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Memento Mori and Other Stories

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Memento Mori and Other Stories

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
Creative Writing
Fiction

by
Abigail Arnold

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Table of Contents

Memento Mori	1
Coup De Grace.....	21
Gentleman Caller	38
Of the Wretched.....	54
Cooper.....	71
The Dame Who Wore Pants	86
VITA.....	103

Memento Mori

Robin held the neck of her dressing gown closed as her stockings and chemise fluttered to the mud from above. Her landlord flung her clothes from the second story window of the small house she shared with her late brother, Sherman.

She collected the garments ignoring the landlord's insults and the gawking lamplighters until heavy items rained from the window—luggage, boots, and dishes that had been scattered about her room. Robin cried out when he dropped the glass-face exposure timer that belonged to her Eastman camera. It hit the brick steps below, shattering.

She picked through the shards of broken glass and twisted bits of metal, but there was nothing that could be salvaged, save for a thin cog the width of Robin's ring finger. She slipped it on, stuffed all she could carry into the largest of the suitcases, then slogged toward the Allegheny River.

Robin ducked into an alley to inventory what she had. Her mourning gown was splattered with muck like the rest of her dresses, but the thick black fabric was warm and hid the grime better than any of the others. She slipped it on over her dressing gown then stuffed her black hat over her unbrushed, matted hair. She'd spent her last few days lying in bed, worrying about what the next day would bring, mourning Sherman, mourning the loss of her former life, and mostly, her Eastman that she knew she would not be able to keep.

The Eastman was her most prized possession. She and Sherman had built their modest living from it after he won it in a poker game and brought it home intending to pawn it off later. That night, they drank gin, celebrating his good fortune. After he'd stumbled off to his room, Robin familiarized herself with the Eastman and found she was good at it. Life looked different when peering through a camera, authentic, yet artificial—one could choose which they wanted to see inside the frame.

Instead of pawning it, Robin insisted they use it. It saved her from having to marry for money or work in the factories. Little choice now, she snapped the suitcase shut and headed toward steel mills on the river.

* * *

A bell clanged in the distance signaling midnight, even still, the Allegheny was busy with oil barges trekking up and down the mighty current. Most of the shops lining the river were closed for the night. Robin crouched in the shadow of the doorway of one, a milliner store, and stretched her tired legs. It was cold enough to see breath, and her coat had been left in the house on the bench next to her Eastman. One by one, shop owners gated their doors shut for the night.

At the end of the lane, a shop light still glowed in the night. Robin watched as a man snuffed out the oil lamp and left the business carrying something clunky and heavy. He walked toward her, struggling. Robin recognized his burden as four grimy exposure plates he must have been taking home to clean. It crossed her mind to ask him if he would like help, and if he had a few extra coins to spare, but he was big, much bigger than she, and had a cruel tilt to his mouth. He heaved passed her. Once he was out of sight she crept to his shop.

The business was dark from the outside, curtains pulled over the front windows, a rusty thin-railed gate over the door. Robin walked around to the back of the small building. It was secluded and the windows had no curtains. There were cameras and frames of all kinds inside. One of the cameras was an Eastman, only slightly older than hers. She found a damp rock from the alley and lobbed it at the window closest to the door latch. It echoed as it smashed through, but no one came, no police whistles. Robin lifted the latch, let herself in.

The hearth gave off a pleasant smoldering heat though it was no longer lit, only embers. She set the suitcase down next to it and peeled herself out of her damp, mud-soaked dress, hanging it over the mantelpiece to dry, then wandered barefoot in her dressing gown around the shop.

Photographs hung everywhere in the front showroom. Family portraits, landscape shots, and an entire wall dedicated to memento mori, images to commemorate the dead. The room with the fireplace was a carpentry workroom. Stacks of wood lay about in various stages of completion, destined to make furniture. Some were varnished and ready for a portrait. Some were in the process of being cut from larger beams of wood. Next to a pile of wood shavings was the camera Robin had seen through the window.

Her Eastman was certainly in better shape than this one. She ran her fingers over scuffs on the sides and legs, the dusty exposure covering, the filmy layer grease covering the lens. The owner really should take better care of it. She looked into the viewer but didn't see anything. She pulled the curtains and lit a small candle on one of the work tables, looked through the viewer. Nothing but blackness. Disassembling the camera, she found that the reflective lens inside, the part that allows the camera to capture an image, was broken, cracked right down the center and spidering out. It came apart in pieces, tiny shards biting into her fingers.

She combed the shop for extra camera parts until finally, she found the correct lens. It was painstaking work to take the Eastman apart, replace the lens, put it together again, but as she did it she felt better for the first time since Sherman had died and she'd been left to fend for herself. She couldn't pay bills or negotiate with the landlord or the grocer for extensions, but she could fix this camera, make it serve a purpose once more.

When Sherman was alive, he was their breadwinner in name only. He worked, yes, but his wages went to his penchant for card games and white wines. The funds she made in his name from the Eastman was what kept them in rent and food. It was a modest living, nevertheless, it had been hers. Robin didn't like to think that she missed it more than Sherman, the sense of achievement and freedom. But she did.

* * *

Before Robin left the shop in the graying dawn light, she put the Eastman back in place, hoping the shop owner would examine it again. She swept up the shards of glass from the window pane, wrapped them in a handkerchief, and dumped them into the river to the milliner shop to see if

they were hiring. They shoed her away before she could get the words out. The seamstress was the same as far as employment but offered her a few pennies for beating her carpets, enough to buy some crusty bread from the baker. The baker told her he had no room for a shop helper and recommended she try the factories.

Robin nibbled on the scraps of bread as she wandered into the business district on Smithfield Street. There was a cabinet making shop tucked between a cooperage and a grain store. From the outside, the cabinet shop seemed to make good business in spite of the wretched smell of putrefied fish permeating from the river. The sign above the door was solid metal, freshly painted, "Claxton's Cabinet Makers and Undertakers." It creaked in the cold, gusty wind. There was a display window featuring a fine-looking crib, a dining set, and a coffin.

Through the window, she saw an older woman also in black mourning gowns. Robin lamented for the woman and pitied herself, but then an idea barged into her mind, stamping down sympathy. Widowed women were granted a bit more, though not much more, sympathy than single women, spinsters like Robin. She thought of the memento mori photographs hanging on the wall of the shop and the coffin in the cabinet maker's window. It was becoming more common nowadays for cabinet makers to be the only stop after a death. She herself had gone to a cabinetmaker for Sherman's funeral arrangements.

That night, she went back to the photography shop and hunted through the shop for paper and ink. She wrote a letter in the hand of her former solicitor, praising her work as an assistant to her imaginary husband. She kept the story as truthful as possible, leaving room for anyone to think that she was both a skilled photographer and in deep mourning. Both were true, only the details varied. When she was finished, the letter looked as real as any she had ever seen from a solicitor. She used the cog she'd rescued from the mud as a wedding ring.

Now she needed evidence of her skill. The framed photos on the shop wall would be missed if she took one with her. Searching through cabinets and drawers, she found a portfolio in the writing desk by the front door. She flipped through it stopping on a memento mori shot of a little girl on a piano bench, hands poised to strike a key. It was fantastic work. Robin could hardly see the wires holding the hands up, and the way the photographer caught the light in her eyes made the girl look alive.

The next morning, she stepped over the threshold of Claxton's Cabinets, and into the musky perfume of pine and cedar. The older woman from the previous day sat behind a small desk holding a document up to an oil lamp. She wore her mourning dress again, thin wired spectacles, and a braided bonnet over her white hair.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked.

"I'm miss—Mrs. Barrett," Robin said. "I'd like to speak to the proprietor."

The woman looked Robin up and down. "I'm so sorry for your loss, ma'am." the woman said, taking note of Robin's black dress. "I'm Mrs. Hazlet."

They shook hands then Mrs. Hazlet padded down a hallway, came back a few minutes later, towing a short man in a black suit with the largest mustache Robin had seen in her life. It stretched from ear to ear in length and fluttered as he walked toward her. He was balding, though he seemed no older than thirty or so.

He took her hand, introduced himself as Arthur Claxton. He gave her a rehearsed apology for her loss.

"Thank you, Mr. Claxton. May we talk?"

"Please," he swept his arm toward the back of the store. "Follow me."

Mr. Claxton led her passed a workshop fuming woodsy scents, a dimly lit office, and a small storage space. At the end of the hall was another office with an older, balder, shorter version of the first Mr. Claxton behind the desk. He had no mustache but a perfectly manicured beard, graying at the chin. He introduced himself as Elwood Claxton and invited her to sit. Arthur Claxton took the seat next to hers.

“How can we help you, madam?” Elwood asked.

“I come to you today hoping that you have need of someone with my skill set,” she said.

The brothers exchanged a brief glance. “We’re cabinet makers here,” Elwood said. “Best in the Smoky City. Recently, we’ve branched into coffin making. We are cheaper than the General Store. Faster too. And we line the inside with velvet to make even the poorest dock worker, mill man, or matchstick girl rest in peace in comfort and style.”

“Yes, I realize that.”

Arthur piped up. “And you also realize that you were shown in by Mrs. Hazlet? She serves as our secretary and seamstress as needed so I’m afraid we simply have no use for you, my dear.”

Robin bristled. Arthur was younger than she was, although he must have been trying to look older with the way he kept that mustache. She didn’t appreciate being spoken to like an infant.

“Do you have a photoist on staff as of yet?” She produced the framed photo of the piano girl she had stolen from the shop. She felt less bad about stealing it than she did gaining employment with someone else's work.

Elwood took the picture and examined it. “You did this?”

“Yes, sir. My late husband ran our modest business. I assisted him for years before he passed suddenly.”

“Do you still have the camera?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t,” she said. “I plan to make my living with it now that I’m a widow.”

“Did you have your husband’s photograph taken?” Arthur asked.

“I did it myself,” she lied. “Staging a corpse isn’t very different than a live person. Easier, in fact. The dead stay still.” She was making it up as she went along, but the science behind it made sense. Before, she constantly had to ask her portrait subjects to hold perfectly still while the camera caught the image. The slightest movement from either the subject or the photographer would blur the photograph.

“Indeed?” Elwood rose from his desk, opened a window, sat on the ledge. He pulled a cigarette case from his jacket and lit one. “The General Store has a photoist on their staff. So do the Gorecki Carpenters. Great deal of money to be had.”

“We don’t have time to coddle,” Arthur said. “No one to watch over her.”

“I don’t require a keeper, gentleman. I require employment.”

“Death is a gruesome thing, Mrs. Barrett. Leaving this world is no flowery venture.”

“He’s right about that. The poor are our bread and butter,” Elwood said. “The rich, yes, they come to buy wine cabinets and china hutches and rocking chairs. But the poor, the poor come for their loves. Their children taken too soon. Their men lost in the mills and docks and fields. Their women withered by disease. We help them say goodbye. At a fair market price.”

“Forgive me, no,” Arthur said. “I sympathize with your situation, Mrs. Barrett. However, this isn’t the type of work that—”

“Forgive *me*, gentleman. Candidates aren’t exactly breaking down the door to be on your ticket. I’m the best thing you’re likely to find—below market price.”

Robin had Elwood's attention. She pretended to know what market price was without mentioning real numbers. She let them do most of the talking. She nodded seriously, reiterating her skill whenever Arthur offered a number that she could earn at a factory. After some haggling, the brothers agreed to pay \$1.75 a day, a whole twenty-five cents more than what she’d make as a secretary, twice what she’d make in the cotton or steel mills. She promised to come back with her supplies the next business day.

Down Smithfield Street, Robin found rooms for rent near the new Heinz tomato paste factory on the Monongahela River. The landlady found her looking through the windows and asked if Robin was on her own.

“Yes,” Robin said. “I’ll be seeking new accommodation soon, ma’am.”

The woman looked skeptical. “I don’t want any trouble here,” she said. “I don’t rent by the day.”

“Not to worry.” Robin beamed. “I’m a photoist. And I’ll be back next week to see the room.” Robin left the woman gaping after her and started back across town to the photo shop.

* * *

Robin watched the owner close up his shop for the night. Once he strolled away, she crept around the back and let herself in once more.

The camera was heavy, awkward. And she would need to carry exposure plates, spare lenses, darkening cover, all the supplies of her trade. Impossible to do at once. Robin gathered

her materials while she mapped out places to stash them. Then she would have to come back for the Eastman.

She decided to take the exposure plates, the most cumbersome item, first. She found a leather satchel under a bench, stuffed three plates in, thinking she could drag them if need be. She found her other supplies with ease. She put them in an old flour bag, set them by the door.

Her back twinged after only three blocks of hauling the exposure plates. They were heavier than she remembered, clicking against one another with each stagger forward. On Gorman Street, Pittsburgh's finest had been planting trees along the carriage lanes earlier in the day, shrubs hugging their trunks, bushy, dense.

Robin tucked the plates inside then examined her hiding spot from all the around the tree to make sure there wasn't anything telling peeking out. She repeated the journey several times until all that remained to retrieve was the camera box.

It wasn't hers, and she knew that, but she could see herself owning a little photo shop like it one day. She always imagined that was where she would end up with Sherman. He could run the books while she did the craft end of things. The clients would talk to him. She would talk to her Eastman. Robin breezed into the shop still smiling at the image when a voice rang out from the dark: "What are you doing?"

Robin froze, the door behind her wide open. The owner stood, flour sack in hand, the contents spread over a workbench. "Thief!"

She turned to run. Too late.

His arm clamped around her neck, he squeezed, Robin lost her breath. She kicked, flailed hard, made herself dead weight, threw elbows. She couldn't tell who she was doing more

damage to, herself or the man. Something connected, he fell to the ground taking her with him. His grip slackened, she wrenched around, dug her nails into his face. He howled.

Robin staggered up, seized the first thing she saw, an exposure plate, lifted it high over her head, brought it down with all her might, felt a thunk when it connected with the man's head. He slumped to the floor in a heap.

Robin commanded her body to move—it wouldn't, not even to check her own injuries. The man wasn't breathing. Neither was Robin. She hoped to hear a wheezy intake of air from him, a hollow groan of pain, but there was nothing. Her stomach rolled. He would have killed her, nevertheless, she hadn't meant anything so permanent. His body was in plain view of the open door. Robin closed it and looked around for something to cover him with. She took two darkening hoods from newer cameras and covered his top half with them, then gathered up the Eastman and went back into the night.

* * *

When Robin arrived at Claxton's, the porch lamp was already lit, chasing away the last wisps of nighttime fog. Through the window, Robin saw Mrs. Hazlet clearing space for something. Robin let herself in, lugging the camera behind her.

“Good! You're here,” Mrs. Hazlet said. “They're fetching the body now.”

“Body?”

“Tragic thing. Poor girl died just last night. Sixteen years of age.” She leaned close to whisper. “Scarlet Fever. The little ones have it too. Older brother went few days past. The rest will go by the end of the week, you mark me.”

"Almighty God," Robin said, politely.

It was tragic, she knew that pain, but Elwood must have been inspiring her with his single-minded devotion to his work because all she cared was that she would have several new subjects.

A runabout wagon stopped outside with the girl's body, two gravediggers, and Arthur Claxton.

"Take them through the back," he said to the men, then turned to Robin with no preamble. "We have a space set up for you."

Robin and Arthur wrestled the equipment through the workshop to another room she hadn't seen the first time. It was with an open space with a small round tea table, a chair, and four long windows to the alley behind the shop.

"I'll need some curtains," she said, thinking aloud. "Too much light from these windows will cause overexposure."

"Anything you need let Mrs. Hazlet know." The men came in with the girl's body on a stretcher covered in burlap. "Just put her anywhere," Arthur said.

The men carefully set the girl down on the floor. Decay, oddly familiar and terrible, wafted through the space. Arthur left without another word. Robin set to work.

Over the weeks, Robin perfected her skills. She learned to undress them was the simplest part—it was harder to pose a body than Robin thought. She knew bodies solidified the longer they were dead, still, she had always assumed there would be some fleshy give. It wasn't a problem for subjects that she posed as if sleeping. For the ones who wanted to see their people "living" rather than "sleeping," it was a challenge to stage them in lifelike poses.

At first, she constructed a pulley system to help her with the weight, then asked Elwood to make a life-sized prop stand like the those fashioned for china dolls so she could make the dead seem as though they were standing on their own. Elwood was delighted by their profits and went far beyond what she had asked by making her a bed for her showroom along with a rocking chair and a cradle.

