent. The elevator was in constant motion tonight.

Britt's band was on. Clyde ditched her coat in a back closet, found the arm of a couch to prop herself against, and took out her flask of whisky from which she swigged and placed in a garter on her thigh. She looked around the crowded room, through the pillars into the front room where the band was inciting the crowd into a frenzy.

She studied the flow for a few minutes then started her walk through the room, stopping to say hi or touch people as she passed faces she recognized. Her naked breasts and torso painted in black-light-glow peacock feather-and-flowers landscape stopped people mid-stride. The crowd both parted for her and reached out to touch her, to absorb her as she wound through them. She felt like Jesus or a rock star.

“You rockin that get-up, girl, *get it!*”

“Did you paint yourself?”

“Are you performing tonight?”

“Hot – hot!”

She heard Britt’s band kick into another song – they were almost through their set. Under the archway that opened into the second room where the band was playing, she found herself next to Gray, propped up on his cane.

“Oh, hello there.”

“Hi back atcha. Look at you, you naked Goddess. You’re wearing the painting’s tutu.”

“*The tutu ...right.*”

“You know it drives me mad-love-crazy for you.”

“I know it does. How’s things?” she asked, touching his forearm. There was tension in his arm, a deep, explosive shaking that vibrated off him.

He shifted his weight, standing for a moment on his bad leg and leaning heavily on his cane to adjust his posture so that she was forced to remove her hand.

“Fine, okay. Things are – you know. I’m down to a pack of cigarettes a day. Down from three,” he said, brushing over bigger topics with the revelation of one detail.

“Hey, good for you.”

“I have to. Doctor’s orders. There’ve been a lot of doctor’s orders lately,” he said, as he switched his weight back to his good leg and leaned against the wall, sweating a little.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. But, you’re holding up okay?”

“I’ve missed you. I wish we could go picking again.”

“Aw. I’ve missed you, too.”

She looked around the room, avoiding his eyes that wanted to capture hers with his sideways glance, wanting space between them. Spotting a friend across the room with relief, she turned back to him and looked him in the eyes.

“Be good to yourself.”

By the time Britt found her, Clyde was drunk.

“You missed our set, didn’t you?” Britt asked, taking a drink of Clyde’s whisky.

“No. I missed most of it, yes. But you were still playing when I got here,” she answered, grabbing her flask back from Britt and tilting it to her lips.

“How are you so drunk already? It’s just past midnight,” Britt admonished.

“One of those nights. I derailed in the middle of performance tonight – flubbed my lines.”

“Sorry, dude.”

“Then I broke a glass and cut my foot. Just one of those nights.”

Clyde handed the whisky back to Britt.

“Have some. Catch up to me.”

“Bad things happen in threes, you know,” Britt cautioned, catching the eye of one of her band members. “Our equipment’s all loaded up. I’ve got to catch my ride in a few. You want to come with us?”

“Aw, thanks but no, I’ll stay and sober up. Did you see Gray here?”

Britt was waving to her band mate. She brought her attention back to Clyde.

“Gray? No, I didn’t see him tonight.”

“We ran into each other earlier.”

“How was that?” Britt asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Kind of – a bit of everything. Weird, okay, hard, not hard.”

“Hey, you sure you don’t want to come with us? If you’ve had a night of it, why don’t you call it one and come back with us. I’ll drive you to your car tomorrow,” Britt offered, placing her hand on Clyde’s shoulder.

“Thanks, hon. I’m going to stay. I’m not ready to call it a night yet,” Clyde said as she brought her opposite hand over Britt’s, holding it on her shoulder.

She checked her phone an hour later in the bathroom and had a text message from Gray. She erased it without reading it. No point in starting up all that again. The party was winding down, and she was exhausted, crippled from dancing in her stilettos all night. Her wounded foot had rubbed the bandage off, rubbed itself raw. She threw the trench coat over her sweaty torso, her tutu making the coat stick out oddly, like a parasol. Reaching the freight elevator, she pushed the button, and, hearing nothing moving, peeked over the edge. It was stuck between floors somewhere below. *Damn it.* Clyde found the fire escape and started downstairs, careful of her stilettos and the grates in the metal stairs. She had to double-up on her steps, taking two steps per stair, or 14 steps per floor. Plus two on each landing. She contemplated stopping halfway down to take off her heels, but she was a trooper. Besides, you did this to yourself, my dear.

She sniffed the sky and detected snow in the air. A shiver ran down her spine and settled in her right ass cheek, tingling. She unwrapped her arms from her torso three feet from her car. It was one of the few left. At 16 additional steps counted from the base of the fire escape, she hit



the automatic unlock button on her keychain. Her keys still in hand, she was caught in the glare of headlights as a truck pulled out of a space and behind her car. She threw up a hand to shield her eyes from the bright light and peeked around her arm to see who it was.

