

Fall 12-20-2017

Boiltown

Eric Layer
University of New Orleans, ericlayer@gmail.com

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



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Layer, Eric, "Boiltown" (2017). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 2420.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/2420>

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

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

Boiltown

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
English
Creative Writing

by

Eric Layer

B.X. Cornish College of the Arts, 1995
M.X. University of New Orleans, 2017

December 2017

Table of Contents

Prologue.....	1
Part One.....	11
Part Two.....	112
Epilogue	216
Vita	219

What matters an eternity of damnation to someone who has found in one second the infinity of joy?

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, "Le Mauvais Vitrier," *Le Spleen de Paris*

Prologue

The call came at night.

It took Valero a long time to hear it. He was too busy dreaming.

He was a child again, a gangly, loose-limbed boy in an oversized T-shirt and baggy shorts, bounding his bare feet through a muddy thicket of trees and whistling an old war song. He stopped by the shore of a black lake. Searching the dirt, he found the perfect, flat stone to skip across the water. He reeled his arm back and whipped it towards the lake. The rock left his grip at just the right angle and speed. It hit the surface and sparked, landing with a dull thud. The lake had gone dry.

Valero's phone kept ringing. He'd set the tone for crickets, their chirps melding into his dream state, signaling to the boy that it was getting late, time to head home. But where was home? Nothing looked familiar. He'd lost his way. He followed the scent of burning wood into the darkness. The trees towered all around, leaning in like judgmental giants. Mosquitoes bit up his legs. Eyes peered out from the shadows, following his every movement. In the distance, he

spotted smoke. There, flanked by fire, he found his father, humming a different tune and pouring beer from a can over the plucked pink carcasses of two dead birds. “*Delisioso, mi hijo, eso estaba delicioso,*” he said in his thick Salvadoran accent. His mustached lips sucked on a cigar, the ashes descending like sleet onto the raw flesh sizzling on the grill. The excess bird parts – feathers, legs, and beaks – were piled beside him, looking like new creatures crafted from the remains of the burning ones. The young Valero wanted to ask, *Are vultures good to eat?* But he knew the answer: a whap on the chest. Better to keep moving, spread out on the unzipped sleeping bag, watch the stars crack through the black veil of sky. With his fingers he traced the dots, forming connections, patterns, the secret map his grandfather told him about. The old medicine man claimed that in the night sky there existed a blueprint to the fate of the universe. If only he could read the signs. But Valero could barely find the North Star, let alone any shapes. He was a dreamer, not a mapmaker. He preferred to lay his head back in the dirt, fill his hands with sand, and dissolve into the steady whir of crickets.

Someone whispered, “*Arnold! Wake up!*”

He knew that voice. It belonged to Alma, his wife. He’d heard it every day for the fifteen years they were together. And practically every day since then, too. He reached for her from his side of the bed. He was grown now, no longer skinny, a middle-aged man with a beer gut and thick patches of hair on his arms. She used to run her fingers through it. “*Mi gorilla,*” she’d say. Or, when she was feeling especially salty, “*Mi gorilla gordito.*”

His arm found no one beside him, just the empty half of the bed she left behind.

Was it dream, or memory? Though it felt so real, Valero couldn’t recall ever going camping in the woods with his dad. They never left the desert. Not together, and rarely apart. His old man was born and buried there, and it looked like Valero was headed for the same fate.

The crackle of the fire and the glow of the stars were gone now. Only the crickets remained, chirping from his phone on the nightstand. When at last he picked up and tried to say hello, all that came out was a phlegm-filled croak.

Sirens blared from the other end. A frantic voice shouted over them. It was all so loud and distorted that he could only catch two words:

“Armageddon’s burning...”

Valero shivered from the shock of cold air blasting through the cranked A/C. It was like that in the spring. He’d go to bed burning up and wake up freezing. He reached down and pulled up the Navajo blanket, the one his grandfather had given him not long after Alma left him. “Something to keep you warm at night,” he said at the time. He died less than a year later, the last one on his mother’s side who had still followed the native ways.

“Chief? Are you there?” repeated the voice Valero now recognized as Officer Lipton, or “Lips,” as he was better known, a play on both his name and his tendency to blather.

“What’s burning?”

“You know, the place out in the sticks, the Armageddon Lodge or whatever it’s called?”

“The Apocalypse, you mean, not Armageddon. And Lounge, not Lodge.”

“Right, whatever. Either way, it’s on fire.”

“Anyone hurt?”

“They’re pulling bodies as we speak.”

Valero told him he’d get there as soon as he could. It was only after he hung up that he realized he wasn’t sure where he was going. He hadn’t made it out that way for some time, and GPS was spotty that far out. If nothing else, he could probably follow the smoke.

Hadn’t he just dreamt of something like that? Following the smoke through the trees to

find his father? Only here, in the desert, there were no trees. No owls, no crickets, no dad, and no wife.

There was also no time to ponder dreams. A crisis was in progress, lives might be at stake, and Valero couldn't find his pants. The longer it took him, the more people might be suffering, needing him. He was a cop, a Deputy Sheriff in Diablo County, California, one of only a handful of officers in the under-populated desert region, located squarely in the ass end of the state.

He finally found them halfway under the bed. They seemed tighter than usual, and he barely managed the button. Had his belly really gotten bigger overnight?

Fully dressed in his uniform, he went to wake Emilio and tell him that there was an emergency, and he'd try to be back by morning to drive him to school. He knocked lightly and opened the door, only to find an empty bed. He'd forgotten it was Friday, Alma's night. They split weekends.

A minute later he was on the road, speeding in his squad car, a souped-up Taurus, lights flashing but sirens silent for now, since there was no one on the road. He switched on his high beams as he drove past the point where the sidewalk faded into sand, hitting the highway going close to a hundred. He kept a steady gaze, but it was easy to hallucinate on the dark road, especially after being wrenched so recently from his dreams. A tumbleweed turned into a kid on a tricycle; the shadow became a charging bull. When a bicyclist suddenly appeared in the middle of the road, he jerked the wheel. By the time he realized there was no bike, it was too late. His tires had hit the soft shoulder and slid. He resisted the urge to brake, remembering what his mother had taught him. Before the car could buckle and send him into a tailspin, he turned the wheel into the skid, cranking it left and right each time the wheels squeaked. Eventually, the car

straightened out again. He kissed the wheel, thanking his half-Native mama for imparting her ancient automotive wisdom upon him.

When he finally crested the last hill at the edge of town, he saw the fire on the horizon, an orange glow engulfed in black smoke. It looked as though a bomb had gone off, though it seemed like the most unlikely spot for a terrorist attack. The whole thing looked out of place, a smear on an otherwise unmarked desert landscape.

The unlit, unpaved road that led to the Apocalypse was tough to find, especially in the dark. It was the only real structure out there, besides all the ramshackle huts, makeshift canopies, and broken down trailers that littered the area. Once he found the road, it was clear which way to go. A long line of headlights fled the scene, ripping past him. He followed their trail, but in the opposite direction, heading towards the fire with sirens blaring.

He caught a few glimpses of the passengers as they tore by. Their faces were wide-awake and pale as ghosts. They looked like most survivors he'd seen, shell-shocked and guilt-ridden, their relief tainted by living through something that others hadn't. He knew the feeling. Once he survived an ambush, while two other officers didn't. The bullets came out of nowhere, so fast he never had a chance to draw his weapon. One bullet had gotten so close that he could feel the air around it as it passed his ear. Why God chose him over the others was one of the reasons he didn't put much faith in the guy. His God wouldn't play favorites.

In the parking lot less than a hundred feet from the blaze, Valero pulled up next to Lips' squad car, though the officer was nowhere in sight. The firemen seemed to have the flames mostly contained by now, dousing those that remained. A safe ways from the smoke, victims were strapped to gurneys while paramedics worked to revive them. The ones he could make out looked bad, their skin blackened and torn. Others looked fine but were having trouble breathing,

several using oxygen tanks. Firemen in heavy gear dug through the rubble searching for any remaining bodies. He was ready to lend a hand, but the fire chief said it was better if he kept his distance, helped with the ones who'd made it out. Another fireman handed him a large bag full of first-aid supplies. Valero tried to hand out water, ointment, and bandages to the survivors, but most of them were already well equipped, and more concerned about their friends. The young crowd asked if he'd come across a skinny blonde girl or a short brunette in clown makeup or a stocky black guy wearing a red dress, someone named Willy or Astara or Swamp Girl. He imagined them all inside, dancing and having fun and feeling like they'd live forever. Now they'd never feel that way again.

“How many bodies so far?” he asked Lips when Valero finally found him kneeling next to a young blonde, her hair dripping with sweat and soot, long strands sticking to her cheeks. She looked overheated but unburnt.

“Hard to say,” Lips said, quickly standing, as though he'd been caught in the act. “The fire crew's on it, though.”

“Any idea how it started?”

“Apparently there was a big rock show, a festival type thing. Kids here from all over. One of the bands brought a bunch of pyrotechnics.”

“Fireworks? Inside?”

“Maybe fireworks, I'm getting different reports. But there was definitely fire. Also, someone drove a truck in there.”

“Was it an attack? Drunk driver?”

“Apparently neither. It was part of the show.”

However it started, the Apocalypse was a tinderbox, a former barn made almost entirely

from wood. There's no way they could've had permits for open flames, though he doubted they had permits at all. Did anything around there have to be permitted? Technically, the place operated as a private club. Guests paid "dues" to get in, and drinks were by "donation." Police had shut down the place only once, and that was years back, when Valero was still a rookie. A body had been discovered in the nearby Wasteland Hot Springs, and it was believed the killer was on the loose. Turned out it wasn't foul play at all. The guy died of dehydration, boiling himself to death in the murky pool. It gave the outside world a new nickname for the recently developed community: *Boiltown*.

In a sense, the whole town could be considered illegal. It was unincorporated and unregulated, owned but not maintained by the government. Anyone living on the land was essentially squatting, which also meant no property taxes and no services of any kind. The government only came in when crimes or accidents occurred.

The question was: which one was this?

Valero wandered through the wreckage, delivering burn cream, gauze, and water for the few left who needed it. A kid with half his head shaved quipped, "Got anything stronger? I could really use a beer."

At least some still had a sense of humor. Others were worse off, waiting for the medics in order of severity, their skin charred and splotched with red blisters and exposed tissue. Valero couldn't look too long without feeling sick.

He questioned those he could, those who would talk to him, who hadn't already fled or were too busy looking for their friends. Most seemed to agree that the show had gotten out of hand, with too many people in too small a space. Add open flames and a motor vehicle to that mix, and things were bound to get bad.

He came across just one voice of dissent: a girl, no older than seventeen, with thick eyeliner that ran down her cheeks, either from crying or because that was the style these days.

“I saw who did it,” she said, before he even asked.

“Who did what?”

“Started the fire.” She looked around, leaned in, and whispered: “The devil did it.”

“Is that someone’s nickname?” It wouldn’t have been unusual. Most Boilers had strange names, as if the place had a list of commandments new residents were forced to follow: *Thou shalt rebrand thyself with a bizarre appellation.*

“No, the actual devil,” the girl said. “He was in disguise, but I could tell.”

“What did he look like?”

“Like... a rock star.”

The girl spat a grayish wad into the dirt. Before Valero could delve further, shouts came from the wreckage: “Over here! We found another one!”

Several firemen ran over to help pull the person out. Valero offered, too, but without the proper gear, the chief said it wasn’t safe. Judging by the large size and the baldness of his scalp, it appeared to be man, though Valero couldn’t tell if he was alive or dead. It took several firemen to lift and carry him out. He filled up the entirety of the stretcher.

Valero turned back to the girl, but she had disappeared. He searched the area but there was no sign of her. The smoke started to get to him, making it hard to breathe. He walked back a ways and found Lips pacing, smoking a cigarette.

“How can you do that right now?” Valero asked.

“Nerves,” he said. “What can I say, I’m an addict.”

Valero looked back to the ones remaining. Nearly all were weeping, starting to give up

on finding the ones they'd lost.

After a minute, he turned back to Lips. "Can I have a drag?"

"Want your own?"

"Just a drag."

He took in the smoke and immediately coughed it up. It was as terrible as he remembered. He handed it back.

"What a tragedy," he said.

"Yeah," Lips said. "Places like this, though, it's just a matter of time, isn't it?"

Valero turned and looked him square in the eyes. "People died here tonight."

"I'm sorry, but it's true. These Boilers want to be free from government until shit like this happens, and then they find out they actually need us."

"I understand, but now's not the time. Have some respect."

Valero quelled the urge to sock the guy in the jaw. He'd love to see the shock on his face, the anger boil in his eyes. He'd love to have him hit back harder.

Instead, he walked off and kept looking for the girl. But he never found her. He never found anything. He wandered in the ruins until the fire was down to cinders, the victims recovered, the ambulances filled, the witnesses dispersed, the smoke cleared. Only a few stragglers remained, and they sat in the dirt, heads slumped over, hiding their faces in their hands.

Back in his car, Valero watched the sky turn purple, the sunlight beginning to crack through. He had to pick up his son in the morning, in a few hours, and he had planned on taking him to their favorite swimming hole in the Colorado River. He knew he should go back to bed and get as much sleep as he could, but he wasn't tired anymore. He considered texting Jade to

see if she was still up, if she was working at the club, or if she could meet at their usual spot. But it was too late for that, and too early to start his day. He was stuck in the middle, the dead zone.

As he drove off, he kept picturing the devil the girl described, a rocker in leather pants, a guitar slung around his chest, and horns protruding through the strands of his long, greasy hair. It brought him a strange comfort, to think that one evil man could have started the fire. Otherwise no one was to blame, which meant that everyone was. Even Valero.

He couldn't stand mysteries or grey areas. He believed in cause and effect, truth and consequences. So when Alma left him, the one question he was left with was *why?*

All she could say was that she didn't love him anymore. Which said it all, without explaining anything.

He'd gotten so used to the emptiness that he almost didn't see it until it was too late. Something was in the road up ahead. A figure came into view, staring, hypnotized by his headlights. He slammed on the brakes just in time. It was a mule deer, staring at him with an almost human expression. Valero laid on the horn. The deer seemed unaffected by both its near death and the blaring of the horn. It looked confused, almost like it was wondering why Valero had bothered to stop.

They stayed that way, staring at each other, for a minute, maybe more. Eventually, the deer went one way, and Valero the other, and both disappeared in the vastness.

Part One

1.

Something wasn't right.

It wasn't just the broken neon sign that greeted Ray at the entrance, blinking *aradise otel*, or the truck he parked his motorcycle next to with the bumper sticker that read *Honk If You Eat Beaver*, or the dingy pool with the deflated rubber duck floating on its side, or the walkway light on the second floor that flickered in odd increments, like some strange Morse code coming through the electrical grid, or the door to the room, number 29, its second black digit hanging upside-down so it looked like a six. Nor was it the plain brown door, or the paint flaking off, or the dim light coming from inside, or the eerie quiet that surrounded him. This was no average night, and these unusual details made sense for an after midnight rendezvous at a roadside motel. Still, Ray couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

The night had begun innocently enough. He'd been with Sergio, drinking beers and snorting lines in the converted garage that served as his apartment. When they were good and loaded, they started to jam, Ray on guitar, as always, and Sergio on drums. He wasn't a great drummer, but he made up for it with his unwavering enthusiasm. After only about ten minutes, Sergio got a call from his girl. She was getting off work early, and he needed to pick her up.

So Ray was alone again. He hadn't had a girlfriend for a while, but for good reason. Annie, his last one, had overdosed and nearly died, and if he hadn't thrown her in a tub of cold water and shook her until the ambulance came, she might've. The thanks he got was that she found Jesus and moved back in with her parents. Ray had seen God once, or rather, he felt God,

but he was on acid, so he wasn't sure it counted.

After playing guitar by himself for a while, he got bored, restless, the coke running through his bloodstream with nowhere to direct his energy. He thought of hitting up a bar, but it was a Monday night in Yuma, Arizona, and he figured most places would be dead. Instead, he browsed the Internet and settled on a porn site, preparing to jerk off the last vestiges of his high, and then try to get some sleep.

Porn wasn't doing it for him, either. It was too plastic, too phony, and too flat. He longed for the real thing, the thrill of crossing the sexual threshold, the meeting of lips, the slow disrobing, the skin-on-skin, the grip of hips and thighs and ass. He clicked over to the personals, browsed the *Casual Encounters* section, and saw an ad that caught his eye:

Seeking a stranger for one night of FUN. Smart, sexy, and sane Snow Bunny seeking M of any size, shape, and color for a night of drinks, laughs, and unbridled passion – I host – you bring the party favors.

He knew the euphemisms: snow bunny meant she liked to do coke, and party favors meant he had to bring it. He checked his stash. There wasn't much left, but enough for two people to have a decent night. He answered the ad not expecting any reply. Fifteen minutes later, he got one. She was interested, but wanted a picture. He sent two, one onstage at a gig, the other reading a book by Kant, just to show his full range of interests. She sent one back, a portrait in front of the magic castle at Disneyland. Despite how he felt about the clichéd nature of the photo, at least he thought she was cute, attractive enough to spend a high with. He especially liked her face, her rosy dimpled cheeks, her lips, full and kissable.

Doubts did cross his mind: What if she wasn't real? What if the whole thing was some kind of set-up? It could be a sting, though that seemed unlikely, especially since she placed the ad and he had answered, so he assumed that would be obvious entrapment. Plus when she asked if he could pick up a gram, he said he'd bring what he had and wouldn't charge her. The second, more likely option, was that he would get mugged. But he was pretty sure he could suss that out with a phone call. Once they talked, his fears subsided. She sounded sweet on the phone, giggled at his jokes, seemed surprisingly sane. She said she was in town for business and bored out of her mind. He said he could help that. She said he should come hang out with her in her motel room and gave him the location. The Paradise Motel was all the way across the border in Paradise, California. It was long ride from Yuma, over an hour, but, in a way, that made it even more of an adventure.

And so he left the quiet monotony of his Arizona suburb and headed to the bowels of Paradise. It had to be the most ironically named town in America. Not so different from Yuma, though more apocalyptic than idyllic. It was a treeless, concrete wasteland of glowing corporate logos, service stations, and strip malls. Its entire existence owed to the hub of factories that encircled the town making god-knows-what, and the Paradise Water Park located at the edge. He took the business road to get to the motel. The dingy downtown area had seen better days. Trash and tumbleweeds blew by. Store windows were covered in yellowed newspapers, their doors boarded shut. The first person he spotted was a man sleeping in the doorway beneath an unlit sign that said *Club Paradise*, its entrance shuttered by a rusted steel gate. He scanned the unnatural environment and wondered what kind of people frequented this sad terrain, or, worse, called it home. There was absolutely no reason to visit Paradise. Unless you were going to get laid.

There was something else, though. It was that rush, the thrill of the unknown, the illicit late night meeting, that anything-could-happen excitement. Even if it all went horribly wrong, it would be a story to tell. Even if she looked nothing like her picture, maybe they'd form a connection, share some laughs, get each other off, and leave it at that.

He paused at the door, number 29. It would've been so easy. He could've just walked away, gotten back on his motorcycle, and driven off. His life would go back to somewhat normal, and he might even forget about the night he almost met a stranger in Paradise.

But then there would be no story. If he walked away, he'd never know, and the never knowing would be worse than the potential disaster. After all, if she was hideous, he didn't have to go through with it. If someone had a gun, he'd hand over his money and his drugs, neither of which were much. If they tried to take his motorcycle, well, good luck. That pile of junk was on its last legs anyway, and as hard to get started as a stubborn mule.

With all this in mind, he knocked.

It took a moment for her to answer. When she did, he was surprised. She looked exactly like her picture, like it could've been taken right before she sent it. Her brown hair was long and wavy, and she was solidly built, large but not fat, with deep blue eyes and a warm smile. She wore a silky, champagne-colored robe that barely contained her curves. Though she was less conventionally "pretty" than most of the women he went for, he wasn't feeling particularly picky.

"I thought you weren't coming," she said.

"Neither did I," he said.

She stepped aside for him to enter and shut the door behind him.

A small lamp on the nightstand lit the room, a white hand towel over its shade to soften

its hue. There was a phone and a plastic cup of water next to it, but not much else. He didn't see a suitcase, though it could've been behind the small closet door in the corner.

"Relax," she said, as though she sensed his nervousness. "Have a seat."

He took the only chair in the room and she sat on the edge of the bed. Neither said anything for a moment. It was weird, after all their talk online and on the phone, to be in person and suddenly have nothing to say.

"Want to take those off?" she said.

"My clothes?"

"No. Your shoes."

They shared an awkward laugh as he slipped off his boots.

The ice broken, she asked him some basic questions, how the drive was, if he found the place okay, where was he coming from, how he liked it there. He answered on autopilot, feeling like he'd stepped out of himself and was watching the scene unfold. Then she asked him if he'd ever done this kind of thing before.

"Not exactly," he said. "I've met people online before, but not usually like this, in an out-of-town motel."

"So why'd you do it?"

"I guess I was feeling a little wild tonight."

"Me, too."

She smiled. She did have really nice lips, though he had a hard time imagining kissing them, now that they were real.

"Speaking of wild nights, did you bring any of that nose candy?" she asked. He nodded. She pulled a wad of cash from her purse on the bed. "Here."

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Come on, I was the one asking you to get it for us.”

He took half the money, two twenties, and handed the other two back. “Now we’re even,” he said.

“All right. Do you mind cutting up some lines on the table there? I need to powder my nose before I powder my nose.”

She laughed and left to the bathroom, shutting the door. Again, Ray considered bailing. But why? She was cute and nice and didn’t even seem nervous. Maybe he wasn’t feeling as horny as he had at home, but that could change. Maybe a line would help.

He took out the baggie and poured a small pile onto the table. Then he dug into his wallet for a credit card and began to chop it up, though it was already loose and powdery and didn’t need much. When he finished, he heard the bathroom door squeaking open. He looked over, expecting to see her walk out. Instead, it was a man.

“What the fuck?” he said, jumping back and racing for the front door. The guy came at him quickly, but Ray managed to beat him to the door, swung it open, and nearly ran right into a second man right outside the door. He sidestepped, managing to sweep around him, and headed for the stairs.

“Stop!” they shouted. “Police!”

He turned to face them, still backing away. They had gun holsters, and badges hanging from chains around their necks. They hadn’t pulled their guns yet, but their hands were in ready positions. Probably the only thing keeping them from shooting him was the fact that he was white.

“Put your hands up where we can see them,” one of the cops said.

Ray lifted his arms, but kept backing up, considering his options. If he jumped, he might make the pool. But then what? They'd pull their guns and arrest him anyway, and all he'd be was wet.

His heart was pounding out of his chest. He couldn't think straight. His senses shut down. They were shouting things he couldn't hear. Nothing made sense. Were they really cops? Was any of this real?

"Look out!" someone screamed, but it was too late. He'd fallen backwards down the stairwell and tumbled all the way to the bottom, cracking his head on the hard ground. At first he could only reel the liquid gathering around his scalp and soaking his hair. The cops hovered over him, still shouting, reaching for him, as his eyes filled with water. With his last bit of effort, he turned away from them, and stared over at the pool, into the big, black, empty eyes of the deflated duck, still floating over the shimmering surface of the water.

2.

Sera knew better than to follow the guy. She had a bad feeling, and if she'd learned anything in her transient life, it was to trust her instincts. But he promised her pills, and she was in no state to refuse. All he wanted to do was take pictures of her feet. How bad could it be?

She'd been on the streets, prowling, looking to score. Jessi, her ex, had gotten her hooked, and when Sera left her, she thought she could go cold turkey. It was harder than she thought. Getting through a day sober felt like torture, and booze and weed just weren't cutting it. It was like she'd been released from a womb too soon, thrown out into the cruel world without

any filters up. She felt everything too much. Even the slightest look from a little girl on the street sent her into a crying fit.

She needed something, and she knew the streets could provide. But everywhere she went it was either crack or heroin, and she didn't want to go down either road. Eventually she stopped to take shade under the awning of a boarded-up bookstore, browsing the window display. That's where the older man with the face of a rotten peach asked for a light. She gave him a lighter and bummed a cigarette. They got to chatting, and then he asked if she ever posed for magazines. She rolled her eyes. "Use that line much?"

"Not your face, your feet," he said, staring down at them. "They're exquisite."

She'd heard of these guys, these foot-fetishists, but never met one live and in person. That day she was wearing her sandals because it felt like a hundred degrees out, and she'd recently painted her toenails a cobalt blue, so they did look pretty. When he got around to asking about the pictures, she asked how much, and he said he didn't have much money, and she said what else you got, and that's when the pills came up. He didn't have them on him, they were at his place, and "anyway, wouldn't it be better to take the pictures somewhere private?"