Robin became quite proficient at opening eyes with the handles of sugar tongs and the curve of spoons (bottom lid first, top lid second, because they wouldn't stay open any other way). If the body was too decayed to open the eyes, she painted whites and pupils on the outside of the lids, then stuffed yew flower in the pockets of gentleman's trousers, boxwood flowers in ladies' bodices. She sewed shut wounds, covered marks, rouged cheeks rosy to life. Robin was haughty, indifference toward corpses around the brothers, gentle and sympathetic around customers. Both were true, and the more time passed, the more work she had, the less guilt she felt for killing the man.

One morning, Elwood was helping her pump water out of a dead bargeman's chest when the bell over the door chimed with the arrival of a customer.

"I'll get it," she said and went to the front.

"Do I have to keep doing this?" Elwood called after her, stilling pumping.

"Prevents bloating," she said over her shoulder.

In the front room, a woman in a coral dress, red coat, and gleaming silver jewelry stood holding the memento mori photograph of the piano girl close to her face.

"How much for one of these?" the woman asked.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Robin said. "Please, sit, and we can discuss—"

“No, no, no,” she said impatiently. “How much to have my photograph taken? Like I’m dead.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I want you to dress me up like one of your corpses and take my photograph.” She spoke slowly as if to a simpleton.

Robin looked the woman over wondering if she might be insane. “But...why?”

“Because I want to see them, of course. I don’t want to die without seeing my portrait. I want it to be spectacular. Reflective of me. I wouldn’t want to be remembered by a subpar image.”

She picked up another from the display. “What do you think of this one? No! Don’t answer—I already know what you think. I’m not sure I want to look like I’m sleeping. The ones with open eyes are much more,” she snapped her fingers briskly, “Dynamic. That’s the word. I want my photo to be dynamic. Can you do that?”

A living subject. Too long since Robin had one. “Whatever your pleasure,” Robin said. “I’m sure I can find a way to accommodate you.”

“Will these hurt?” she asked. She pointed to the barely visible wire holding up the girl’s hands in the piano photo.

“Well, no. You would just hold your hands up yourself.”

The woman looked disappointed. “Why?”

“Because you’re not dead.”

She huffed. “I know that. I want the experience of it. Do you understand?”

Robin didn’t. “Of course. But the wires are embedded in the skin of the subjects. Think of them like fishhooks. I doubt that’s an experience you will want to have any time soon.”

The woman put down the photo, bunched her coat tighter around her neck. "I'll be in touch. There are a few other places I want to interview first." She left behind an invisible cloud of thick floral perfume. Robin went back to work.

It was only a few hours later when the bell rang above the door again. Robin peeled off her apron and went to the front room. A man stood with his back to her holding the photo of the piano girl. It still bothered Robin how everyone seemed to pick up that one first.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

The man turned. Robin froze despite wanting to run. The owner of the photo shop held the picture she stole from him, alive and well and glaring at her.

"An interesting woman came into my business today," he said. "She was going on about wanting to look alive in her mori portrait. Something about a girl playing a piano. Funny. I had a shot just like it. It was stolen...as you know."

Robin's hands went slick with sweat, her mouth went dry.

"These your work?" He picked up one of a man at a card table. "You've got some talent. Good. That's very good." He put the photo down, crowded her space. "Of course, it's not your merit that put you to work here. Nor your gear."

"I'm no thief—"

"Except you are, madam." He cracked his knuckles. "Come to my shop after you're done for the day. We'll talk about what's to be done here."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"These Claxton brothers stand out, I'm sure you've noticed. That gentleman with the mustache is quite easy to find. I saw him at the alehouse down the lane having his workday lunch. I should call on him. Introduce myself as a fellow business owner in the area—"

“Stop. All right.”

His face hardened, he pointed his finger in her face. “Today, madam, after close of business.” He turned on his heel and left. Robin watched him stroll down the street, tipping his hat to the gentlemen as he went. Robin spun the cog around her finger wishing she had hit the man harder.

* * *

The man called himself Jed.

When Robin arrived at his shop, he invited her in as if they were old friends, even offered her wine.

“No,” she said. “I’d really rather get this over with.”

“You’d better take it.” He poured her a glass. “After all, what if you never have anything this fine again.” He set the glass and a sheet of paper in front of her. “The damages, madam.”

Robin read over the list. Jed was extremely thorough, he’d even tallied the cost of the window she’d broken. There was another item at the bottom, worth more than she’d make in a year, marked “PP&SR.”

“What does this mean?” she asked.

He gulped his wine. “Personal pain and suffering reparations,” he said, smiling.

“I can’t afford this.”

“Installments,” said Jed. “You’re doing some decent work at Claxton’s. I surmise they’ll keep you as long as you continue your good work. And you will continue it. Sooner or later, it will be enough.

Robin began meeting Jed every payday whether she went to his offices or not. If she tried to avoid him, he would show up at her home. Soon she learned it was simpler to meet him on a bench by the river in Highland Park. He would always bring along a picnic basket for himself with bread, cheese, expensive wine, stuffing his face while she counted out the money. More and more she saw him with new things: walking stick, pocket watch, clothes. Today, he had on a brand new waistcoat with shiny buttons.

“How much longer do I have to do this?” she asked.

He laughed. “Oh, my dear lady. Don’t be foolish. This is your life now.”

On the first day of summer, strikers set fire to the Union Depot and the Pennsylvania Railroad, crippling the city. When the police couldn’t make them return to work, Robin suddenly had a rife influx of subjects with knocked in skulls, bashed in faces, and river drownings. She was becoming accustomed to seeing another’s troubles as her good fortune—she had more work than she could handle so the brothers had agreed to give her a raise. Robin hoped it would be enough to get Jed to leave her be. She met him in the park.

"Strikes are boons for our business, wouldn't you agree?" Jed said. "And I hear there is an outbreak of the pox in Shadyside. Shame. Such a shame. Good news for you, though, my good lady." He held up the purse she'd given him and shook the contents. "This isn't enough."

“I have nothing else left to give,” Robin pleaded. “I’ve more than paid you—”

“I will decide when it’s enough, madam. You’re not even close.” He slung his picnic basket over his shoulder and left her staring out at the river with barely enough coin for bread.

* * *

After work next day, Robin covered her head with a veil and made her way to Jed's shop. She blended right into the foot traffic. The pox was rampant and many of the women had taken to covering their faces.

When he closed for the night, Robin followed him several blocks to a district of the city she'd never seen before. There were men and women on stoops and front porches openly flirting, carrying on. Jed bought a bouquet of posies from a street cart then went into a large house. A cathouse, Robin realized. Jed was buying women with her money.

She walked back home mulling over how she could use Jed's leisure activities to her advantage, reasoned that she couldn't, and, more importantly, that she had to get closer if she was going to find anything to help her be rid of him.

* * *

Robin followed him to the cathouse again a few days later, and this time, the doorman let Robin in with scarcely a look. She wore a scraggly mustache fashioned from her hair, trousers, a bulky overcoat, and a hat, all of which she'd taken from Arthur Claxton's office. She used the clamp from her camera hood to hold the trousers up.

The hallway was lined with thick beeswax candles leading to an open lounge with a ramshackle bar at the back and a stage at the front. Robin stood at the entrance to the room and couldn't help but admire how the proprietor had lit the stage, ethereally highlighting the dancer.

Robin drew closer, appreciating the way the overhead light directed the eye to the dancer's alluring cheekbones and bodice, until the woman theatrically stripped off her corset, revealing a layer of curly chest hair. Men hooted.

Robin turned from the stage and scanned the silhouettes of the patrons. Men sat next to other men, holding hands, kissing. Some played women, or perhaps that's what they felt they were all the time, Robin didn't know. But in the back corner of the lounge sat Jed on a settee, a man in a blue dress atop his lap.

Robin traipsed over to them, smile brimming so widely she knew her mustache was going to fall off but did not care. She stood closely behind them watching as they nibbled on each other's ears and rubbed noses until they noticed her.

"May we help you, friend?" Jed asked.

Robin made no effort to disguise her voice. "Without a doubt."

She took the mug of beer from Jed and sipped it, trying not to grimace. "We can help each other," she said.

Jed shot up dumping his companion with a thud. "How dare you?" He inched toward the exit.

Robin squared herself. "You will release your hold on me. You will never intrude upon me at Claxton's again. You will never seek me out. You will forget we ever met."

He rounded the settee, yanked her to him, his breath hot and sour fanned her face, making her gag. Robin struggled, but with the cloak of shadow, anyone would think they were only two lovers in the dark.

"Or what?" He sneered and shook her. "No one would believe you. You have not a speck of proof, not one."

"Nor do I need proof." Robin scraped her boot down his shin. He instantly released her, she jumped back and around the settee, stood over Jed's stunned lover huddled on the floor.

“I don’t have a care for your preferences one way or another,” said Robin. “You desire a wife about as much as I do a husband, and I take no umbrage with that.” Robin looked down at Jed’s lover. “But there are those in this city who do. Ears that could hear whispers of a photoist and his pretty lover in blue.” Robin looked up at him and pretended to see through a camera, made herself believe she had that same control. “Rumors alone would be enough.”

Jed spit. “I’ll be damned to hell before I let you rob me twice!”

“I want nothing from you,” Robin said. “Keep the money. Consider it payment for the Eastman.” she pointed at him. “But you leave me be now.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “Whatever you say, ma’am. Whatever you say.” He spat the words.

Robin knelt down next to Jed’s lover who recoiled from her like she crawled up from the floorboards. “You have a lovely face, sir,” she said. “I hope your friend here helps you to keep it as such.”

Robin looked up at Jed, watched his gaze flash between his lover and Robin before his shoulders slumped. He nodded, avoided her eyes, and she knew she’d won.

“Good day, gentlemen.” Robin turned on her heel and strode out of the building.

She was buoyant as she approached the riverwalk. Robin stood on a railing, stripped off her mustache, dropped it into the charging Allegheny. She spun the cog around her finger, enjoying the smoothness of it against her skin, watching as the river carved itself a path, steadfast, unrelenting.

Coup De Grâce

In ‘Nam, my buddies called me Crack, short for *crack-shot* or *crack-pot* depending on who was doing the talking. My name made other guys think that I could look after the fresh grunts, so I was landed with Bug when our truck's radiator exploded, spewing steam from under the hood, stranding us on a nowhere road between Saigon and base camp.

“Told you not to push it so hard,” Bug said, reaching for the radio.

I watched the perimeter while he called for support.

He'd told me not to push it, all right. After he told me his life story, everything from his favorite choke-and-puke back home to how he lost his first tooth. Yeah, he probably told me. I was just too busy trying not to snap his goggle glasses off his face and make him eat them.

“Never seen bugs like this in Maine, man,” he said. He paused to send a coded distress call on the radio. “Ticks, yes. Bugs, no. And this heat! God! Remind me why we’re in this shithole again? No, wait, don’t say anything, I’ll tell you: It’s because we’ve got to prove who’s

got the biggest dick. America comes swooping in like the avenging angel and freedom rings once more. What about me? I'm the one that's getting eaten alive out here."

"Focus or you won't have to worry about mosquitoes much longer," I said.

"This shit's not working," Bug said. He threw the receiver down. "Radio is nothing but white noise."

"Don't tell me that."

"It's the truth, man. See for yourself." He handed me the receiver. I put it to my ear. Nothing but static.

"Where's camp, twenty clicks southeast?"

"Thirty. We're not leaving the truck here for gooks to booby trap." I got busy fixing the engine and prayed it would haul our asses back to base camp before I killed Bug or the enemy killed me. "Take point," I ordered.

"You fix trucks? Is that what you did back in Real Life?" Bug got out of the truck and took the position as lookout. "My sister is the mechanical one in the family, if you can believe that. My dad was a real fixer and when he died, it seemed all his mojo transferred to her. I got up one morning, about six months after the funeral, and there she is, ten years old, fiddling with the inner workings of the television, trying to get the *Shari Lewis Show*. You remember that show?"

There was a hairline fissure in the side of the radiator. Not good. I had to cool the engine and patch the crack to get us moving again and we still probably wouldn't make it back. But the war was run on a shoestring of probably nots and maybes.

"Then last year she's in the garage," Bug went on, "changing the oil in the car! I told her if she keeps this up she's going to get branded as a grease monkey and she can kiss goodbye any

chance of a boy kissing her. A guy doesn't want to kiss a girl slathered in engine grease, you know?"

"Can't say I do."

"Last time I got a letter from her she said she was roofing the house. Roofing! I swear next letter I get is going to be from my mother saying that my sister fell and cracked her thick skull."

"I'm sure you're right." I wrapped hand rags doused in water from my canteen around the radiator.

"Way to make me feel better, man."

"Make me feel better: Eyes peeled, trap shut for a change, and watch the perimeter.

Copy?"

I worked in silence for a few minutes. Bug paced up and down the little stretch of road, watching the tree line and elephant grass for gooks.

"Crack. Hm. Who gave you that handle?" Bug asked.

"You just can't help yourself, can you?"

"Just making friendly conversation. There's got to be a story, right? Oh, come on!" He rubbed his hands together. "The guys tell anyone who will listen who's got jungle rot where, but not one word about you."

Tell Bug, and I'd rotate back to the world on a disciplinary charge. Or a psych evaluation. No thanks.

"Try the engine," I said.

He sat in the driver's seat and turned the key. The engine roared to life, but it was hot, too hot. I told Bug to kill the engine and went to the back of the truck to inventory what we had

to get us on the road. I hurried, still, Bug found a way to talk me to death about his bobby pin girl before I found a fistful of pepper packets and another canteen of water in the back.

“She was in a red dress with hair to match,” Bug said. “She shook it out, walked up to me real slow, and used her bobby pin to clip my tie together, then laid one on me right there in the middle of the train station. I swear, the girl looks just like Joey Heatherton.”

“She’s Joey Heatherton now? Thought you said she was a redhead?”

“Same difference. The point is we had a moment. Passionate! That’s why I keep this pin. To remind me of what’s waiting.” He secured the bobby pin on his helmet band.

“Try the engine again,” I said.

“Do you have anyone waiting back in the world, Crack?”

“Nope. Try the engine.”

“Not one person? Oh, come on, man. Give me something to work with.” He offered me a cigarette. The look on his face was so young, so pleading, that I took the smoke. He looked satisfied and walked around to the driver’s side as I spoke.

“I got my mama, daddy, and baby brother back in Louisiana,” I said. “Marky is eighteen.”

“He joining the shit?”

I shook my head. “Kid’s got a bum knee that keeps him out. Walks with a cane ever since he was nine.”

“What happened to him?”

“We ain’t that close, Bug,” I said squinting through the match flame.

“You and your brother?”

“You and me.”

“Be that way.” He adjusted his rifle over his shoulder. “I guess we could always talk about the time my dad took me to Polar Falls whitewater rafting. Gotta act quickly in that—”

“Now you’re doing it on purpose.”

“Doing what?”

“Flapping your gums,” I said. I tossed the half smoked Lucky and started connecting hoses back to the radiator.

“Got to do something to entertain myself. It’s a war.”

I leaned over the engine. “I *will* muzzle you...with your sock. Shut up and try it when I tell you.”

He snapped to a mock salute, puffed out his chest. “Yes, sir, Corporal Crack, sir.” He turned to walk the perimeter, blessedly silent.

I filled the radiator with water and poured pepper inside as a temporary patch.

“Okay, try it,” I said.

No answer. The engine didn’t turn over.

“Try it again, I said.” He was probably standing at attention just to annoy me.

“What, you’re not talking to me now?” I stood up.

Bug held his hands in surrender. His M-16 rifle was propped next to him against the side of the truck along with my AK. An older man in a VC uniform, filthy, determined, held his weapon to Bug's head. On the other side of the truck, another VC stood with his rifle pointed at me.

* * *

Before I was Crack, I was New Guy.

I was at a listening post sitting in the rain late one night with my unit leader, G-Pa. We were dug deep in our foxholes, quiet, straining for anything amiss in the jungle. Nothing but chittering in the bushes, the rustle of lizards moving through the high trees. Critters hooted, tittered, cackled endlessly, and that didn't bother me, but it made it harder to hear anyone coming at us. I jerked the business end of my M-16, Wilma, at every bump in the night.

"Hey, New Guy, want a cube pop?" G-Pa tossed me a sucker from his helmet band.

"Thanks," I said. My mouth watered cutting through the slimy buildup of tobacco coating my tongue. The forgotten taste of strawberry invaded my mouth.