The door opened and Gray stepped out of the driver's seat, cane first. She melted, half-relieved it wasn't cops or some strange psycho, and half-scared it might be a psycho and wasn't cops.

"Gray! I thought you were the authorities or something," she said. The driver's door was open, beeping at her. "What are you doing? I thought you'd left."

He was leaning on his door. He closed it. Hobble-walked to her.

Clyde's heart pounded in her chest.

"I texted you, did you get it?" he asked. His tone was flat and she noticed something different, lacking.

"I – no, I didn't check my phone. I'm sorry."

He was standing in front of her now. He touched a strand of her long, platinum wig and wrapped it around his fingers, walking himself closer as he wrapped the strand tighter. Her body shivered, their breath intermingling in the air, the heat of attraction steaming off them.

"You look hot as a blonde, but I like your natural color better."

"Actually, it's not. I'm a brunette," she lied.

"Really? I always thought you were Irish."

"A mutt, really."

"Brunette, huh. Of course you are. There's no bottom to you is there?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“Nothing, nothing. I texted you after I saw you tonight because I realized it’s been two months and I still can’t stop thinking about you. I was thinking, you’re right, I needed to clean my shit up.”

“I mean. I don’t know what to say. It doesn’t really matter now,” she sighed.

“Just give me tonight. Come home with me tonight. I need you tonight. I want your naked, painted body all over me.”

“I want you, too, I just don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“You can start over tomorrow, just throw yourself into tonight, leave tomorrow behind for the now.”

He used his whole body to talk, throwing his arms into the air, his cane propped against his hip. He had a way of stringing together words like poetry to which her body responded on a primal level. Still she hesitated.

“I’ll make you pancakes for breakfast,” he said, his head bent over her, his lips brushing hers.

She let him kiss her. Her heart was pounding, and if he was asking her for tonight, she wanted him still, damn it anyway. Still, she pushed back.

“What’s the point? We’ve already tried this.”

“The point is, end this year with a bang. I love you.”

“Two people can love each other but still choose not to go down the same path together.”

“And I think that’s what we’re doing. Doesn’t mean we can’t have one more night.”

“It’s not good for either one of us,” she persisted.

“I’m not a bad person. And there’s something special between us.”

“I don’t think you are a bad person. I just think our chemistry together is.”

“Two ships. Passing in the night.”

She looked at him for a long moment, before saying, “Okay. I’ll follow you in my car.”

Bad things happen in threes...

She pulled up behind him at his place and turned off the car, sitting inside without moving. Gray’s door opened and he looked back at her. She opened the door and got out of the car.

“I know you’re sitting there weighing the risks versus rewards of this. I know you, Clyde. But don’t think about it, just ... roll with it.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” she asked, walking backward to face him as they walked to his door.

“Baby, you are soooo here, right in front of me, right now – you.”

Inside, he set the cane aside, turning to kiss her, lifting her up on the kitchen cabinet. She wrapped her legs around his waist as they kissed and fondled each other into a frenzy of clothes being pulled off.

“Keep the tutu, wig and heels on,” he instructed her, pushing her coat off and smearing her painted breasts roughly with his lips and hands.

Chapter 13.  
Love Nightmare

*December 25th. 2:01 a.m.*

“Keep the tutu, wig and heels on!” Gray pushed her coat off, smearing her painted breasts roughly with his lips and hands.

Paint on his face, in his hair, and *nothing makes sense anymore* was her wild thought as she closed her eyes and felt him rip off her panties, push her legs up in the air, and lick her from front to back. She arched into his mouth, navigating him to the right spot and he stopped long enough to say, “God, I’ve missed the taste of you. Like candy,” then went back to what he was doing to her, sliding his finger inside her while he hummed on her clit until she climaxed less

than two minutes later, contracting around his finger. He withdrew his finger and licked it, then pulled her legs up over his shoulders, one hand reaching down for his cock. She heard his zipper and felt his cock against her, ready.

“Let’s move this into the bedroom,” she suggested.

He pulled her off the counter, steadying her in her high heels, and slapped her ass under the tutu.

“I’m following that tutu wherever it goes. How do you want it?” he asked as she crawled onto his bed on all fours, looking at him over her shoulder, wagging her rear at him. He entered her from behind. Hard. All the way in until she moaned in pleasurable pain.

“You’re so tight,” he sighed, sinking into her again. “Arch your back like you want it.”