"And what'll happen there? You pull a pistol on me? Handcuff me to the bed? Push me into a hole hidden under your carpet and trap me in your sex dungeon? No thanks."

"Nothing like that," he said. "I just want to take some pictures, I swear."

He assumed a puppy dog look, innocent smile, raised eyebrows, tongue between teeth. If he had a tail he would've wagged it.

So she had finally agreed, the temptation of the opiates too strong to resist, that and the twenty dollars he managed to cough up, too. Sure, he was kinda creepy, but weren't they all kinda creepy? Plus she had her mace close at hand. One weird move and blasto.

He walked with a limp at about half her usual pace. She followed him down Broadway, past the quickie-wedding chapels, the music stores selling CDs and blasting their pumped-up mariachi, the cheap Chinese houseware and Mexican trinket stores, the recently renovated hotels converted into overpriced lofts, the old theaters that were now art-house cinemas and designer cocktail bars, the produce market she'd stolen from a zillion times, and, after the gentrification ended, past the tents lined up on the streets of Skid Row.

“Where the hell do you live?” she asked.

“Not much farther. It ain't the Ritz, if that's what you're thinking.”

He stopped it front of the Cloud Nine, one of those pay-by-the-week places with a shared toilet and a room that barely fit more than a foldout bed. Sera had considered staying in one like it after she had to leave her last place, but decided it'd be safer and cheaper to live in her van and take showers at the Y.

The building was a four-story rattrap, the kind of place lonely old men lived out their last days. A few of them leered at her in the lobby, itching their bony ribcages like mutts littered with fleas. The paint peeled from the walls, the floors were unswept and sticky, and the smell of dying lingered everywhere. Nothing good could happen there.

She considered turning back but was so close to relief that she couldn't stop now. She followed him up the creaky staircase to the top floor, down the hallway in bad need of a sweep, and arrived at his sweatbox. His room reeked of bleach and roach poison. Though tidy enough, the walls and carpet had enough permanent stains and an overall fadedness, that she doubted the place would ever look clean. In addition to the bed, there was a tabletop that folded out from the wall in the kitchenette, and a single light bulb swinging from the cottage-cheese ceiling. Bad as it

was, Sera had seen worse. She'd lived in closets and storage rooms, in cars and trains, and once she'd even spent the night in a cave. Compared to those, this was luxury. At least it had a door.

The guy flipped the deadbolt. He apologized for the lack of AC, and immediately opened all the windows and closed the blinds over them. He invited her to sit and offered a glass of water, apologizing for not having more. "As long as you have those pills, I'm happy," she said.

"Oh yeah, the pills." He placed the glass on the table in front of her and disappeared into the bathroom. As she waited, she noticed a photo album on the table in front of her. Inside, the photos were all of feet: big ones, small ones, black, brown, and white ones, clean ones and dirty ones. Some were in sandals, others in heels, but most were shoeless.

"Here you go," he said, holding out two white pills. "You might want to start with just one. They're pretty strong."

"Two pills get you two pictures."

"How much will five get me?"

"Five."

"How about six?"

"Deal."

He handed her four more. "But that's really all I can do. I actually need them for pain."

"What's wrong?"

"War injury. It's not important."

She assumed it had something to do with the limp, but he clearly didn't want to talk about it. Instead, she asked about the pills. He told her they were Dilaudids. Though she'd tried most every kind of opioid on the market – Oxycontin, Percocet, Viocodin, even straight-up Morphine

– she had yet to try this one. She’d always heard it was one of the stronger ones, though for some reason most people seemed to prefer Oxys.

“Cheers,” she said, washing it down with the slightly acidic water. Already, she felt less anxious, awaiting that synthetic sheen to wash over her.

“Shall we?” he said, pulling a Polaroid camera off the top of the fridge.

“Wow, old school. Isn’t that film expensive?”

“I bought it in bulk, back when I had some extra cash to blow.”

She went to the window, bent a dusty blind to see out. The view looked past a fire escape and into another window into an almost identical shitty apartment. She could see a woman in the other room, sitting on the edge of a bed, dressed only in her bra and panties. Lights flickered in the room. Sera realized a television must have been on, but the woman seemed more focused on the floor in front of her. Somehow she must have sensed someone staring, because she suddenly looked up, straight at Sera, who immediately snapped the blinds shut.

“What’re you looking at?” the man asked, adjusting the lights in the room.

“Neighbors.”

“They’re all freaks.”

“Takes one to know one.”

The man chuckled, though it sounded more like a hiss. “Come stand over here,” he said, gesturing to the center of the room. As Sera took her spot, he shoved a cartridge into the bottom of the camera. It came to life, making a zinging sound. It reminded Sera of her mother’s camera, and the day they’d gone to the beach together, her mother snapping shots while Sera combed the shore, attempting to find a perfect, unbroken shell.

“Now, take off your sandals,” the man said.

“Don’t you want to take a few with them on?”

“I only get six photos. I’m going to make them count.”

As she slipped them off, she noticed his eyes go wide like a kid at Christmas. He asked her to hold her foot at an arched angle as he snapped a shot. After a couple more shots, she thought it was going to be the easiest gig of her life.

He pulled a fruit crate from under the bed, placed it under the light, and asked her to place a foot on top. He dropped to his knees, getting close. “May I?” he asked, holding his hand out to adjust her position. She nodded and he gently touched her heel and moved it higher.

“You’ve got mighty fine arches,” he said.

“I was a dancer once.”

“I knew it.”

In truth, she’d been a dancer twice: ballet as a child, and stripping as an adult. Both lasted less than a year.

She kept moving, striking poses, as though her feet were her whole body. It felt so easy, so free, to be just one body part instead of so many. He kept saying how beautiful she was, how graceful, such class and refinement. At one point, he got so close to them with the camera, she couldn’t imagine they’d stay in focus. But perhaps that’s what he wanted. A kind of blurry, artsy shot.

After his extreme close-up, she felt a little faint. She moved her foot off the crate and asked to sit down. He pulled back the clumped up sheets on the bed and told her to sit there. She asked for another cigarette and he gave it to her and lit one for himself. He went to the window looked out. After a few drags, he let out a cough that escalated until it sounded like a death rattle. The sun had started to set, and she couldn’t care less.

The opiates kicked in hard, turning her stomach. She hated puking and didn't want to run down the hall and puke in the shared bathroom, but holding it in was making her more nauseated. She took deep breaths, and it gradually subsided as she slid into her warm dopamine bath. Closing her eyes, she thought of her mother, as she often did when she got high. The poor woman was partially to blame for the pills: the first ones came from her medicine cabinet. Though Sera never appreciated her when she was there, she missed her now that she was gone. It couldn't have been easy as a woman and mother living in a male-dominated, Jesus freak commune. She gave up so much for the cause, her folk singing ambitions, her desire to live in Paris, her looks, even her back, which was constantly going out. They sang together when Sera was young, but eventually her mother stopped. When Sera started taking music seriously in her earlier teens, her mother was her biggest supporter. "I was good, but you're better," she told her once. "You write music. I only sang other people's songs."

Then Sera remembered how her mother never liked her music. It was too abrasive, too noisy, too much. Things were either too much or not enough. Her mother was never satisfied, which was probably why she ended it the way she did. With pills.

Sera wasn't sure how long she'd been stretched out on the bed, her mind miles away. When she came out of her haze and back into her body, she saw the old man standing over, beating off with a sock. It wasn't just weird anymore, or a good story she could later tell. It was just gross.

After he finished, he yanked the sock off and tossed it aside. His face had gone red and his forehead was moist. He seemed to lose all interest in her and disappeared into the bathroom. Though he hadn't touched her, she felt used, soiled like the sock. It made her want to vomit.

She managed to hold back her bile, left the bed, and slipped her shoes back on. Before she decided whether to leave, she noticed the pill bottle still sitting on the table, grabbed it, and shoved it in her shorts. While she was at it, she checked the pockets of the coat hanging off the back of the desk chair and found his wallet. The toilet flushed in the bathroom, followed by the sound of a sink faucet. She opened the wallet and saw the man had been lying about being broke. There was over three hundred dollars in it. She grabbed all the cash and stuffed the wad in her shorts. Just as she was about to leave, his cellphone began to chime crickets on the table. She quickly grabbed it and chucked it out the open window. The faucet stopped. She ran for the door.

As she twisted the knob, she heard the bathroom door also opening, sped up and slipped out before the old man entered the room. She bolted down the hall, the three flights, and out the front. Only one old man in the lobby seemed to notice, yelling, "Where's the fire?"

Later, at the other end of downtown, she slipped into a diner to catch her breath. She decided she was far enough away for now, took a booth in back, away from the window but close enough to see outside in case trouble came walking up. She ordered a coffee and nothing else. The waitress rolled her eyes as she took the menu. They were probably used to small orders and crap tips in this part of town. Sera decided she'd tip extra generous.

What had come over her? She'd rarely stolen anything and never this much money. But he'd done worse. He sexually assaulted her. He might've done worse if she hadn't come to and stopped him. He deserved to be fucked with, after fucking with her.

Her hand shook as she took a sip of hot coffee and burned her tongue. She barely felt it, or much of anything. The opiates were still churning in her, giving everything a glossy feel.

The Polaroids. She'd forgotten to grab the pictures. Hopefully they were only her feet, though he could've taken more while she was practically passed out. Also likely was the

existence of cameras in the hotel. But would he really want to get police involved? He was trading pills for sex acts, which was probably not the worse thing he'd ever done, either.

The bigger question was: where would she go? Where could she make her money last? She thought of Mexico, but she still didn't have a passport, or a fixed address, or much of anything stable, really. It would have to be close enough that she wouldn't risk her van breaking down to get there, remote enough that the law wouldn't find her, and cheap enough that she could afford to live there.

She remembered hearing about a place so surreal sounding now that she wondered if it was even real. Her old band, Somnambulist, had a gig at a biker bar in the desert town of Paradise. Though they were billed with other metal bands, their style was really more heavy ambient, and the rednecky locals were clearly hoping for more high energy thrashing type music. During a song that consisted of ten minutes of low, droning feedback, the rowdier ones booed them off the stage. Afterwards, while they drowned their woes in booze at the bar, a few of the less macho locals complimented their set, but told them they were playing the wrong place.

"You should play the Apocalypse," one of them said.

"Where's that?"

He explained it was in Boiltown, a community of outsiders that lived way out in the unregulated desert, free from authorities or government services of any kind. Every weekend in the cooler months it was the place to be for off-kilter bands and wild parties. "Just watch out for the meth," he said.

That wouldn't be a problem. Uppers were never her thing.

They'd always planned to go back. But then the band broke up when the drugs and the fighting over control got out of hand. For a while, she and Jessi carried on, but that imploded,

too. Now, alone, maybe it was time to reinvent herself, again, and find somewhere to do it. A place full of strange savages and artsy freaks, who celebrated life by living, not working a soulless job or being on a constant hustle. She always loved the barrenness of the desert. It offered endless possibilities, a blank canvas to create on. Ever since she'd managed to release herself from the mind control of Love's Way, she longed to be truly free. Maybe Boiltown was just the place.

The distant whirring of an ambulance brought some relief, but also reminded her that she was still close to the scene of a crime. The waitress was ignoring her, flirting with a construction worker at the counter. Sera waved her arm, but still couldn't get her attention. Maybe she'd become a ghost. Maybe the man had killed her, or she'd overdosed in his bed, and the rest had been a dream.

Eventually, though, the waitress nodded, and brought her the check. She slugged the last of her coffee, and left a five on the table, pulled a pen from her purse, grabbed a napkin and wrote: *Goodbye LA.*

She stuck it in the window on her way out.

3.

Ray woke up in a white room, hoping it was heaven. When he noticed all the cords hanging off of him, the muzak filtering through the room, and the steady beep of the heart monitor, he started having doubts. The nurse came in to take his blood, he knew for sure. Not heaven. Not even close.

The nurse was far from an angel, too. In fact, she wasn't even a she. She was a mustachioed man with a round belly and a hairy mole protruding from his cheek.

At least the drugs they gave him had a heavenly quality. His haze made it hard to be too upset.

"Good, you're awake," the nurse said.

"What happened?"

The nurse told him he'd had a fall, hit his head, lost a lot of blood. They were checking him for a concussion or other head trauma. Ray figured his brain was probably fine, because he instantly remembered everything that had happened, right up to the cops showing up.

"Am I under arrest?" he asked the nurse.

"The police brought you here. I believe they'll be escorting you out when the time comes."

After the nurse left, he kept replaying the events in his mind, noting every time he thought to turn back, abandon the mission, go home. Why had he ignored them all?

Because he wasn't a drug dealer. Actual dealers wouldn't do what he did, and wasn't that who the cops should be after?

At least, that's what he told the defense attorney they'd assigned him, after he'd recovered enough to go straight from the hospital to booking to the courts for his arraignment. He was

charged with possession with the intent to sell and transport for crossing state lines.

“Sell?” Ray said, outside the court afterwards. “But I was giving them away.”

“It actually doesn’t matter whether you’re selling or giving: it’s the same charge.”

“So I’m penalized for being generous. Awesome. What about entrapment?”

“Unfortunately, entrapment’s a tough one to prove,” his lawyer said. “On the plus side, this is your first offense, and I think we can get it down to just one charge of possession.”

She was right. They offered him mandatory rehab without jail time for a plea of guilty to possession of a class one narcotic.

“Rehab?” Ray said after the verdict. “But I’m not an addict.”

“Regardless, this is really the best case scenario for you.”

The best thing would be to have it all thrown out, he wanted to argue, but he knew it was fruitless. He was in the system now and would have to be pushed through by people who knew more about it than he did.

The counselor he was assigned saw little difference between drug users and drug abusers. “Eventually, all users abuse,” he said. Ray didn’t agree. If someone just ate pizza on the weekends, no one would say they were abusing pizza or were pizza-addicts. It was just because drugs were illegal that people took the all-or-nothing approach.

Ray was a dabbler, used here and there at parties or band practices or after gigs. He wasn’t particular either. His drug of choice depended on what was around. He’d tried most of them and didn’t really have a favorite. If anything, he was closest to being a pothead, but he didn’t even smoke weed everyday like a lot of people he knew. And weed was kind of legal now, so it didn’t have the stigma it used to. Not like cocaine.

Luckily the state was paying for his rehab because work had dried up, most of the

gardening gigs he was up for got taken while he was in jail, and now he had this stupid black mark on his record. Even though rehab was free, all the court fees had added up, and pretty soon he got an eviction notice taped to his apartment door: *Pay or vacate at the end of the month*. He would also be out of rehab by then. He started to think about leaving town, leaving all his baggage behind. He'd been talking about it for months, getting the hell out of Yuma and going somewhere to focus on his real passion: music.

But where would he go? He still liked the desert: its clean air, wide-open sky, and epic landscapes. He liked the extreme people able to handle the extreme heats. Outside of the major cities, the desert seemed like an unlikely, unlivable place, which was exactly why he liked it.

One day over a beer with Sergio, the one friend who'd stuck with him through the ups and downs, he got to talking about where they could go. Sergio told him about a place he'd stumbled upon in his travels. He was always going on epic journeys on his motorbike, something Ray dreamed about but never had the cash, or the ride, really, to pull it off. On one of these treks, Sergio caught wind of a community of squatters living on free land in southern California just near the border, south of Paradise. In other words, in the middle of nowhere. There were the usual drugged-out, hard luck cases, but there were also artists and radicals who never felt comfortable under any type of authority or restraint, who wanted to live free and wild and not have to answer to anyone.

Now this, Ray thought, sounded more like heaven.

The catch was that there was virtually no way to make money out there so you had to be able to beg, barter, and steal to properly live. That was fine by Ray. Ever since his parents died, one after the other, and left him almost nothing, he had to get by however he could, and that included a whole lot of hustle. All the drugs didn't scare him, either. If there was one thing he

learned from rehab it was that he wasn't an addict.

Sergio had gone to an open-mic "talent show" they had out there. It was described as "*Free, anything-goes, everyone welcome except assholes,*" according to the website, which was the only information on it. There weren't even directions, but Sergio thought he remembered the general area.

They set off in the early afternoon, the two of them squeezed onto Sergio's bike, Ray's guitar strapped to his back. It was only supposed to take two hours, but they got lost somewhere outside of Paradise on a dirt road that Sergio thought was the right one but ended up leading to a dead end. They stopped to smoke cigarettes and have a look around. All was silent and vast, an expanse of nothingness as far as they could see. The only other thing alive was the occasional lizard scuttering by on a rock.

They re-mounted, drove back the other way until they hit the main road, cruising slowly along the shoulder looking for more roads. The sun was starting to go down, and they worried their quest would only get harder. After a few more miles, Ray spotted another road, this one looking particularly trodden. They were sure it was the one when, a little ways in, they saw a sign hanging from the remains of an old water pump that said *Freedom – Nine Miles Ahead*. That had to be the place.

At about the nine-mile mark, they saw signs of life in the form of junk: piles of tires, the shell of an old car completely stripped, broken, discarded furniture, and bloated trash bags all littered the sides of the road. Later, they passed a few RVs and tents far off from the road, and then a large encampment, an area fenced off with barbwire, and several domed structures covered in camouflage tarps, with a sign that read: *Warning! Cannibals Eat Trespassers*.

Ray had a hard time believing people lived way out there, wondering how they'd survive

with no services, no businesses, and, he imagined, no jobs. He doubted much could grow out there, either. And then there was the heat, on par with Yuma, but, without much A/C, he wasn't sure how they could take it.

Soon the area became even more densely populated, the structures more intricate, the RVs more deluxe. They came upon the remnants of the old ghost town. Some of the old houses looked partially repaired and lived in, while others were still barely standing. The nicer section had hand-painted street names hanging from poles.

As they left the populated area, they found themselves again in wide-open desert. Far down the road, a blurry figure appeared, so distant it could've been a mirage. As it got closer, they began to make out the shape of a person riding a strange contraption. Eventually, they saw it was an old man with goggles and a long mane of white hair flowing behind him. He rode atop what appeared to be a motorized cooler, with motorcycle tires and a loud engine.

"Howdy friends," he said, stopping next to them. "You look lost."

"We are, we're looking for the Apocalypse," Sergio said.

"I'm heading there myself," the old man replied. He wore a permanent smile that showed off all his missing teeth. "Beer for the road?"

He hopped off his cooler, opened the lid, pulled out two Natural Lites, and passed them out. They toasted and drank. The beer was as cool and refreshing as any Ray had ever had.

They followed slowly behind him, as his speed seemed to top out close to thirty mph. The road twisted and bent and eventually brought them to their destination. It was the largest structure they'd seen, a dilapidated wooden barn with its name spelled out in beer bottles:

Apocalypse Lounge.

They were early, it seemed, judging by the subdued scene inside. They ordered two more

beers from the bar and sat on a ratty old couch, hoping the night picked up. The only other patrons were two old-timer hippie types that their friend joined at the bar, a younger woman swinging a hula hoop around near the stage, and a couple on a couch in the corner, who were either falling asleep or nodding off.

Once the sun went down and it cooled off a little, the crowd began to swell. By this point, Ray and Sergio had befriended the owner and bartender, who introduced herself as “Hilde, the Swedish Cowgirl,” and had the thick accent, cowboy hat, and agreeably tough demeanor to prove it. She plied them with shots of the house moonshine, so they were good and buzzed when the open-mic started. The audience consisted of mostly desert rats, but spanned a wide variety of ages. Sergio definitely stood out as a rare person of color, but no one seemed to treat him any different. The only population lacking representation seemed to be the business class, though there was one guy wearing a three-piece suit, probably ironically.

The music itself was a mixed bag. Ray was surprised that, for the amount of idle time he assumed the locals had, they weren’t all better musicians. Then again, it took a lot of practice to get good at anything. He got the impression that some of the locals wound up in Boiltown because they didn’t like hard work.

Ray went on towards the middle of the list when the crowd was good and lit. He played two songs, one a slow dirge, the other a more raucous, boot-stomping number, which the people seemed to prefer. Unlike a lot of the musicians, he played his own songs. He was also a skilled guitar player, having spent the majority of his teen years locked away in his bedroom, learning to riff like Angus Young and solo like Van Halen, though he eventually tired of heavy metal tropes and developed his own sound.

He got a lot of praise and high-fives after his two-song set. Hilde gave him a free shot,

saying she hoped he'd stick around for a while. "Lord knows we could use real talent around here," she said.

Though musicians were the majority, the open-mic was open to all forms of expression, which also meant poetry, stand-up, and "performance art," ranging from bad to mediocre. Only one of the comics, a rare person of color, elicited genuine belly laughs by cracking a lot of jokes at the expense of the mostly white crowd. "I think y'all chose the wrong place to have your little white power paradise," he said. "You're not equipped for this kind of heat. God made you white so you would stay away from places like this. He also made you dumb. See, this proves black people are smarter. Just because we *can* handle the heat doesn't mean we want to."

The real freaks were the performance artists. One guy sat onstage, tore up a Bible, and ate it. Another drove nails into his nostrils and lifted weights with his nipples. And then there was the woman who just screamed, nonstop, for two minutes, bowed, and walked offstage.

After several hours of performances, the crowd showed no sign of wearing out. A dance party followed the open-mic, and that's when the energy really picked up. The DJ, a big, bald guy everyone called Baby, spun from his eclectic vinyl collection, everything from Cambodian Garage to Atlanta Trap, sequencing the mix perfectly. Though the speaker system lacked fidelity due to its being run on a generator, and the records skipped like hell, no one seemed to mind. The moonshine probably helped, as did what Ray assumed were the copious amounts of drugs that were being consumed. They'd only brought some weed with them and decided to go on the hunt for more.

Ray caught Baby between songs. "Great music," he said. "I love that you played ESG."

"Thanks," Baby said, digging through his crate, his eyes wide as saucers. "You were great, too. Let me know if you ever wanna jam with a drummer."

Ray nodded. “Hey, you don’t know where I could score something besides moonshine, do ya?”

Baby froze for a second and gave him a serious look. “You’re not a cop, are ya?” Before Ray could answer, he burst out laughing. “I’m kidding, man. What did you have in mind?”

“Well, I guess what everyone else seems to be on.”

“I can’t speak for everyone, but I’m on Joy.”

“Joy? What’s that?”

Baby explained it was a new drug that had been making the rounds. “It’s like a mix between ecstasy and acid... only not really like either. Better, in a way. I’m sorry. I’m having trouble speaking. I’m actually joyriding right now. And it’s only my second time.”

It turned out they’d come on the right night. The drug hadn’t been in circulation for long. The rumor was that a local recluse called the “Alchemist” had invented it. Baby had heard different stories about him and didn’t know which were true. All he knew for sure was that only one local dealer had it, and it wasn’t cheap: thirty-five bucks a hit. Ray wondered how most of the locals afforded it.

“Seems pricey,” he said to Baby.

“We save up all week for Saturday nights,” Baby told him. “For some of us, it’s the one night we cut loose like this.”

Ray wasn’t sure he wanted to risk trying such an untested substance. Sergio was all for it. “Shit man, why not?” he said. “These people don’t seem like they’re having bad trips.”

Ray looked around the room. Everyone was dancing, beaming. They looked... *joyful*. Even Baby had removed his shirt and was out on the floor dancing to his own tunes.

They decided in the end they would split one hit since Ray was broke. Luckily, the Joy had

put Baby in a generous mood. “As newbies to the Apocalypse, I’ll give you a two for one special, just this once.”

Ray went with him behind the DJ station, where he pulled out two capsules. “You could snort the powder for a quicker, more intense high. But I recommend swallowing your first time.”

They washed the Joy down with beer and waited. Ray caught a buzz right away, but he figured that was just the anxiety and anticipation of what was to come. They ordered waters at the bar to stay extra hydrated, rolled cigarettes, and watched the dancers writhing. From the looks of it, it wasn’t the ideal place for single women, though he imagined there were some intrepid, adventurous souls out there. He wasn’t looking for anything in particular. Rehab had helped him in one way: it allowed him to slow down and re-asses his life. And he determined that he jumped into things too quickly, especially with women. This time, he’d wait for the right one.

He lit a cigarette and leaned back into the bar, wondering if this was the last place in America you could still smoke inside. He didn’t realize until that moment that he missed it. Not the smoking so much as the freedom to do it unmolested. His attempt to be an adult in “civil” society had begun to wear on him, this living paycheck to paycheck and giving most of it to the big corporations and franchises that had taken over small town America. He was tired of his music always taking a backseat to his job. Maybe his recent arrest and subsequent firing was actually a blessing. Instead of jumping back into another job, maybe there was another way.

He exercised his newfound freedom with every pull on his cigarette, letting the smoke caress his lungs before blowing out a great big swath of smoke into the air. He started seeing patterns in the nicotine fog. His skin tingled and his limbs lost their tightness. The weight on his brain lifted, and his heart beat with new fervor.