"You pissin' yourself yet?" G-Pa asked.

I bit into the sucker. "Sure not."

"Bonehead," he said, lighting a smoke.

G-Pa was only a few years older than me. His name was short for Grandpa in spite of his age. He was a career man and used his precious pack space for penny candy. The older guys said that even when he was cherry, he was like someone's grandpa on a Sunday picnic, offering butterscotch candies to his buddies in the unit after a day of humping gear from one end of the jungle to another.

"Why's that," I asked.

"This," he slapped the butt of his rifle, "is what you need." It was an AK-47. The enemy's gun. "I'd be real scared if I were packing what you got."

I shifted my grip on Wilma. "This is what I trained on."

"But mine works," he said. "If you're smart, next gook you kill, you'll trade in the scrap metal for a weapon that will do what you need it to when you need it to."

"Roger that."

The only person I'd ever hurt was Markey. He dimed on me in for breaking into the pantry and stealing mason jars of strawberry jam. We ended up on a creek bridge much too close to the rail. I shoved him, he hit his knee thunk on the way down, but he didn't scream until he hit bottom, and then all I could do was stand frozen.

G-Pa signaled me to stay close to the dirt, quiet. I pressed myself into matted razor grass, every sense in gear. The air smelled earthy, and I draped my poncho over Wilma as rain pattered the leaves overhead.

Metal scraped against metal. G-Pa whipped around firing off rounds. The gooks fired back and were close enough that I could make out three outlines in the dark. Bullets burrowed into the soil next to me as I scrambled for better cover.

I fired wildly. Everything from basic training slithered along with my body heat. I didn't aim, I just kept squeezing the trigger.

“Get your shit together, New Guy! Cease fire!”

My hands were cold, stiff. Letting go of that trigger took effort.

“Eyes up. There's one more. Try to hit something this time,” G-Pa whispered. He was on his stomach next to me in the high razor grass.

The rainclouds snuffed out most of the moonlight. I scanned the bush for the glint of a weapon, a patch of drab tan. Somewhere in that high grass and mud was a man with the same want as me: to be the one breathing at the end of this. I willed him to die instead of me, for G-Pa to die instead of me, for anyone to die as long as it wasn't me. There was a basket of strawberry jam waiting for me under my bed. Waiting for me and Marky to eat it.

A flash on my left flank. G-Pa and I both fired. Then nothing but a roaring downpour. I still had the damn sucker clenched between my teeth.

* * *

The gooks made Bug and me hump through the jungle. I didn't know which way we were going. The elephant grass was so high, I'd lost the sun a couple clicks back. It would be dark soon. A rescue party would be deployed to find Bug and me. If they hadn't already, my buddies would find our rifles and gear in the truck with no sign of us. All the enemy took so far were our rations and water.

I didn't know if they didn't speak English or if they just didn't want to speak to us. They communicated well enough with the threat of their rifles. We cooled it every time they so much as inched their guns in our direction. The gook in command, the older one, spoke in low Vietnamese to his buddy who looked younger than Bug. They brought up the rear, me and Bug leading the way arms raised.

Bug was silent the entire march. I even asked him to tell me about his bobby pin girl again, all the same, he marched beside me jaw clenched, breathing heavier than I'd ever heard anyone. I wanted to whisper this wasn't the end for us. He'd be annoying me in no time.

With every step closer, they were taking us deeper into the jungle. Did they want to have some fun with us before they killed us? The older VC, the leader, pointed to a thin tree with a G.I. helmet hanging off one of the branches and forced us to veer left, deeper into the grass. Elephant grass was like thin razors growing up out of the red earth. The plants in 'Nam were a lot like the people: Harmless at first glance but would cut a G.I. to ribbons if he wasn't careful. Bug didn't seem to notice the little nicks he suffered as we trudged forward.

I could hear our captors blocking the whip of the grass. Did they have a sturdy grip on their rifles? Could we overpower them? I pushed through walls of grass until one clump of

blades stuck to my fingers, a gloop of blood, not mine. I stepped into a tiny clearing packed with Viet Cong.

* * *

I was standing by a small pile of AKs, chewing on penny candy, wondering how to go about taking a dead man's gun. The VC scouts didn't need them anymore, yet somehow, it still felt wrong. I picked one up, the weight felt all screwy, off balance. I tossed it back on the pile.

"Leave the boots. Sweep and clear. Secure the area," G-Pa said. He organized the rest of our troop to move out in a standard patrol pattern.

I couldn't see much on patrol. A vague outline of a tree, the inky fringe of grass, the swirling billows of thunderclouds overhead, no real shapes. Nothing to shoot at. I swept aside the razor grass with my rifle, felt a sudden stab in the meat of my right thigh.

I howled, went down. Machine gun fire illuminated the night long enough for me to see the expression in the gook's eyes as he loomed over me, his field knife raised.

I was shitting myself, sure, there was plenty of that. But even worse than the fear, worse than my wasted life, wasted youth, was the sense that I'd been cheated. Blindsided. Duped. I would never eat Mrs. Emery's strawberry jam. It would sit there under the bed where I left it with Marky waiting for my homecoming that would never come.

The VC's knees dug into my chest, then dead weight, his whole body slumped on me. I scrambled out from under, kicking, punching. I pulled my sidearm as I cleared him. He didn't move. He lay crumpled on the ground zapped by someone's fire. Weapons went off from every direction at once, bright muzzle flare, war cries confusing the positions of the enemy and allies. I stayed low to the ground, assholes and elbows, my only aim to get clear.

Blood was oozed out of my thigh. I heard G-Pa give the order to retreat. I crawled forward until I cleared the dense trees along the field. Dizzy, I propped most of my weight up on my good leg and leaned against a tree for cover. My head was swimming, vision cutting in and out, and I was so damn tired. I slid down the tree, unable to hold myself up, unable to stay awake. In the bush behind me, something rustled.

* * *

There were eight of them in the clearing. Including the leader and his young buddy. Bug and I were outnumbered five to one.

Four VCs were on their backs quivering in various levels of pain. The men had hacked the grass from the base of the blades and piled them under their wounded like bedding. The sharpness of the blades wouldn't bother these guys. Some of them were crispy black, flesh lifeless from the fallout of phosphorus grenades and Bouncing Bettys. Others seemed unhurt but stared lifeless, dehydrated, lips flaky and rimmed with dry saliva. Able-bodied men sat folded in the dirt, weaving strands of elephant grass together into sheets, stringing them between branches like stretchers.

One soldier had a nasty stomach wound. His eyes were open, unfocused, darting around the perimeter like he was still on watch. A spattering of maggots lined the inside, feasting on his guts. Another soldier crawled over to them, his arm wrapped in a sling, burns feathering across his face, muttering in rapid Vietnamese, started picking maggots out of his buddy's wound. He set them in a neat pile inside his helmet. My stomach churned as the men passed around the helmet, eating the squirming maggots like they were better than C-rations.

The leader ignored me and Bug as he addressed his men. Not one of them said a word in response when he was finished with whatever he was telling them. The ones that could still walk hitched arms around each other's shoulders. They lumbered forward in groups of two or three, carrying stretchers between them. There was one body left on a stretcher, the VC with the gut wound. The leader jerked his rifle at us and I understood we were pack mules. They loaded us up with any supplies, made us each hold an end of the stretcher, and moved us out.

"They're going to kill us, aren't they? This can't be happening," Bug said. His voice was flat. Not the endlessly chipper nasal cadence I learned to block out.

"Not over yet," I said.

"It is. It's over."

"They still need us—"

"And the second they don't they'll kill us. I'm not like you. I can't die here."

* * *

I woke up propped against a wall to a raw ache in my leg and the savory scent of shit on a shingle.

"Wakey, wakey, New Guy. You ain't dead yet, buddy. Take some water and have some of this." G-Pa said.

G-Pa was waving a small square of bread and clumpy meat sauce under my nose. It had stopped raining and the sun was up. We were in the ruins of a building in a burnt out village. One crumbling cement wall with a faded ad for cigarettes stood slouching to my left. Directly ahead was a bulbous hill with two of our guys dug in watching. The rest of us seemed to be sitting or standing on what was left of the roof. I ignored the chow, tried to move my leg.

Someone had taken off my boot. My yellow toenail poked through a fresh wrap of field bandages. "How bad?" I asked.

"Dustoff is on its way. You're rotating to a medical base," G-Pa said.

"But how bad?"

An explosion sounded a short distance away. "Incoming!" one of the men shouted. "That'll be the toe poppers!"

"Eyes up," G-Pa ordered. "It's not over yet. That was the early warning. Charlie's on his way. Take this," he said, handing me my M-16. "Shoot anything coming over that hill that isn't American, roger?"

"No sweat," I said.

My leg was shit. I couldn't stand, couldn't fight. G-Pa ran off to join the defensive line. Doc, our medic, stayed behind, crouching along the wall to my left. A flurry of shots, then a spattering, single pops, two shots, one, then dead air. Our guys came back over the hill a while later.

"Area secure," G-Pa said. He flopped down next to me and took a swig out of his canteen. "Wasn't so bad."

I rested my rifle in my lap. "Where's that bird?"

"Coming, don't you worry. What? You worried you won't be the best dancer in the room anymore?"

"Fuck you, I don't dance."

"I bet you twinkle-toes all over the place when no one's looking."

Over G-Pa's shoulder, I saw the kid, and he was just a kid, maybe sixteen, poke his head over the side of the wall with the painted smoking ad. He had an AK and he was looking right at me.

“Down!” I don’t remember picking up my rifle. Only how crippled I felt when I squeezed the trigger and nothing happened. The kid fired, clipped Doc in the shoulder. Doc dropped, shooting at the kid as he fell. The kid went down like he was jerked by a string. A girl popped up in his place and threw a frag.

“Grenade!” G-Pa threw himself down on it.

I ditched my useless weapon and crawled over to him, ignoring the shouts of the men, the pop bullets. G-Pa was quivering. I turned him over and some of his insides slid out. He didn't cry, didn't call out. Instead, he vibrated, eyes cranked open, trained on a fixed point in the sky.

“Medic! G-Pa’s down!” I shouted.

But Doc was down too. The other guys swaddled around him as he cried out for his mother. G-Pa held on, moaning every now and again. I talked to him. I told him all about stealing strawberry jam.

“Then do you know what happened?” I went on. “Marky told on me in exchange for two jars. Are you listening to me?”

G-Pa whimpered, coughed blood. Some of the guys were looking at their boots or toward the perimeter or the sky. Some focused on stopping Doc’s bleeding. It seemed way too bright and I insanely worried about the sun cooking G-Pa’s insides. Like it would matter one damn if it did—he was already cooked.

That grenade should have killed him. It would have been kinder. Kinder than my knowing, even though I was sick with this, sick to see the dying man who had just saved us all in

agony, I was still glad it was him on that frag, not me. But I was sick, too, knowing that it could have been me. Really should have been me. I was injured. I counted on my buddies to put me first when it mattered. They counted on me. But I couldn't throw down my own tattered body on that frag. Couldn't sacrifice that much. G-Pa could. G-Pa who was a better soldier than me. I drew my weapon and shot him dead, the only kindness I could give him.

We lost two more men as they hauled me to the chopper. I don't remember. I can't remember anything after shooting G-Pa, like the bullet had gone through my brain too. The base doc told me later when they brought me in, I screamed about my leg, about G-Pa, they had to dope me with morphine to shut me up. When I woke, the nurse told me that they patched me up to send me back out into the shit. My leg was just a heavy bleeder and only a flesh wound.

* * *

"I can't die here," Bug said. He wasn't praying or pleading, just droning it over and over.

We were humped toward the enemy camp, the gooks, Bug, and me. They had their rifles trained on us, and with carrying a wounded man between us, there wasn't much we could do to help ourselves. The VC didn't stop, they didn't let us rest. Maybe they knew that we'd take any opportunity.

Soon it would be too dark to march, then we'd have to stop. The gooks, as much as they wanted to get back to their friendly territory, I was sure, wouldn't take the chance of stepping on toe poppers and booby traps with nothing but dim moonlight to guide them.

But when the sun completed its trek across the scorched sky the leader didn't order us to stop. Instead, he ordered his men to get behind us, for Bug and me to carry their wounded buddy first.

“Now’s our chance,” Bug said.

“We’ll wait for a better opportunity,” I whispered back.

“There won’t be a better one. They’ll shoot us outside the front gate and leave our bodies to rot. That’s it. The end. No one will ever know what happened to us. Your baby brother will get a letter in the mail from the president thanking him for your service. No more you. No more me. And I can’t die here. I never even got my bobby pin girl.”

“What?”

“She never gave me the pin. I saw her clip it on some other guy’s uniform while I was waiting at a train station. When the guy walked away, he didn’t notice her pin slip off his tie. I picked it up. I said that when I got home, I’d find a bobby pin girl of my own. She’s out there somewhere.”

“Don’t give up. Fight.”

“I am fighting. You’re giving up.”

“They’ll interrogate us before they zap us. We’ll find a way to escape—”

Bug dropped his end of the stretcher and dashed into the thick brush. The leader fired at him while the younger one trained his weapon on me, ordered me to my knees. The rest fanned out in search of Bug.

I wanted to hear explosions close by. Bouncing Betties, toe poppers, land mines tripped by the gooks chasing Bug. I wanted him to run and run until he reached G.I. friendly soil. I wanted him to eat a hot meal and put on fresh duds and go out on the town. I wanted some girl to ask him to dance. Then I wanted him to go home for me, talk to Marky. Tell him that I was sorry I couldn't keep my promise to eat strawberry jam with him on the rickety porch in the spring. I

wanted Bug to have it with him. Take the jam from under my bed and eat it, two spoons straight from the jar, cicadas in the weeds.

I was on my knees so long that my legs started to go numb. It was just me, the young VC, and four wounded who were starting to smell dead. The VC was so close to me that I felt his rifle barrel bump against the back of my head every now and then. I didn't know if he was watching me or if he was watching the grass for his buddies. Bug was right. I couldn't die here either.

Brush of cold metal. I pivoted on my knees and jerked the end of the gook's rifle away. He fell backward, kept hold of the rifle, took me with him, each of us trying to gain control over his weapon. The leader came back just then dragging Bug on the ground by his wrists. They stopped short when they saw us tussling. The leader shouted something then held his side arm to Bug's head. I let go of his guy I had in a chokehold. He thanked me by snatching up his gun and bashing me in the face with it. My vision blurred, then I was also being hauled through the dirt. They put me on my knees nose to nose with Bug.

He looked unharmed for the most part except for his glasses. They were cracked, dangling from the strap around his neck. One of their men checked the wounded on the stretchers. The man with the gut wound was dead. Bug opened his mouth to say something, but I would never know what he wanted to tell me. The leader shot him through the temple. I felt the hot, wet spray of blood across my face and neck. He landed on his side with his eyes open. As they hauled me to my feet, I snagged the bobby pin from his vest and clipped it to my own.

They left their dead man and mine in the dirt together. Just two more dead boys. I was made to keep marching. We marched through the night. At daybreak, we hit their camp and I felt ready to die. Satisfied to be another dead boy in the mud, though I'd seen so much at this point I didn't feel like a boy anymore. I wasn't the boy who stole the jam or the boy who broke his

brother's leg. I wasn't the one who had shot G-Pa. I wasn't even the boy cowering in the mud willing to trade anything for just one taste of strawberry jam with his brother.

When American voices called out from the camp, I was disappointed. And confused. It didn't make sense to me until the leader ordered his men to disarm, pile their weapons in a heap and line up on their knees in front of me.

"Surrender," the leader said in accented English. "Fight no more. Surrender." He even had the nerve to smile at me.

G.I.s swarmed out of the camp and took the VCs into custody as POWs, wounded and all. I was congratulated for bringing in a slew of POWs all by my lonesome. I explained that wasn't how it happened. I talked about Bug. I talked about G-Pa. All the same, they pinned a medal on me and sent me home, wanting me to leave Crack back in the razor grass.

Gentleman Caller

I was in front of the doxy house on Commercial Street, as I was every day, waiting for Mary.

This past fortnight, I'd watched her shop about her trade to men with trimmed beards and fine suits. As the nights grew darker, she became less picky, though she never chose me. I had no fine suits or beard. Only fifteen pence and one shilling, my hulling knife, and my need to protect Mary from herself.