She did, and the muscles on her back flexed, her lower back taut as her ass fit against him. He slapped her right cheek, leaving a mark, and grabbed a handful of her haunch, separating her ass cheeks, going deeper.

Every time he thrust into her she felt him hit her back wall, going as deep as he could. She grabbed the bars of the headboard, coming back to meet him, an “Ah” escaping her every time he thrust inside her. His rhythm got faster.

“Tell me you want my cum,” he directed, his hands on her hips.

“No.”

“Bonnie, tell me,” he said, his voice soft and threatening and cajoling all at once.

“No,” she laughed at her defiance.

She’d squirmed her way partially up the headboard, pulling herself up with her armpits that she’d managed to throw over the edge, to gain some footing under him. To play the game, try to get away.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

He pulled her back down, getting her shoulders all the way down on the bed again as he lay over her, his cock still deep inside her. His hands felt her up from underneath, over her belly and ribs to her breasts, over her breasts to her shoulders and wrists, grabbing her wrists and bringing them crossed over her breasts. He pushed down on her shoulders to slide her back toward him while he simultaneously used his feet under hers to push her feet in closer, to shove her knees in so that she was locked down into a tiny ball under him.

“You can’t get any deeper inside me,” she laughed, becoming slightly ecstatic or terrified when he grabbed her wrists, making her realize her helplessness.

“Tell me – you want – my cum,” he said, thrusting with every other word.

She shook her head.

“You want me to get rough with you?”

He grabbed her head and pushed it down into the bed, slapping her ass. She laughed again. He snatched the wig off her head and grabbed a handful of hair, pulling up. She yelped, hearing her neck pop all the way up its vertebrae.

“Okay, okay! I’ll say it.”

He was hovering over her now, and he whispered in her ear as he thrust his cock again, “The next time I thrust like – this –”

“Ahhh!”

“I want you to say, ‘Gray, I want your cum.’ Be a good girl, and I’ll let go of your hair. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said, her voice defeated, all exhalation.

He rose up, still inside of her.

“Don’t disappoint me.”

He let go of her hair, his hands grabbing her hips and locking them to him so she couldn’t move.

“Are you ready?”

She tried to move her hips but found that she couldn’t; her fingers tried to pry his loose from their death-grip on her hip flexors, and he slapped them away like an insect. Had he ever mentioned being a wrestler in high school? She gave up.

“Yes.”

“Now.”

He thrust deep inside her.

“Baby, I want your cum!”

He pulled back and then held his cock, ready to thrust again.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his voice soft.

“Yes,” she sighed.

He held her to him for a long instant, her hips immobile, her ass pinned against him as her knees dangled just above the bed. A guttural giggle escaped her before she could quash it. He threw her off him, as if suddenly bored with this game.

“How do you want to finish me off? You want to suck me?”

She pushed herself up on the bed to a seated position, nodding. He lay on his back, holding his cock.

“You wiped yourself off. I like tasting myself on you,” she observed when she had taken possession of his now somewhat soft cock.

“Softly,” he said. “Slowly.”

She took his cock in her mouth softly, kissing it first, wetting it with her tongue, licking his balls and taking them into her mouth gently. It was partially hard but rose back up as her tongue got to work on it. She opened her throat and took him all the way in.

“Oh my God, do you know how few women can do that?”

She came up off his cock and smiled up at him, saying, “I like sucking your cock.”

She spit on it, and followed the spit with her mouth and tongue down the shaft. Finding a rhythm and deep-throating him every so often, she heard his sighs and his whisper, “Don’t you fucking stop.”

She knew he was getting close. She deep-throated him now, taking a breath every second time.

“When I cum, I’m going to grab your hair and cum all the way down your throat.”

He was up, grabbing her hair and pushing her head to him before she had time to take a breath. His cock was all the way down her esophagus, blocking her airway. Her hand flew around to his on her hair, her other hand shoving his hip in sudden panic. His hand found her frantic one on his hip and closed around it, intertwining his with hers and holding her hand like a lover. She let him capture hers for a second and then squeezed his hand to communicate her need for air.

“I’m almost there,” he panted.

She tried to close her jaw down around his cock, to bite him so he would withdraw and she could breathe, but her jaw was locked open and his grip on her head rendered her unable to back off. Her hands came to his hips, the one struggling free of his, and she pushed with all her strength, until he suddenly released his grip on her hair.

“No?” he asked, laying down. “I was almost there.”



Her breath came in ragged gasps, all the way from her core to try to get oxygen, and she dropped her head down for a moment between her legs on the bed to get some air and focus on breathing again. She gagged. Air-vomited.