“Let’s dance,” he said to Sergio, who was right there with him, his pupils like full moons. They hit the floor together, joining the throng of sweaty bodies. Soon Ray was just as soaked and didn’t care one bit. It felt so good to move his body every which way, to jump and twist and swivel and fall to his knees and praise the gods and the mother who made him and the genius who made this drug. Though other bodies were close and grinding up against him, he didn’t fixate on one. They became one giant, wobbling mass, united by their highness and their submission to the groove as it moved through them. He’d finally found it, the drug that took him to nirvana.

There was more to Joy than just the body rush. After hours of dancing and wearing themselves out, most everyone had sprawled out onto the couches. Baby switched the vibe up on the music, playing more relaxed, spacey tunes. Ray’s muscles melted into the vibrations, as relaxed as if he’d taken a Valium, but less sleep inducing and more euphoric. When he shut his eyes he saw strangely beautiful patterns, swirling orbs, geometric shapes. When he opened them again, he saw Sergio next to him, making out with a woman in a leopard-print jumpsuit. He wasn’t jealous. He was happy for Sergio, happy for the leopard girl, for this moment, for the Joy.

“I want to stay here,” he told Sergio, later, after the leopard had left, along with most people in the club, and they ventured outside where there was a raging bonfire, and giant, dusty pillows. A couple jammed nearby, one beating on a bongo, the other blowing through a didgeridoo. It was less annoying than Ray imagined. Or maybe it was just the Joy.

“You mean stay the night, or like... forever?” Sergio asked.

“I mean the night. And maybe longer.”

Ray already asked Hilde if he could help with cleaning in exchange for crashing on a couch, and she okayed it, but warned him not to trying anything funny. “Just remember,” she had

said, "I own several guns."

Sergio would've stayed, too, but he had to work the next day. Ray walked him to his ride. He seemed okay to drive, but just in case Ray put him through a few motor-skills tests. Sergio passed them all.

So maybe it wasn't because of the drinking or drugs. Maybe he'd swerved to avoid an oncoming truck, or the headlights blinded him, or he simply got sloppy for a second, lingering too long on that purpling sky, that brilliant desert sun rising in the distance. Or maybe it was on purpose. Maybe he'd had his best night ever, and knew he'd never top it.

Whatever the reason, Ray never saw Sergio again. He crashed his motorcycle off the highway that night on his way home, killed instantly. When Ray heard the news, he didn't believe it. Sergio was always pulling pranks, and he wouldn't have been surprised if he got his sister to play along, even faking tears on the phone. But the longer she talked through it, the more it became clear it was no hoax: the terrible thing had actually happened. He lost his best friend, his only friend these days. And then he knew for sure. He couldn't go back now. Not to Yuma, not to anywhere in the real world. He could only stay in Boiltown.

4.

Sera made it halfway to the desert when she started to wonder what the hell she was doing. She thought of turning around dozens of times, returning the money in an unmarked envelope. The drugs weren't helping. They put a glaze over everything, made her too calm and sedate when she needed to be alert and cautious. When she saw a police car driving behind her, she panicked. What if they pulled her over, searched the car, and found the pills? They even had his name on the bottle. When the cop passed her, she calmed a little, got off at the next rest stop, and threw the pills in the trash.

Something kept propelling her forward into the unknown. Maybe this was just the excuse she needed to get out of LA once and for all, leave her broken life behind her. Not the best way, not how she would've planned it, but she couldn't help that now. All she could do was start over with a new name, a whole new life.

Through her windshield, she had watched the city become suburbs, then desert suburbs, and now just desert. Paradise was the last official town before hitting the two borders, Colorado on the east, Mexico on the south. She recalled hearing that Boiltown wasn't too far from the center of Paradise, but it was hard to find through a maze of crisscrossing dirt roads. She figured she'd stay in town a night or two, get her bearings, figure out what she needed to survive out there. Paradise was still so removed from LA that, if anyone was looking, it'd probably be one of the last places they'd try. She'd even taken all her cash out of the bank and closed her account, just in case.

The only non-chain motel was also the cheapest. She pulled into the Paradise Motel and got a room overlooking the dinky pool on one side, and the highway on the other. After a long,

well-deserved sleep, she got a late breakfast at Manny's Diner down the street, and grilled her waiter about how to get to Boiltown.

“Oh, you don't want to go there,” he said. “It's no place for a woman.”

This was what she'd hear several times that day as she asked the same question of every local she met, the kind of warnings she'd heard all her life. Anything she'd wanted to do with any kind of risk – leaving home, hitchhiking, hopping trains, going to some sketchy bar or rough part of town to buy drugs – there'd always be somebody there telling her it's dangerous for a woman alone. No one ever said that shit to men, who were just as likely to get beaten up, robbed, or killed. Maybe rape was a bigger threat for women, but she could handle herself. She had mace, fists, and teeth, and a powerful set of lungs if all else failed. The threat of the predatory male lurked everywhere she went, but it was no reason to live in fear. Better to die taking risks than hiding away in a safe space. This was America, after all, home of the brave, land of the free, unless, of course, you were a woman.

Eventually she did find someone who supported her, a loud lesbian, drunk at a local bar. When Sera told her about all the warnings she'd received, the woman scoffed.

“People around here still think like it's the '50s, like women should be in the kitchen makin' babies. Fuck 'em.”

The woman wanted to drink the night away with her, but Sera had started feeling sick. The lack of opiates was catching up. She thanked the woman, pocketed the napkin, and headed back to the motel as quickly as she could.

She could barely hold down food the next few days, and her whole body ached, like her skin was sewn on too tight. Somehow she didn't believe the withdrawal could be so bad, that her overall toughness would make her immune. Instead, she spent half her time in the motel huddled

over the toilet bowl and the other in bed. She refused cleaning services, so much so that on the third day the manager came to check on her. She freaked at first, thinking the gig was up, the cops caught up with her. But the manager ended up being kind, even making her a ginger tea to help with her nausea, though it barely made a difference.

Even when she started feeling better, she couldn't imagine venturing out to a place without AC to live in her van in the middle of this desert heat. It was already mid-October, and it still felt like the height of summer. She had enough cash to stay in the motel a few more nights, but would have to find somewhere else to crash soon, or pray it cooled off. All the listings she could find online were too official, required deposits, first and last month, and a year lease. The less she signed, the better. Nothing official, and leave no trace.

Finally she felt strong enough to leave the motel and head to the only non-corporate café in town. While browsing a bulletin board, she found a flyer that caught her eye, mostly because of the picture of three women soaking in a hot spring, sitting close with their chests half-exposed. One smiled, one laughed, and one had her eyes closed, looking completely at peace.

The other side of the flyer was all text:

Is the patriarchy getting you down? Do you long for a place free from the male gaze, from a world mansplained to you? A place where your voice is not only heard, but actually matters? Come to the Hive: A free and open society in free and open Boiltown, FOR WOMYN ONLY. Engage with other seekers in an inspiring setting. Explore the totality of your divine, celestial power. And let the synergistic practices developed by our founder Orlanda gently guide you on a path of self-realization. We aim to strike a balance between mystical exploration and liberating self-expression, between serious study and playful fun. In this spirit, we practice conscious silence, purifying breath, and ritual self-care, including yoga, Reiki, and ecstatic dance. Every

integrative approach is an opportunity to connect the higher self. Join us in the pristine desert to experience a fully functioning matriarchal oasis.

Despite that a lot of the wording made her skin prickle, Sera was intrigued. She logged onto the website listed at the bottom, but it just had the same picture and manifesto, along with an online application. She could only dig up a few mentions on websites like Reddit, but they were all people like her wondering what the hell the place was exactly, with no results. Whatever the Hive was, its operators clearly wanted to maintain some level of secrecy.

In one sense, the Hive sounded ideal, a place away from drugs and men. But it also sounded ridiculously New Agey. She was all for women empowering themselves, but too often it led to these hippy-dippy delusional “earth mother” guises, especially in California. No matter how much they tried to sell themselves as nonreligious, non-dogmatic, and open to all, she knew that was rarely the case. New Age wasn’t so much a movement as a culture, its major ideas all lifted from various sacred texts, its rituals from a variety of mostly Eastern mystical practices. Essentially, it was spiritual colonialism.

She also feared the mention of the founder “Orlanda” hinted at a cult-like atmosphere built around one person’s vision. Having lived through one already, she knew she didn’t need to repeat the experience. She’d seen what having spiritual dominion over a group of people could do, no matter how noble the intentions. Corruption seemed inevitable, though in all the examples she thought of, the leaders were always men.

Despite her instincts, something was drawing her in. There were aspects of her life at Love’s Way that she missed. The friendships, especially with women, were the closest she’d made in her life. Her later connections were mostly transient, drifters crossing paths for a while before moving on. And there was value to meditation, prayer, reflection, to a soul-centered

lifestyle, if, for nothing else, to filter out some of the noise.

She also worried hardcore meditation could bring all her demons to the surface, the bad memories she buried when she left home. Though she understood how therapeutic it could be to unearth her garbage, she was also afraid of becoming overwhelmed, sending her straight back into the soothing arms of opiates.

On the other hand, Sera had a tendency to run towards her fears rather than away. If a creepy guy on the street were stalking her, she'd turn around and walk straight towards him and stare until he was the one creeped out. So, in this sense, she thought maybe she should at least visit the place and see what it could offer her.

When she read through the flyer a second time and ignored the New Age tropes, she saw a certain strain of radicalism that she found promising. A lot of her most recent music was, if not literally about, at least in the spirit of smashing the system and taking down the patriarchy. Performing it was a kind of mystical act, a possession, the exact reason why her family hadn't approved of her "devil" music.

She decided she'd fill the application out. If nothing else, it was a reason to linger in the ample AC the café had to offer.

The application was brief, basic information and a few personal questions. She lied about her name, calling herself Valerie Smith, a play on two of her favorite feminists, Valerie Solanas and Patti Smith. But she answered the rest of the questions mostly honestly. Like the first one:

Why do you want to join the Hive? She wrote:

I grew up on a commune cut off from "regular" society. Though I treasure aspects of my childhood, I've come to recognize I suffered abuse, both psychological and sexual. This has led to many struggles in my life, including drugs and alcohol. Though I've recently managed

to get clean, I'm not sure how long I can last on my own. I'm a songwriter at heart, but I've been struggling to enjoy music lately. I feel I've lost touch with who I am, what I want out of life, what direction I'm supposed to move. I feel like I could be anybody, and, rather than feeling free, it terrifies me.

She continued in this vein responding to the rest of the questions, writing of her teenage runaway years, her days riding the rails with the other wanderers, her bad relationships and band attempts, the awful LA days holed up in her dingy Torrance apartment, hooked on pills. She figured they'd either admire her candor, or else think she was going to be a handful and pass. Either way, by writing it all down, she already felt like a weight had been lifted. By the time she finished, she'd gone through several of her darkest moments and three cups of coffee.

Jacked up, Sera left the café and walked around the small strip of downtown Paradise. She browsed a thrift store called The Treasure Trove, the long rows of used clothing, dishware, furniture, accessories. This was where she belonged, she thought, among the worn and unwanted, the items in need of second chances. She asked for an application, filled it out right there in the store, and handed it to a manager who looked her over like a piece of meat and said they'd be "in touch" in a way that made her skin crawl, and only afterwards as she strolled along the sidewalk did she wonder if she'd imagined the whole thing, if he'd been perfectly civil and kind, if her mind had started to distort even the most innocent of interactions.

She spent the rest of the day numbing herself at the movies. She cinema-hopped through two bad superhero movies, but at least they distracted her from herself for the most part. She kept checking her phone to see if she got a response from the Hive, though it seemed way too early. By the time she pulled into the motel parking lot that night, she started to worry she'd overshared, revealed too much, given herself away.

She worried into the next day, too, her fears increased with her sickness. She spent the whole day in bed or by the toilet. She checked her email obsessively. Why did she suddenly care so much? Did she just hate rejection? Or was it because in the present moment, it was the only option she had.

That night, she received a response:

Subject: *Welcome to the Hive.*

Dear Sera,

I can tell from how courageously forthright you are in your responses that you would be an ideal member of our household. We just so happen to have a last minute opening that we need to fill as soon as possible. If you'd like to, come and meet the others, and we can discuss all the details. We could see you as soon as tomorrow if you're free.

Sera wrote a quick response, sending it before she changed her mind:

That's great news. Yes, I can come tomorrow. Please send directions.

After she hit send, she took a bath and went to bed. She had her first decent sleep in weeks, and, if she dreamed, she forgot them all by the morning.

5.

Eventually, Ray got Baby to cough up his source.

The two of them started meeting twice a week in the back room of the Apocalypse. As befitting his size, Baby was a beast on the drums. What he lacked in subtlety he made up for in sheer force. It brought out the loud and heavy in Ray, who'd managed to convince Hilde to loan him her truck to haul out his few possessions, most of it musical equipment. Fairly quickly, he wrote three songs that matched with Baby's drumming style: loud, fast and loose, just how punk rock should be.

On their third meeting, Ray asked if he had any more Joy, or a way of getting any. Baby resisted, saying he didn't want to buy more because he got easily hooked and was trying to save it for special occasions. Ray agreed with that sentiment, but he just wanted one more trip on his own this time, curious how it would be without the drinking and partying to go with it.

They went back and forth for a while, Baby saying that the only guy who had it was fairly picky about who he sold to. After a few more beers and bong rips, Baby was feeling looser and said he could broker an introduction next time he saw him at the Apocalypse. Turned out that Ray had already met him at the Apocalypse. He was a super slender, long-limbed, pale white guy with stringy, shoulder-length hair. But his two most distinguishing features were his eye patch and his name: Snake.

"Like that Kurt Russell character in those *Escape from New York* movies?" Ray said.

"Who?" Snake replied. "I have no idea what you're talking about, dude. I came up with the name myself, 'cause I love snakes."

Despite the odd first impression, Snake eventually warmed up to him. When asked about

Joy, he said he didn't carry it on him but gave him directions to his place.

“Swing by anytime tomorrow,” he said. “Not too early.”

Ray was still crashing at the Apocalypse but on the lookout for another crash pad.

Around noon the next day, he borrowed one of Hilde's mountain bikes and followed the directions. Turned out he lived in one of the nicer places in the old ghost town section, where the streets had names. His was Desire.

The place was almost a normal, wooden house, except that it had been built around a boulder. Its stone face actually jutted out in the middle rooms of the house, and provided a solid foundation. It was also slightly raised from the ground, three steps worth. Snake had even installed a fire station metal pole that connected the first and second floors, which they both slid down to end his quick tour.

“Doubles as a stripper pole,” Snake said when he made it to the bottom.

Snake wore a bathrobe and slippers and had his long, greasy hair pulled back into a ponytail. He looked much more househusband than he had at the Apocalypse, where he was dressed head to toe in leather.

There was also a bathroom with a working shower (“Warm water, not hot...but who needs that,” he said), and a compostable toilet (“Yep, we compost our own shit.”) He even had a basic, non-electrical swamp cooler that worked off of cold water and helped keep the place “cool enough to survive the summer. The trick is, keeping the water cold. That's why we do need a generator sometimes.”

All in all, the place was inspiring, showing Ray just how one could pull off living comfortably in the desert without any civil services of any kind.

“Doesn't the gas get expensive though?” he asked.

“Solar, my friend. It’s a wonderful thing.”

He showed Ray the basic solar device he’d put together with help from a handyman. It powered all the lights in the house. It also powered the row of aquariums that lined the walls in the backroom, the place where Snake conducted his business.

It was the darkest room in the house, the shades drawn, the room lit mostly by the blue hue of the tanks. Surprisingly, they didn’t house any snakes, but a collection of fish, most of them bright, colorful variations of goldfish with fluffy tails and flanged fins.

“Siamese fighting fish,” Snake said as Ray stared. “That’s why they’re mostly separated. Get ‘em in a tank together, and they’ll rip each other apart.”

Snake invited him to come back sometime for a “fight night. A bunch of us get together and bet on who’ll win. Like a dog fight, but less mean, ya know?”

It still sounded cruel to Ray, but he didn’t say anything, just nodded and said, “Yeah, totally.” Rule number one in drug deals was not to offend or insult your dealer straight out of the gate.

“So, Ray, you’re staying at the Apocalypse? How’d you pull that off? You fucking Hilde or something?” Before Ray could answer, Snake burst into laughter, exposed a few silver-capped teeth. “I’m kidding, man,” he said, slapping Ray’s shoulder. “I hope you’re not fucking that old bag of bones.”

“Just spooning,”

Snake laughed even louder, spinning a circle in his rolling chair. He was clearly hopped up on something. He could barely stop shaking his legs.

“Baby tells me you started a band,” Snake said. “That’s pretty sweet. We need some good music around here. Too many old farts playing the white man blues, you know what I

mean?”

Ray nodded. “I try to stay away from blues licks in general.”

“Good, that’s good. Leave the blues to the black folks. They’re the ones who should be singin’ ‘em. What do we gotta be blue about, right? Depressed, sure. But blue? Nah, that’s something else.”

Ray wasn’t quite sure on the subtle difference between the two, but he had a feeling if he asked that Snake would only confuse him more.

Snake asked him a few more questions about his background, where he grew up, how he ended up in Boiltown. Ray got a little choked up when he mentioned Sergio, but managed to reign it in, not wanting to get too heavy during a drug deal.

“Sorry for the grilling, I just like to get to know my clients a bit, you know?” Snake said. “I consider them my friends. I’m not a businessman so much as a facilitator. If I could give the shit away for free, I would. But what really interests me is aiding in people’s heightened experiences. Of course, I gotta make money to survive. But I don’t want that to define our relationship.”

Ray often found this to be the case in the drug world. Unfortunately, often the guys who really wanted to friends were the ones he wanted the least to do with. He didn’t mind the idea of a professional relationship when it came to drugs. Show up, exchange the goods, and leave. But it rarely worked that way. Everyone wanted to be so damn human.

Snake, though, he seemed okay, so far.

“So do you know what you want?” Snake asked. “Or would you like a menu?”

“Do you have one?”

“I’m kidding. But I’ll give you the rundown. I got weed, bags and edibles, molly, acid,

and Shrooms, regular or in chocolate. I don't peg you for a meth guy, but I have some of that, too. As far as pills, I got Percocet, Valium, Vicodin, and Oxys. Oh, and Ritalin, in case you're a hyperactive teenager."

"Man, I'd buy them all if I could."

"I feel the same. Why be picky when it comes to drugs? Dabble. They all have something unique to offer."

"What about Joy?"

"Oh, right, I forgot you know about Joy. That Baby's a naughty one. He wasn't supposed to share."

"I was pretty insistent."

"Nah, it's cool. It just comes in a limited supply. But I think still have a few left. They go quick, though, especially around payday."

Snake leaned down to a safe in the corner, punching in a series of numbers, and opening it. He pulled out an olive green metal box out from the safe. It looked like something you'd use in the army.

"So how many you looking to buy?"

"Just one today."

"One?" Snake asked, turning to look at him. "You came all the way out for one. And then you're going to have to come all the way back here when you want another one."

"Unfortunately, I'm broke."

"Everyone's broke around here. I tell you, if I could, I'd go somewhere like Palm Springs, where people are flush. Unfortunately, I'm restricted to Boiltown with these babies."

He pulled a capsule out and held it to the light. Ray could see the powder had a slightly

green tint.

“Why’s that?”

“It’s complicated. Let’s just say that we don’t want word spreading too fast about this stuff.”

Snake pulled a second capsule from the box on the counter and placed it on the table.

“Tell you what. I’ll give you two, one you pay more for now, the other you get me at the Apocalypse sometime. Hilde’s paying you something, right?”

“She tips me out. Thanks, man. I appreciate that.”

“Hey... what are friends for? And you want to make them last a little longer, you can always snort about half the powder out of one and still have a pretty decent trip. I’ve heard of people hanging their heads upside-down and dripping it, but, to me, that’s just overkill.”

As Ray got up to leave, Snake’s cellphone buzzed and he read a text. “Oh shit. Hold on, I gotta make a call.”

He dialed a number and then spent the next five minutes fighting with someone named Jilly, his girlfriend, Ray assumed.

“No. I said no. Fuck no! This is my place of fucking business, you know!”

At some point, Ray got up to leave, giving Snake a wave.

“Hold on,” Snake said to him, and then into the phone: “No, not you. I’ll call you back. What? You better fucking pick up.”

Snake put the phone down and apologized, rolling his eyes and saying “Women.”

Snake took Ray out the back way, saying he wanted to show him something. Ray followed to the fenced off garden in back. It was full of sculptures, some made of twisted metal, others from repurposed garbage and found objects. It took a moment for Ray to realize they were

all creatures of some sort, like giant imaginary insects. There must have been dozens of them.

“My art,” Snake said. “Or hobby. Or whatever.”

“They’re great. Really impressive.”

“Yeah, well, gotta let it all out somehow, right? I’m more of a hands-on kinda guy.”

He was more skilled than Ray gave him credit for. He wondered how many other Boilers were like this, talented artists who were just a bit too freaky for the “regular” world. He’d much rather see art in an environment like this than some fancy gallery in New York City any day.

“Come back anytime,” Snake said, at the gate.

Ray waved and got his bike that he’d stashed on the side of the house. Soon he was cruising down the road, Joy in his pocket, and a new song stuck in his head.

6.

Sera was lost. She tried her best to follow the directions Orlanda had sent her, but the roads around Boiltown meandered with no sense of order, and GPS was no help. She was lucky to find anything at all out there. She felt like a castaway wandering another planet and all of sudden stumbling upon signs of life: A stack of stones. A pile of tires. A heap of bloated trash bags. Soon she was surrounded by shelters. Boilers were nothing if not crafty. They built homes from mud and straw, from plywood and PVC, fences made of broken beer bottles and rusty nails, an entire wall made from old TV sets. Even structures that seemed uninhabitable had been painted in bright colors, transformed into works of art.

The people stayed mostly hidden behind their makeshift fences. The few she'd seen were were almost all men and all nearly naked. Not that she blamed them. As sweltering as Paradise was, Boiltown was worse.

Hot air blew into the van, providing little relief. She was looking for two large boulders. According to Orlanda, each one was painted with the outline of a woman's spread open legs, and the road ran right up the middle. She wondered if this "driving into the vag" idea came from the Hive or had been drawn on by some pervy redneck. It could either be really feminist or really sexist, depending.

In any case, she never spotted the "Yoni Boulders," or the patch of San Pedro cacti that was supposed to follow it. She drove right through what felt like the hub of Boiltown and to the other side, once again finding herself in a vast desert wasteland.

She was just about to give up and turn the van around when she saw someone biking along the side of the road. She slowed as she got closer, making out that it was a person, a

woman, in fact, wearing a large straw hat festooned with flowers, pedaling away with her baskets full on both the front and back sides. Sera knew she was headed the right way.

She pulled up on the side of the bicyclist, and rolled down the passenger window, yelling through it to get her attention. The woman turned her head, a look of terror turning quickly to relief.

“God, I thought for sure you were a creep,” the woman said as they both slowed to a stop. “I mean, that’s a pretty rapey van.”

“Sorry about that. I’m kind of lost.”

The woman was tall and slender, with an alien look to her, sunken cheekbones and wide eyes that rarely stayed in one place. She might’ve been a model once, or a junkie, or both.

“I’m looking for the Hive,” Sera said. “You know it?”

“You’re not a reporter are you? Or a cop?”

“Neither. I’m Valerie. Orlanda invited me.”

“Oh, a new resident?” The woman’s eyes lit up. They seemed to take up half her head.

“Yes, maybe. I’m thinking about it.”

“Oh, don’t worry, we’re all nervous at first. But once you settle in, you won’t want to leave. I’m Jazzmina, by the way.”

Sera wondered if getting a new wacky name was part of the initiation. She was still trying to decide if she wanted to keep up the Valerie thing or go ahead and use her real name.

Jazzmina agreed to throw her bike in the back and ride with Sera so she didn’t get lost. It turned out they were less than half a mile from the road. Those pussy boulders were hard to miss. She felt a little dirty driving between them.

Jazzmina reached into her thick straight hair and pulled out something from behind her

ear. “Mind if I smoke?”

“Is that a cigarette? I’d love to share.”

“No, this is the good stuff, straight Ganja. No smoking tobacco at the Hive, just to warn you.”

“Oh, well, that’s cool. I’m trying to quit.”

Though the idea of getting a little high was appealing, weed was unpredictable for Sera. It could be great or terrible, induce laughter and a creative spark, or paranoia and itchiness.

“Probably I shouldn’t since I’m driving,” she said.

“Ah, that’s the best time. A few puffs, lay back, and let the car drive you.”