I expected to see her on the steps leading to the house, bathed in evening lamplight, inviting smile, sans hat. Her bright red hair was what attracted her johns, and myself, especially without the decency of a hat or bonnet. When I first saw her, it was piled it high in a loose knot, compelling me to snag the strands with my fingers and tug it all down. In the mornings, she didn't pin it up, she let it loose, flowing down her back, as she staked her claim on a corner, chasing away street nippers.

I stood on the opposite side of the street from the whore house. There were plenty of women. Sick women, hacking, wheezing. Old women who settled for the leftovers: millers like myself, dock workers, sailors. Women who weren't women at all—girls, barely out of their nappies—sold off faster than all the rest. But no Mary.

I dodged the piles of dung—horse and human—plopped haphazardly throughout the muddy lane of Commercial Street as carriages whipped past spraying me with runoff from the drainage lines and mealy bits of animal carcasses left to rot. Filthy was home.

As I approached the market, a young boy rushed me demanding coin, breath hot with consumption. I shoved past him, scanning the crowd of women working the street outside. The doxies of the East End were out in fine form, smiling through rotten teeth at anyone who took notice. I folded myself into the mob of bleary shoppers, the vendors of fruits, linens, and worthless bric-a-brac, eyeing every woman working the streets. None of them was Mary.

The Ten Bells, the pub across the street, was crowded with whores and toffs from greater London up the lane. Mum used to leave me behind the counter. The barkeep that fed me porridge was long dead. No one would remember me. I went inside and ordered a pint I'd never finish.

The smell reminded me of how Mum would sick up gin into an empty bottle then strain the bits of digested bread so she could toss it back down her gullet. I sat at the bar grimacing at the clacking, boozing women, who far outnumbered the men, pirouetting, even the sick and pregnant ones, enticing exhausted workers to purchase their trade.

"Care to buy a lady a drink, sir?" a young voice asked.

I turned. She was young, dark-haired, and smiled into my eyes as she slid her hand from my wrist to my shoulder. I gently shook her off.

"No money," I said. I turned away expecting her to do the same, but she clamped her sooty hand with strength alien to someone so slight.

"Please, sir. Just one drink, I beg you," she said. Her hand quivered and for a moment I thought about giving her my drink if it made her stop distracting me.

"Piss off," I said.

She pushed herself away from me and kicked my stool. "Wanker."

"Not your type, eh?" asked the barman. "Not broke-in enough for you?"

"Too broke-in."

"Fair enough. Something wrong with my bitter?"

"No, sir. Fine bitter." I took a large gulp of salty swill. "Very fine."

He stuck out his hand and introduced himself as the owner of the pub. "What do you do?" he asked.

I took another sip. "Barber."

"A barber! I've got four boys and a wife with a liking toward kitchen shears." I matched my laughter to his.

"Whereabouts your shop?"

I quickly mapped large, chaotic streets with bustling businesses out of my way. No running into him and his tired little wife and grubby little sons.

"Wentworth Street," I said. I never went down that way. Too many open spaces, too far from home. I fished a pence from my purse and slid it across the bar. "Come see me and I'll give you and your family a cut." I took my pint to a booth at the back of the pub.

Sitting at a round table in my path were city boys in bowler hats and suits. One of them was fat and red-faced with the young girl from the bar sitting on his lap. His three mates were

just as lush, salivating over a ginger haired woman in a red dress without a hat. I ducked into a booth where I could see and be unseen. Mary threw back a shot and immediately poured herself another from the pitcher she shared with the men, ignoring the food the men ordered even though she must have been as hungry as anyone in the district.

I sat back and let the shadow of the booth envelope me feeling relaxed for the first time all night. It was like I was looking at her through a long tunnel of darkness, the glow from the overhead lamps highlighting her. The women laughed loudly above the din of the bar and clinked glasses with the men. I watched her mouth. She seemed to be negotiating. A city boy, smiling as if he had just been given the crown jewels, took her arm and led her outside, his mates whooping after him. I counted to sixty and followed.

The street market vendors were packing up for the night. The street lamps dwindling blue flame hardly combated the dark. The moon was bright but only aided in swathing the labyrinth of alleys and side streets in thicker shadow. I knew I would find Mary somewhere down these streets. Tarts always took their men farther into the dark of the alleys where they could not be seen or heard by pedestrians.

I let my eyes adjust to the dark and kept to the shadow as I went south. If she was smart she would take him toward the Thames—more alleys to choose from, fewer witnesses. I dodged chamber pots emptied from balconies and the clumps of mud and shit thrown from carriage wheels and horse hoofs as I followed. Every few minutes Mary would pass under a lamp and her hair would blaze in the flame as she walked side by side with her john. When they walked beyond the lights they vanished into shadow. I quickened my pace.

She did not lead him all the way to the river but turned east and led him into the catacombs of the ramshackle tenements. The homeless and destitute moaned in pain and snored

in the blissful ignorance of sleep on beds of yesterday's newspaper and heaps of damp burlap. I stalked down a side street and stopped short at the sound of grunting just around the corner.

I stayed in shadow and watched a couple savagely rut. The man was in a fashionable black suit. His shiny long chained pocket watch glinted in the moonlight and slapped against the brick of the building in time with his movements. The woman was in rags and toothless with a black eye. Not Mary. When she tried to speak he shushed her. She was only a scratching post as far as he was concerned. I crept past them. I could lose Mary in the maze even knowing the area as well as I did.

I turned down a parallel alley, the quickest route out the tenements, and listened for any sounds that might give away their position but all I could hear was cats hissing and screeching as they fought each other for scraps.

Something struck my back. I fell forward onto my hands and knees in the mud. Children snickered in the shadows, marking me as prey for this pack of wild youth. I looked up in time for another blow, this time to my face. My vision spun and I tasted blood.

"There, there," one of the boys said.

I counted six of them. The youngest looked no older than ten. The one standing over me was older, perhaps late teens, nearly a man.

"We want your money now, mate," the boy continued. "I've no need of your life, but I'll take that too if you don't give up the boons." The other boys egged him on.

He kicked me thrice in the ribs, the last blow knocking me to my back. All the boys rushed me, stomping, pummeling. I curled to my side in a ball, blocking as many hits to my head as I could. The older boy called them off long enough to pat down my coat and trousers.

“Lookey, lookey!” He rattled my purse, coins clinking. “A bit flush are we? Any more where this came from, eh?” He kicked me hard in the goffs when I didn’t answer, so hard, my knife sailed from my belt and sunk in the mud.

“And what were you planning on doing with this?” He picked it up and held it out for his horde to see.

“Protection,” I rasped.

“Didn’t serve tonight.”

“It will. I promise you that, boy.”

A whistle squealed from somewhere at the top of the alley. The older boy spit in my face, kicked me once more, then ran off the other direction with my knife and purse, his mates trailing behind him.

* * *

A copper stood over me.

It could have been hours with the way my consciousness ebbed. He was still blowing his damn whistle, trying to bring the lot of them down on me with Mary still somewhere in the maze.

“Are you alive?” the copper asked.

“Passably.” I stood, grunting against the stiffness in my side and the ache in my groin. I braced my hands against my knees, tried and failed not to vomit.

“Did they get off with everything then?”

All but Mary. She was near. I could feel it. But she wouldn't see me unless I paid her, I was sure, and without my knife, I was powerless to save her from dying of the clap or consumption or gin, huddled gracelessly in a murky alley like this one.

Little bastards. Finding Mary was useless until I found the shites who jumped me. The copper blew his whistle again. His uniform was pressed, starched. A clean depressed blue, so dark it was almost black. He was a head taller but otherwise about my size. I groaned, leaned against my knees again, waited. The copper gently put his hand on my back, stepping close. Close enough for me to wrench his nightstick from his waistband and strike.

He was stunned by the first blow and fell back against the damp brick. I shoved him flush against the wall with one arm against his neck and pushed hard. He clawed at my arms but the slick mud on my clothes gave him no purchase. He went limp. I struggled to keep him out of the mud as I heaved him to a stone alcove. It was a dark damp hole but paved with cobblestone. I wouldn't have been surprised if one of the street boys had been hiding in it, waiting for unsuspecting prey to wander into the trap.

I yanked off my clothes, tossed them aside, and donned the copper's, careful not to soil them. The boots looked new, so I nicked them too. I left his warrant card and bobby cap. I tucked his billy club inside my belt. I scooped my hat from the mud and rinsed it in a trickle of water from the eaves of a tenement, then followed the row of slapdash dwellings toward the Spitalfields. None of the people huddled beneath the awnings were the street boys. Or Mary.

I cut up Leman Street toward Limehouse. It was busy, some shops still open for the night, but the people were not the same as they had been—families, working men and women—finding their daily bread before turning in for the night. Only the lewd, the desperate, the foolish roamed now. I didn't have to wonder at which I was. I was all.

As were the boys with my knife, stalking these streets for the weak or the stupid As a boy, only a bit younger than their leader, I did my fair share of pick pocketing Mum's johns' coin while they were distracted. Once, I made off with thirty quid from a toff who was rough. Mum used to hang a stained bed sheet over the washbasin cabinet. I was small enough to hide inside.

“Wait until he picks up a rhythm. Creep out. Take the money, not the wallet. Creep back in. Above all stay quiet,” she instructed.

I did as I was told, but the rhythm the man picked up was the squelching of his fist against Mum’s fleshy face when she asked him to pay before instead of after. My hands shook as I peeled back the bed sheet in time to see Mum spitting out teeth.

“Not pretty anymore,” he said. Mum didn’t move, she didn’t respond, not even when the toff tore off open his trousers and climbed on top of her on the dirt floor. When he found his rhythm, I stole his money, his pocket watch, and the links from his cuffs. Mum didn’t move for a long time after he left. It was the rise and fall of her chest that told me she was still breathing. I wasn’t sure if she was sleeping or pretending to.

When she finally spoke it was startling. Not because of the break in the silence of our little hovel. Her voice sounded different, airy, muted from her swollen face perhaps. “You’ve never had a drop candy, have you? Why don’t you go fetch yourself some sweets?”

I didn’t answer. I sat bunched up with my back against the planks of the wall.

“Did you get it?”

I nodded.

“Then leave me in peace.” She rolled over, grunting as she turned her back to me.

I left the money and pocket watch on the floor next to her and quietly closed the door behind me when I left. I never told her about the cufflinks, but I did get the candy. I bought a bag

with each of the silver cufflinks I'd lifted. I sat by the Thames and ate every piece. Tangy lemon. Creamy butterscotch. I ate until I was sick. And then I ate more. Sucked on them until my tongue was raw. The luxury wouldn't last and there had been a high price paid for it.

The candy shop of my youth was long gone. Others sprang up in its place. The street boys' leader wouldn't have much interest in sweets, but the younger ones, the ones who stole their experiences from the pockets of Londoners would be kings for a day and would want all the riches that came with being a little lord. I combed the East End until I found two of the boys outside a sweet shop, just closing for the night. It was the leader and the zealous cock-kicker. I lurked under a bar awning, watching them play as if they were ordinary children instead of the damned little wraiths they were.

They playfully shoved each other, passed paper sacks of candy back and forth and played Irish boxing until they were both panting. The young boy took a piece of glass from his jacket, the leader slid my knife from his, and they mock-fought a battle to the death. My knife gleamed in the dim moonlight, caught the licking flames of the lamp they sparred beneath.

Folding myself into the shadow of the oil lamps, I crept behind the younger boy. I wanted the leader to see me coming. I struck the boy with the billy club. He dropped like he was pulled downward with a string and cut his leg on the hunk of glass he was holding. The leader stood in shock for a moment between me and his limp brother.

"That's mine," I said, pointing to my knife.

He charged me with a roar, slicing wildly. The boy had clearly never used a blade, his movements were choppy, but that only made him unpredictable. He cut my forearm. I rammed the club into his kidneys. He wailed, careened backward, dropped my knife. I lunged for it as he did and we were both in the mud tussling as we had earlier. This time it was even more of an

unfair fight as I had nearly twenty years and six inches on this small boy. He cried when I flipped him on his stomach and dug my knees into his back, fists clutching his hair and smoothing his face into the mud. I held him there until he stopped moving. When I turned him over his eyes were open but he saw no more and never would again. His face was smooth and he looked even younger than he must have been. Barely more than a baby.

Patted him down. There was no more than a few bob now. I was filthy, the copper's clothes caked in mud. I would be lucky if Mary didn't run away screaming at the first sight of me. The night was late in every sense. As it went on, and as I searched, the lamps grew dimmer, burning off the oil. The smokestacks of the factories and mills and coal houses eased from billowing to a steady waft of soot and fumes.

I let my instincts take over and felt rather than saw my way through the dark. I found them against a brick building near Spitalfields. He was adjusting his trousers while Mary tugged her skirts down. He tossed coins to the ground. Mary chased them as they rolled over the cobblestone. It wasn't the same man she left The Ten Bells with. I tucked myself away from what little light there was, careful not to look at the city boy head on. Even if they couldn't see, people still knew when they were being watched. They felt eyes on them, a warning sign danger was near. He passed within inches of me without ever knowing I was there. Mary tucked her wages into her petticoat and started out of the tenements. I followed.

I stayed close until she was back on the main road, then hung back and let her get ahead of me. She was all mine, she just didn't know it yet. The lane still had the odd passerby walking briskly. I stayed in shadow, watched, followed in her footsteps until she suddenly stopped short and whirled around.

"Who's that?"

I froze.

"I know you're there. Joseph is that you?"

I stepped into the moonlight.

She sighed. "I'm done for the night, love. Come to Dorset Street tomorrow."

I stepped closer as I took my purse from my pocket and shook it. Her face lit up at the coins jingling inside the wool. "Are you sure?"

Mary looked down one side of the road then the other. At the bottom of the street, there was a couple staggering, laughing. She watched them for a moment until they disappeared down a side street. "All right, then. Come on." She pressed her back against a closed shop door and started to lift her skirts.

"Somewhere more private?"

She chewed on her thumbnail as she looked me over in a way that made me feel as though she was searching my person for weaknesses to exploit. It was disconcerting to be on the other side of a gaze like that. I only let myself be analyzed in that fashion when the boss men would come to inspect the progress at the mill and line all the workers up like we were standing before a firing squad. Those that were injured or unhealthy would be sacked on the spot. I didn't match the gaze of this woman the way I would with the boss men. Instead, I looked down at her feet and dodged eye contact while she searched me for weak spots.

Whatever she saw must have satisfied her. "My lodgings are just down the way."

I'd never been to a woman's lodgings. "Down the way where?"

"Miller's Court. It's not far."

I knew it wasn't. "I'm shy," I said.

She laughed. "I'm on my own. You're perfectly safe. But you have to pay now." She held out her hand.

I stepped close enough to touch her, placed two shillings in her smooth palm, and offered her the crook of my arm.

"Oh, my! A gentleman." She snuggled up to me as if she had known me her whole life and led me towards Miller's Court.

"You're a quiet one," she said. "Cat got your tongue? Or is this the shyness?"

"Who's Joseph? Your fellow?"

She giggled and burped. "Ladies like me don't have fellows, sir. We have friends. Joseph is a friend."

"We won't go to Miller's Court only to find Joseph waiting on your front step, will we?"

"We will be quite alone, I assure you." I smiled and encouraged her to tell me more about herself.

As we walked to her lodgings she told me how Joseph had left her for work. That in Wales she came from a decent family but was beckoned by the decadence of city life and the promise of work in London.

"Things were all right at first. Then they weren't. Lady has to do what she has to do to get by," she said.

"As anyone must."

She said when she met Joseph she stopped working on her back. Joseph had a job and kept after. But just as the autumn started, he lost his job and she had no choice but to return to the streets.

"Then one morning he was gone. Poof! He'll be back once he finds a new situation. Then I won't have to work anymore. He'll come back."

"I'm sure you're right," I said.

We approached a small brick tenement with wood doors and canvas awnings. Number thirteen was hers. The window had a jagged hole plugged with a black petticoat covering the rest of the glass. Inside was a rickety cot and night table pushed against a wall opposite the door, unlit fireplace, a grimy washbasin. I was raised in a room like this with Mum, barely clinging to her sanity, and when death finally came, her final gasps mingled with the creaking bed as she hacked and sweat through the sheets. She had the pox. A slow death.

"I welcome this," she said her last day. Her senses had left her long ago, but her eyes were clear and focused. "This world is a cruel one. Harsh and wicked. It takes and takes until there is nothing left." She smiled briefly. "Death is a kindness to the wretched like me, boy."