“Come here and ride me then,” Gray said, but before he finished she was up, eyes blazing.

Her arm swung at him but he deflected it, throwing her out of bed with her momentum, across the room. She rolled into the concrete wall, smashing the back of her head. He was out of bed before she recovered, his hand around her throat, squeezing the air from her again as he lifted her up, eye-level with him, her feet dangling off the floor even in their heels.

He smashed her head against the wall again. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head, and immediately the pain followed, exploding inside and all around her head. Her fingers tried to pry his fingers from her throat.

“You don’t want to ride me? Okay, I’ll fuck you against the wall,” he said, laughing as he slammed the back of her head again, slapping her face, bursting open her lip. “Oh, you don’t like it this rough? This is how I play.”

She arched her back, to use her legs for leverage, to kick him, no air now, no breath to scream or cry, but he held her throat tight while he smashed the back of her head over and over into the wall, knocking the rest of her breath out of her. She tasted the blood from her lip.

“When I tell you to say my name, *you say my fucking name.*”

She struggled with everything she had. It didn’t matter. He was too strong, too big. Her head ringing, she felt him shove his cock inside her, up against the wall, her head held there by his hand, wanting to sob but unable to breathe as he choked her, slamming her head into the wall repeatedly while he fucked her.

Black-purple now – everything was black-purple, with light zaps and trails in the dark-purple pressure-haze, and her fingers pried one of his up just enough for a partial gasp of air as she felt herself losing consciousness.

He licked a tear off her cheek.

“I love your tears. You look so beautiful when you cry.”

I’m dying, I’m going to die. She couldn’t see anything, could only feel him, hear him break the ringing in her ears as he came, yelling, “Fucking Satan’s daughter!”

The panic was fading now, just make her lungs stop screaming. Her hand slid down and connected with a small table, on which she felt something heavy. She brought the object up blindly with her last bit of energy, felt it connect with his skull, heard the crack, and felt the reverb in her arm.

His hands let go and he reeled away from her.

“Bitch!” he yelled, staggering.

She gasped for air, sliding to the floor. Her fingers slipped, and the object fell out of her hand. She tried to make her eyes work again, grabbing the object coming into focus as Gray landed on top of her, pinning her with his weight to the floor, her neck with his forearm.

She brought a knee up as her arm rose with its weapon which unbalanced him, catching him in the groin, and she saw the old-fashioned, wooden paddle become her sword of life as it smacked his head again. Gray cursed her as she scrambled away from him, using her stiletto heels as weapons. She heard her sobs coming from deep inside her, a place she didn’t recognize, guttural sounds.

He held his head; the side of it had broken open and half his face was covered in blood. They both struggled to their feet.

“I’m not fucking around!”

She tried to quiet her gasps.

She grabbed the paddle with both hands as she swung it back. Wait for it – wait for it – no balls. She heard her fourth-grade softball coach talking to her and took a breath as she waited. Time grinded to slow motion. He was raging now, groaning, blood pouring from his head, his eyes bulging as he spit out a tooth, glaring at her.

His reach was longer than she thought and she tripped back, away from his hand as he snarled at her. She heard the air whistle as she swung the paddle through the air at his head. Follow through.

He spun around with the force. She kept her eyes on his head, eyes on the ball, swung the paddle back the other way, hitting him from the other side, and he fell against the wall. She stood over him and swung again, a scream ripping from her, hearing the paddle crunch against his skull as he slid to the ground.

He wasn’t breathing anymore. She jabbed at him with the paddle. No response. Again she jabbed, harder. Nothing.

The stillness pounded like waves in her ears, broken by her sobs. Her hand clapped over her open mouth, and she sobbed. Her legs gave out, and she collapsed on the floor, holding the paddle, staring at him, at the blood. Hyperventilating, listening to herself hyperventilate as if she was someone else. She doubled over, her forehead pressed to the floor as she tried to get air so she wouldn’t pass out. Finally, her breath heaved to heavy exhalations punctuated with moans, and the sounds stopped. She drew in one last deep breath, exhaled, and sat up again.

Sudden vertigo overwhelmed her as she realized she had just killed a man. What’s next, then? She wasn’t going to go to prison for taking the trash out.

As if someone else took over, she stood, despite the vertigo, and stared at the crumpled body in front of her. She saw the wheelchair in the corner.

She felt detached from her body, a cinematographer of her own movie scene as she watched the wheelchair get closer to her, her hands reaching out to the handlebars, rolling it to his body and half-shoving, half-lifting him into the chair, hearing her grunts and sobs from behind the screen in front of her. She looked down and watched her legs walking in their heels, wheeling him slowly around the corner, down the hallway, until they stopped at the top of the basement stairs. She saw her arms draw back and she watched her hands let go, air replacing his wheelchair handlebars, sending Gray's 6'4" heft down the stairs, listening to him crash, watching the wheels spinning at the bottom, glimmering in the darkness.