Jazzmina demonstrated her words by doing exactly that, miming the steering wheel, slinking back into her seat as she continued to puff. Sera was prepared to answer the typical introductory questions (where you from? how’d you hear about us? etc.) but none were forthcoming. Instead, Jazzmina hummed a song under her breath as she puffed away. Halfway through her joint, she rolled down the window and sat up on the frame, leaning her torso out and letting the wind whip her hair. She let out a loud whoop.

“I call that a wind bath,” she said, pulling herself back inside with her hair frizzed in all directions. “Good for the soul. You should try it. I’ll take the wheel.”

Sera reluctantly stuck her head out, but once she was out there, the wind did feel exhilarating.

“Now shout something,” Jazzmina said. “Go ahead. There’s no one around.”

Sera screamed, more a bloodcurdling wail than Jazzmina’s celebratory whoop.

“Wow, you’ve got some demons, don’t ya?” Jazzmina said. Sera nodded, settling back into the car. “That’s cool. The Hive is the perfect place to let them all out.”

A few minutes later, they came upon a series of cacti lining the road, something hanging off each one. Sera took a closer look. They were all bras.

Once they'd reached the top of the hill, Sera spotted a large, domed structure, covered in a white canvas.

"There we are," Jazzmina said. "Home sweet home."

Jazzmina showed her the nearly full lot where she could park. Most of the cars were covered in sand and dust, so thick she couldn't see inside. Clearly they hadn't moved in a while.

"Yeah, this desert dust wreaks havoc on engines, especially if you don't use them enough," Jazzmina said when they left the van. "That poor little Honda used to be mine. I mean, I guess technically it still is, but I doubt it'll ever run again."

Jazzmina led her up a paved walkway to the main entrance, two large planks of wood made into double doors and secured to the tent frames. She stuck a large skeleton key in an old-style lock, turned it, and swung them open. "Come on, I'll give you a tour," she said.

The doors opened into a large open area. She was immediately struck with the strong smell of sandalwood. The floor was covered with a large Persian rug, lined with stacks of purple yoga matts and red cushions. All of the sections of the tent flaps had been painted over with pictures of religious or historical women. There was a Virgin Mary, a Shiva, an Athena, and a Kali. There was also a Joan of Arc, an Amelia Airheart, a Janis Joplin, and a Nina Simone.

"We're not big into worship here at the Hive," Jazzmina said. "But we do have our heroes."

There was one that Sera didn't recognize, the centerpiece, covering the section behind a small stage and an altar in the back of the room. It was of a stunning, white-haired woman, big, warm eyes, her long locks in a head-wrap on the top of her head and shooting out the opening

like a fountain. She had a jeweled bindhi on her forehead, a stud through her nose, and a crystal around her neck. The painting ended at her naked bust, where her hands were pressed together in prayer, her nipples covered by the bracelets dangling from her wrists

“That’s Orlanda,” Jazzmina said before Sera could ask. “She didn’t ask to have it made. She’s not all vain like that. Someone surprised her on her birthday last year.”

The altar onstage consisted of a woven rug, wooden incense holders, multi-colored candles, Kachina dolls, and fertility figurines. There was also an assortment of instruments at the back of the stage, including hand drums and flutes, a harmonium, a ukulele, and several large sound bowls made of metal and quartz.

“Do you play?” Jazzmina asked.

“Sometimes. Mostly, I sing and write songs.”

“That’s awesome. We sing here most nights, so you’ll fit right in. Of course, you’ll have to wait until after your weeklong vow of silence.”

“My what?”

Jazzmina led her towards the back near an out-of-place *Exit* sign. “Oh, Orlanda didn’t mention that part yet? I should probably let her tell you.”

She opened the back door and allowed Sera to pass into the garden.

“And what happens if I break it?” Sera asked. “This vow, I mean.”

“I’m not sure. No one ever has.”

As Sera crossed the threshold, Jazzmina’s grin became vaguely threatening as she squinted her eyes.

“I mean, we won’t kill you, if that’s what you’re afraid of,” she said, holding her gaze until she broke into a high-pitched laugh. “I’m kidding. And don’t worry. Come that seventh

day, you'll actually break the vow through song. It's a joyous way to re-enter, beginning your new life singing."

The grounds surrounding the bunker were more like a small farm. They passed by a greenhouse from which the overwhelming fumes of marijuana wafted and ended up in front of a cornfield. Several women were scattered throughout the rows of corn, picking and dropping armloads of husks into wicker baskets.

"We practically live off our corn," Jazzmina said. "We also grow beans, sorghum, wheat... you'd be surprised what you can grow in the desert."

"What about water?"

"From our well, at least until it dries up. We use Native American dryland farming techniques, so we don't even require irrigation, and a little goes a long way."

The women working outside looked tired and sweaty, but all offered smiles when she looked their way. Jazzmina grabbed a husk that had fallen on the ground and began to peel it. "They're actually good enough to eat raw."

"I take it we're all meant to pitch in?"

"Yes, we all work, but there's a rotating schedule so no one feels overworked. When you're contributing to a beautiful cause, it never feels like work."

As Jazzmina crunched away on the raw corn, they circled back to the garden and stopped to look at an unimpressive labyrinth made from gathered stones. She explained its significance, something about the courage of allowing oneself to be lost, though Sera failed to see how anyone could be in such a meager maze.

As she stood there staring at the winding trails of rocks, something poked Sera in her back. She leapt backwards and started straight into the dark, milky eyes of a deer. He jutted his

antlers towards her, not aggressively, more of a curious nudge, waving his black tail.

“Oh, don’t mind Drake,” Jazzmina said. “He just loves to flirt with all the new girls.”

Drake had clearly been domesticated and was completely fearless, coming right up to Sera and nuzzling his snout into her belly. Jazzmina said he’d been rescued as a baby after one of the women accidentally hit his mother with her car. They’d managed to nurse him back to health, but he never got a chance to adjust to the wild, so they were stuck with him.

“Not that we mind,” Jazzmina said. “He’s pretty much the only male around here.” The buck began to sniff just above Sera’s panty line. “I think he knows it.”

The deer wandered off as they continued down a stone path that led to the back of the dome. They came to a long canvas structure similar to the main hall, but each section had flaps that opened into private bedrooms. There was enough room inside for a bed but not much else. Jazzmina walked her to the very end.

“You’re lucky,” Jazzmina said, opening her flap. “You only share one wall.”

“Where would we put our clothes and stuff?”

“We live simply here. Most women don’t own more than one outfit per occasion. Work clothes, dining clothes, and dancing clothes. That’s about all you need. You can store them in the trunk at the foot of your bed.”

Sera kept her smile on, but inside she was having serious doubts. The Hive seemed more and more like a feminist prison than a utopia.

“I’m going to end your tour here so you can rest a bit,” Jazzmina said. “I’m sure it’s a lot to take in at once. Unless you have any more questions?”

Sera had so many that she found it impossible to narrow down to one, so she didn’t bother. Her main question was how easy it would be to slip out undetected.

“I’m good for now,” she said. “I’ll wait till I see Orlanda.”

“She might be taking her siesta now. But I’m sure you’ll have a chance to speak with her after meditation.”

Sera thanked her for the tour, and Jazzmina said, “No need, clearly it was meant to happen.” She pulled Sera in for a hug and hung on a little too long.

“Namaste,” she whispered. “May your heart be filled with light.”

After Jazzmina left, Sera saw that a schedule was posted by the door. Group meditation was in less than an hour, followed by dinner, and then *Sacred Singing*. Just the idea of eating had her stomach grumbling, as she realized she hadn’t had anything since breakfast. She would at least stay for dinner and then come up with an excuse to leave. Or she could try being honest. “It’s just not for me,” she could say.

She lay down on her mattress, which was actually surprisingly comfortable, and had just drifted off to sleep when a bell chimed. She heard rustling, poked her head out of her flap, and saw several women in white pajamas walking down the pathway. Though she’d seen her own pair folded in the trunk, she decided to keep her own clothes on, not quite ready to commit to the uniform yet, cozy as it may be. After she joined the throng, one of the women leaned in and whispered, “You’re new aren’t you?” Sera nodded. “We’re so glad you’re here.”

The woman was elderly, with a twinkle in her eye and a rosy-cheeked smile reminding Sera a little of her late grandmother, the former dancer who married three times and ended life as a single lady. Of all of her family, Sera always identified with her the most.

She followed the women as they filed into the main hall, grabbed cushions from a stack and set themselves up in rows. Each woman seemed to know her place in the lineup. Sera took the first one she saw available. After a minute, someone tapped her shoulder. “That’s my spot,”

the woman said.

Sera apologized and received several shushes from the women around her. She found another place, but was soon met by another lady with the same complaint. Finally, Sera waited until everyone was seated and then found an empty spot at the back and settled into her cushion. While most women in the room kept their eyes closed and heads bowed, Sera scanned all the faces. There were around twenty or so women gathered, all of various ages. One problem Sera always had with these New Agey kind of places was how very *white* everyone was, and, with a few exceptions, the same seemed to hold true for the Hive. It tainted the vibe of a place that claimed to be so “inclusive.” It was the same all over, though, so she couldn’t really put the centuries of racial inequalities on the Hive’s shoulders. Real change took time.

A minute later, Orlanda appeared, wearing a red robe emblazoned with seashells on the front and a design on the back that resembled a raging fire. She was as stunning as her painting, if not more so, her blue eyes shining, her hair let down, falling all the way to her waist. Even with little if any makeup, her face radiated. Sera guessed that she was middle-aged or older, though she probably could’ve passed for under forty.

All whispering and movement stopped as she took the stage, lighting a stick of incense and placing it in a holder center-stage. She sat cross-legged on her cushion and slowly cast her peaceful gaze upon every woman in the room. As she connected with each person, Sera could see them straightening their spines, as if just by looking at them, Orlanda was improving their posture. Sera couldn’t help but do the same when Orlanda’s eyes landed on hers.

“Welcome,” Orlanda said. “What a wondrous night in a wondrous place. We are all so lucky and privileged to be here, now, in this sacred space, on the twenty-third of October, the first night that Mars has shifted from dreamy Pisces into hard-working Aries. So you might have

a blast of inspiration, or a sudden flash of insight, or the urge to embark upon a new mission in life. Or, if you're feeling extra passionate, it's probably because we're on the cusp of Scorpio."

The women nodded and murmured their agreement, obviously knowing what the hell she was talking about, whereas Sera had no clue. She had always tuned out most Astrology talk, first because it was considered sacrilegious by Love's Way, and, later, because she thought it was silly. She knew she was a Gemini, the twins, which meant she had two sides, hot and cold, or good and evil, something like that. Jessi, her last ex was into it, saying things like, "That's so like a Gemini," whether she was upset or thrilled by something Sera had done.

"Sometimes these celestial energies are subtle, manifesting even when you don't realize it," Orlanda continued. "Think of the major shifts in your life. Maybe they started as something minor, deciding you didn't like the taste of your ham sandwich, for example. At the time, you just thought: *bad sandwich*. Only later did you come to recognize it was the first step in refraining from participating in the de-ritualized slaughtering of innocent animals."

Another round of laughter, and this time Sera got the joke and joined in, though she also thought, *What if it was just a bad ham sandwich?*

"Today is also Sapphire's first birthday," Orlanda said, and a woman looking much older than one stood up while the room applauded. "One year ago today she had her commitment ceremony."

"Yay Sapphire!" someone shouted, and the room burst into finger snaps.

"I would also like us to welcome a new guest here today. Her name is Valerie... would you like to stand up?"

Sera rose, feeling odd to be introduced by her fake name in this "sacred" space. Then again, she doubted a lot the names she'd heard were birth names anyway, so she decided to

embrace her new name. But, to fit in better with the group, she thought she would give it a twist

“Actually, I prefer to be called Valeria,” she said.

The women looked confused and turned back to Orlanda, as if to see if this sudden renaming was okay. Maybe Orlanda was the one who gave the women new names, and Sera had already stepped on her toes. She did appear to be thrown, and didn’t talk for several seconds, like a woman who’s not used to being interrupted.

“All right then... Valeria,” she said. “Please keep in mind that Valeria is on her trial period, so she can see if this is right for her, and we can see if she is right for us. Let’s welcome her, everyone.”

More finger snaps. Sera recalled how this quieter form of applause had become the preferred alternative to clapping in some circles, though she couldn’t remember why.

“As we begin our determined sit today, I will briefly summarize the purpose of these sessions,” Orlanda said. “The physical goal is to sit absolutely still for the entire duration, sixty minutes. Secondly, we are practicing mind control. Not of others, of course, but over our own minds. During the silent period, we are attempting to focus our thoughts away from memories or fantasies and simply return to the here and now. Some use mantras to help focus the mind, but we prefer not to invoke any words in our practice for fear of contamination. We don’t want a bunch of mantra-addicts in here. Nothing should be between you and your core besides breath, the fuel that will drive us deep within ourselves. No matter what other thoughts come into our heads, always return to the breath, the link between the body and the mind, and the gateway to the soul.”

There was something soothing about Orlanda’s voice, and Sera’s eyes fluttered shut. She had a vision of the man with the Polaroids, jerking off to her feet.

“Let your thoughts be like the currents of a stream, gently passing as you float above them.”

The old man faded, replaced by the man with the mustache, the one at the commune who used to look after her, who took her swimming, who held her in the water... Her gut wrenched.

“And if you do feel any sensations in your body, notice them, acknowledge them, and then let your attention move on. In this way, you will begin to feel no pain.”

She went back to her breath, and the memories faded. She began to get sleepy, so sleepy she could hardly keep her head up. She faded and fell.

She fell back onto the floor and slept through the rest of the session. When the chime rang, she opened her eyes, and for a moment she forgot where she was.

She looked around. She was the only one sprawled out on the floor. The rest were sitting upright, blissful smile on their faces. She apologized to the woman behind her, whose lap she'd nearly fallen into, and pushed herself back to sit and listen to Orlanda's final words.

“And remember, if anything I say doesn't appeal or agree with you, you're not wrong. I don't have all the answers. I'm not your guru or Goddess. I'm a person, struggling just like you. You must be your own guru, your own Goddess. *Namaste.*”

“Namaste,” everyone repeated, including Sera, though hers was a second late.

Once Orlanda had dismissed everyone to breakfast, Sera approached her at the altar. “So, you're the lovely Valerie,” Orlanda said. “I hope you had a nice nap.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Oh, don't be. The first time is always the hardest. It'll get easier.”

Orlanda busied herself blowing out candles, snuffing incense, and straightening up her altar.

“To be honest, I’m having second thoughts.”

“Everyone feels that way at first. It takes some adjustment. Remember your first day at a new school?”

“I was home-schooled.”

“Oh, yes, that’s right.”

“I appreciate what you’re doing here,” Sera said. “I’m just not sure it’s for me.”

“You may think that, but I don’t believe it’s true. For one thing, you’re here... most people don’t make it this far. I read your application. You’re more like us than you even realize. There’s a lot of artists here, and a lot of former addicts. We’ve struggled our whole lives trying to negotiate our passions in a world not guided by love. One woman can’t do it all. Even a small group struggles. Ultimately, we want to be a large group. Nationwide. We need people like you, Valerie, er... Valeria. Strong, honest, independent women. But, of course, it has to be the right fit. Let’s give it a week to find out.”

Orlanda stood as if she’d said the final word. And there was something contagious about her certainty. Sera was exhausted making her own decisions, and it felt good to let go for a moment and let someone else.

As they walked towards the exit, Sera said, “Jazzmina had mentioned something about a weeklong vow of silence? That terrifies me.”

“It terrifies everyone, my dear. But ask any of them now, and they will all say it was necessary. Silence allows you to observe without the constant need to judge everything. Of course, you’ll still be judging in your mind, but this way you’ll be acutely aware of your own judgments. The goal is to soften that voice for a while, allow yourself to come to life as a child again.”

“And what if I break it?”

“It’s no big deal. But it’s easier than you think. You’ll see at dinner how little we talk even without the vow. A lot of conversation is just ego feeding, one mind trying to top the other, completely extraneous. With silence, you can absorb our lessons much faster. Of course, if you absolutely have to, you can always come talk to me in private. This is your home, not a prison.”

“Well, that’s good to know. My childhood home was a little like a prison.”

“Yes, and so I get why you’d be nervous coming to a place like this. But I assure you, we’re nothing like the place you described. We might both believe in love, but here we actually practice it.”

Though she’d promised not to let Orlanda charm her, she found it hard to refuse her face-to-face. Plus she was right. She’d barely given it a chance. She could at least try a day or two. How bad could that be?

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll give it a shot. Mostly because I’m hungry, though.”

“Well then... I think you’ll be pleased.”

They stepped into a large, open area, where picnic tables were spread around a large fire pit. Some women were throwing wood onto the fire, while others were filling their plates with food. Sera smelled garlic, ginger, and other aromatic spices. The spread was huge, two salads, arugula and kale, sprinkled with nuts and seeds and veggies, a butternut squash soup, a veggie stir fry with soybeans and rice, and an Indian style *Chana Masala* with chickpeas in a spicy gravy. The women sat in silence, gorging on the delicious food, looks of contentment on their full faces. Sera took her place in line, excited by the spread. Food, the mighty equalizer. As she heaped spoonfuls onto her plate, she thought that Orlanda could be right. This could be the place she was meant to be after all.

7.

The Apocalypse was popping, and Ray was nervous. Fall brought all the gawkers to Boiltown, the retired snowbirds escaping the cold, the crust-punks looking for drugs, and the “tourists” looking for an injection of weirdness into their dull lives. He wasn’t sure if his nerves came from the size of the crowd, or the fact that he’d just taken several hits of chronic bud that had his head spinning. After a string of “Joyrides,” Ray had taken a break from heavy drugs, more from financial necessity than anything else. But he struggled to refuse them when they were offered to him, and, as the new host of the Apocalypse Open-Mic, it happened often.

He took over hosting when Jehovah, the old host, had disappeared. Apparently, that was common in these parts. Boilers showed up out of nowhere and left with the same lack of fanfare or farewells. Some would be gone for years and then one day show up again as if they never left. He supposed it was the nature of the place. It was rough living, and though he’d only been there for a few months, it had already been wreaking havoc on his mind and body. Still, cities were tough in different ways, and he enjoyed the relative quiet and seclusion. He made a few friends but mostly kept to himself, playing a lot of guitar and writing a lot of new music. He’d started jamming and writing songs with Baby, dubbing the band “Shit Show.” Pretty soon they were the house band at the Apocalypse.

“It’s not the first time,” Hilde told him about Jehovah’s silent departure, on the same night she asked if he’d take over. “Once he left to join the circus. He was convinced he’d make a good clown, because everyone was always laughing at him. I tried to warn him. A clown in life doesn’t necessarily make a good clown onstage. I guess he found out the hard way.”

A hand squeezed Ray’s shoulder. It was Hoover, so named because of the copious

amount of drugs he could snort up his giant honker. “Got a little blow,” he whispered in Ray’s ear.

“I’m good,” Ray said, not having done coke since his arrest, not that he was against it, exactly, but after doing Joy, he figured why settle for less?

Helga flashed the lights, meaning “Show-Time.” Ray took the stage in his usual guise, cowboy hat tipped, beer in hand, cigarette dangling between his lips.

“Ladies and Gentlemen and in-betweens, how is everyone enjoying the end of the world?” Ray asked the crowd, whose response was a singular whoop. “Yeah, me neither.”

He downed his beer, dropped his cigarette into the can, and went for a final sip. The first time he hosted, he’d done this by accident, and so naturally it became his signature move. He got a few laughs, likely from the newbies who hadn’t seen it before.

“What say we ring in our last days with a few tunes?” he asked.

“No thanks!” came the voice of Tupelo Bill, always the loudest drunk at the bar.

“Yeah, well, fuck you, too.”

Ray strapped on his Gibson, took his pick in hand, and waited for Baby to count-off. After a few seconds of silence, he turned around and saw Baby wasn’t there.

“Paging Baby,” he said into the mic. “You’re wanted onstage.” He looked around in the crowd but still didn’t see him, and, if his giant, baldheaded mug were out there, he would notice.

“Has anyone here seen my drummer? Or, better question, does anybody out there play the drums real good?”

A few people whooped and rushed towards the stage. But before he could hoist one of them up, a shout came from the back.

“Traitor!” Baby shouted from the bathroom door. “Can’t a drummer take a shit?”

The crowd laughed, though Ray doubted that's what he was doing in there, seeing as Hoover had walked in there a moment before. Ray pretended to look at his watch as Baby pushed his way to the stage.

"Try not to crush anyone on your way," Ray said.

Baby let out his donkey-laugh as he bounded on stage, settled into his special-order massive drum stool, and counted off with his sticks, shouting, "One-two-three-four!"

Ray struck the first chord, and all the power went out. The sound faded, and the lights went to black. Only the sound of Baby's drums continued, rattling on for several bars until he realized what happened.

Ray wondered if this was it, the end, *finito*. The cops were finally shutting them down. Or maybe the military was invading. Or the bastard in the White House finally went and started World War Three, and the Apocalypse was about to live up to its name.

And then he remembered: he forgot to gas the generator.

"Sorry folks," he said. "My bad. Generator needs a little juice."

Hilde switched on the battery-powered lanterns around the bar and offered a round of shots on the house. She was always giving drinks away, which was why she never made money. But that was never the point of the place, or Boiltown in general. They'd left society so they didn't have to engage in their rules, capitalism being first and foremost. Friends before commerce. That was their motto. Except when it wasn't.

Ray made his way behind the stage, down the path to the wooden shed where the generator was stored to muffle its sound. He searched through the empty canisters until he found a full one, poured the gas in, and pulled the cord. The engine sputtered back to life.

The lights flickered on, and the crowd let out a cheer. Though unintentional, the blackout

seemed to liven their spirits. That or the free moonshine.

Ray resumed his place at the mic. “Alright, now, where were we?”

With that, Shit Show kicked into full throttle, rattling the floorboards of the rickety stage. Baby beat hard and steady, Ray chugged away on power chords fed through his vintage RAT distortion pedal and blasted out through 200 watts of amplifier. The lyrics consisted of only four words, “Eat Shit and Die,” which was also its unofficial theme song.

Ray hollered and thrashed over the ruckus, his long greasy hair hanging over his face. At the climax, he rushed the crowd, jumping on an empty couch that immediately toppled and took Ray with it. Even after face planting, he was not to be stopped and continued shredding away while writhing on the sawdust floor. Baby was less showy but just as thunderous. His monster limbs swung and pummeled, beating his kit with the force of a battering ram. Together, they tore through their caustic, three-song set, the same one they’d been playing since their first gig. At this point it was nothing new for the locals, but Ray focused his frenzy on the handful of new faces. At one point, he zeroed in on a tourist in a dress shirt filming with his phone. Ray got right up in his face and spat into the lens. It wasn’t that he objected to being filmed per se, but he wanted tourists to get the picture: Shit Show, the Apocalypse, hell, all of Boiltown, wasn’t about hiding behind screens or observing from a distance. It was a place to celebrate total and complete engagement in life, and nothing less.

By the end of their short set, Ray had broken three strings, toppled two couches and a half-row of chairs, and driven away at least a dozen people. His second fall had him spitting blood, the cause of at least one of the evacuations. The band possessed ten times the energy of the crowd.

On the one hand, that was fine. Their music wasn’t meant for the masses. Even if hated,

the show wouldn't be easily forgotten.

On the other, Ray did want something more from music than just energy. He'd written songs in a lot of different styles, but his favorite part was just exploring the guitar, trying to get different and unique sounds out of it, creating whole sonic environments. It was too experimental for the crowd at the Apocalypse, but lately his heart was more in that than Shit Show's three songs. And as much as he liked running around and freaking out, he wasn't sure how much longer his body could take it.

By the end of the open-mic, Ray was exhausted. He probably could've used the line, but then he'd be on that train and end up doing blow all night, paying for it in the morning. After a couple months of open mics, not to mention the other shows during the week, Ray was spent. The Apocalypse ended up being a full time gig. He finally found another place to live just so he wouldn't be there 24/7. An old guy had died and left a trailer behind. Ray fixed it up and moved some of his stuff there. It was within walking distance, but far enough away that he could barely hear the music in the club when he shut the door.

Ray didn't stay for the dance party. He needed his rest. He said his good-byes and headed home. The night was alive with stars, as usual. Many nights he wished he had a woman by his side, holding hands, sharing the sky. But, as he feared, there weren't too many available ones around, and the few that were just weren't his type. He'd hold out through winter, maybe Spring, but if he didn't find one by next summer, he might have to re-think his whole Boiltown adventure. It was the ideal place for him in many ways, but without anyone to share it with, it felt a little empty and selfish, like he was hogging all the good times for himself.

8.

If there was one thing Sera learned in her first two days at the Hive, it was that meditation was *hard*. In her first morning session, she made some progress. She didn't fall asleep. Instead, she couldn't get her mind to shut up. The more she tried to stop them, the faster the thoughts kept coming, shifting from her memories of the commune to wondering about what the next meal would be, if these mostly skinny women even ate bread, and how would she keep her mouth shut while they blabbered on around her?