I leaned down to kiss her forehead, then stopped. I couldn't remember her ever having done that for me. She was pathetic, lying soaked in filth and disease. Her death was only a short stroll from her life. She had been born in the muck. She would die in it. How could a life such as hers end in anything but unforgiving torment?

I was good with my hulling knife, as good as any doffer boy could be. I freed us both with a slice of her throat, and as her body bowed off the bed and she stared into my eyes, I felt her finally see me. I put my hands on her chest and held her down until the thrumming stopped.

Mary lit a candle on a table beside the bed, then stood in front of it. She bent down to untie her boots. "Take off your coat, sir."

I did as I was told, draping my coat over one of the chairs. I rolled up my sleeves as I moved closer. Her back was to me. I watched her shed her clothes, the sham of desire in her

smooth movements, putting on a show, as she must have done a hundred times. The backs of her legs were dirty with bits of leaves still clinging to them. She turned around surprised to see me dressed.

“Shall I help?” Her smile was coy but I knew anything from a strong breeze to a swift slap would chase it from her face. She was faking. They were always faking like Mum and all the others from the district. They played parts.

I played mine as she unbuttoned my jacket and my shirt running her fingers over my skin.

“Someone had a scrape,” she said. She traced the moon-shaped bruises on my chest and stomach.

I shivered from her touch. And something else. Her hands trailed down my stomach systematically as if she was inspecting a horse before snatching my belt. I caught her hands in mine and brought them to her side before she found the knife in my belt hidden only by the tail of the copper’s shirt.

I rested my hands on her shoulders. She flinched. I smiled. “What’s your name?”

To my surprise, she told the truth. "Mary. Mary Kelly."

"Come sit with me, Mary Kelly." I led her to her little cot and pushed her to her back. Reclined like that, breasts flopped to the side, so small in her bed, she looked like a child.

"Hm. No that's not right." The lick of the single candle flame played across her face. "Take your hair down." She did as I commanded, taking out the pins one by one, flicking them to the floor. She looked up at me with her hair fanned around her, ready to accept whatever I decided my coin was worth.

I climbed on the bed and straddled her. Her face was pinched as if she could laugh or cry. I loomed over her, pressing my lips against her forehead, then pulled my knife, guiding it to

Mary's neck, a quick death. A jab to my gut, stabbing pain in my ribs, sent me flailing off the bed. Mary, up in a flash, stood over me and kicked my face.

I snatched her ankle and yanked her down to the dirt. She squealed and dragged her fingernails over my face as I wrestled her to the ground, taking punches, kicks, knees to my ribs. I cried out, so she dug her thumbs into the fleshy side of my abdomen. I couldn't help but roll off of her and swallow back bile and pain. She screeched and went for my knife. The last threads of my control snapped and I threw my weight on her. I shoved an arm over her mouth to quiet her screams. Still, she fought me like she had something worth living for.

I grabbed a fistful of her ginger hair, slid my knife over her throat before she had a chance to scream. Blood sprayed the wall, the yellowed linens, me. I yanked her head back further, brought her eye to eye with me then sliced my knife across her neck again until it grated against bone. Her mouth formed a word I would never hear, but she saw me, really saw me. Life drained out of her before it could be fully formed and she slumped in my arms. I let go of her hair, her head flopped against my shoulder, nearly severed from her body. I scooped up her legs in my arms and set her on the bed face up.

Mary did not look peaceful or frightened in death. Her face had hardened in defiance. She fought to the last, naively thinking she had a choice in her fate. But how exciting it was! I stabbed, gouged, dove into the sticky depths of Mary's body until there was nothing but unrecognizable meat.

I only kept her heart intact, a keepsake. I stuffed it in my pocket and wrapped myself in my coat over my bloody clothes. I didn't even bother to wash up in her basin. I gently pulled back the petticoat covering the window and peeked outside. It was the darkest part of the night, a mere hour or so before dawn. Even London sleeps at this hour. I stepped outside and breathed

deep letting the crisp air fill my lungs. I felt weightless as I ducked into an alley and strolled with my hand in my pocket, rubbing the satin flesh of Mary's heart, back toward the Thames.

Of the Wretched

The allied base was under attack. Vivian stuffed on a hot gas mask and ran to the mess tent where most of the casualties were kept until they could be moved to the hospital ship. The battle raged nearby, Young men fired hot metal at one another from different ends of the island, and launched toxic mustard gas, as the men called it for its foggy yellow fumes.

Inside the mess tent, Vivian hurried down the rows of wounded men, cutting their tainted uniforms from them so they could be taken directly to surgery without contaminating the ship with gas. Vivian even cut their socks off, sending them to casualty wards and operating theaters naked.

“Pre-op, B Deck,” she directed the orderlies. “Left at the top of the gangway.”

Nurse Crenshaw bellowed over the encampment through her mask. "Storm is moving in, people! She flitted from one wounded man to another, assessing wounds and ripping off uniforms. "Finish your triage!"

Thunder ripped overhead, more trucks from the front rolled in, bursting with casualties, Vivian ran outside and climbed in the back before it stopped moving. Racks of beat-up cots lined the truck walls each with a ruined, howling man. Vivian sent them out in order of severity and tried not to cover her ears—even when she was aboard ship she was hearing the men in her sleep.

Only a few of these men were victims of the gas, but the others were pale with blood loss, shredded by shrapnel, burned black by explosives. The soldier in the last cot drifted in and out of consciousness. His leg was bent at a sick angle, brow covered in sweat. Vivian pulled back a scrap of bloodied trouser, surprised when he seized her hand.

“It will heal or it won’t,” he said. “Don’t waste your time.”

“Let me look.” Vivian tugged her hand free, lifted the filthy material from the man’s wound, smelled pungent gangrene through her mask.

“Orderly! Pre-op,” Vivian called.

“Please, no,” he begged. “No surgery.” He tried to get up.

Vivian didn’t know where he thought he could crawl, all the same, she couldn’t let him try, and pressed him down. He hesitated a moment—she thought him worn out—then he began thrashing, fighting her, and she could not hold him herself.

“Be calm,” Vivian said. “You’re going home.”

The man shoved her hard against the cots. Orderlies boarded. Vivian ducked off the truck as two orderlies and three men from the man’s unit restrained him and pulled him off the truck. The man fought them until the men carrying him on the stretcher could no longer keep their balance. He toppled into the mud.

Vivian couldn't abide this hopeless man, who hadn't gathered how fortunate he was to be going home while scores of his brothers would never see home again. One of the soldiers tried to pick him up with no success, the wounded man punching at anyone who came close. Vivian unsnapped the pistol from the soldier's belt, surprised by how light it was, smacked the screaming man over the head with it. Unconscious, he flopped in the mud.

Vivian gave the pistol back to the startled soldier. "Get him aboard," she said.

* * *

Hours later, the ship lurched through the storm as Vivian ran down the corridor to the operating theater with a sterile saw. She learned the man in mud was Lieutenant Shoal and that he knew words that could shame the devil. Vivian heard him before she came in the operating room.

Nurse Crenshaw and an orderly were held Shoal down, as she stepped over the battlefield of discarded sutures, bandages, and sticky fluids. The doctor took the saw and ordered sedation. Vivian filled the syringe, found a vein. Shoal slipped free of his restraints and knocked it out of her hand. It shattered.

"We go without it," the doctor said. "You!" He pointed at Vivian. "Hold him down."

"Now, girl," Crenshaw said.

Vivian went to the head of the table, shoved his shoulders down as he screamed. Crenshaw crammed a balled up wad of linen between his teeth. Vivian couldn't look away as the doctor sawed. Blood sprayed his already stained gown in thick bursts of blood and pus. The ship rocked, the doctor swore. Vivian looked down at Shoal just as his eyes rolled back and he went still.

"I need more hands," the doctor ordered.

The ship bucked as Vivian went to his side. With no preamble, the doctor stuck her fingertips into the rotting, bloody flesh.

“Feel that pulsing? Hold it there.”

Vivian did while the doctor resumed his sawing. Vivian’s ears rang as the blade ground through bone. She found the strength to look away from the amputation, and into the eyes of Crenshaw, watching Vivian from the other side of the table. The scar on Crenshaw’s right cheek, a gash from her years in Africa, gaped under the harsh sterile light, making two glowering mouths.

Vivian lost her footing as the storm pummeled the ship, everyone groping for balance, except Crenshaw, who managed to stay upright, and replaced Vivian’s fingertips with hers in Shoal’s leg. Vivian scrambled to find her footing, then out of nowhere, a heavy supplies cart rolled into her. Vivian felt the bite of rough hands haul her upright, her head swam, something sticky trickled from above her eye.

“Don’t you dare, girl,” Crenshaw said.

Vivian didn’t know which of Crenshaw’s mouths spoke to her, they were suddenly both so real, though she knew that could not be true. The doctor announced he was done, held up Shoal’s amputated leg, the room swirled, Vivian thought the ship had capsized, then thought nothing at all as she sank into blackness.

* * *

Vivian felt something cold, wet drip on her eye. For a moment, she thought she was back in her tiny home in Belfast where the water trickled through the roof every time it rained. But when she

opened her eyes there was no plank roof, only Crenshaw standing over her, wringing a damp cloth over Vivian's face.

“Up, girl, up.”

They were still in the operating room. Someone had pushed Vivian against a wall. She sat up, her stomach rolled, her left eye felt swollen. “What happened?”

“You let yourself be knocked out, damn you.”

Vivian flushed. “How long was I out?”

“Long enough. Try to stand, there’s work for you.”

Vivian stood, head foggy. She could feel the ship moving beneath her, steadier now, but the engine hummed in powerful occupation. Crenshaw led her to C Deck, the post-op ward, where Shoal, still asleep, lay in a bed at the end of the row.

“All things into account, the amputation went well. He has a fever caused from the gangrene, most like. Keep him under observation.” Crenshaw gave Vivian his chart. “I’ll come relieve you in a few hours.”

“Begging your pardon, ma’am—”

“If you’re about to say you’re unable to handle this because of the bump on your darling head, bite your tongue, girl.”

Crenshaw was half a head shorter, even so, Vivian felt herself shrink under Crenshaw’s hard gaze. She had been a nurse longer than Vivian had been alive and this was not her first war. Everything about her, from twisted fingers to scarred face, was battle-hardened.

“You had no business bringing this man aboard,” Crenshaw said. “I saw you wrangle him. Heard him say to leave him. You should have.”

Vivian felt her face redden again. “We’re meant to heal, are we not? Elseways, why are we here?”

Crenshaw crossed her arms. “We aren’t here to save those who don’t want to be saved. Who could you have served had you not been passed out like a ninny on the deck of my operating room? This man isn’t even a high-ranking officer.”

Shoal didn’t matter to Vivian nearly as much as the notion of disposable people. Vivian’s parents died on a dirt floor in a union typhus ward deemed too insignificant to see a proper doctor.

“One less family will grieve.” Vivian pointed at his bed. “That man’s mother or brother or child will see him again.”

“Irrelevant. This is war. Wars are won with men and weapons. And this is a war we must win.” Crenshaw turned and left Vivian standing by Shoal’s bed.

“She’s right, you realize. I won’t be winning any wars any time soon.” Shoal was staring up at her from his bed, trembling, but lucid.

Vivian put on a reassuring smile. “How do you feel?”

“Dear god, you have to ask?”

“That good? I’ll just be on my way then.” She held a cup of water to his lips.

He drank deeply, then sputtered. “You did this to me, woman. I said to leave me.”

“Why?”

Shoal gave a sour look.

“I asked, ‘why?’”

“Look at me,” he said. “My wife. Will she be happy when she sees the likes of me?” He weakly slapped his good leg. “Sees this tattered carcass?”

Vivian mopped a damp cloth over his brow. “She’ll be glad to have you home. I’d trade any limb you care to mention to have my family back, even if I had to be at their call for the rest of my days.”

“It’s not the same. I made promises to her,” he said.

“And, perhaps, those promises will be harder to keep now. But you’ll get the chance. Others are not so fortunate.” She reapplied the cloth to his forehead. His skin felt warmer, though the fever had to be breaking by now.

“That feels good, the coolness.” He gagged. “I can smell myself.”

“How about we clean you up?”

Vivian fetched a basin with clean water, soap, and a new cloth. She unbuttoned Shoal's shirt—he was still wearing his grimy uniform except for the trousers—revealing a spotty red rash on the trunk of his body.

Vivian dropped the basin. "How long have you had that?"

He looked down. “Not certain. Before the bullet ripped through my leg, I hadn’t had much chance to do a physical accounting. After, it didn’t seem to matter anymore.”

“I can assure you: It matters.”

* * *

Vivian banged on Crenshaw's cabin door so hard it echoed in the corridor. When Crenshaw finally opened, she was bleary-eyed with wisps of blonde hair escaping her cap, a thick book open on her cot behind her. She was already donning her frock and cap. Vivian was grateful she wouldn't have to wait for her to dress.

“It’s typhus,” Vivian said. “Shoal has the rash, and fever, and—”

“Keep your voice down, girl,” she hissed. “Don’t start a panic.” She closed her door and started toward C Deck but Vivian stopped her.

“I quarantined him. Seemed the safest course.”

She led Crenshaw down to the lower levels of the ship. There was a small ward on E Deck that was to be used by the officers during their leisure time, but as there hadn’t been much to be relaxed about, the ward remained empty save for the space taken up by extra cots and surgical tables. Shoal was right where she had left him, damp, clammy, pale. Now that she was really looking at him, Vivian could see the illness lurking behind his eyes.

“Get the doctor,” Crenshaw said. “Hurry now.”

Vivian came back with the doctor as fast as she could, his hasty gait echoed beside hers. She waited in the hall while Crenshaw and the doctor examined Shoal. When they emerged, the doctor wore a mask, sped past her without a word.

“We need to gather all the men we brought aboard with Shoal and put them down here. Get some orderlies to help, but keep mum on this. If someone should ask you, say that we are making room for another group of wounded.”

“We should not keep this from the crew. Everyone would be safer if they knew what they were facing.”

“That’s for the captain to decide. Away with you. Do as I say.” Crenshaw turned on her heel and left toward the bridge.

Vivian’s stomach rocked with the ship as she gathered help and began quietly relocating patients. It was late. Most of the staff and crew were asleep. Some of the patients stayed asleep all the while as they were moved, whereas others awoke and demanded to know what was happening. Vivian recited the lie Crenshaw gave her, stayed vague. Perhaps the patients believed

it or perhaps they were simply too unwell to challenge her, either way, they seemed to take her lies as gospel. The orderlies and nurses were more suspicious.

Vivian offered water to a wounded man with a fever while one of her colleagues, a tall nurse with bottle-bottom glasses, felt his forehead.

“Stop that,” Vivian said. “Don’t touch him.”

The nurse looked at Vivian though she'd gone on leave from her remaining wits. "He wasn't feverish before," the nurse said.

She pushed up his sleeve to take his pulse before Vivian could stop her. The rash had broken out over the man's arm. The nurse looked up at Vivian, startled, silently asking for confirmation. Vivian nodded slightly.

* * *

Over the next weeks, Shoal's condition worsened and more fell ill.

Vivian sat next to his bed, writing paper and pen in her lap, as he dictated a letter to his wife.

“How she will ever read this, I don’t know.”

“I’ll deliver it to her, of course, if...” she smiled, patted his hand with her gloved one.

“But I won’t have to. You’re right, she’ll never see this letter at all because she’ll see you first.”

Shoal wheezed a laugh, sending him into a fit of painful, wretch coughs. All around the ward, men struggled the same, the number of sick slowly rising, and Vivian couldn’t help but wonder if Crenshaw had been right to leave Shoal behind.

“Do you have anything else you’d like to say?” Vivian asked.

“Remember the pound cake your mother made? Dry, hard thing it was?”

“Come again?”

“I came to call on you for the first time and chipped my tooth on it? Poor woman didn’t have the skill for baking.”

“Lieutenant Shoal, you're not making sense.”

“And I never told you this, my love, but you don’t either. I worried my last birthday cake would take me to my maker.”

“Lieutenant, please.” She lightly shook his shoulder.

“Get away from me, kraut!” He moaned, eyes unfocused, trained on something, some memory or made up horror Vivian couldn’t see. “It’s cold here, so cold...”