She forced herself to think again, move feet, move.

She braved the possum to set fire to the basement after she'd found the gasoline canister in his closet, along with bleach, ammonia, rubbing alcohol, other chemicals, and oil-soaked rags. She skirted the wheelchair and Gray's body at the bottom of the stairs, intent on finishing this.

The basement was dark, filled with shit like she'd imagined, an unfinished dirt floor with stairs leading up to his living space. Smelling of rot and decay, chemicals and danger. There was no door leading up to the upstairs, so the light from his space shone in, casting shadows on the piles of who knew what: junk, treasure, antiques, pissed-on, brand-new, as she navigated the path from the light. She could smell animal in here.

She felt her way toward a back corner, letting her nose lead her toward the most organic, decaying part of the space, dousing piles and bags with chemicals along the way and igniting

them with a butane lighter. She found some bags with what appeared to be paper and clothing in them and poured it on the mess.

That was when she heard the possum snarl for the first time, saw its yellow-green eyes appear over the humps of sacks, glowing in the faint shadows at her, no soul, all glass reflection, a primordial creature whose existence predated humans.

She froze, felt her hand grip the lighter, leveling her balance as she stood off with the possum. She'd pissed on its nest. *Fuckall.*

"It's all coming down. You should leave now before I fuck you up," she said in a voice that belonged to some other woman she'd never met. The possum snarled again.

Her left hand gripped the butane lighter, and she stood her ground as it hissed and snarled, feeling what was left of the gasoline splash around in its container. She took a breath, exhaled, and lit the pile of trash she'd just doused, backing away. The possum screamed as its nest burst into flames and leaped at her. She backed up, throwing gasoline at the creature to keep it at bay, pouring it behind her as she quickly made her way to the stairs. When she got to Gray's body, she lit the gasoline trail. The possum was trapped behind the line of fire. She took several greasy rags she'd left on the stairs and lit them and threw them into the nearby piles. The fire was already taking over the basement. She backed herself up the stairs.

She looked at his body, mangled under the wheelchair. The fire was creeping toward him. It was time to go.

Move feet. Move.

At the top of the stairs, she looked around at everything one last time. His shrine in the corner, displaying everything from a cup of some woman's crystalized piss remnants to deities, candles, incense, coins, dried flowers and dried blood on a razor edge, had new additions to it:

her hair band, her white fishnet stocking and the devil's horns she'd worn to the Maximón party. She saw her voodoo on his shrine, pieces of herself he had collected.

She grabbed her coat and purse, found her panties, and took the paddle. At the last moment she remembered her wig and retrieved it.

"I just collected on my voodoo. Our tab's zero now," she said to the empty room.

She thought of the possum, and her body convulsed with disgust.

At home, she locked the door behind her and checked the deadbolt seven times. She shed her coat in between the door and the kitchen and walked to the freezer. Pulled out the whisky and some ice. Grabbed a clean glass and poured a hefty drink. She took a long sip, feeling it sting her lip, letting it warm her insides and clear her head. She slid the tutu down her hips and stepped out of it. She sat in a chair and unbuckled her shoes, removing them. Naked, she sipped on her drink.

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There was no memory of driving home, of taking a shower. Only the memory of seeing her body in the shower and her damp, newly dark hair, reminding her she'd done so.

"Tonight's off the ship's log, not recorded, didn't happen."

The sound of her voice startled her in the silence of her apartment.

## Vita

An Irish-French-German Kansan native (who's heard all the *Wizard of Oz* references), Cara Elizabeth Duryea is what happened when a conservative math major from a family of engineers and farmers married a liberal mental health nurse from a family of jewelers and merchants. (Cara still thinks there was a switch at birth, or possibly time travel involved.)

Past lives of Cara's have included that of a Romanian gypsy, a courtesan during the French Revolution and a disciple of John the Baptist. Her current life is that of an oxymoron reliving Groundhog Day in an episode of "The Fruitless Romance: Bubble Girl Meets Bubble Boy".

She exists in Kansas City, Missouri, and on occasion can be caught engaging in such malarkey as throwing coins at wishing wells, running in the rain, and writing chapters in journals, scribbles on paper napkins, and random thoughts on steno pads that may someday become a scene in one of her fiction books.

Cara's favorite quote is "Well-behaved women rarely make history." She attempts to incorporate this statement in her daily life as an agent to chaos.