Several times she abandoned her mission, opened her eyes and looked around the room. Everyone else seemed to be doing it right, lost in their land of peaceful meditation. The woman directly in front of Sera had a large pimple on her neck that looked infected. Someone else nearby was wearing a very strong, sickly sweet-smelling fragrance. Sera's stomach felt a little off, and she started to wonder what would happen if she puked right then and there. Or what if a mosquito was in the room? Would the women just sit there, allowing the mosquito to sting them repeatedly? Or would they swat it openly, crushing its guts in their palms? And what about an earthquake? Just breathe until it passed?

Sera tried to shove all the memories and thoughts away, but they kept coming at random. There was the time she almost broke her leg jumping on a boxcar; the first gig she had playing her songs for an audience, when she got so nervous she couldn't feel her fingers; her Dad's smoky breath when he kissed her forehead goodnight, and she wanted to tell him about the mustached man, so many times. But he left before she ever could, left her there alone, because he didn't care, he loved no one but himself.

She pulled herself back to her breath. Her thoughts were rebellious, refusing to follow

orders, like her mind had a mind of its own. She was trying too hard, rather than being present and allowing the moment to unfold. Or maybe the problem was she was too conscious of her trying, rather than just doing. She couldn't think her way out of thought. It reminded her of the tattoo on her back, the one she'd gotten as a teenager right after leaving the commune. It was of Ouroboros, the snake eating itself. It represented a lot to her: the continual devouring of the self, the cycle of rebirth, the creative process of turning oneself into art, or just self-indulgence. It could be good or bad, depending on perspective.

Sera believed that change was the one constant. But she was never clear if she was evolving or trapped in a vicious cycle. Or was that a necessary step in artistic growth, in any growth? Since she left home, she'd always chosen an interesting life over a stable one, but how long could that be sustained? And why was the "interesting" choice almost always the unhealthy one?

The second goal, sitting still, that was impossible, too. After five minutes, her body began to ache. By ten, she had a sharp, pinching sensation in her tailbone. After around the fifteen-minute mark, she was in excruciating pain and finally had to shift her body, which gave her a temporary reprieve. After another five minutes, the same pain came back again, along with strain in her legs and shoulders. When she tried to uncross her legs, she realized they'd completely fallen asleep and felt like two solid blocks of wood, like they didn't belong to her.

No matter what position she put herself in, one leg on top or the other, kneeling, legs bent and soles of the feet on the ground, eventually she'd find herself stiff and in pain and have to shift again. The hour seemed to pass excruciatingly slow. Just when she thought she couldn't take it anymore, Orlanda finally rang the chime, signaling the end of the session.

Compared to that, the rest of the day was a breeze. It was true what Orlanda had said:

being silent wasn't so bad. It made her acutely aware of all her judgments, both of others and herself. One minute she'd think the woman across from her was an idiot for something she said about western medicine being a hoax, and the next her heart would go out to her when she found out she lost a son to cancer. It did allow her to listen more fully, to observe and absorb, and, in a way, freed her from the burden of having to formulate an opinion about everything.

By nighttime, though, she grew restless. She had always been a night owl, and bedtime at the Hive was nine o'clock. She found she couldn't sleep and ended up wandering the grounds. She'd been roaming the gardens for almost an hour when she realized she wasn't alone. Someone was sitting on the edge of the dry fountain, smoking a cigarette. When she approached, she saw that it was Sapphire, one of the younger ones, and newer to the Hive. Sera approached her, and at first she looked frightened, like she'd been caught in the act. But Sera smiled, and said, "I won't tell on you for smoking, if you won't tell on me for talking." Sapphire agreed and also shared her cigarette.

Sapphire admitted she was having a hard time, too. "The days are fine, but nights can be a challenge," she said. "Thank God we have Eden, or I might really go nuts here."

"Eden? What's that?"

Sapphire leaned in close. "You're not supposed to know about it yet, not until you fully commit. But, now that we have secrets together, I'll tell you."

Sapphire said that the main way the Hive stayed afloat was through a place called Eden. Many of the women at the Hive worked there. "It's kind of like a fetish club," she said. "For men who love powerful women."

"Like dominatrices?" Sera asked.

"More or less. It's located in this random building in Paradise, that's set up like an

exclusive club. The men are required to wear masks and leave their cellphones at the door. Once inside, they have to surrender to the will of the Goddesses. It's not sexual, per se. We're not directly arousing them. It's more about humiliation and subordination. Putting men in their rightful place."

"And Orlanda knows about this?"

"Of course she knows. She's the boss."

They finished the cigarette. Sapphire said they shouldn't push their luck but could meet again at the same place the next night.

Somehow knowing about Eden and her nocturnal rendezvous with Sapphire made her next day go much smoother. Even in meditation, she managed to relax a bit more, not let her thoughts eat her alive.

The next night, she found Sapphire in the same place and again shared a cigarette.

"Hey, want to go for a walk outside the grounds?" she asked first thing.

"Sure," Sera said.

She followed Sapphire up a nearby hill. As high as the Hive was, she realized they were still in a valley of sorts when they reach the peak.

"There's something else I wanted to tell you," Sapphire said, a wicked grin on her face.

"There's more? You already blew my mind last night."

"Well, like I was saying, we're not exactly forbidden to leave. The problem is, there's not really many places to go most nights. Except..."

She blew her smoke up in the air and then stared out into the distance. Sera followed her gaze, and noticed a glow of bright light in the far distance. She squinted her eyes and could just make out some kind of building. She even thought she heard the faintest sounds of music coming

from it.

“What is that?” she asked.

“A place called the Apocalypse Lounge.”

“Sounds scary.”

“It’s actually really fun.”

“So you’ve been there?”

“Several times. The best night to go is open-mic night. Performers come from all over, and some are pretty good.”

“Open-mic. You mean anyone can perform?”

“Why? Do you have an act?”

“I have some songs.”

“You should totally do it. We should go tonight! It’s a long walk, but it’s worth it.”

Sera took the last drag on the cigarette and tossed it into the fountain.

“Why walk when you can drive?”

She pulled her keys from her pocket and jingled them in the air.

9.

The crowd that night was as packed as he'd ever seen it. Every week it seemed to get a little more crowded. Winters brought more of the snowbirds around. But a lot of people were also venturing in just for the open-mic. For the last three weeks, the list filled up within an hour. He'd even met some musicians recently who drove all the way out from LA.

There was a downside to the popularity, though. As psyched as he was that things were picking up, the last thing he wanted was for the club to be filled with LA hipster douchebags. He really wanted to keep it homegrown, and not become some kind of weird showcase for musicians looking to get signed. Though it seemed unlikely given how remote they were, he'd heard about other towns and neighborhoods suffering once the hipsters moved in.

After Shit Show got respectable though un-thunderous applause, Ray thanked the crowd, kissed Baby's bald head, and grabbed the sign-up list to announce the next act. He pitied the performer who had to follow them, generally one of the old timers like *Plastic Pete and His Singin' Saw*. But this time he saw an unfamiliar name at the top of the list.

"I believe our first performer might be brand new to the Apocalypse," he said in a ragged voice after all his screaming. "Would you all put your hands together and welcome... KUNT!"

A figure strode in from the back. At first, he couldn't tell if it was man or woman, as he was too distracted by the outfit, a shiny, silver jumpsuit. When she made it to the edge of the stage, he saw that she was definitely a woman, with spiky purple hair, thick black liner, and dark blue lipstick, nailing a kind of punk rock/space alien look. More than her look, what struck Ray most was the expression of total confidence she wore, showing zero trace of apprehension.

She placed her instrument, a plain wooden box, on a keyboard stand center stage that a

younger blonde woman had set up for her.

“What’s that?” Ray asked.

“Her instrument,” the other woman answered for her.

“I assume you need a DI box?”

The woman nodded, lifting the lid from the box.

“Does she talk?” he asked her assistant.

“She sings.”

Her instrument looked to be a small keyboard and a panel with several large knobs. It looked close to a vintage Moog, but was clearly homemade, judging from the web of exposed wiring in the back. As Ray set up a mic for her just in case, she screwed a long antenna to the top of the box. Ray wondered if she was going to play music or communicate with the mothership.

From her first note, he could tell she was something special. Her strange box turned out to be a thing of magic. At first, it let out a low, hypnotic drone. She slowly turned a knob and higher tones emitted from its guts, all on the same, droning note. She began to play the keys, one by one, building the sound into a frighteningly dissonant chord. She took a wide-legged stance center-stage, head bowed, bringing the mic to her lips. The sound grew in volume and intensity. Just as it reached near ear-deafening levels, she let out a high-pitched scream. She must have held it for a minute straight. It was so loud the entire audience covered their ears. Then, in an instant, it all cut out at once. She closed her eyes and bowed her head. The audience seemed unsure whether to applaud, if that was the end of the song, or some lengthy intro. After a moment, she looked up and said, “Thank you. That was called ‘Silence.’”

The crowd applauded, some enthusiastically, others barely. Half of them looked confused and annoyed, while the other half were enthralled. If nothing else, she’d gotten their attention.

The next song started more musically, with a low, thudding bass line from her keyboard line that she looped. Then she took the mic, and spoke over it:

“It’s true what they say about wild women. We often succumb to baser habits, taking the low roads when we should hit the highs. But after the earth is scorched, and all the dust has settled, the wild women will be the ones to lead the flocks to heaven.”

She played a repetitive, danceable bass groove, then stepped on a pedal and a programmed drumbeat kicked in. The crowd began to move, some just their heads nodding, others with their whole bodies. She waved her hands around the antenna and a sound like a distorted siren came wailing out of the speakers. Now Ray realized it was a Theremin, though not like any Theremin he’d ever seen before, more like a combination Theremin/keyboard/looper/drone-machine. Whatever it was, it sounded incredible.

While the sounds and structure of the song were unusual, the melodies were evident and even featured a sing-along, fist-pumping chorus. Her vocals were sometimes shrill, sometimes ethereal, and often looped and harmonized over. It all might have been too tech-heavy if she hadn’t also performed with such energy and intensity, bounding around the stage when she wasn’t turning knobs. It was hard to look away. She didn’t move much, but every time she did, it was like lightning had struck the stage.

Ray couldn’t make out half her lyrics, some of which sounded like a made-up language. But he could feel them, and that was more important. The audience responded, too, gathering close to the stage with more attentiveness than he’d ever received in a Shit Show performance. Ray was both in awe of this singular woman’s range and power and acutely aware of his own shortcomings.

As the song progressed into a more subdued coda, her voice became crystal clear, almost

operatic. Still, some of the limitations of being a one-woman band showed through. There were a lot of lows and high frequencies but not a lot of mids, the kind of thing a guitar could provide. Her drum machine sound got a bit monotonous, and sometimes her looping was a little off the beat, or else she stacked too many sounds on top of one other, overwhelming the speakers. And sometimes her fiddling with the box kept her from connecting with the crowd. Ray had the feeling that the support of a backing band would free her up, allow her to really cut loose, and then she'd really be a force.

“You’re sleepwalking,” she said in a surprisingly low voice at the end of the song. “Wake up before it’s too late. Wake up!”

She snapped her fingers, cut out the sound. The audience went ape shit. Ray went out to congratulate her and help her with her gear, but the crowd kept cheering for one more. Ray was torn. He wasn’t supposed to play favorites.

“Sorry folks, you know the rules,” he said into the mic. “There’s a two-song limit.”

“You got three!” someone yelled.

“I’m the host.”

A few people booed, and then someone started a chant: “Kunt! Kunt! Kunt! Kunt!” Soon everyone was in on it. Ray was overwhelmed. He looked at the list. Sgt. Joe was up next. He saw him make his way to the stage and stop at the lip. “Let her play one more!” he yelled up to Ray over the din. “I don’t need to follow that.”

“Okay, okay,” Ray said back in the mic, and the rowdy crowd cheered. “One more song from Kunt, then.”

He turned and expected her to take the stage but she stood on the sidelines, looking nervous.

“That’s all I got,” she whispered in his ear when he crossed to her, her confidence showing its first crack. “I mean, I have other songs, but I only prepared two.”

The crowd got restless, pounding on the bar and clinking their glasses together.

“What if we just jammed?” Ray offered.

“You mean improvised something?”

“Yeah. I’ll play guitar, we’ll get Baby on the drums, and you’ll play... whatever the hell that thing is.” She looked reluctant, not quite convinced. “Come on, it’s Boiltown. People are very forgiving here. Even if it sucks, they’ll be into it. Just wait till you see some of the other performers.”

The singer nodded, still looking nervous but willing to try. Ray scanned the crowd, spotted Baby near the bar, and motioned for him to come onstage. He told him they were going to jam, and that’s all Baby needed to hear, immediately jumping behind his kit.

Ray strapped on his guitar and waited. He left it up to the singer to start, but she just stood there, looking apprehensive. Finally, she played a single, low note on her keyboard, let it ride for several seconds, and then let go. Silence. A smattering of giggles and jeers came from the crowd. Ray thought she might walk offstage, but then she repeated the note, held it for the same lengthy period, and stopped again. Baby caught on, and began tapping out a slow rhythm on the ride cymbal, a slushing sound, setting both mood and tempo. After a few rounds, he added a single floor tom hit. The backbeat was developing, and it was Ray’s turn to fill in. He hit a minor chord based on the initial note, but created tension by rising to a flatted fifth while working his pick along the grooves in the strings, creating an abrasive, rippling effect. The singer began to chant a low, warbling note, as Ray slashed through a chord progression to match. Both Baby and Ray showed more sensitivity than they ever did in Shit Show, playing completely from

the gut. Together, the trio created a sonic tapestry. It was like they were telling a story, Baby providing the dramatic backdrop, Ray embellishing and adding sound effects, and the singer narrating the drama as it unfolded. As the singer's part developed melody, Ray echoed it with new chords. Baby was more sensitive to the music than his usual Shit Show battering, but still heavy as hell when it needed it. When his beat really kicked in, the three of them fired off at full throttle. Their improvised song climaxed in a frantic jam, ending on the highest note possible.

Once again, the crowd lost it. He'd never heard so much applause at the Apocalypse. Ray imagined that the sixty or so people there might someday say: "I saw them before anyone knew who they were."

"Boilers and associated freaks," he said into the mic when the cheers died down. "Hope you enjoyed our little choir music. Now, is it okay if she leaves the stage, or are you going to riot?"

The crowd laughed, and the applause died down.

"Riot Choir," the singer said to Ray. "Now there's a good band name."

"Better than KUNT?"

"That was just a joke."

They spoke as she broke down her equipment and he set up for the next act.

"Do you have a name, or is KUNT what you go by?" Ray asked.

"I wish. It's Seraphina. Most people call me Sera."

"Mind if I call you Phina?"

"Call me whatever."

"And you can call me Ray, whatever."

She smiled, and they locked eyes for the first time. Ray had a feeling in his stomach, but

it was more than butterflies. It was like the sensation he got when he stood on the edge of tall cliff and looked down. Not the fear of death, exactly, but the allure of jumping towards it.

“Did that just happen?” Baby asked from behind them. “Or did the drugs just kick in?”

“Yes, that happened,” Ray said. “And what drugs are you on, anyway?”

“Snake just got a new batch. And it’s better than the last one.”

“Are you serious? Better?”

“What are you guys talking about?” Sera asked, leaning in with a conspiring grin.

Baby looked at Ray, and Ray looked back at Sera.

“So, Phina, how do you feel about joy?” he asked.

10.

The first time she tried Joy was still the best. Not that the subsequent times were bad. Far from it. But there was something about that first rush, the laser-like lucidity mixed with total abandonment. It was like she'd been given a super power to lose all inhibitions, but not in a sloppy way: in a triumphant, transcendent, *joyous* way. A little like acid, in the sense that it allowed her to get past her ego, her whole sense of self, but less introspective and more engaged. It was like she'd been holding onto some great weight her whole life, and Joy finally allowed her to let it go. Everything that clouded her mind – her family, Love's Way, Jessi, opiates – all of it faded, allowing her to truly connect to the present like she never had before.

One thing was certain: it was better than meditation.

At least until the morning after. Sera woke up feeling like her head was in a vise. The smell hit her first, a pungent mix of man sweat and cigarettes. She wasn't in the familiar confines of her van, and it took her a moment to piece together the rest of the night. She remembered the capsules took a while to kick in, and then suddenly, everything became so alive, and they danced for hours to an eclectic mix spun by the giant bald drummer guy (was his name really *Baby?*), followed by a late night stroll with Ray into the desert, taking in the stars with no one else around, climbing up some boulders and sitting on top, gazing up at a sky filled with more light than she'd ever seen, touching hands, that electric first feel of someone else's skin, his arms folding her into his chest, and the kissing, so much kissing, and then...

They didn't fuck, she was pretty sure. But she was in his bed, and they were naked, so it was possible. She waited until he stirred, stretched, opened his eyes, and asked how she was feeling.

“Like shit,” she said. “What did you do to me?”

“That’s the moonshine more than the Joy. We probably shouldn’t have combined. But it’s hard not to.”

“We shouldn’t have done a lot of things. Speaking of... we didn’t... I don’t need to pick up plan B, right?”

“You don’t remember? The epic lovemaking session?”

“Shut up.”

“You’ll be fine. I was a gentleman, strangely enough.”

He left the trailer for a moment and started up the generator, which powered the much-needed fans and appliances. He boiled water for coffee and hard-boiled eggs, “Breakfast of Champions,” as he called it.

When they’d finished, she asked if he could give her a ride home. “On my mountain bike?” he said. “I don’t have a car. But I’ll see about my neighbor’s truck.”

It seemed crazy, surviving this far from civilization without a car, but somehow he seemed to be pulling it off. When he needed supplies in the city, he said he’d borrow the truck in exchange for helping his old neighbor with errands. Ray came back fifteen minutes later with the keys.

She’d nearly gotten lost trying to direct him, until she saw the pussy boulders in the distance. “And I thought I’d seen everything in this crazy town,” Ray said.

She had him drop her off down the hill, away from the sightlines of the complex. “Just what exactly is this place?” Ray asked.

“I’m not supposed to say. But it doesn’t take kindly to men, I’ll tell you that.”

“What is it, the Island of Lesbos?”

“In a way,” she said, kissed his forehead, and waved good-bye.

She’d arrived right in the middle of midday meditation. She felt bad that she’d made Sapphire go back alone last night, but there was no way she was going to show up to the Hive still high out of her mind. She’d offered to spilt her share of Joy, but Sapphire abstained. At least she probably felt a lot better than Sera did today.

She had started to get better at meditation. Yesterday, she sat for almost half an hour without moving and occasionally had long stretches of total focus on the breath, filtering out extraneous thoughts. But she hadn’t experienced the bliss others spoke of, the awakening, the out-of-body experience when they let go of all pain and bodily sensation, like their souls had left and floated above them. All she felt was some minor satisfaction that she was briefly able to let go of her thoughts. But it was nothing compared to what she felt on Joy.

She went straight to the hall, figuring if she slipped in quietly enough, maybe her lack of presence all morning would go undetected. The women were deep in the zone, the only sound the sucking of air through the thirty or so nostrils gathered. Sera crept as quietly as possible and made it to her spot before she realized she forgot to grab a cushion. Rather than risk disturbing people, she let her butt ache until she couldn’t take it anymore. As Orlanda would say, “The goal isn’t just to seal yourself away from all distractions, but be able to ignore them when they do occur.” Rather than beat herself up for being forgetful, why shouldn’t it be on them, an “opportunity for empathy,” to “observe their own negativity,” and consider that one of their fellow womyn might be suffering from a sore ass.

When Sera got back to her spot and settled, she took several long, deep breaths, conscious of her body in space and the air travelling in and out of her. But once again, distraction came easily.

She kept re-living her strange and beautiful night. It exceeded all her expectations. She had worried the crowd would either be a bunch of method out metalheads, or old-timer, country music types. Though both groups were represented, there was so much more. She hadn't danced that hard in ages. It helped that the drummer, Baby, was spinning so much good music. And the Joy didn't hurt, either.

In the end, she was glad she'd stayed. The night brought her back to her element: performance. At the Hive, she had to hide the wildness, whereas last night she was able to unleash it. Sapphire had noted the change, saying, "My God, I had no idea who you really were."

Now she sensed new possibilities blooming: a new band, a new drug, and a possible new connection to explore. The problem was, what to do about the Hive?

While peaking on Joy, she'd had several revelations. One was that she realized she wasn't a total introvert or extrovert but felt best with a healthy balance. She couldn't see sequestering herself away, as many in the Hive seemed to, especially while excluding an entire gender. Though a break was good, she also felt like the ultimate point of her feminism was equality and unity, not just empowerment. And it didn't help anyone by hiding. What were all these powerful ladies doing, living like they were in a harem? The only difference was that there was no man to please, though Orlanda did her best to fulfill that role. Sera even had her suspicions that sex was involved. She'd heard noises at night during her wanderings, but it was difficult to tell where exactly they were coming from, and if it were one, two, or a group of people.

Instead of all this meditation, why weren't they out in the streets, raising hell? By keeping themselves apart, weren't they just abetting the patriarchy more than defeating it? Orlanda would say that true freedom came from within, and that no one could hope to free

anyone else if they weren't free themselves. But the process seemed like it could last a lifetime, and the results could still be so intangible.

What did it mean, to be "free?" To Orlanda, it wasn't just freedom from the constraints of an unequal society, but from the desires of the mind and body. To "wake to a state free from suffering." For Sera, a certain amount of suffering seemed inevitable. Life had light and dark shades. It had its victories and defeats, the good and the bad. Constant happiness wasn't a sustainable goal, and maybe it shouldn't be. Otherwise, she might as well have kept taking drugs.

Sera wanted the fullness of expression, and the ability to channel it through her music. Her problem with the Hive was this idea of getting rid of all cravings to find bliss. Maybe it sounded good in theory, but she preferred the idea of embracing desire until it ran its inevitable course. Food became shit in the end, but that didn't mean you should stop eating. Wasn't lack of desire ultimately the same as death?

This was less an issue if you were convinced, as Orlanda seemed to be, that death wasn't the end. Some of her reasons were scientific: time was relative; energy couldn't be created or destroyed. "We've always been here, in one form or another, and we'll be here again after this body passes," she said once, as if the soul were a hermit crab, forever trading shells. "We live in this paradox. On the one hand, we are all timeless, ageless souls; on the other, we have bodies that will grow old, wither, and die. So naturally we spend our days traumatized, with a hole in our heart the size of God."

Sera was sure she'd heard the last phrase somewhere before, fairly certain that Orlanda had cribbed a lot of her beliefs, but that didn't bother her. What was harder for her to accept was blind faith, the allegiance to something without direct experience. She grew up surrounded by it, and witnessed first hand how it could lead to all kinds of magical thinking and hypocritical

actions. “It was God’s plan,” or, on the inverse, “Satan possessed my soul.” These were just ways of not taking responsibility, just as leading a “spiritual life” often meant separating from everyday life. Even the Buddha had to leave his wife and kids to find his bliss. Sera wondered what the Hive would say about that. And she might’ve asked, were she allowed to speak yet.

It wasn’t that Sera didn’t believe in the idea of a soul. But it was also a personal thing, impossible to prove, and therefore the perfect pitch to hinge a movement on. Sera had developed her own philosophy since her great escape from Love’s Way: *we’re born to die, so, in the meantime, we should live*. Sitting on her ass trying not to think seemed like the opposite of that.

The one area she felt the most alive was music. But the lifestyle had led to indulging habits that weren’t necessarily helping her life. Ever since she discovered her mother’s stash of half-smoked roaches and burned them down with her best bud Billy while they jammed on drums and keyboards together, Sera had known the joys of that perfect union: drugs and creativity. Unfortunately, it wasn’t always sustainable. Over the years since, she’d seen so many artist friends lose themselves to addiction when they let the drugs become more important than their art.

Maybe filling a void was a fool’s errand. Some holes couldn’t be filled. The better notion was to dance around the holes. At least, that felt true for Sera’s life. A balance between punk rock and Zen. It didn’t mean cutting herself off to anything, but in fact, embracing everything in moderation. This was not the way of the Hive. They dealt in extremes. Total abstinence. Total silence. But hadn’t society already done a good job silencing women? Wasn’t it time for them to speak up, not shut down?

“Gently return to your bodies,” Orlanda said in her soothing alto, bringing the group out of their meditation. But Sera had never really left. She spent the entire session not meditating,

but thinking through her life. And she wasn't sorry.

The room started to clear, and Sera stacked her cushion with the others and headed for the exit. Orlanda cut her off.

“Valeria, would you mind staying after with me for a moment?” she asked. Sera nodded. Orlanda led her to the altar, where they sat on cushions and waited for the others to leave. As soon as the last one shut the door, Orlanda spoke.