She called for the doctor, Shoal screamed, loudly enough Vivian thought people on the top deck would hear. By evening, news of the typhus outbreak spread throughout the ship like the disease itself. Everywhere she turned men and women wore masks. Vivian didn’t bother anymore because she knew from experience once it was this bad there was no stopping it. Her fate felt joined this illness, this cruel thief of both body and mind.

When typhus came to Belfast, Vivian had spent every free moment with her parents when they fell ill. She sat with them, held their hands through all their fits and fevers. At night, when they rested, she walked beyond the edge of town to escape the claustrophobia of the city, where she could breathe clean and deeply.

Vivian sought such a relief now and wandered to the top deck. It was raining, lightning over the horizon, too murky to see stars. She stepped into the torrent. The rain was cold, though not unpleasant. Vivian filled her lungs, breathing with ease for the first time since she left Belfast.

When she decided to leave after the typhus took her parents, it had never occurred to her that she might not make it home. The dangers of war were trumped by the promise of what the world could offer. In her naivety, she didn't realize suffering was everywhere, it was never a choice. The only choice was *where* to suffer, and given an option, Vivian would choose a dirt floor, a leaky roof.

“What are you doing?”

Vivian turned to find Crenshaw watching her through a porthole.

“Taking some air,” Vivian said.

“Come inside before you catch something.”

Vivian snorted. “More chance of that inside, I'd say.”

She went inside. Crenshaw ordered her to fetch fresh towels and linens for the quarantine ward, and boil the soiled ones. Vivian went to the quarantine ward first, the worse cases of the fever, and brought clean sheets to restless patients.

Shoal was asleep, though, not soundly. The tall nurse with the red glasses lay in a sick bed. She smiled weakly when she saw Vivian and gingerly pointed to a dram of whiskey at the nurse's station. Many of the nurses had come down with the fever—only about half the medical staff remained fit for duty. Vivian took the bottle and gave each patient in the ward a tablespoon to help with the pain. They were almost out of morphine.

When she came back around to Shoal, he was awake, but she had run dry of whiskey.

“I have to tell you, miss: Hospitality in this place leaves much to be desired. I think I'd like to complain.” He light chuckle turned to a wet hack.

Vivian put a cup to his lips. “I'll be sure to share your grievances with the management, sir.”

“For now, I’d settle for some morphine.” He folded his hands as though praying.

“I can’t,” Vivian said. “I’m so sorry. We simply don’t have enough to spare.”

"Then, please, I beg you, find that accursed foot and give it a poke. It itches. Continues on without an end in sight."

Vivian laughed. “I’ll see what I can do. In the meantime, I’ll take your sheets and bring you some whiskey once I have these in the boil.”

She balled the soiled sheets into one large one and used it like a linen bag, promised Shoal once more that she'd be back with whiskey, and headed toward the laundry on D Deck. Shoal was certainly still gravely ill, though still in such good humor, Vivian hoped he would somehow pull through.

Vivian heaved the laundry past a supplies room where they kept the medications. The door was ajar. Vivian heard clanking bottles inside and peeked through the cracked door. A young seaman and an older officer rooted through the medications, chemicals, and drugs, uncaring of leaving evidence of their theft. She must have made a noise, the officer, the bigger man, turned and saw her, made for the door.

Vivian sprang away and launched the soiled linens at the two men, not thinking that they wouldn’t realize it contaminated. She turned to run, but the officer caught her by the cap, tearing some of the pins out of her hair. She cried out.

“Where is it?” He shook her. “The morphine! Where is it?”

Vivian struggled. “Not here.”

"Liar!" The boy erupted into a fit of coughs. "She's lying. I've seen them come out of this room the needles full of the stuff. It's in there."

The bigger man gripped her face between his large, rough hands. Vivian knew, if he wanted, he could pop her skull like a boil.

"You have a bigger problem, gentleman. Take the morphine, if you must. But, if you do, realize that it won't do you any good."

"How's that?" the boy asked.

"Because I can tell from here you're already sick." Vivian smiled. "And your friend here is standing in riddled sheets, breathing in typhus air."

The officer looked down at the scattered mess of bedclothes at his feet and panicked. He released her and ran off down the corridor with the boy hot on his heels. Vivian went into the room and found the large brown bottle on the shelf marked "chlorine." Crenshaw had suggested they camouflage the morphine after it became clear they would run out before they made it to Southampton. The bottle was, in fact, empty of chlorine, and stuffed with small vials of morphine, all that was left aboard. Vivian found the bottle, tucked away in the back of the highest shelf, and popped the top. Inside, empty vials rattled.

* * *

Vivian rapped on Crenshaw's door. Again. And again. She put her ear to the door, heard nothing.

"Nurse Crenshaw! I have an emergency."

Vivian tried the knob. It was locked from the inside. She was in there. Vivian tried once more knocking, then she began to kick. She kicked the door over and over until the flimsy lock gave and the door swung open. On the floor, Crenshaw was sprawled facedown in her nightgown, thick, red rash on her back.

Vivian tried to rouse her, heart thrumming in her throat as she hauled Crenshaw into the small bed. Vivian guessed that Crenshaw had the fever for at least a couple of weeks. She put a cool compress on Crenshaw's forehead and another over her chest. She was burning up. Vivian took her hand and waited for her to wake.

The room was not barren as Vivian would have expected. Crenshaw had books with long titles and colons in them. There was a single tintype photo of a young man. The photo was too old to be her son, and to be next to her bed, he must be a lover, husband perhaps. Vivian couldn't see the woman softening enough to have dinner with another person, let alone share a life with them. But in her closet, peeking out from the ocean of black and white frocks, caps, and dresses was a fashionable red dress, and Vivian wondered if she knew Crenshaw at all. Perhaps the man in the photo waited for her still.

Crenshaw groaned, her eyelids fluttered.

"Can you hear me?"

She nodded, cupped her hands over her eyes.

"The last of the morphine is gone. I caught two men trying to pilfer it, but it was already missing."

Crenshaw nodded, spoke too softly for her to hear. Vivian leaned in close.

"My dress," she croaked. "I hid it."

And Vivian did not have to ask in which dress. Vivian found the morphine swaddled in thick bandages in the pocket of the red one.

"Was going to ration it," she said. "Too late for that now. We won't last much longer."

* * *

The captain ordered full speed the rest of the way to Southampton once he learned of Crenshaw's illness. There were two nurses remaining, the rest either sick or dead, and only a handful of volunteers like Vivian. The crew had taken to tossing the dead overboard to protect their dwindling numbers.

Vivian spent her days boiling linens, scrounging for alcohol to dull the typhus victims' pain, and caring for the wounded patients she had left. She moved Crenshaw to Shoal's ward and set their beds next to each other. In less than a day, they drove each other mad. Crenshaw couldn't stand Shoal's "tawdry sarcasm" while he advised stick removal from a delicate place. Vivian kept their beds right where they were, hoping the annoyance might stimulate them.

Vivian could tell as soon as she was back in British waters. The sea felt friendlier, less choppy, even though the storm was still brewing in the distance. She stood on the top deck and breathed deep, truly clean air. She could swear she could see Ireland on the horizon line beneath the tendrils of lightning. She imagined herself disembarking in Southampton, taking a train to London, and from there, home to Belfast. It was raining in her daydream, too.

The captain announced when the ship was within radio distance of allied forces. Cheers erupted in the wards. He said he radioed permission to make port and was waiting for a reply. Vivian went to get the sick ready to disembark and started with Crenshaw. She was in poorest condition, her age having accelerated the illness.

Vivian entered the ward to find a gathering around Crenshaw's bed. Vivian's stomach dropped to the deck, she shoved her way through the crowd of nurses and aids. Crenshaw's bed was empty. But there she stood next to the lifeless body of Shoal, shutting his eyes for the last time.

* * *

Vivian wouldn't let them commit Shoal's body to the sea. Not while they were so close to home. His poor wife was somewhere near those lightning strikes on the horizon line, Vivian knew, but she had trouble seeing her there, or the train home, both shaded by the image of Shoal in the mud begging to be left to die.

Vivian sat next to Crenshaw's bed, wondering how compassion could be exorcised as Crenshaw talked about losing hers during her service in Africa. Despite all she suffered there, it was still her favorite place in the world.

"Everything is hot and bright," she said. "Just as it should be."

"What about the sand?" Vivian asked.

She shrugged. "Just a more formidable form of dirt, girl. You can beat it out a rug and clean it out a wound all the same."

Vivian stayed with her for as long as she could before an exhausted sailor found them and told Vivian the captain wanted to speak with her. Vivian went to the bridge and found the captain with his head in his hands.

"My first officer is sick," he said.

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir."

"We've been denied permission to make port."

"I'm—Excuse me?"

He held up his hands in surrender. "We can't risk exposing the whole country, they say. They'll consider permitting a lifeboat with anyone who is not yet ill. If they haven't contracted it yet, they probably won't."

"Make port anyway," Vivian said.

“They’ll fire upon us.” The captain sighed. “This is no negotiation. I’m ordering all volunteers and non-essential personnel—who have not fallen ill—to disembark. That means you. Pack your things.” He turned away, dismissing her.

“Will you be leaving, Captain?”

"And go where?" He turned back to his radio, dismissing her.

Go where, indeed. Vivian didn’t go to her cabin, she went to Crenshaw’s cabin instead and took her tintype to the ward which was becoming more of a morgue. Crenshaw was tucked in her sickbed sleeping fitfully, as were many of the wretched, attended by only by each other. Vivian placed the tintype on Crenshaw’s bedside table and got to work.

Cooper

I watched from the window outside the cabinetmaker's shop his apprentice took the trundle bed from the display. The shop owner came outside to say he would hold the bed for me one day, no more than that.

“I’m good for it,” I said.

I thanked him and promised I would have the rest of the funds for the bed by the end of business today. We shook hands. Peggy, my wife, was going to be beside herself.

I pulled my collar up against the wind and strode down the lane to the hidden coops on Lloyd Street. I wasn't proud of what I was about to do, but I kept my promises, and I told my wife I would get her that bed.

Peggy was far too easy to please which made me think she wasn't. She never complained about our one room home or the lack of meat on our table. It only seemed to bother me, and that couldn't be true. I didn't want to become lazy in my affections toward her. I wanted to deserve to be her husband.

On the afternoon she saw that bed in the window, she trailed her fingertips along the glass and asked how fine it would be to have a bed like that when her nephew came to visit. The promise to get the bed for her tumbled from my lips, and I stood by it, even more firmly after she wrote a letter to the boy telling him all about it. Peggy glided around the house for days, assuring me that she didn't *need* a bed, our straw mat did the job we needed, but a bed would be such a wonder to experience.

Sunrise did little to brighten the city, dense fog blanketed the streets, so thick that the light could not cut through to heat the city. I was almost to the coop when a man in a dusty flackcoat, no hat, and a bloody rag pressed to his mouth staggered into my path. One side of his coat was blotted with mud like he had fallen at some point, then tried to scrub the mess out. He was a small man, tightly gripping a brown leather satchel, checking street signs as he stumbled down the lane. He sat in a gutter and wiggled a broken tooth with his fingertip.

I stopped in front of him. "Rough morning, friend?"

He looked up, startled, groaned as he got to his feet.

"I don't want any trouble." He kept walking, not meeting my gaze, and was difficult to understand, voice muffled by his swollen mouth. I matched his pace, and he walking faster, unmindful of the piles of horse dung plopped in the street.

"Ah, I don't mean any harm." I clapped him on the back, trying to be encouraging, friendly. He flinched. "You look down on your luck."

"You could say that," he said. "Someone thought I looked too clean." He put his hand to his face and groaned. "Many someones."

"The city can be rough," I said. "Better to walk with a friend in case your muggers find you again." I offered him a swig from my flask. "How about something for the pain? That has to hurt like the devil."

He jerked to a stop. "Bless you, sir," he said.

Whiskey dribbled from the corner of his mouth as he drank deeply. I let him have his fill—he didn't have much to look forward to today. I was sorry to make the man's life even more difficult, but he made himself an easy mark, and the bed was waiting. He tried to give the flask back.

"Keep that for now," I said. "I have a feeling you're going to need it more than I do."

Around us, Baltimore woke. Shops opened, taverns started serving breakfast, the scent of biscuits and ale wafting from the business we passed. He must have been in a great deal of pain. He walked along beside me as I lead him to the coop, not asking where we were going, sipping from the flask. It didn't take long before his lightheaded stumbles turned to drunken staggers. I had to take the man's arm lest he walk in front of one of the carriages thudding down the lane. He leaned against the side of a building and held out the flask.

"I've drunk the rest," he slurred. "My apologies."

I smiled. "Plenty more where that came from. I know a good place for a drink." I took his arm. "Follow me."

"Presently, I seem to find myself low on funds."

"Don't think on it. I'm a regular at a place that will let you drink on credit."

"Lead on, then," he said, heaving himself up. "Lead on."

* * *

The morning after Peggy saw the bed in the window, I went to the docks, the Shape, we called it, looking for work as I did every morning. But on that morning, a boat of Irish made port, all working for half the usual wage, and the Shape was full. The Shape had been full a lot lately. The barkeep at the tavern was beginning to know me better than the dockmaster.

I went to the tavern, sat at the bar, and sipped my drink. Just one drink, mind—I didn't want to waste coin on ale, but nor did I want to go home and see the disappointment on Peggy's face at another day of no work. I was sipping my ale when a man took up the seat next to mine and offered to get the next round.

He called himself Jakes and seemed a decent fellow. He bought me drinks like we were old friends which suited me fine. I drank on his coin till the room spun, comforted that I would at least be able to sleep that night, if not on a trundle bed. I told him I had to be making my way home.

"You had better sit down before you fall down, Mr. Reynolds," he said. "Big strong man like you? We'll need a mule and a length of sturdy rope to get you back on your feet."

"I get around fine," I said, but sat back down.

"Tell me, Reynolds," Jakes said. "Have you heard of Mr. Howell Cobb?"

"Can't say I have."

"He is running for office soon. If you're looking for work, we could use your help in his campaign."

"What kind of work? I don't know anything about politics."

"You don't have to." He gave me a scrap of paper with an address on Lloyd Street.

"Come here before Election Day." He paid the tab and left without another word.

Later that night, I went to listen, see if what he had to offer was better work than the Shape. The place on Lloyd Street was a brick building tucked behind two newer businesses, and even from the outside, I could smell the faint scent of hay and feed. I knocked on the door and was shown into a long hall of stalls that were once used for horses.

There was a man behind a desk in each stall scribbling in leather bound books under the dim glow of oil lamps. A board with numbers written in chalk dominated the farthest wall from where I stood. All manner of men milled about placing bets on everything from horse racing to government. Jakes met me there. Today he was wearing a fine, dark suit, a pretty woman in red on his arm.

"Decided we like being flush, did we?" He laughed and shook my hand. "You'll do well, my large friend, you'll do well. Let me show you our work."

He took me a room with a large cage in the center, barely enough space for a man to walk around the perimeter. There was no one in it presently, but Jakes told me that come election time, it would be full to the rafters with street men no one would look for.

"Bookmaking is my first love," he went on. "But there's money in voter fraud, believe you me, sir."

Jakes worked for the election candidates. He and his men found people no one would miss and made them vote over and over again in disguise. The more election ribbons brought back, the more money for the cooper. Simple. Easy.

“This is where we keep the men,” Jakes said. “We call it the ‘coop.’ Get it? Chicken coop?” He snickered. “Do us a favor: get in.”

“Sorry?”

He pulled on the bars like he was trying to pull them down. “Looks sturdy, yes?”

I nodded.

“I want to make sure. We get the men all full of liquor, suddenly they’re all strongmen at the fair. Go on, I won’t lock you in,” he said.

I crossed my arms. “I’m fine right here, thanks.”

Jakes laughed. “See, you’re getting the hang of this already. Good man.”

He took me back to his office and showed me a map with all of the voting stations in the city. The coopers used laudanum to keep the men calm and malleable. Jakes warned me if I used laudanum, I had to make sure to only use a little so they didn’t die while they were voting at the polls.

“The coppers start canvassing if something goes amiss. Only so many places to hid in the city. Sooner or later, they find us and tear my business apart.” He clapped my shoulder. “Make sure you’re not the one who makes that happen.”

Jakes said that I was to find men on the street—ones I thought I could handle if it came to it—disguise them, change their clothes and hats, shave their beards or clip their hair, if I had to, and take them to vote until they couldn’t stand anymore.

“Then just dump them somewhere,” Jakes said. “They’ll find their way or they won’t.”

I folded the map and put it in my pocket. "What if they don't?"

He shrugged. "I have my own troubles, don't you?"

* * *

I led the man around the side of the building where the coops were kept. His gait was clumsy but he kept up like he knew the way himself, his only focus on his next drink to cure his ills. It had taken us double the time to walk six blocks than it would had I been on my own. I had to stop him from wandering into every tavern along the way in between the slurred chatter about how much his head hurt.

The more he had the more he talked. He staggered along until the buildings became smaller, shabbier, and the number of people thinned out. He had enough good sense to question me before he put himself entirely in my charge.

"Where is it?" he asked. "This doesn't look like a tavern. Finer places back that way, I'm sure."

"We're almost on it," I said. "This way."

I took him down the alley to the coop, knocked on the door, and lead the man into the dark room reeking of tobacco, stale alcohol, and wet hay. A lantern hung just above the door, all beyond its light was blanketed in shadow.

"You're late." Jakes voice rang out from the dark. "Put him in back with the others."

The man turned to me. "What is this?"

Two of the other coopers sprang from the dark. They hit the man, stripped his clothes from him, and took his satchel. He roared, kicked and punched at the men, then tried to push past

me. His fist connected with my face, my eyes watered and I felt blood from my nose drip into my open mouth as I cried out in pain.

One by one, lamps and candles were lit plunging the room into soft warm light. I punched wildly, connected with something hard and fleshy, and when my eyes adjusted, the man was sprawled at my feet, barely conscious. One of the coopers handed me a bottle of laudanum and I dribbled some into the man's open mouth, hoping it might calm him down.

"You've got a live one, looks like." Jakes kicked the man hard in the back. "Why didn't you use your knife? Just cut him next time," he said.

He grabbed the man by one ankle and nodded for me to do the same. Together we dragged the man into the coops with the others.

* * *

When the voting polls opened, I splashed the man with a bucket of water through the grating of the coop. He jolted upright, sputtered, and kicked weakly at the cage. He was stripped down to his underclothes and sock like the other groaning men also just waking up.

I opened the cage long enough to toss him some clothes. "The sooner you put those on, the sooner you can go home. Don't make me come in there to dress you."

He sat with his head in his hands. "You're a monster."

I offered him a sip from my freshly filled flask. He raised his head and looked at it, but didn't reach for it. "You're going to kill me," he said.

"No, I'm not. But if these other boys think that you're not worth keeping around, they will. They'll cut you a new smile and leave you in a gutter to rot."

"Liar," he said.

He rubbed his hands against his temples then got up and slowly threaded his hand through the cage for the flask. He drank deeply. If I wasn't careful, he'd be of no use. I didn't want to carry him all over Baltimore.

"Get dressed," I said.

The man slumped on a wooden bench in his cell. He untied his belt, flung it at me. The man's satchel was outside the coop. I unclipped the latch, and he launched a boot at the cage.

"That's mine," he said. "And I'll have it back by the time this is over."

"Got something good in here?" I turned it over and dumped out an extra change of clothes and some papers. No coin, no booze.

"What about this?" I shook the satchel, nothing else fell out. "Is it worth something?"

"Put all that back!" He spat at me, shook the coop so hard I wondered if I should have tested it when Jakes asked.

"Tell you what," I said. I scooped up the contents of his satchel and put it back inside.

"You behave yourself, I give this back. You don't, I let the good Mr. Jakes have you and it when I go." I slung the satchel over my shoulder and waited for his answer.

The man looked feral with his dripping wet hair and swollen face, even so, he nodded, not meeting my eyes. I left him alone to dress with the others in the coop and went to collect my wages from Jakes.

"Make sure he votes until he can't anymore," Jakes said.

He tossed me a small purse. I rattled the coins inside. It felt light.

"This isn't what we agreed," I said.

"You get the rest when you bring me his ribbons. At least three. Here." He tossed me a heavy sack with several changes of clothes and a small bottle with a dropper inside.

"Laudanum," Jakes said. "Use a little to keep him weak." He bent his hand back over his papers.

"I want my money." I felt more than saw his men moving toward us in the dark.

Jakes never looked up from his work. "When I get my ribbons."

They surrounded me, more than I could handle even with my knife. I stuffed the bottle in my pocket and went to fetch the man in the coop.

He was dressed, but not well. The buttons on his shirt were out of alignment and the trousers didn't fit around the waist.

"Time to go," I said. I opened the cage, handed him a gray coat.

He moved sluggishly, a sleepwalker awake in his own nightmare.

"You're a scrappy fellow, I respect that," I said. "But if you punch me again I'll stick you with this." I showed him the knife latched to my belt.

He backed away from me. "I understand."

"Nothing will happen to you as long as you vote for Mr. Cobb and bring me your voter's ribbon. We'll be done before dinner, I promise."

I hauled him with me into the rain. Off in the distance, towards the docks at Fell's Point, a fog horn groaned. The boys on the docks would be moving double time, trying to stay ahead of the weather. I led the man to Gunner's Hall and gave him another drink, this time with a few drops of laudanum.

"Don't draw attention to yourself. Just go in, make your mark, get the ribbon, and come back out."

He nodded.

"Who are you voting for?"

"Mr. Cobb," he said.

"Right. Tell anyone I'm with you, I swear, I'll make you sorry." I hoped that sounded tough enough to make him believe me.

* * *

The man stumbled as he left the voter's station at Gunner's Hall. I waited across the road from him. Foot traffic was much heavier this late in the morning and I thought he was having trouble distinguishing me among all the faces because he didn't notice me immediately.

I raised my hand to catch his eye. He saw me and started to back away down East Lombard Street. I met his frightened gaze and pulled my coat over the handle of my knife. A hansom rolled between us, and when it cleared, he had vanished.

I studied the busy street, looking for the only man on the street that wasn't wearing a hat. I caught a glimpse of tangled black hair disappearing into an alley and started after it. The man still had enough clarity to run from me, but not enough to outrun me. He slogged through the alley holding up his trousers, reeling from the laudanum. I ran into him full force, knocked him to the dirt.

"I warned you." I rolled him over, I took my knife from my belt and poised it on the tip of his nose. He stared wide-eyed at the knife.

"Where's the ribbon?"

"I never got one," he said. "I purged myself instead."

There were bits of his last meal on his jacket. And no ribbon. I punched him in the face, then hauled him to his feet, hit him again in the stomach. He retched.

"Put these on." I took a change of clothes from the bag Jakes gave me, flung them at the man.

"No."

I hit him again, so hard his head struck the side of the building behind him. He slumped to his knees, bracing himself then fell onto his back.

"Now!"

He changed, watching me all the while. I wondered how I looked to him. If Peggy saw me now, would I still look like her husband? I squirted a few drops of laudanum into the flask and told to drink. He looked so pathetic sitting there in the mud that part of me wanted him to stop. But the bottle was already poised at his mouth and I was too far into this to back out now. I let the drug take effect then led him back to Gunner's Hall.

"Put this on." I handed him a Panama hat from the sack. "Go in, vote, get the ribbon, come back out, live. That's the most important part, my friend: You'll get to live. Cross me again, and I give you my word, you'll die." The threat was meant to be a lie, nevertheless, as I said the words, I realized they were true.

He said nothing, I thought from defiance, but as he approached the tavern he tripped twice over nothing but air. When he came back out I expected him to run. Instead, he staggered along the side of the building until I found him clutching a voter's ribbon in his hand. I slipped it into my pocket, took him back into the alley, and helped him change again. I poured more booze down his gullet until I was sure he was actually drunk and wasn't trying to fool me, then back to Gunner's Hall twice more.

By the time he came out with the third ribbon, his face was whiter than that of any man I'd known and seemed to be fixed in one blank-faced expression. He looked more statue than living, breathing person. I hooked his arm over my shoulders and dragged his dead weight to the alley.

"You're all done now, my friend."

He groaned, eyes closed.

"Where do you live? I'll get you there."

He mumbled something then passed out. I propped him up against the building, set his satchel next to him, then went back to the coop to collect my money. I told a passerby along the way that a man was passed out drunk in the alley.

* * *

The cabinetmaker sent his apprentice to deliver the bed. Some of our neighbors were watching as they brought it into the house I shared with Peggy. I told them to keep quiet, that I wanted Peggy to simply walk into our home and see her new bed, complete with the trundle bunk underneath for the little ones, already set up and ready to go.

I traded our threadbare bedroll for a few cubes of cheese, chunks of ham, and a small candle, then made up the new bed myself with linens from Peggy's hope chest. It looked comfortable but I didn't rest on it—I wanted Peggy to be the first one to have a lie back.

When she came home, I was lighting the candle for the table and had to rush to the door to cover her eyes before she could see it. I stepped outside and covered her eyes with my hands before I led her to it.

“What are you up to?” She was laughing. I felt her warm breath on my hands as I directed her to the bed.

“Sit,” I said, lining her up. The bed barely creaked under her weight. She squealed, flung her arms around me. I held her tightly.

She ran her hands over the frame while I showed her the trundle bunk where our babies would sleep one day. I was teaching her how to remove the whole trundle part when there was a heavy knock at the door. Two policemen stood in the rain, each with a billy stick hanging from their belts. I reached for my knife on instinct, but it was on the table behind me where I’d been using it to slice cheese.

“Officers?”

“Is Mrs. Peggy Reynolds at home, sir?”

Peggy? “What do you want her for?”

The officers exchanged a loaded glance. “May we come in, sir?”

I let them in, asked if I could get them anything like I’d seen Peggy do when her friends stopped by, although I don’t know what I could offer them. They both declined the offer of nothing and sat in the two rickety wood chairs at the table, candle burning between them. I stood by the new bed.

“What’s this about?” I asked again.

“Hello,” Peggy said.

He took off his hat and nodded to her. “Ma’am.”

The other copper stood. “Do you recognize this?” He handed her a crumpled piece of writing paper. She held it to the light as she read.

“This is a letter I wrote to my nephew. See, here, the return address.” Her face darkened. “How did you get this?” I went to her side and took her hand. Her fingertips were cold.

“I’m sorry to be the one to have to tell you, ma’am. Your nephew was found dead in an alley near Gunner’s Hall. I’m so very sorry.” He produced a brown leather satchel. I stilled, let go of Peggy’s hand.

“This was found with his body,” he said.

She yanked the satchel from his hands, dumped her letters on the new bed, and dug through them as if she would find her nephew at the bottom of the pile if she only burrowed deep enough. When she tore through the bedclothes, I didn’t stop her.

The Dame Who Wore Pants

Pop told me before he left to fight the Germans to stay sharp or a town like this would swallow a dame like me whole. Now I wasn't about to be choked down by nothing or no one, and I like to think I followed his advice to the nick, but it didn't take a detective to see that Ernest, my boss, was trying to impress me at this fancy joint with cloth napkins, and I was chomping down a salad like I had someplace else to be.

“You want dessert?” Ernest asked. “I hear they have a great chocolate mousse. Thing’s so light it floats.”

“I’m trying to watch my figure,” I said.

Ernest was a great boss, Pop’s beat cop partner before the war, though he and the other detectives demoted me back to lunch orders and secretarial work the moment they came home. Tonight, Ernest said I could come along to fetch Blinky, a habitual bail-jumper.

“You don’t like your first stakeout, Malone?”

“This isn’t a stakeout, pal. And it’s not my first. I’ve been on the street before.” I bit an olive from a toothpick in my drink.

He snickered. “Right. Snapping Kodaks of cheating spouses. That’s the beauty of this, doll. You’re not stuck in a hot car eating Slim Jims. I got a tip from one of my contacts on the force saying our old pal, Blinky, is working for the Vaccarella family. This is one of their places.” He took another bite of his chicken marsala. “Hate to say this of a mob joint, but this is the good stuff.”

“We can pick up Blinky any old night of the week, why now?”

He took another bite. “Scoop is, Blinky will be here tonight to make a delivery to the bosses. He moonlights as a bag boy when he’s not ripping off dumb tourists and rich old broads. Blinky’s got warrants again. He’s a walking payday for us if we can get him on multiple charges.” Ernest clinked his fork against my glass. “Another drink?”

“Should probably stay sharp.”

I scanned the people along the boulevard. A couple of big goons sat at some outside tables by the entrance, the outline of their peashooters under their jackets. Now that I knew who

frequented this place the unsavory types were so much easier to spot. I took a sip of martini. Vodka, not gin. Five olives, extra dirty, extra dry. Shaken to hell.

“Folks will start to think you don’t like me very much.”

“Pardon?”

“The way you keep craning your head around like you’re trying to find an escape route. I think I’m insulted.” He looked annoyed.

“Sorry. You’re right. I should be more inconspicuous.” I swallowed the last couple ounces left in my glass and glanced around the patio, drumming my fingers.

A woman in a red dress, a silver cane, and dark sunglasses limped past us into the restaurant. She had the longest dark hair I’d ever seen on a real person, it was down to her waist like one of those glamorous Egyptian dames I’d see in the pictures. She wasn’t even that good-looking, not with that mole on her chin, but that hair, it drew the eye. And I got grief for wearing pants. She didn’t seem to even notice every head turning to watch her walk inside.

Ernest stilled my fingers against the table, curled them in his. “No need to be nervous, doll.”

“I’m not nervous,” I said.

He gripped my hand tighter until I tugged it away. His touch felt like a restraint which did nothing for my impatience and only made me edgy.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “You can be, I won’t tell.”

Suddenly, Ernest was leaning over the table, close enough to whisper a secret, and for an alarming moment, I thought he was about to lay one on me.

“Eyes up. He’s here,” he said. He put on his sunglasses.

In the reflection of his lenses, I could see Blinky heaving himself out of a cab. He was short for a guy as bulky as he was, in a gray blazer, black button down, loose tie, hat, and carried a briefcase. He sure looked pretty proud of himself as he lugged that briefcase to the restaurant.

“Stay here. I’ll hit him while he’s still got the goods,” Ernest said.

He stood, I made to follow, but five bozos in the front charged Blinky as soon as he stepped onto the patio. Tables and chairs clattered, a dozen voices announced themselves as L.A.P.D. Blinky tried to run, but was blocked by thugs, cops, or screaming bystanders everywhere he turned. He wildly pulled his piece.

I ducked under a table while Ernest ran into the thick of it—the cops, the mob, and Blinky all ready to fire. Ernest was shouting, Blinky pleading, people everywhere, some scattering, some inching closer. We were all rolling in the dirt of this town. I crouched closer to the mess as two mooks rushed out of the building followed shortly by the woman in red.

A shot went off followed by another and another. I scrambled for more cover, tipped the table on its side like a shield. More shots went off, sirens in the distance. I glanced over the table to see Blinky running full-barrel with two cops right on his heels, chasing him down an alley. Ernest was squaring off with a gangster, each trying their best to punch the other in the kisser.

“Detective Right Hook!” I whistled. “We gotta go!” The mobster looked at me. Ernest slammed him one good. Lights out.

“Which way did he go?” Ernest asked, running to his car. I fell into a run beside him and lifted the keys to his Fivver from his pocket.

“This way.” I hopped into the driver’s seat.

“You drive?” he asked.

“Get in!” I put it into gear and burned rubber.

“Where are we going?”

“Next street over,” I said. “Only so many places Blinky can go once he clears the alley.”

We caught up to Blinky as we rounded the corner. He was slowing to a jog, trying to blend in with the shoppers and pedestrians, until he felt the heat of the Fivver’s grill on the back of his legs.

"Christ, take it easy!" Ernest shouted. He looked like he was about to grab the wheel.

“Don’t even think about it,” I warned. Blinky was trying to outmaneuver me by skirting in and out of traffic. Fat raindrops slapped against the windshield as Blinky sprinted onto the sidewalk and into a crowded club.

“Let me jump out,” Ernest said.

I slammed the brakes. He dashed after Blinky.

I pulled the car around the back entrance and heard them before I saw them, shouting insults to one another, as they emerged from the club. Ernest came out on Blinky's heels but rapidly slowed down from a dead run to a desperate jog. He stopped with his hands on his knees, gasping for breath. I shifted against the grind of the gears, jammed down the gas, and held on as the car lurched forward, over the curb. Blinky turned, his eyes wide. The car hit his knees, he doubled over, hit the hood, rolled over the roof, splattered on the pavement behind me.

I got out, kicked Blinky who was contorted on the pavement like a sideshow freak.

Ernest huffed over, hands braced on his knees.

"Got him," I said.

“Do you even have a driver’s license?” he asked.