“I'm not going to ask you to explain where you were. As I said in the beginning, this is your home, and you're free to come and go. However, I do think that perhaps I had you wrong. I suppose you can only tell so much by what someone has written. Though I still believe you may need us, I now see that the timing may not be right. What do you think? Oh, and yes, you can talk now, though I'm sure you've already broken that vow anyway.”

While Sera had been thinking the exact same thing, now that Orlanda articulated it, and seemed on the verge of kicking her out, something in her rebelled.

“I've struggled, it's true, but doesn't everyone?” she said.

“Everyone doesn't start sneaking out in the first week. I've known only one to do that, and she didn't last here, either. Not at first. But then she came back. And that's what I wanted to tell you. You're always welcome back when you're ready.”

She started blowing out candles as if she'd said the final word. But Sera had more to say.

“Can I at least stay until the ceremony tonight?” she asked. It wasn't that she didn't agree with Orlanda. But she also still needed a place to stay, and some money, and she recalled what Sapphire had said about Eden, and how she'd learn about it after he vow of silence ended.

“I'm afraid you haven't earned it, yet,” she said, blowing out the final candle. The hall went dark. “All I asked for was one week. Like I said, when you're ready, we can try again.”

Back in the dining hall, Sera ate her last lunch, half-listening to the ladies' conversations about the latest astrological forecasts. She shared a few knowing smiles and eye-rolls with Sapphire, but, other than that, made no effort to communicate with anyone. Because she still wasn't supposed to speak, she had no way of telling them that this would be her last lunch. And Orlanda didn't make an announcement, either, though it wasn't surprising. Announcing a woman's failure wasn't exactly the best way to boost morale.

Still, she had trouble leaving without any acknowledgement. So, just as the lunch hour was ending, she stood up on a picnic bench, and cleared her throat.

"Hi everyone. I know I'm not supposed to talk, but I just couldn't leave without thanking all of you for the opportunity to be here. If you're interested, I'll be playing music Saturday nights at the Apocalypse Lounge not too far from here."

The women looked shocked, turning to Orlanda to see her reaction. As usual, Orlanda stayed calm, but Sera could sense a suppressed rage brewing behind her eyes. She tightened her face and forced a smile. "Everyone, let's thank Sera for giving it her best try. In the end, that's all we can ask."

The room burst out in finger snapping. Sera tried to hold it back, but her laughter came out anyway. She dropped her face in her hands, trying to pull it off as crying. She gave a wave and left the room.

Less than an hour later, she was packed and on the road again. Sapphire came out to the van to wish her safe travels.

"Where will you go?" she asked.

"Not far, for now. I'll probably be living in my van a while, try to find a shady spot to park. But if you still sneak out to go to the Apocalypse, I'll see you there."

“Actually, Orlanda recommended I not do that for a while. And I think she might be right. I kind of lost my way.”

“Are you serious?”

Sapphire nodded, the color drained from her face. It made Sera want to grab her, throw her in the van, get her away from this place. But it wasn't up to her. Young as Sapphire was, she was still an adult, and had to make her own decisions.

Sera made hers. Although, when she thought about it later, driving back towards the center of Boiltown, she realized Orlanda had really been the one to make it for her. She had a strange feeling it had all been a test. Had she passed or failed? And why did Orlanda seem so confident that she'd be back some day? Did Orlanda know something she didn't?

She was tempted to turn around, drive back, force Orlanda to explain herself. Or was that just what the matriarch wanted? It was the same way she felt about opiates. She was glad to leave them behind, but she missed them right away. So many times she'd been tempted to return. But she didn't. She kept moving forward, straight into the unknown.

11.

Several days after Ray met Sera, they had their first real rehearsal. Ray was busy cleaning out the practice space in the back room at the Apocalypse. It had basically become his second home, but he'd let it get as filthy as his first one. He preferred it in there during the hotter summer months because it got less sun, and, with the swamp cooler filled with ice, kept relatively cold.

When Sera showed up, he was only halfway through bagging all the trash, and she offered to help.

“No, you relax, have a beer, or a bong rip, whatever’s your poison,” he said.

“I’d rather help, to be honest. I’m a bit wound up from that drive.”

She told him she just got a job at the Treasure Trove, a thrift store in nearby Paradise. Ray tried to spend as little time as possible in the “city,” though he did have to go there occasionally for groceries and supplies.

As they swept and mopped and bagged up the trash, Sera asked him where it all went.

“Once a week a guy we pay a guy with a truck to do a dump run,” he said.

“So you do have services.”

“Yeah, just homegrown, like everything else here. A lot of people don’t want to pay for it, though, so they end up burning their trash.

“Sounds awful.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty toxic. I’m trying to change things, get people to compost, but a lot of them are pretty stuck in their ways.”

“I won’t even ask about recycling.”

By the time they were done with the cleaning, they’d both worked up a sweat, settling on

the couch and popping beers.

“So where do you get your food?” she asked.

“The store, mainly, like anywhere else. Though some keep it real rustic and hunt or trap. Mule deer and quail are the most sought after, though some will eat coyote or armadillo or whatever other god-awful meat you can get out here. Some fish Lake Chartreuse, which I find frightening. That thing is so polluted. And, of course, you can grow stuff, though that takes some serious effort, too.”

Ray told her more about the illustrious history of the area now known as Boiltown. How the old ghost town used to be a mining town called Cisco, but the conditions were so extreme that its population never rose above the hundreds, and was all but abandoned by the 20s. The nearby Paradise became more developed, and by the 50s had briefly resurfaced as a recreation area for C-list celebrities as an alternate to Palm Springs. They were drawn in by the lake, less polluted at the time. But when it started being used as a dumping ground, the lack of rainfall and irrigation took its toll, and the water was no longer safe. Paradise prices dropped, and several people lost their houses, opting to settle in the former ghost town, latter dubbed Boiltown. Eventually, the town spread out, attracting other dropouts, druggies, and Nuclear age paranoiacs looking to settle as far from regular society as possible. Any plot of unregulated land in the area was free to squat on, provided you got there first. They learned how to grow food even in harsh, desert conditions, composting everything including their own feces, utilizing self-sustaining wind and solar energy devices as well as borrowing from the irrigation canals that ran through the edge of town. No one paid rent. The general ethos was that life should be a party, so there was usually plenty of booze and drugs to go around, though this did lead to occasional thievery and all-around sketchiness.

“And we do tend to attract some serious head cases from time to time,” he said. “They rarely last around here. The arm of Boiltown justice is swift and sometimes brutal.”

He decided not to elaborate, for fear of scaring her off. Not that he thought she had to worry much. From what he could tell, she was solid and could take care of herself.

“It’s kind of a weird mix around here,” he said. “Most Boilers are individualists who came here to get away from all authority. But then they find out they’re in a difficult place to live, and end up having to help each other. It’s like a constant balancing act.”

“I imagine, if you’re on your own, it gets lonely, too.”

“Yeah, well... sometimes we like it lonely. And sometimes... we don’t.” He looked at her, smiled, and then chugged the last of his beer. “So whaddya say? Shall we make some noise?”

She nodded, and they set up their equipment. Ray fed her a cable from the PA, while he hooked into his vintage tube amp. She opened her strange, boxed instrument, and plugged it in.

“Where’d you get that thing, anyway?” Ray asked.

“This tech-geek I befriended in Austin made it for me. I basically described what I wanted – a drone box in a Theremin with a small keyboard – and he put it together it. Pretty cool, isn’t it?”

“It’s perfect for you.”

Sera suggested they play a song of his first, but she seemed to have trouble working her way into it. Everything she did kind of overpowered what he was doing. It was much better the other way, him finding parts to her songs, but even then she seemed tense, unable to abandon herself to the sound the way she had onstage.

They took a break. Ray lit a spliff and offered it to Sera. She hesitated.

“It’s up to you,” he said. “I think it might help loosen us up.”

“It’s just been a while for me. So I might really get stoned.”

“Just take a puff or two. It’s not the most chronic weed. Mostly shake, mixed with tobacco.”

She took a couple tokes. He put the rest out and suggested they improvise, like they had the other night. “And let’s pretend there’s an audience out there we gotta impress,” he said.

Sera set a slow, basic beat from her drum machine and started a bass line on her keyboard. Ray found a counterpoint part on guitar, and a slinky sound began to form. She sang more rhythmically than usual, sharp consonants and nonsense words. This time something clicked. The weed probably didn’t hurt, allowing them to be less critical and in their heads and feel the music all the way to their bones.

In less than an hour, they’d written a new verse together. In another hour, they’d come up with a second part. A chorus? Maybe. Time would tell.

Over the next few weeks, Sera continued to meet Ray three times a week for songwriting sessions, and eventually with Baby to add drums to the mix. They continued building off improvs, and gradually the songs sprouted and took form. Songs ran the gamut of moods: fast and slow, bombastic and soft, sometimes building to a climax, other times remaining at one level throughout. Sera remained the lead singer, and Ray would occasionally harmonize in his low baritone. Sometimes they used Sera’s songs as blueprints, adding layers and new parts, filling out the sound. Other times, they’d jam, and shape them from there, always leaving room for spontaneity. After a month or so, they really came together as a band, wordlessly shaping the songs not through conversation so much as actually *playing*.

Her connection with Ray developed in a similar way. It was awkward, at first, after the

explosiveness of that initial meeting. But the more they worked together, the stronger the connection. They'd hang out after their practices, drinking, smoking, chatting, but the romance didn't blossom right away. It was only after another month when they got loaded one night after an open-mic and ended up back at Ray's trailer. The first time, he came quickly, but the second time, she made him wait until she had. Their chemistry in bed was a bit like the band's: an initial rush followed by awkwardness that led to an eventual awakening.

By their second month together, she'd pretty much moved in. Though it was tight quarters for two, they made it work. Luckily, they always had the rehearsal room at the Apocalypse and would end up spending more time in there than in the trailer.

Making music by consensus wasn't always easy. They were both highly opinionated and stubborn. When tempers flared and fights broke out, Baby often assumed the role of mediator. Sera was more extreme, sometimes even threatening to can the whole thing. Ray didn't mind. He knew she was just expressing her rage so she could let it go, and that she'd come back around.

The words, both the titles and the lyrics, were often a point of contention, though Sera wrote most of them. During a run-through of a song called "Artificial Women," Ray stopped in the middle, asking, "That line about '*there's no need for fantasy, it's all been synchronized.*' What does that even mean?"

"What do you think it means?"

"I have no idea, that's why I'm asking."

"It's kind of about how soon we might be able to create artificial environments that seem to satisfy all our desires and how dangerous that could be."

"Okay, but how does that relate to the rest of the song? I thought it was about shallow women."

“You think I’d write a song degrading women? It’s about men making fem-bots and using them as sex slaves. Although it’s really about how patriarchy has made us into robots already.”

“God, I hate that word.”

“What word? Robots?”

“Patriarchy. It’s just so overplayed.”

“Well, I hate living in it, but I don’t really have a choice, do I?”

Baby smashed a cymbal to break them up, his usual technique. “Can we just rehearse the song and worry about the words later?” he said.

After they started performing more regularly and longer sets at the Apocalypse, Ray began to suspect that, for Sera, having a rock band wasn’t quite enough. It was partially a vehicle for her larger concerns, most of which had to deal with the role of women and the marginalized of society, how she wanted to inspire a revolution. The movement came first, music a close second.

Some nights, lying in bed together, she’d try to describe her vision.

“Too many female musicians use their sex to sell their music, or else go the opposite route, arty but sexless,” she said one night. “I want it all. Great, subversive songs which ooze female sexuality, not the cliché, ass and titties kind, but real feminine power.”

“And you’re sure you’re not a lesbian?”

Her eyes widened, and she sat up in bed. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It’s a joke.”

“It’s not funny. Also, I’m sure I’m bisexual, in case you didn’t know.”

“I didn’t, actually, but I’m not shocked or anything. I’m more surprised that you never

brought it up in the six months we've known each other."

"Has it been that long?" she said. "I guess it just didn't come up. We've been more focused on the music, you know? And I also like relationships, so I'm not really interested in fucking anyone else right now."

"Neither am I."

It was as close to a "commitment" conversation as they'd ever had.

The Riot Choir had begun headlining every other Friday, which soon became as much a draw as the open mics. Word had spread about the band to other towns, and soon their gigs were packed. The more money they made from donations, the more Joy they started indulging in, using it as fuel when their inspiration began to wane. Eventually, they even used it before performances and noticed how their heightened energy also seemed to rile up the crowds. They kept saying they had it under control, and they still were only using a couple times a week. When they started to record a demo with a friend's equipment, they said they'd stop using for a while.

One night at a gig, Sera disappeared, and when she came back, Ray was sure she was high. He didn't say anything until after the show, which was better than ever, so it was hard to complain too much. She said a friend offered her a bump, so what was she going to do, refuse? That would be rude. He reminded her of their vow, to which she replied, "Vows are made to be broken."

Though the drug use didn't seem to hurt the band, it did start to wear on them. Sometimes Sera wouldn't come home, and he knew she was out high somewhere. Then he started doing the same. Joy was easier than the messiness of intimacy. It provided all the feelings of love without the baggage. And the times they'd use together, they felt closer than ever, secure in the notion

that everything was going to turn out fine.

The one time he worried that they were becoming addicts, she tried to downplay it.

“It’s a phase,” she said. “It’ll pass. We just need to ride it out. This is how I am. I go deep into something, long enough to figure out what I have to figure out, and then I’m done.”

“Is that what you’re doing with me, too?”

“No,” she said. “Of course not.”

But she didn’t look him in the eye when she said it.

As the band’s popularity grew, their fans, especially Sera’s female fans, would flank the front of the stage, hanging on to every word, every gesture that she made. Sometimes Ray wondered if they’d come for the band at all, or if they just came for her. As their adoration grew, he saw a change come over Sera as well. She got better, sharper, more refined, like a diamond. She poured all her energy into the music, and the vision for the show. Unfortunately, that left little time for Ray. It got to the point where they rarely slept together anymore.

Eventually, Ray turned to Joy to fill the void. It was too hard to stand back and watch Sera have all the attention and all the fun. The band’s popularity also meant he got offered a lot of drugs by fans who just wanted to hang out with him. He’d moved on to snorting, just a little at first, but when it got less effective, he upped the dosage.

The shows got bigger. Sera collaborated with a local artist to project images on them while they played. She also teamed up with modern dancers to help with some of her moves, and to back her up during certain songs. She even got someone to design specific light effects for the songs. Whenever Ray sat in on the production meetings with all the other collaborators Sera had lined up, he felt he was only getting in the way. They were all female and/or queer. He stood out, the lone straight dude. No one seemed to listen much to his opinions, and so he eventually

stopped going. At the end of the day, Sera was the front-woman, the visionary, the guiding light. He followed, trying to keep up as best he could. But she was a burning comet, scorching everything in her path. He worried someday she'd burn him, too, and fly off forever.

12.

Sera was operating on a steady diet of tomato juice, potatoes, and Joy. She'd cut out everything else: alcohol, weed, meat, sex, even sugar, except for the naturally occurring kind. It was all to better service the band, the music, the movement. Their shows became a major local attraction. The Apocalypse was more popular than it had ever been, and visitors began to outnumber the locals. It was fine when the crowd was on board with them, but occasionally groups of tourists showed up who were clearly out of their element, looking more like they should be at a cheesy Hollywood dance club. That really pissed Sera off.

One night she saw a lot of "bros" in the crowd, clean cut guys in khakis and blue button-downs, all grouped up and ogling the more scantily clad women around. Though Hilde usually managed to either eighty-six guys like that, or make them feel really uncomfortable until they left, with the amount of people the club now drew, she'd become overwhelmed with her bartending duties.

Sera liked to open shows with a feminist salvo, which she pointedly performed while staring down the bros. One of them shouted, "Just play some music."

"Just kill yourself," she shouted back.

Later, a few of them threw money at her dancers. She picked it up and burned it with a lighter, all the while saying, "Your money's won't save you... Your money's no good here..."

"So this is the part of the evening when we offer free castrations on stage," she said between songs, eyeing the bros. They booed. "You're free to leave. In fact, please leave."

But they didn't. For some reason, they stayed, and got more belligerent. During the next song, a beer bottle came flying at the stage, just missing her. She couldn't see who'd thrown it,

but assumed it was one of the bros. She jumped into the audience, flailing her arms and smacking as many of the guys as she could. Ray joined in, trying to diffuse the situation, but one of the bros took the opportunity to punch him in the face. That spurred a full-on brawl, mostly locals vs. bros, until it spilled outside and the bros fled.

Afterwards, Ray was pissed, but he seemed to blame Sera more than them. “I’m not even sure they threw it,” he said. “And even if they did, you were provoking them the whole time.”

“You’re going to take their side?”

“I’m not taking sides.”

“Did you see the fucking looks they were giving? Not just to us, but to all the women around who were just trying to dance without being ogled?”

“Sure, they’re probably dicks, but all they were doing was looking. I didn’t see them grab anyone. Try to have some empathy. They probably just don’t know any better.”

“That’s all I was doing. Trying to help them know better.”

“But why do you have to be so judgmental about it?”

“Because the world judges me, every day. Even in Boiltown, where it’s a fucking billion degrees, I can’t walk around in shorts and a tank top without getting catcalls. You don’t understand, because you don’t experience it.”

“True. But I don’t do it, either.”

“That’s not enough. You have to say something. Otherwise, you’re encouraging them. Those dudes do it because historically they’ve been able to get away with it. Well, not here. Not while I’m around.”

Ray let it go, but she could tell he struggled with this so-called “radical” side of her, which she felt wasn’t radical at all, but all about equality. A lot of Boilers, for all their outsider-

ness, still held onto antiquated gender roles. The men were manly. The women were girly. Unless they were gay, and then it was the opposite. But either way it felt restrictive and generally more imposed by the men around. Which might be why a lot of them ended up alone.

Even Sera had become more synonymous with Ray, and not the other way around. She lost track of the times she heard herself referred to as “Ray’s girlfriend,” and the times she responded, “I have a name.”

Sometimes she wondered if the city wasn’t a better place for her after all.

Though the bar brawl may not have been good for their relationship, it did bring the band more attention, especially when a video that someone had filmed on their cellphone went viral. Invariably, it caught the attention of some labels, some of whom came with record deal offerings, all of which Sera rejected.

“We should at least hear them out,” Ray said one day after receiving a slew of email inquiries.

“Why? We agreed to do this all ourselves, at least for a while. They just want a piece of the pie. But what do they really do for us?”

“I don’t know... Exposure? Tours? Connections?”

Sera read off a list of bands that some of the labels put out. “Heard of any of them?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean...”

“It means they’re not making much money, and probably almost all of it goes to the label, which is run by businessmen, not artists. Only huge bands make any money and can afford any kind of independence. So why settle on something small when we can get the same results ourselves?”

In the end, Ray agreed, but begrudgingly. She assuaged his doubts by listing a few of the

larger, well-respected independent labels that she hoped to land, but it was going to take more effort to get there.

They did get one offer they considered, not from a label, but a promoter. The guy was from LA and had been to a couple of their shows and fell in love with both the band and the Apocalypse. He wanted to throw a festival, a kind of mini-Coachella, only with more underground bands, and thought it would be the perfect venue. He wanted to call it “Dystopia in the Desert.”

They were both leery, at first. They feared Boiltown and the Apocalypse were already overexposed, and didn’t like the idea of promoting the “weirdness” factor to a bunch of rich kids from the city. But when the promoter told them the headliners would be KRASH, a legendary group of British anarchists who pioneered the whole “tribal punk” sound, they couldn’t refuse. If there was any band the three of them could agree had influenced them, it was KRASH. Her original name, KUNT, had been an homage.

As preparations for the festival got under way, they set a rigorous practice schedule. In two weeks, they finished three new songs, created new outfits, and even shot a video with their buddy who had a camera, a kind of arty-snuff film told in the point of view of a female serial killer for the song, “Jane The Ripper.” Sera wanted to make it their biggest show yet, dreaming up all kinds of wild ideas.

“We’ll get fire dancers and burlesquers, those guys that beat on oil drums, and the Cirkus Ridikulus sideshow performers. Each one can come out during a different song, until the whole stage is just full of freaks.”

“Don’t you think that might distract from us?” Ray offered.

“So what? It’s not all about us.”

“Well, it’s not all about guys lifting things with their nipples, either.”

“What if we just did all that in the last song?” Baby suggested. “That way, it’ll be this epic surprise. Plus, it already has that build.”

They both agreed that was the best plan. Without Baby around, Sera started to wonder if they’d ever agree on anything.

As the event approached, Sera poured all her energy into it. This left little room for her sex drive or much of any drive other than for the show. It got to the point where she’d be up half the night planning and then crashing for a few hours on the sofa, waking up and getting right back to work. They’d both started snorting Joy just to keep their energy up.

Just when it seemed like everything was ready, that they were actually going to pull it off, the promoter called with a major problem: KRASH cancelled. It was supposed to be their big reunion show, the first time they’d played in over a decade. Apparently, the two leaders, who’d become bitter rivals after the band broke up, got into a huge fight again and decided to call it off. It was less than a week before the show, and he couldn’t find a suitable replacement.

“The good news,” Josh said, “is that now you’re the headliner.”

It wasn’t great news. Half the reason they wanted to do the festival was because of KRASH. It was also the reason Sera had put so much time and energy, not just to please the audience, but to impress her favorite band. She had visions of being on tour together, of KRASH passing the mantle onto them.

Now the pressure was on. They had to do it all on their own.

The event only days away. They ran the last number through once with the whole group for the first time. Though dynamic, Sera thought it was still lacking a certain something, but couldn’t put her finger on it.

That night she had a dream. They were performing the number, and, at the song's climax, someone drove a truck into the crowd, not like plowing people down, but slowly, allowing them time to make way. And there were dancers in the back of the truck who handed out drumsticks to the crowd, who started banging on the truck, using it as a giant percussion instrument. The band left the stage and joined them, and the truck backed out of the barn, until everyone was outside by a bonfire, drumming and dancing under the stars.

"That sounds insane," Ray said in the morning when she told him her dream.

"Like insanely good?"

"Like... insanely dangerous."

"Why? It'll be going slow."

"What about fumes?"

"The barn door will be open. And it won't be in there for long. Hell, we don't even have to have the engine on, as long as someone can push it."

Ray kept shaking his head. "I don't know."

"It's what the show was missing... total audience involvement. I feel like there's all this stuff happening onstage, but nothing offstage."

"Fine. Okay. Whatever."

"You don't seem sure."

"It doesn't matter what I think, it's going to happen anyway," he said, sitting up in bed and lighting a cigarette. "I had a dream, too, by the way. It was about us."

"Good or bad?"

"What do you think?"

Sera grabbed a cigarette from his pack. "Let's not get into that right now."

“Why not?”

She leaned back and blew out a stream of smoke. “Because I think it’s a big talk, but one we should have after the show. Don’t you think?”

“You mean, like wait to break up?”

“I mean, like wait to talk.”

He sighed, shaking his head. “Fine,” he said.

She knew it wasn’t, but she also knew to say anything more would just start the conversation neither really wanted to have. They left it at that.

The night of the show, the Apocalypse was packed like never before, over capacity. Even though KRASH had left the bill, few had asked for refunds. A policeman even showed up, obviously catching wind of the large number of cars out on the highway, heading towards Boiltown. Hilde decided to keep the moonshine under wraps for the night and just serve beer. This clearly annoyed some regulars, but it was probably worth it to avoid another brawl situation or a citation from the cops.

The band that played before them were a bunch of twenty year olds from LA who basically played their laptops. Baby described them as “karaoke rock,” which wasn’t far off. Surprisingly, a lot of the crowd didn’t seem to care, bouncing around and singing along. Sera couldn’t decide if this was a good or bad thing. Either the Riot Choir would appear dated by being in their thirties and actually playing instruments, or they’d win the young crowd over, show them a kind of dynamic performance that they weren’t used to.

“Thank you, Paradise,” the young female singer said to the crowd at the end of their set.

“This is Boiltown, sister!” Hilde shouted from the bar.

“Sorry, Boiltown. It’s confusing.”

“Just the way we like it!” Hilde shouted back, making the crowd howl. It gave Sera some hope. They seemed to get it.

One of the best parts of the festival, besides how they managed to pull in a crowd, was that they provided roadies. Their gear was set-up, tested, and tuned before they even hit the stage. Sera felt like royalty, for once. She always wanted to make a grand entrance, but it was tough when the audience saw her fumbling around with cords and sound-checking beforehand. The band was able to take their positions without being seen. Sera waited in the back of the crowd, a cordless microphone in her hand.

The promoter wanted to announce them, so he took the stage first. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “Let’s put our hands together for your headliners, Boiltown’s favorite bunch of nihilists... The Riot Choir!”

Opera came blasting from the speakers, a high-voiced soprano singing an aria. This was Sera’s idea, to start the show with music so left field, people would drop any and all expectations for what was to follow. Projections began to play against the backdrop, a reel put together by Zillah, a local trans artist, showing a lot of slow motion riot scenes from different eras: Watts, Los Angeles, Ferguson, Stonewall, Paris, Cairo, Tiananmen Square, all the young people protesting, dancing, running wild through the streets, throwing rocks and bottles, police in riot gear bashing them with sticks. It was what Sera referred to as “setting the tone.”

As the aria climaxed, Baby was supposed to start the set with a steady kick drum, like a heartbeat. But before he could start, Sera spoke over the music.

“We’re not actually nihilists,” she said. “Nihilism is stupid. My mother didn’t believe in anything in the end, and she killed herself. We believe that life has meaning, regardless of the reality of death. So fuck Dystopia, and fuck Apocalypse. We’re here to celebrate life.”

A few cheers rose from the crowd, but mostly they looked around in stunned silence, trying to figure out where the voice was coming from.

Baby dropped the beat. Ray came out and strapped on his guitar. They were both dressed in their usual black. Sera was supposed to wear the silver jumpsuit, but suddenly it seemed wrong, too gaudy for the occasion. She quickly approached Nat, the sound woman who was adjusting knobs in the back, asking her if she had any electrical tape. She handed Sera a roll. She took off her jumpsuit, leaving her panties on and taping X's over her nipples. Then she resumed her place in the back of the audience.

“The universe...” she said into the mic, crawling through the crowd, who parted, letting her pass. “The universe didn't start...” She was halfway to the stage. The music started to build. “The universe didn't start with a whimper.” She made it to the lip of the stage. The cymbals swelled. “It started... with a BANG!”

The lights blasted the stage, and the band kicked into full gear. Sera hit a high note on the Theremin. Ray chugged along, his chords as cutting as ever. The crowd was swept up in the spirit, jumping along to the beat, fully engaged, just as she'd hoped.

The song followed its usual structure until the moment the band came to an abrupt stop. Then Sera screamed: “We will not be silent!”

There was supposed to follow a long period of silence, but of course the crowd thought the song had ended, and cheered accordingly. She waited, head down, until Baby counted them back in, hitting the chorus one last time. The audience joined in the chant, everyone singing, “We will not be si-lent!”

They'd reached a new level, some kind of intersection between art and catharsis. The only challenge now was to keep it going.

Song after song, they were pulling it off, performing like it was both their first and last time, like it never happened before and would never be repeated.

Though their structures were intact, they also found room to improvise around the songs, keeping everything fresh. “This is not a test,” Sera ad-libbed at one point. “This is not an experiment, or a trial run, or a fucking work-in-progress. This is your life, for better or worse, till death do you part from the thing you call you. So what are we going to do about it in the meantime? Are we going to accept things the way they are? Or are we going to tear down the motherfucking system?”

It all came together for the final number, “Let’s Have a Riot,” their manifesto, the big number. As planned, the auxiliary performers came out one by one, starting with the gentle strains of Plastic Pete and his musical saw. Then came two guys wielding chain saws, revving and making sparks. The oil drummers joined in next, then the Cirkus crew, flanking the sides of the stage. The fire dancers appeared in the audience, where the crowd parted, making room for the barrage. Once Baby got the beat going, the whole room was dancing. Sera leapt off the stage and joined them.

And then, the big climax: The barn doors opened, and the truck rolled in. Everything was running perfectly. The crowd took the sticks from the dancers in back and started banging away on the truck. The performers and audience came together until there was no difference, until individual release became collective catharsis, joined by the communal pulse of music. For those final few minutes, it was everything Sera had hoped for.

But, like most fantasies, the rapture didn’t last. As the rhythmic fever spread through the crowd, they began to lose the beat. They overcompensated by getting louder, not restricting their drumming to the truck but hitting any surface they could, the edge of the stage and the bar and

the walls, metal buckets and empty gas canisters and glasses until they shattered, anything and everything that could be struck. They toppled couches, threw chairs, and bottles. The cacophony was immense, and completely chaotic. It had gone from orgy to melee within minutes.

It was too late to pull back. Though Sera appreciated the anarchy, she worried it was spiraling out of control. People piled in and around the truck, and it was no longer safe to back up. They were doing more damage than she expected, smashing the windshields and caving in the hood. Sera signaled the band to stop, but it didn't matter. The audience had taken over, and there was no stopping them.

It all happened so fast. First she heard a scream, craned around to see who it was. By then several voices joined in, all pointing towards the stage, where she saw flames rising rapidly. People began to run for the exits, trampling over each other. Then another fire seemed to break out near the bar. Sera saw Ray still holding his guitar and running through the crowd but couldn't spot Baby through the smoke. As soon as she turned to run, someone collided with her, and they both got knocked down. Heels crunched over her back, crushing her. She covered her head with one hand, and lifted the other. Someone grabbed her wrist, pulled her up. Sera turned to give the other fallen girl her arm but got pushed along by the crowd before she could take it. The fire roared, growing, getting closer. Heat singed her back as she ran. The whole crowd quickened their pace, and she was pushed through it like a lifeboat in a storm-ravaged sea, the waves breaking as she groped for the shore.

And then... the coolness of dirt as she collapsed, away from the collapsing club, safe from the blaze. It took her a minute to regain her senses, and by then it was too late. All she could hear was her heartbeat. Her body survived, the only part that made it out alive.

Part Two

1.

Eden was located in the middle of Paradise, the last place Valero would expect to find it, smack dab between a Waffle House and a Wal-Mart. It was the one venue in town that came anywhere close to the underground scene in nearby Boiltown. Valero parked in the lot next to the large, grey building. Most people passing by might guess the concrete, windowless structure was a self-storage, an auto parts warehouse, or an abandoned jailhouse. They'd be wrong.

Entering Eden was like stepping into a dream. Though the parking was in the front, the entrance was in the back, at the end of a narrow pathway and down a single flight of stairs where a green door was illuminated by a single red bulb. After Valero rung the buzzer, a bouncer in a black suit would check his I.D., frisk his pockets, and allow him to pass into the foyer. It was always strange being on the opposite end of a pat down. When the bouncer finished, Valero always felt like he should frisk him back. The bouncer gave a nod, and Valero was let in past another curtain to a woman a glass booth who took his money, and handed him back the required mask worn by all patrons. It was a simple, black mask that only covered the eyes and upper half the face, yet was still enough to allow most of the clients a certain amount of anonymity. It also depersonalized all the men in the room, allowing greater focus on the women.

Another bouncer escorted him to the main room. On the other side of the black velvet curtains, Valero never knew what to expect.

There were several rooms. Some were dungeons, with various instruments of teasing and torture. Some rooms were less adorned, a few chairs for the men to sit and watch women

perform. Valero entered one of these rooms first. The room was lit by a dim red light, except for the performance area, which was brighter. A performer in a deer costume prowled the stage, embodying the animal completely, its slow movements and sudden skittishness. On the other end of the room, a hunter prowled the stage. They performed a strange dance of chase and seduction, the hunter luring the deer, and the deer turning the tables, overpowering the hunter, and beating him with his own gun. The deer then strung up the hunter against the wall, stripped her half naked, and proceeded to torture her with nipple clamps, clothespins, flogger, and eventually with a dildo.

Valero left after a while, and sought out one of the dungeon rooms. Though he enjoyed watching from time to time, he preferred more hands-on kinds of experiences. Not that he could put his hands on anyone there. Touching the women, even touching yourself, was strictly forbidden at Eden. He'd seen bouncers drag out several men during his time there for breaking these rules. Valero didn't mind the lack of intimate contact. He came to be put in his place.

The first dungeon he found was a little crowded for his tastes, but the second one had only one other man inside, sitting on the floor, his hands chained and his bare ass on the cold concrete. Candles lit the room, casting flickering shadows along the brick walls. Hanging on racks were many devices for torture play: whips of various sizes and functions, ticklers and tuggers, leashes and harnesses, even a pair of swords, which he assumed was just for show, but, then again, it was Eden, so anything was possible. Several pieces of furniture were equipped to subdue and immobilize, many that Valero never had the guts to try, including a wheel in which the sub was strapped and spun while flogged. Dizziness was never his thing, or puking, for that matter.

A woman in a vinyl corset wrapped around her heaving bosom approached him. Valero

had seen her before, though she'd never engaged with him until now. "Did I say you come could in here, pig?"

Valero shook his head, wondering if Jade told her to call him that.

"On your knees," she said, pushing her elbow against his shoulder until he dropped. "I can see we have a bad boy here, today, and you know what happens to bad boys, right? Right?"

"Right."

"Did I say you could talk?" She smacked him hard across his ass with her flogger. "Did I?"

He shook his head, biting his lip to not moan from the pain.

"That's better. But I still don't trust you."

She tied his arms behind his back with leather straps, bent him over and stepped on him, digging the heel from her stiletto into his back until he crumpled. She then yanked him halfway up and stuffed a pair of panties in his mouth, spoke right into his ear, saying, "I've been wearing these for days."

As she proceeded to humiliate and torture him, he fell into a blissful stupor, until he completely forgot who he was supposed to be.

< >

Once his hour was up, he grabbed his belongings at the front and sent a text to Jade: *Meet me in back*. These days, Eden was just the warm-up. The real fun began in the motel, with Jade.

He drove his car to the back entrance, the attendant recognizing him and waving him through. He parked and waited, wondering about the other men who came there. Were they in

power positions like him, men tired of always calling the shots? Did they have wives or girlfriends waiting at home that they loved but didn't desire anymore? Or had they also been left, and this was all they had? And did their appetites, like Valero's, evolve the deeper they went, until what was possible at the Eden just wasn't enough anymore?

Valero liked it a bit rough, and Jade had no trouble providing. Alma, his ex, was never comfortable with violence in the bedroom. Nor was she very dominant, usually preferring he take charge and tell her what to do. He got tired of taking initiative, always calling the shots. But it wasn't a divorceable offense. He never would have left her because their sexual interests didn't always align. When he found the Eden, he figured he could have it both ways. But he figured wrong.

When Jade came out, she wore a long, tan trench coat and heels. Just the sight of her got him excited, the mystery of what was underneath. She got in the passenger seat and he leaned and gave her a peck on the cheek.

"Let's go, bitch," she said.

He drove half a mile to their usual spot, the Paradise Motel. After dropping her off to get the room, he pulled onto a dark side street and walked the half block back to the motel. This was the most stressful part of his nights with Jade. It was in these minutes-when he ran the most risk of being caught. He was less paranoid about it now that he wasn't married, but still, as a Deputy who'd probably be Sheriff one day, he tried to keep his nose clean. Not that he thought he'd bump into anyone he knew around the Paradise Motel, but he couldn't be sure. It was a small town and people talked. The saving grace was that any other locals around the motel would most likely be up to no good, too. It wasn't exactly a five-star luxury inn.

Now that Alma was out of the picture, he could've always hosted on nights he didn't

have his son. But that felt wrong to do it in his family home, even if his family was no longer there. He preferred the sleaziness of the motel encounter. And maybe he liked that tension, the feeling that any minute someone he knew might round the corner and see him for who he really was.

She'd left the door cracked and the lights low, as usual. The room looked empty, but he knew better. The door slammed shut, and Jade grabbed his arm, pulling it behind him. With her other hand, she gripped a hunk of his hair. She smelled of cherries and menthol.

"You're under arrest, pig," she whispered in his ear.

"You're hurting me," he said.

"Shut your mouth. Don't make me use my nightstick on you."

She pushed him against the bed. He craned his head as she whipped open her trenchcoat, revealing a sexy cop outfit underneath. It was complete with a gun belt, tight leather short-shorts, and a blue policeman's jacket zipped down to expose her ample cleavage, and a fake badge, hanging off her left breast.

She pulled the long black weapon from her gun belt, which Valero now saw to be a dildo, and definitely bigger than usual.

"Like it?" she asked.

"Might be a bit much."

"You can handle it, pig."

She forced his head around to face the bed.

"Now I'm going to have to strip-search you, make sure you don't have more contraband."

Her nails scraped their way down across his nipples and under his arms, down his belly and landing at his belt, which she unlatched and yanked off. She pulled his pants down and gave

his ass a few whacks with the belt before wrapping it around his mouth, fitting the buckle between his lips like a gag.

“Good. Now you can’t talk back.”

She resumed her search, hands running up his inner thighs and stopping at his bulge.

“What’s this? Did I say you could get turned on?”

Valero groaned with the belt in his mouth, shaking his head.

“Then why are you?” She yanked down his underwear, exposing his ass. His erection slapped against the bed.

“You’ll be punished for this.” Soft, glossy lips grazed the follicles of his inner ear as she whispered: “Or is that what you want?”

He could hear her greasing the dildo. Beads of sweat poured from his head. He was terrified, exhilarated, dizzy with anticipation.

“Ready?” she asked.

He shook his head and moaned.

“That’s what I was hoping you’d say.”

< >

“Where the hell did you get that outfit?” he asked her later, when they were lying side by side on top of the sheets.

“Halloween surplus store,” she said. “’Tis the season.”

He wanted to wrap his arm around her but he knew it was probably off-limits. Still, she was practically on top his arm already, and all he had to do was move his hand slightly, and he’d

be touching her shoulder. He figured one caress couldn't hurt. Just as he flopped his hand over, she slipped out of bed, crossing the room to get a cigarette from her purse. She put it to her pink lips, and lit it with a match.

“Crack a window, would ya?” he said.

She slid it open, and sat on the windowsill, and blew her smoke out into the night. “It’s getting warmer at nights,” she said. “Summer’s coming on. Does that mean less crime or more?”

“It could go either way. Heat and no school usually means more crime. But some schools are on full year sessions, and a lot of people leave the desert for the summer. So you never know.”

“No summer vacation. What a nightmare. So glad I finished school in the nineties.”

Though he never loved to smoke, the way Jade did it was so sensual, it made him want a drag. She’d inhale a puff, let the smoke curl around her lips, suck it in, and then slowly blow it out. He resisted the urge, found his pants on the floor, grabbed his flask, and took a swig of whiskey. He wished he’d been a little drunker this time. Occasionally it hurt more than he liked, and this had been one of those times. But, like Jade often said, he could take it.

He reached into his other pocket and pulled out the photo.

“Before you go, do you mind if I run something by you real quick?” Valero asked.

“What’s that?”

“I’m looking for someone. It might be a long-shot, but I thought it’s possible she ended up in your circles.”

“Don’t tell me you’re bringing your work into this?”

“Just a little bit.”

“Look, just because I’m dressed like a cop doesn’t mean I am one, too.”

“Come on. Just tell me if she looks familiar.”

He handed her the photo. She held it under the desk lamp.

“She didn’t kill someone, did she?” Jade asked.

“Nothing like that. You know her?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Goes by Sera, maybe Seraphina. Maybe something else, who knows.”

“Why do you think I’d know her?”

“Seems like the type to need quick money, under the table. Figured Eden might be an option. Apparently she’d mentioned the place to her boyfriend before.”

“Well, I don’t know her,” she said, handing him back the photo.

“You sure? Look again.”

She looked at Valero, then back at the photo. He’d done this long enough to know when people were lying. And Jade was lying.

“Not familiar at all?” he asked.

She flicked her ash into a plastic cup. “Always acting, aren’t you?”

“Acting?”

“Yes. Acting like my prisoner, like my little bitch, and now you’re acting like a detective again. Can’t you just be you for once?”

He knew she was teasing, but she also hit a sore spot.

“I am a detective. More or less.”

“That’s your job. But it doesn’t define you.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Do you think I’m always like this? Always performing? Of course not. It would be

exhausting.”

“Are you performing right now?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know anymore.”

For the first time, Valero was getting a glimpse into another side of Jade. Less sure of herself. A little scared, and a little jaded.

“Tell me how you know her,” he said.

He snatched the cigarette from her grip and took a drag. She crossed and re-crossed her legs.

“I don’t,” she said, handing the photo back. “Not really. My boyfriend does.”

There was something cruel in the way she said it, as though she meant to hurt him. This was the first time she mentioned a boyfriend, though he had his suspicions. A woman like that, he couldn’t imagine she was alone in the world, though he’d sometimes fantasize that she was, that they both were, and that they’d met under entirely different circumstances.

He took another drag and handed her back the cigarette.

“But I haven’t seen her around,” she continued. “Not since...” She stopped herself, staring at Valero, clearly wondering what he knew.

“The fire,” he said. “I know all about it. That’s why we’re looking for her. She hasn’t necessarily done anything wrong. We just need to find her. Ask her some follow-up questions. I went to her boyfriend, the guitarist’s place, and he told me she was missing. That one morning he woke up and she was gone. So she may have just left the guy, but since we don’t know her whereabouts, I’m asking everywhere I can.”

“Like I said, I haven’t seen her since that night.”

“So you were there?”

She sighed. Clearly she'd let something slip, more than she meant to.

"Yeah. But I left as soon as I saw that truck roll in. I just had a bad feeling."

Valero thought of all the people in shock scattering through the smoke. Jade could have been any one of them.

She finished her cigarette and dropped it in the plastic cup. They both began collecting their clothes and silently dressing.

"Well, I'm glad you weren't hurt," Valero said at the door. "Did you know anyone who was?"

"The drummer. He was... I mean, *is* a friend of my boyfriend's. Do you know how he's doing?"

"Still in a coma, last I heard."

"Still? That's not good. It's been... two weeks, right? Can I ask you why it's so important you talk to her? I mean, do you think something bad happened?"

"No. But we still have some questions about the fire."

"Wasn't it an accident?"

"Maybe. But still, what accident exactly. How'd the fire start? No one seems to know."

"Does that really matter at this point? Unless someone did it on purpose."

"That's why I'd like to talk to her."

Jade slipped her trenchcoat on and crossed to the table.

"She wouldn't do that," she said.

"So you know her pretty well?"

"Enough to know she wouldn't do that. Not on purpose. She's not a monster."

Jade grabbed the money Valero left on the table and slipped it into her purse.

“Anyone else you know who might want to see the place burn down?” he asked.

“Everyone I know loved it there. We’re all in mourning.”

She steadied herself on the table, looking like she might cry. Valero reached out and squeezed her shoulder. She put her hand over his.

“Warm,” she said.

They stayed like that for a moment, the closest they’d come to an actual embrace. He hadn’t felt this close to anyone since Alma.

“You want to go first?” she asked, pulling her hand away.

“You go ahead.”

He could still feel the softness of her shoulder on his fingertips, even as she shut the door behind her and walked down the hall, even as he heard her car start in the lot and her motor fade in the distance. He turned on the television and sat on the bed, mindlessly switching channels from one to the next, turning the sound loud enough to drown out his thoughts.

2.

Ray hung his head off the edge of the mattress, stuck the dropper up his nose, and squeezed out the last of the joy. He could feel the liquid falling, filling his sinuses, dripping into his brain. Soon every inch of his body would come alive, and for those final, few hours, he could pretend like everything was okay.

The effects took time. Quicker than snorting, but slower than shooting, not that he'd tried that. He stayed upside-down as long as he could, waiting so that every drop would be absorbed. If the stuff didn't kill him, the wait probably would.

Everything was still a mess. He could see it even clearer from his new position. The floor was strewn with tracked-in dirt, beer cans and cigarette butts covered every surface, dust balls gathered in clumps like armies in ambush, ready to take over. All the surfaces, the floors, the walls, the counters, all covered in a thick layer of grime. He could barely summon the energy to throw anything away since the fire, much less dust, sweep, or mop. It all seemed so pointless. It would only get dirty again.

He felt it on him, too, but it was a filth he couldn't remove, no matter how hard he scrubbed.

No wonder Sera left. It had been days, maybe even a week by now, and even longer since the fire, and he still felt her heat everywhere. She had left him in a rage, and it was a relief, at first. She'd been impossible since the fire, but so had he. How could they not be? So many lives, gone. Hilde. Baby, unless he made a miraculous recovery. And even if he did, when he saw what had become of him, would he wish he hadn't?

Ray could feel all the poisons leaking from his body, the tar draining from his lungs, the

toxins emptying out his liver, the bad thoughts in his brain squeezed dry like a sponge. When they came to take him away, all they'd find was a pile of dried-up skin and bones.

It was the last of the Joy from their post-fire binge. Just a thin layer of powder had been left in the capsule. To get the most out of it, he had melted and mixed it with a little water in a spoon and fired it with a flame, like heroin. Shooting it might be more effective, but he hated needles, and anyway he didn't want to leave the trailer to get them.

The longer he hung upside-down, the more his head swelled. It wasn't just the blood rushing it. He'd woken up that morning with a big pimple, perfectly placed on his forehead between his eyes, creating a kind of red, swollen third eye.

He could easily alleviate the pressure by holding his head up, but the longer he remained inverted, the more chemicals he'd absorb. If he quit before it was time, some might drip out his nose, and he needed every precious drop.

He spotted something familiar beneath the sofa, the missing knob from Sera's magic box, the one she'd lost months ago. He remembered their fruitless search, tearing apart the van and the practice space in the back of the Apocalypse, when somehow it had migrated to the trailer all along. Maybe this would be the magnet that would lure her back, or the gift he could present to her when she returned to save him at the last second, a symbol of a love and a musical partnership nearly ended too soon.

Ray replayed the fantasy in his mind. Sera comes back to him. Baby wakes up, his wounds all healed, just some leftover scars that make him look tough. They reform the band, but do it over, do it right this time. They rise from the underground and conquer the mainstream. Sera gets her revolution, and this time, the women win.

He hoped she showed up soon. She didn't have much time left.

That fantasy didn't last long, as long as it took for Ray to realize she wouldn't care about some plastic knob. She'd already replaced it with one she took off an amp, just like she would replace him someday with a newer, better model. She was the special one. What was he? Another white man who played guitar. Big fucking deal.

When Ray got dizzy and the room filled with stars, he knew it was time to sit up. He lifted his head and waited for the room to settle. Sinking back into his pillow, he squeezed his hands into fists, tensing the muscles in his wrists and arms, watching his veins swell with blood. The first signs of Joy began to manifest. His limbs loosened and breath deepened. A satisfaction settled over him like a long held thirst finally quenched.

He read once that a heart had only so many beats per lifetime, so the slower he could get it, the longer he would live. Now he wanted it to go as fast as possible, get it over with sooner than later. He thought of all the people on treadmills, working so hard to get their blood pumping, their heart rates up, not realizing they were actually killing themselves. It almost made him laugh, those fitness freaks thinking they could outrun death when they were only racing towards it.

Death was ever looming. That was the only truth. The rest were masks worn as shield from that ugly reality. At first, it seemed like drugs were the answer, the way to strip off the masks. But there were layers upon layers of them. The more he stripped off, the more he revealed.

When Ray finally left the bed, he felt like he was floating, like his body had gone weightless. He hovered all the way across the room and into the kitchen, stopping at the cabinet where he kept the gun. He slid open the drawer and pulled out the pistol, the nine-millimeter he'd taken from Hilde's place. He knew he had to act fast, do it before he came down and started

to doubt himself. This was the whole reason he'd done the drugs first. He wanted his last moment on earth to be a joyful one.

But where should he do it? Over the sink seemed the most polite place. Easier to clean up. But it was at an awkward height. He hoisted himself onto the counter. There wasn't enough room for him to slide his head over the porcelain without his legs jamming against the wall. He slid off and sat on the floor. The mess didn't matter. No one would want the trailer anyway. They'd probably just burn it with his body, a fitting end.

He checked to make sure the gun was loaded, and was surprised to find his hand shaking. He hadn't realized he was nervous until that moment. He opened the barrel, saw that all six chambers were full. There would be no Russian roulette. No second chances. This was it. Unless...

He looked over at the door, expecting it to open. In a movie, it would. Or the phone would ring at the final second. He hadn't had a working phone in months, so it would have to be the door. But it remained stubbornly in place. This was no movie, no dream from which he would wake. At least, not until he pulled the trigger.

Ray leaned his head back, stared at the ceiling, the blur of the fan blades, whirring. He saw those stars again, flickering at the edges of his consciousness. They blinked and beckoned. Soon their light would be all he'd see.

It was so enticing and so terrifying: to be something and then, in an instant, nothing. How was it possible? How could he be so fragile? He felt like a mountain sometimes, so solid, so immovable. And yet in his lifetime he'd watched all manner of televised disasters befall others: cities devastated by floods, whole villages wiped out by tsunamis, planes crash into

buildings that crumbled to dust. He'd also witnessed first-hand his own mother succumb to cancer, held her bony hand as it tensed for the last time, and then let go.

And he'd seen a fire burn up people he loved. He'd felt the searing heat on his own face, heard the screams, the suffering and terror, and smelled the flesh burning all around him. And what did he do? He ran. He pushed past all the bodies, clamoring for escape. And they told him, after he survived, that he was one of the lucky ones. They didn't know shit. The lucky ones were free. And soon, he would be, too.