“Is that important?”

He didn’t get a chance to answer before they cuffed me.

* * *

I was only in the clink overnight before Ernest called in some favors from his buddies on the police force. He wasn't there when they let me go, but Sal was. He brought me to his bar below the office where I went for lunch orders and after work drinks every day.

"Think he'll fire you?" Sal asked.

Sal was convinced he was going to be the guy to make it big in the fancy cocktails trade, but only a sparse few of his concoctions were actually drinkable. This one was warm, brown, and bitter as it flowed down my gullet. Sal didn't skimp on the booze, though, and that was good—I was in such a mood battery acid would have been appealing, if I thought it'd get me drunk. He dug under the counter for more bottles and started shaking vodka over ice.

"Maybe. Or he might just go ape." I sipped my drink and relished the burn traveling down. "Or he might go ape, then can me. It's a coin toss."

"Worse things, you know." Sal put a celery garnish in with vodka and soda, then thought better of it.

Sal was Lucy's pop and they had lived on the same block as my family. Lucy joined the nurse's corp and went to war the same time as my pop. When Sal and I received, *gee, sorry* letters from Uncle Sam, we started looking out for each other. Even before, Sal was always doing things to keep, "Lucy and Malone out from underfoot," as he used to say to Pop over ice tea in the back yard. Neither of us had mamas, maybe that's why Sal and Pop were so vexed by Lucy and I riding our bikes all over the neighborhood.

One summer, I got a pair of lounge pants from the thrift store for a penny, Lucy grew a foot and started wearing a bra, and Sal told Pop that us dames needed to have paper routes. In the mornings, Lucy and I got on our bikes and did our routes together. Mrs. Rae, an old broad on our block who Sal said used to sing on stage, liked her paper delivered right to her mailbox. Word on the street was that she'd pop the bike tires of any kid who didn't.

I didn't even want to deliver her paper, but Lucy said we had to, and for weeks we took turns taking the paper all the way up to the mailbox on the gate leading to her backyard. We never saw her, no one did, and the tongues that wagged the kid-talk flapped with rumors and theories about what old Mrs. Rae looked like, her creepy habits, what she did in that backyard.

One morning, the gate was open.

"Don't go in there," Lucy begged.

"Nothing to see here," I said.

Lucy huffed, thrust the paper into my hands, and pedaled down the street. She stopped a couple streets down and looked back at me as if she was waiting for me to chicken out, pedal after her, leave the mystery of Mrs. Rae be. I left my bike in the grass and walked into Mrs. Rae's backyard. She needed her paper, after all.

The yard was a garden filled with all kinds of plants with vibrant flowers, but none of them were maintained, all growing together in a tangle of vines and leaves. There was a table in the center of the yard with a big umbrella sticking out of it and a wicker chair occupied by a gray-haired broad with rollers and a hairnet. She didn't stir when I came into the yard, didn't move at all—I thought she was dead—then her chest rose and fell gently, a light snore escaping.

I stepped closer, put the paper on the table, noticed she was wearing pants under her housecoat. I giggled, planning how I would tell Pop that pants on a dame couldn't be unladylike

if Mrs. Rae were wearing them, what with her being fancy enough to sing on a stage. But then Mrs. Rae woke up.

I was standing over her, close enough for her to wrap her waxy fingers around my wrist.

“Wondering when you’d get here,” she said sleepily.

I tensed, thinking that the rumor about her being psychic or a witch was true, that the other kids had been right, I’d never see my bike again, no one would see *me* again. She rubbed my arm like I was a pet and laid her head back, letting her eyes drift shut.

“Pull up a chair,” she said. “Let’s sit a spell.”

I did as she asked, expecting something sinister like her using my hair for those pin dolls, but still unwilling to run away. It occurred to me that if she left her gate open for me, then there must be a reason, and I waited for her to let me in on what that was.

She looked at me expectantly. “Well?” she asked. “Are you going to read to me or what?”

I played along, opened the paper without a word. I read her the funnies first because that’s what I liked, then the obituaries because that’s what she asked for. She had me read the names twice in case there was someone you knew. She said she didn’t, but had me read each entry anyway.

“That’s how you know,” she said. “When you stop seeing the names of folks you knew. That’s when you know the jig is almost up.” She stuffed her hands in her pockets. “I figure one day soon, I’m not going to have anyone left behind to read mine. Just in case any of these are alone too, I like to do them the courtesy.”

“Mrs. Rae,” I asked, hesitantly. “How come you wear those pants?”

“Because they have deep pockets,” she said. She took out a cigarette case, lit one. “Why do you wear yours?”

No one had really asked me that yet. Pop just said it wasn't cute anymore and Lucy wished me luck getting any of the boys to like me. Sal said I could do what I liked but I had to be prepared for the mooks of the world seeing me a certain way.

“Because I like them.” It felt stupid to just say it that way, but that was the truth.

“Keep it up, then,” she said.

I read to her until she fell asleep, and went back every morning in the summers and every day after school until she fell into the big sleep two years later. She wrote me into her will and left me all her pants. At her funeral, the only guests were me, Lucy, Sal, and Pop who said loneliness was the price to pay for someone who doesn't go along to get along. I stopped wearing my pants after that and didn't bring them out again until Pop and Lucy never came back home from the war.

“There are worse things,” I agreed with Sal. He put another of his creations before me, this one with a sugar rim on the glass. “Pop would probably be upset that I dented the Fivver with Blinky's caboose,” I said, over my drink. Sal laughed.

“Actually, you did that when you hit the curb,” said Ernest, strolling in with a newspaper under his arm. “Congratulations. You made the pages, doll.” He slapped it down.

Not a front page article, but there I was, on page six, standing over Blinky, the dented car, flanked by Ernest. I tossed the paper aside. “I was aiming for Blinky.”

“I wouldn't say that too loudly if I were you,” Ernest said. “I told my brothers in blue it was me driving.”

“You took credit for my bust?”

“Sorry, doll, that wasn’t a bust, that was a gum-up. We’re lucky no one was hurt.”

I rolled my eyes. I almost wished I was going to prison if it meant I got the collar. The paper was calling my bust a “daring car chase” and the “exciting adventure of an unnamed L.A. P.I.” I was helping those mooks sell papers.

"I talked to our friend Blinky," Ernest said.

I sat up straighter. “How are his legs?”

"He'll live. He's in a bind, though. Mob wants him dead. Cops want him locked up. And there is some boxman out there breaking into high-quality mob stash houses with info he got off Blinky. Not that I'll be crying myself to sleep over that. The boxman, though. He doesn't seem to have any fear, and Blinky knows more than he's saying."

“What’s a boxman?” Sal asked. He brought out some sandwiches in a paper sack.

“A guy who specializes in cracking safes,” I said. “Handy skill.”

“No one even knows what he looks like. He made off with hundreds of thousands in diamonds last month with Blinky’s help.” Ernest took a sip of his drink. “Apparently, Blinky decided that being an errand boy for the mob wasn’t all it was cracked up to be, thought this boxman would give him a cut when the dust settled.”

“Blinky’s as stupid as he is greedy,” I said. “Hope he enjoys prison.”

“Don’t count on it. He’s dropping the dime. Turning state’s evidence on the Vacceralas, getting a deal.”

“He just rides off into the sunset?” Sal asked. “Some guys have all the luck.”

“There’s a ledger. One of my contacts inside the club said that after Blinky was taken down, the big boss noticed it was missing from the safe in his office.”

“What’s in the ledger?” I asked.

“Locations of all the mob’s money and assets. I think that’s why the boxman cut Blinky out: They didn’t need the guy who knew where the goods were, only the records of the hiding places.”

“Blinky still knows— Ah. That’s why he gets a free scam card.”

Ernest nodded. “Hey, by the by, sorry I wasn’t there to meet you when they sprung you from the big house.” He slid his hand across the bar, held mine.

“Thanks. I know you were watching my back. I appreciate it.” I put my hands in my lap. “What happens next with this boxman, pinching off poor, defenseless wiseguys?”

Ernest straightened his tie, smoothed his lapels. “Well, he didn’t waste any time. He already knocked over two of the caches Blinky gave us last night. Another one this morning.”

“Somebody is using the ledger as a shopping list,” I guessed. “All we have to do is get to the next item on the list first.”

“Blinky says the next place of note is a hotel down by the wharf.”

“The ritzy one where all the stars stay? You think he’ll steal a boat?”

Ernest laughed. “No. Blinky says the basement office has a safe with a couple Swiss bearer bonds in them.”

“So what? Are the bonds worth a lot?”

“Couple hundred grand. It’s not that big a score compared to what they’ve already lifted which is part of the worry. If they have a scratcher, a bond forger, then they could turn that couple hundred into millions. My buddy on the force asked me to help out. Keep my ear to the ground. Want to ride along?”

“Get real. You’re letting me back into the field?”

“As long as you promise not to go off half-cocked again, and you promise to do as I say this time, we’ll be fine.” He seemed to consider something, smiled. “And as long as, er, you don’t mind the outfit.”

“What outfit?”

* * *

The hotel had a bar that was always hiring cigar girls. Ernest pinched one of their uniforms for me, a skimpy tulle nightmare with barely enough fabric to be called a dress. It came with a blonde bob wig that was itchy as hell. We were upstairs in the shop where I was trying to walk in the heels.

“I look like a chippy. Why do you get to go in as a customer while I have to parade around like a call-girl?” I tugged the skirt down further. I felt naked with Ernest looking at me like a nail in a toolbox.

“Perfect,” Ernest said. “You look like you’re ready to sell some cigars. Just watch for anyone suspicious. You see anything, don’t try to play hero.”

The hotel overlooked the docks. Ernest went inside first through the front; I followed using the employee entrance. No one batted an eyelash when I said I was new. I headed to the main floor with a cigar box anchored around my neck and waist with leather straps.

I lit expensive cigars with long stem matches and let the mooks pat my tush while I took a gander around for the boxman. Another dame ran the other side of my section. She wore the same costume I did, with the blonde wig and the loin cloth of a red tulle skirt, but it was something else that made her familiar to me.

The dame was sitting on the lap of a mook in a smoking jacket, laughing at his every word as she stroked his chest. I was sickened by how well she was playing it off—we were both

being paid to stand around in this get-up and let the mooks paw at us, and I didn't know about her, but this was not my finest moment.

She turned, that's when I saw it: A beauty mark, they called it in the pictures. I'd seen her just before all the hubbub with Blinky—the dame in the red dress with the cane, and it sure didn't look like she needed one now. The dame got up, glided around the room on a jazz tune like she owned the place. Ernest was on the other side of the room gabbing with the bartender.

I started to make my way to him, then out of nowhere some geezer grabbed my arm, pulled me to a sudden stop, held me about an inch from his face, the stink of booze and tobacco wafting out of his trap.

“Give it back! My wallet,” he said.

“What—what wallet?” I didn't have a clue what he was talking about. He gripped my arm so tightly I couldn't feel my fingers. Ernest was making his way toward me but a throng of whiskey drinkers and cigar smokers had gathered around us and he was having trouble getting through.

"You were nice and friendly earlier. Too friendly. I should have known you were up to something."

“I've never seen you before.” This was the mook the dame in red had been loving up on. She must have picked his pocket. I watched, stuck, as she disappeared down a staircase into the basement.

The geezer shook me hard. “Give it to me!”

He threw me down, I fell on my arms, unable to block his kick to my ribs. The geezer was going for it again when Ernest rammed him, pummeled him into the floor. The bouncers were on Ernest after a couple of jabs and hauled him out the front.

Ernest was looking right at me, jerking his head to the side like he was having a fit. The message couldn't have been clearer: Get outside. But I was willing to bet the geezer's wallet wasn't the only thing the dame in red lifted. I ignored the pain in my side and took off toward the ground level where she had gone.

The biggest office was at the end of the hall, no windows, ostentatious as hell with ornate wood carvings of mermaids in various states of undress. The safe was directly behind the desk, cleaned out. There were two safe doors. The first was a combination lock, the second a double-latch door with a pick-proof lock, a small gold key protruding from it. The key was attached to a chain that was secured to a wallet.

I beat feet outside and caught sight of the dame in red spiriting across the dock toward a waiting yacht. I kicked off my heels, took off in a dead sprint after her. She hopped on the yacht and disappeared toward the stern. I could hear the sirens in the distance but knew we'd lose her if I waited for them. I climbed aboard the yacht as it pulled away from the dock.

I didn't see anyone on the boat deck. I crept into the cabin and found the dame's purse on a table. The bonds were inside wrapped in a sheet of plastic. I stuffed them down my blouse and snuck to the side of the ship. We were getting further and further out, much more and I wouldn't be able to swim back. I swung a leg over the railing, about to dive off when a voice rang out.

"Stop!" The dame in red wasn't wearing her wig or costume anymore, but a red blouse and white sailor pants. "Another step and I plug you."

"Where's your boss?" I put my hands up but didn't climb down.

"Don't have a boss, toots."

"We got Blinky. We know about the boxman."

She laughed. “Don’t tell me you put the screws to old Blinky. He don’t know nothin’ about nothin’.”

“*You* set him up,” I said. There was no boxman. There was only this woman and she was all the help she needed.

“Not bad for a day’s work,” she said. “Enough to settle down someday.”

“Is that what you think you’re going to do? Settle down? Join a bridge club?”

She tipped her head back and laughed, long and loud. I made to jump but faltered when a slug zipped past my head.

“You’re a gas, toots. I like you.” She pointed the gun at my head. “Don’t make me feed you a lead salad.”

“No way you’re letting me live after I’ve seen your face.”

She shrugged. “Tag along. Think of the dough we’d make. With my street-smarts and your knowledge of the fuzz, we’d make a hell of a team.”

“Right. Until you decide it’s cheaper to sell me out like you did Blinky.”

She thought for a moment then nodded. “A dame has got to watch out for herself.” She raised her gun, cocked the hammer back.

“Wait! Just one question first.”

She sighed. “Make it quick.”

“How come you’re wearing those pants?”

She looked down at herself as if remembering she had them on, I took the opening, dove into the murky water. Bullets whooshed past me, and I stayed under as long as I could, as close to the yacht as possible for cover. I surfaced as her revolver clicked empty.

“Golly, you’re quick!” She was laughing. “Do yourself a favor and get yourself a gun, toots. Those fast feet won’t save you forever.”

“And you won’t be able to run forever,” I said.

“No, but pants do make it a little easier.” She leaned over the railing and blew a kiss to me. “See you around, toots. If you change your mind, I’ll be south of the border.”

She disappeared, a few moments later the yacht kicked into high gear and cut through the waves, escaping toward the horizon.

I swam back to the wharf. By the time anyone realized I was in the water, the dock was lined with cops, flashing red and blue lights. They sent a rescue boat out for me, Ernest was there, wrapping his jacket around my shoulders, rubbing my arms even though I wasn’t cold.

“Malone,” he said. “This is real important, honey. What did the guy look like? Did you see his face?”

I slicked my wet hair back. “Didn’t see. I was too busy dodging slugs.”

When we arrived at the docks, the police took my statement, all acting like I’d been kidnapped. They asked if the boxman was rough, if I had any marks. I said over and over that I wasn’t taken, I had pursued a suspect. Ernest gave the rest of my statement to the police since they were confirming everything I said with him anyway, then took me to his Fivver so he could talk to his buddy from the force.

“Can I have the keys? I want to turn on the heat.”

He gave them to me. “Stay put.” He stopped just outside the hotel to talk to a tall uniformed officer.

I turned over the engine, sat listening to the car rumble, and imagined the dame in red sailing toward her next heist in her world without limits or boundaries. The dame in red dared to cross those lines and it paid off for her. She was rich, accountable to no one.

I gasped, reached in my dress, pulled out the bonds still wrapped in plastic. They were damp, nothing a heavy book and a little air wouldn't fix. I looked out at Ernest who was walking away, deep in conversation with the cops.

Ernest had a jones for me, I knew. Maybe he really liked me, or maybe he had just promised Pop he'd take care of me, either way, it wasn't something I had a lick of say in—Ernest would dog me until he wore me down. If I became his sweetheart, he'd probably even give me interesting cases to work on sooner or later.

I tossed the bonds on the passenger seat, took my street clothes from the backseat. I didn't care who saw. I stripped out of the wet dress, put on my pants and blouse, then got back in the car, and opened the glove compartment. Inside was a roadmap that only had the highways as far as Tijuana, but that was good enough for me.

VITA

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