He put the gun in his mouth and closed his eyes. He thought of his father, looking down, or maybe up. Shaking his head. "*I knew it would come to this,*" he said. "*Like father like son.*" He thought of his mother, watching all her children, thinking about how fine they all turned out. "*Except that Ray. Where did we go wrong there?*"

The tears felt good rolling down his cheek. He could still cry. This pleased him, even if it was the last time.

His hand shook as he curled his finger around the trigger.

A shot rang out. His head fell back against the cabinet. He waited for the world to disappear. But it didn't.

No smoke came from his gun. No blood ran down the wall. He hadn't pulled the trigger. He was alive.

But the shot, it was real, he was sure of it. It sounded far away, outside of the room. Or was that just his perception? Was it, in fact, his gun? Had he died, and this gun-not-firing was all a dream, his mind avoiding the reality of its own death? Or maybe this was what death was: dissociation.

Someone was yelling. It was definitely coming from outside the trailer. Had the cops finally come for him? Were they going to do the job for him? Death by murder. And yet now, strangely, he wasn't sure he wanted to die. On his own terms, yes. But not on someone else's. Plus in that moment when he thought he'd shot himself, he could recall only one feeling: regret.

He crawled across the room to the front door, cracked it, and peeked out. The light pierced his eyes, blinding him. He blocked the glare with his hand and scanned the road. He saw the bright orange of a pair of shorts. They were worn by his neighbor, Sal. The old man was shirtless as usual, proudly flaunting his gray chest hair and sagging old-man boobs. He had a rifle slung over his shoulder. Ray could still smell the gunpowder. Had Sal finally lost it?

"I surrender," Ray said through the crack.

"I wasn't shooting at you, friend," Sal said. He had a way of saying *friend* that made Ray feel like anything but. Like a lot of the hippy burnouts around Boiltown, Sal had a dark side. He'd been in Vietnam, and sometimes it seemed like he never left. This wasn't the first time the old guy fired off a shot in broad daylight. Usually, though, it was celebratory, a few blasts into the air to mark some momentous occasion, a birthday or a fourth of July or a new year. Something about his scowl told Ray this hadn't been one of those festive type shots.

Ray stuffed the gun into the back lip of his shorts. "Mind if I ask what you were shooting at then?" he asked.

"Is that your mutt?" Sal pointed the butt of his gun towards Ray's trailer.

"What mutt?"

"It ran under your house."

Ray stepped outside and peered into the trailer's dark underbelly, catching a glimpse of quivering tufts of straw-colored fur and a pair of amber eyes, wide with fear. Ray crouched

down, holding out his fist and clicking his tongue. The dog sniffed in his direction, carefully creeping towards him until Ray felt hot breath on to his hand, and the moist stroke of a tongue.

“Yeah, he’s mine,” Ray said. “So please don’t shoot him.”

“It was just a warning shot. He was getting a little too close to my chickens. You might not want to let him out on his own. If he don’t get shot, someone’s liable to scoop him up.”

“Good point.”

The dog turned to offer his butt, which Ray dutifully scratched, causing the dog to roll onto his back, and expose his belly. With a better view, Ray now realized that “he” was actually a “she.”

“How come I never seen him before?” Sal asked.

“Just got him.”

“What’s his name?”

“Fate,” Ray said, uttering the first word that came to mind.

The dog began to crawl closer. Ray worried that if she came out, Sal might notice that she was a girl after Ray had started with all this “he” business. He nudged her back over on her belly and gave her more rubs, stalling her exit.

Sal stared at Ray’s face for a moment. “Are you all right, son?”

“Yeah, never better. Why?”

“You look like shit. And you got something up on your forehead.”

“Oh yeah, it’s a zit. I’ve been meaning to pop it.

“Mighty large one. Friendly suggestion: take a bath. And take that dirty mutt with you.”

With that, Sal hobbled back towards his home, leaning on his rifle like a cane. Ray turned back to the dog, which had finally emerged from under the trailer. Under normal circumstances,

Ray would never have taken her in. But this was no normal dog. This dog had just saved his life.

3.

Sera left Ray in the middle of the night with no destination in mind. She just knew she had to leave. As long as she kept moving, keep the van heading forward, away from town, away from her life, there was some kind of hope on the horizon. Even if it meant burning precious fossil fuels and wasting what little money she had left, she couldn't face another night cramped inside that trailer, reliving their nightmare. No amount of Joy was helping the pain go away. It felt better this way, clear-headed and free, to be stationary but have the world whipping by. She worried if she stopped too long, she'd fall apart.

She also felt safer on the road, less able to be caught. When the cop had come to question them, she thought for sure she was going to get arrested. The fire had been her idea, after all. And the truck. Sure, Hilde okayed it, and the promoter, too, though he made sure she took all the necessary precautions, which she had. The problem was it had started and spread so quickly, and that the two guys armed and ready with extinguishers got pushed away by the fleeing crowd before they could effectively use them.

That's what she told the cop, and he accepted it at the time. But she always feared he'd return, having realized she was to blame all along.

Better to stay moving. Maybe she was meant to be nomadic. She'd lived on the road for years, ever since she left Love's Way, from her first thumbed ride in a stranger's car to her days riding the rails, she enjoyed the feeling of being untethered, unattached to any patch of land or so-called family. She wasn't afraid of getting lost. She couldn't. To get lost you had to be going somewhere.

She pulled off in a town called Mecca to pee. Afterwards, she drove around aimlessly,

found herself veering towards the poorer, sketchier sections, quickly sussing out where the street deals were going down, the places where stares lingered longer from men she passed. She drove long enough to know it was possible to hit the brakes, roll down the window, stick out a wad of cash, and get back some relief. And then she hit the gas, and peeled to the nearest highway.

After miles of endless desert, she finally hit water, the Colorado River, the crooked line that signaled the end of California. As tempting as it was to keep driving, the water beckoned. She skirted the shore until she found an isolated swimming hole. She stripped naked, jumped in the cool, life-affirming waters, and laid out on a warm rock taking in the sun. She stayed until she heard distant voices, and left before they could reach her.

With the sun starting to set, she still hadn't come up with a plan. She was finally feeling a bit more in her skin, her thoughts turning less to doom, though they'd still dip in and out.

The question was: where would she go? It was a question she hadn't answered for herself when she left. She considered contacting Persephone, her half-sister, the only family member from whom she wasn't estranged. The last she'd heard, she was living in Hawaii with her husband and two children. Though Sera had basically blown her off for the last few years, sweet, innocent Persephone wasn't the kind to hold a grudge. She managed to come out of the commune relatively unscathed, partially because she was still young when the whole thing imploded and didn't remember much about it. She was one of the lucky ones.

But Sera didn't have enough money to get to Hawaii and didn't want to lean on her sister for any, whether she had it or not. She thought of selling the van for a plane ticket but wouldn't want to do that until a plan was firmly in place. She figured the most she could get for the hunk of junk around here was a grand, if that, and it would probably take a while to sell. That wouldn't get her too far, though it might be a start.

On the other hand, she needed the van. It was her mobile home, her default. She'd been operating a long time with the policy: *if all else fails, sleep in the van*. And maybe that was the best idea. Keep driving. Drive through Mexico, if need be. Better to be in a place where she didn't speak the language, where there was less chance of her being understood, of hurting anyone.

She still needed money. She could try to get her old job back at the thrift store, but that was chump change and would take forever to save up. In the meantime, she'd be stuck in Paradise. Going back to LA also sounded unappealing, more bad memories waiting for her. There was another idea, one that had been festering for the last few days, like a wound that wouldn't heal. The salve hadn't worked the first time. Maybe she hadn't been ready. If ever she needed healing, the time was now.

There was another, more practical reason as well, that propelled her back to the Hive, despite all that had happened there. It could also mean the chance to work at the Eden, which, as Sapphire had told her, was "quick, easy money." Once she'd again worn out her welcome or was ready to move on, with enough money, she'd have the freedom to go where she pleased.

Surprisingly, once she'd begun the drive, Sera remembered the way perfectly. She even remembered the location where she'd bumped into Jazzmina and the route she navigated through the "pussy boulders" and the cacti-lined road, only in addition to the bras, they were now decked out with tampons.

Her old parking space was still vacant, just as she left it the night of her great escape, as though it was all meant to be, as though she'd just gone for a drive and come back the same night. Yet so much had happened in those nine months. She'd given birth to a band and a movement and then watched it all die. She wondered how much of the news had filtered into the

Hive. They must've heard about the fire, even smelled the smoke. But did they know about the Riot Choir? Did they know Sera was the ringleader?

“Even if you leave, you're always welcome back,” Orlanda had told her. She was about to put those words to the test.

She stood by the entrance, reluctant to knock. Maybe she was making a huge mistake. Maybe they'd soon have her brainwashed, too. What if they really had been drugging the food, as she'd fantasized one night? But then she remembered how good the food actually was, and it had the inverse effect. It made her knock.

It took a while for anyone to answer. Sera worried that she'd accidentally shown up during a group mediation session and her knocking had pulled everyone out of their bliss zone, another reason for Orlanda to be resentful and not allow her back in.

Sera was surprised when Orlanda answered the door. Neither said anything for a moment, each waiting for the other to speak. Orlanda didn't look surprised or pleased, but simply accepting. Finally, she started: “Are you ready this time?”

“More than ready,” Sera said. “I need this now.”

4.

Valero snoozed through several alarms until Alma shook him awake, telling him he needed to get his *gordito* ass because the house was on fire. He tore the comforter off and was halfway out of bed before her realized there was no fire, and no Alma, and that she was still gone and it had all been a dream. He did, however, need to get his ass out of bed. He overslept again.

Valero's whole body ached, and his head swelled like someone had clobbered it with a brick, but he knew that someone was him and that brick was whiskey. He stepped out of bed and into the pile of clothes he'd stripped off in the dark the night before. In the bathroom, he took two aspirin, gearing up for the morning struggle. Examining his ass in the mirror, he saw his left butt cheeks were covered in large, purple bruises, though somehow the left one remained unscathed.

After a quick shower and shave, Valero headed into the kitchen to make coffee, only to discover an empty tin. It had been over a year since his wife left, and still he couldn't keep up with buying groceries. All the bananas had browned, and the bread had gone moldy. He grabbed an apple that seemed only slightly soft and left the house running.

When he got to his office, the desk clerk told him someone was waiting in his office. "A Mrs. Gershon and her son," he said, while Valero sifted through a box of donuts on the counter. "They asked to see the officer investigating the Apocalypse fire. I think he might've been a victim."

"Is there coffee?" he asked, picking out the only old-fashioned glazed.

"Machine's still busted."

"Damn. Not my morning."

On his walk through the station, Valero tried to recall a Gershon in the reports he'd filed. In the end, seven people had been killed in the fire and thirty-five injured. In the weeks following the fire, he thought he'd managed to speak to all the victims, but perhaps this one hadn't come forward yet.

They were seated side by side in his office, surrounded by the stacks of paper piled on his desk. Valero greeted them and went to shake the mother's hand, forgetting the half-eaten donut he was holding. He put it down on the only vacant spot on his desk, next to a post-it someone had put there that read: *Wash Me*. He peeled it off, crumpled it, and threw it in the trash.

"Nice shot," said the son, a pimple-faced teenager in bifocals. The only part of him that still looked burned was his ears, the skin flaky and brown around the lobes. It could've been much worse. Several of the ones he interviewed in the hospital were burnt so badly they barely resembled their former selves.

Valero figured they'd come to see if any progress had been made regarding the case. The fire investigators had been unable to determine the cause, ruling it "accidental." Since the club had no official insurance and its owner had died in the fire, the victims were left without any settlements unless someone was to blame. This was where Valero's investigation came in. So far, he hadn't been able to come up with a definite conclusion besides accidental.

"I know who did it," the son said as soon as Valero took his chair.

"Did what?"

"The fire. At the Apocalypse. You're investigating that case, right? Or are we in the wrong office?"

The kid was hyper and spoke in a rapid-fire delivery that challenged Valero's non-caffeinated mind. "Let's start over," he said. "I'm Deputy Valero. And you are?"

“Kyle.”

“Kyle Gershin, right?”

“No, it’s Gershon, with an ‘o.’ And that’s my Mom’s name. I’m named after my dad. Grover. Kyle Grover. He left when I was five. I wanted to change my name, but Mom wouldn’t let me. It seems stupid, ‘cause she’s the one who really raised me, but whatever.”

“Slow down, honey,” Mrs. Gershon said, patting her son’s back. “Breathe.”

“So you’re Mrs. Gershon, yes?” he said.

“Ms.,” she said in a soft voice. “You can call me Sally.”

She had white hair in a tight bun, heavy makeup, and kind blue eyes. She was probably quite the looker in her youth, though it was possible she was even prettier now underneath all that makeup.

Valero reached for the Apocalypse file, buried under the drug cases he’d recently gotten back to since the fire case appeared closed.

“Okay, Kyle, can I ask how old you are?”

“Seventeen.”

It sounded about right. Though he looked a little older, he acted quite a bit younger.

“So you say you were at the show that night,” Valero said, flipping through his notes.

“Thought it was an over-eighteen venue.”

“They’re not that strict there.”

“I don’t think I found any hospital records on you.”

“I didn’t go to the hospital.”

“But you were burned?”

“Uh, yeah, obviously.”

“So why didn’t you...”

“Mom, you wanna handle this one?”

The mother cleared her throat and straightened out her long skirt. “We’re Christian Scientists,” she said.

“Ah-okay,” Valero said, unsure if that meant they were religious or scientific or both.

“Remind me what that is exactly.”

“It means we don’t believe in hospitals,” Kyle said.

“Not entirely,” the mother said. “We’re not against the practice of medicine in extreme cases. We just believe more in the power of prayer and the force of God’s will.”

“And also, the internet,” Kyle added. “She looked up how to treat burns online.”

Valero sat back in his chair, chewing on his pen. There was too much to unpack here, so he tried to steer them back to the fire. “So you say you saw something...?”

“I saw everything.”

“You mind starting from the beginning? And do you mind if I record you?”

Kyle agreed. Valero set his mini-tape recorder down and started the tape.

Kyle told him it was his first ever time at the Apocalypse. He wasn’t usually a “crowds kinda guy,” but a co-worker from Naylor’s, where he bagged groceries part-time, convinced him to accompany her. Though he didn’t say as much, Valero could tell from the way he was talking about her that he probably harbored a crush. He told his Mother he was staying at a friend’s house as they had planned on sleeping in her car before driving back in the morning. Right away, though, he regretted going. There were too many people, and the music was too loud. But he stuck it out, finding dark corners to hide out in.

“I played this game, where I pretended I was a ghost, and no one else could see me,” he

said. That's what he was doing when the headliners started their last song.

"That was the Riot Choir, right?" Valero asked.

"Yeah. Actually, I liked them, at first, even though they were loud. The singer had a stage presence and a real powerful voice. But the crowd was getting wild. I knew something was going to happen."

He went on to describe the same basic scenario that everyone else had. How all the different performers came out one by one. The dancers. The freaks. The fire artists. And, lastly, the truck.

"Everyone was grabbing sticks and banging on everything. I remember wondering if they were really going to start a riot. I noticed an empty spot near the corner of the stage and hid. From there, I could see just the guitarist and the drummer but I think the singer was in the crowd. The guitarist stopped playing and just stood there looking out at the crowd with this weird expression, like he wasn't happy with what was going on. He threw down his guitar and kind of disappeared backstage for a second. And then I saw some kind of liquid splashing onto the stage. It was dark, but for a second the lights flashed brighter, and I could see that he was holding a gas can.

"He... you mean, the guitarist?" Valero clarified.

"Yes, the guitarist. Then it went dark again, and I didn't see him until he came back out, kind of backed to the edge of the stage, lit a match, and threw it onto the gas. I think he jumped into the crowd after that, though, to be honest, once I saw the gas catch fire, I ran."

"Is that when you got burnt?"

Kyle nodded.

"Show him," his mother said.

Kyle turned and lifted his shirt. There were dark marks covering his back.

“Mostly, it got my back,” Kyle said.

“I’m sorry, that’s terrible.”

“It hurt for days.”

“So, to sum up, you say you saw the guitarist for the band Riot Choir pour gasoline onstage and light this fire.”

“Yes, that’s what I saw.”

“And you’d be willing to testify in court?”

For a moment, his face fell, his teenaged confidence drained. He looked to his mother.

“Yes, he would,” she said.

“I need to hear him say it.”

“Yes,” Kyle said.

Valero said nothing, trying to ascertain whether this kid was lying for some reason. But what reason would he possibly have, unless he had some vendetta against the guitarist, which seemed unlikely given who he was, a teenager who bagged groceries at Naylor’s. But it was possible they’d crossed paths somehow. He’d have to look into it.

“Any clue why he might’ve done this?” Valero asked.

Kyle shrugged. “I didn’t know the guy.”

“And why did you wait so long to come to me?”

Kyle started to speak, but his mother reached over and put her hand to her son’s chest.

“First, he had to recover from his wounds to go anywhere,” she said. “And more importantly, we don’t usually like to get involved in police business unless we have to. We assumed that he wasn’t the only witness, and that we’d soon hear about that awful man’s arrest. But when the

news reported that it was ruled an accident, well, we knew he had to come forward.”

“That was just the initial finding,” Valero said. “The case is still technically open.”

“I feel like it’s partially my fault,” Kyle said.

“What do you mean?”

“If I’d done something when I saw him pour the gas, I could’ve stopped it before he lit the match. I just didn’t know. I thought it was part of the show.”

The kid hung his head and started crying. The mother rubbed his back while Valero handed her tissues.

“It’s not your fault, baby,” she said. “There’s evil in this world. It’s infecting everyone. Satan is powerful, but, with the help of Jesus, we can defeat him.”

Though Valero felt for the kid, he started to worry that she was about to perform an exorcism, right there in his office.

And then, just like that, he stopped crying, and shot back up. “I’m sorry,” he said. “We should go now.”

Valero walked them out to the front. “Thanks. This may prove helpful. If you happen to remember any other details, just give me a call. Office or cell.”

Kyle saluted him, and his mother shook his hand, and held on, even as Kyle walked out the door. “One second, Kyle. I need to ask the officer something in private.”

Kyle nodded, and waited outside. She finally let go of Valero’s hand.

“It’s about Kyle’s father,” she said.

“Okay.”

“In case you do some research on us, you might find out, so I thought I should I should tell you myself. I told Kyle he left me for another woman and moved to South America. Only the

first part is true. But I also never told them that five years later he wound up in prison. Attempted murder. He's still there now. So... I just wanted you to know. And, please don't tell Kyle. It's better if he doesn't know."

Valero nodded. "I won't say a word. It's not pertinent to this case anyways, right?"

"No, not at all."

She thanked him and left, joining Kyle outside. Valero wondered what she would tell him they talked about if Kyle asked. He seemed like the type to ask.

Valero immediately went back to his file and found what he had on the guitarist.

Raymond Barrett. Thirty-four. No address. Lives in a trailer in Boiltown. Valero recalled it was a mess. He'd found him by asking a lot of locals, most of whom didn't want to say much. When he visited him in his trailer, he looked awful, which was understandable. He was racked with guilt about the whole thing. He also told him his girlfriend, singer for the band, had left him the day before, gone without a trace. Valero still hadn't tracked her down. Ray said she'd been depressed since the fire, too, and he was worried about her. But now Valero wondered if there was more to the story. What if she found out what he did, and he got rid of her, too?

He decided he needed to bring him into the station, interrogate him, hopefully pull out a confession. Or put him in a lineup, get Kyle to pick him out. He had an eyewitness. Now he also had to make sure that witness was reliable.

He left the station, hoping he could remember where exactly Ray's trailer was. He'd hate to have to start asking around again. He was always afraid one of the more mentally ill down there would get paranoid and pull a gun on him. Fifteen years on the force, and he'd yet to have to discharge his weapon.

Before he hit Boiltown, he had a much more pressing need: at last, he would have his

morning coffee.

5.

Now that Ray had his life back, what next? Nothing had changed, yet, in a way, everything had.

He had something he didn't have before: Responsibility for a life other than his own, this mutt currently occupying half his sofa. He'd have to feed her, walk her, train her, love her. He could barely bother to do those things for himself. But he'd learn. He'd get better. He had to, if he was ever going to win back Sera.

The first step was food. As his high began to wane, his hunger ramped up. And Fate, with her bony ribs showing through her fur, surely was in need of sustenance. He went to the kitchen and examined the contents of the fridge. There wasn't much: a jar of mayo, a half-eaten can of pinto beans, an apple, and something meaty rotting in a plastic bag. He tried the freezer instead, finding a box of fish sticks, four left. He tossed them directly on the tray in the microwave, and went out back to the generator. He yanked the cord several times before realizing it was out of gas, and so were all his cans. He had truly exhausted all his supplies.

Fate didn't mind. She ate the frozen fish sticks right up. Ray ate the beans and the apple, and that would do for now, but he'd have to do something soon. His water tank was getting low, too. Without Sera's van, it was much harder to go on supply runs. Did she know when she left how close to the edge they were? Did she care?

He needed money. There was no other way around it. But how could he get it? It'd been months since he worked any manual labor gigs, and most of those had come through Hilde. Slinging drugs was always an option, but he needed money to buy them, and he still owed Snake. He'd sold off almost everything he had of value, except his guitar rig, but that was last resort, akin to chopping off an arm. He'd almost rather go back to the gun than give up on music.

There was one other option, something he'd resisted for a long time. He went to the closet, pulled the shoebox from the back of the top shelf, and placed it on the coffee table. Inside was a smaller wooden box, tied with a tan shoelace. He remembered how at nine he'd pulled the lace off one of the boots his father left behind. The only other remembrance of his dad was inside the box.

Around the time he turned seventeen, Ray had received a mysterious package. There was no name on it, and the return address was from a PO Box in Des Moines. It was small but heavy. Inside was a jeweled scabbard containing an antique dagger. The blade was worn down, but the handle was pristine, an emerald green color. A small, handwritten note accompanied it, which Ray had also kept, and re-read, though he'd pretty much memorized the whole thing by now:

Son,

I picked up this ancient artifact on my travels through South Asia. I was told it's a relic from the Mughal Empire (1555-1827), judging from the intricate carving on its jade handle. I remember how you liked your plastic weapons when you were a boy, and thought maybe you still had similar interests. Of course, this isn't a toy, but a valuable relic which is to be properly stored and cared for. I know you're about to turn eighteen, and I know I haven't been there for you. But I wanted you to have something of value, something to remember your old man by, and know he only wanted the best for you.

Love,

Dad

It was the last time he ever heard from him.

His mother thought it was bullshit. "Who says South Asia?" she said at the time "He's probably in Idaho, and picked it up at a pawnshop."

“Don’t you mean Iowa?”

“Whatever.”

Later, he learned that he was, in fact, living in Iowa, though he had spent some time in Asia, so it was still possible he’d gotten the dagger there. But he also learned that his dad had gotten brain cancer, and, instead of having to suffer through chemo, he ended his life with a shotgun.

Wherever the dagger was from, it was clearly old and worth something. The handle did appear to be jade, and the carvings were expertly done, as far as Ray could tell. Surely his dad wouldn’t have gone through so much trouble for something worthless. Countless times over the years Ray had been tempted to cash it in. But something always stopped him. It was, besides the shoelace, the only thing he had of his father’s. He always imagined giving it to his own son or daughter one day, though that possibility seemed more and more unlikely, especially now, with Sera gone.

What was he really holding onto? A dream of a father that had never been there for him? It was time to finally sell the damn thing, and use the profits to buy all the food and supplies he needed to go clean, feed Fate and get the veterinary care she probably needed, and prove to Sera that he wasn’t a fuck up, that he had willpower, that he was capable of change. He could even donate some of the money for victims of the fire, and to Baby’s recovery, too.

But where would he sell it? Online was probably the best way, but that would take three things he didn’t have: a computer, the internet, and time. Though he might be able to scrounge the first two, the one thing he didn’t have was time.

There was a pawnshop in Paradise, in the strip mall next to the Naylor’s. It wouldn’t fetch the best price, but it would be quick money, and that’s what he needed. It wasn’t ideal, but

he wasn't exactly in an ideal place, either.

By the time Ray left his trailer it was already mid-afternoon, the peak of the heat. He thought he'd try to wait until it cooled down, but then the pawnshop might be closed. He let Fate run out to do her business, which she hastily did, thankfully avoiding Sal's place, and returned with a stick in her mouth. He threw it back and forth for a few minutes to tire her out, then called her back inside and left her with a bowlful of water. He went out to the back shed where he kept his bike, only to find that both tires were completely flat. After a quick patch and pump, he had it fully functional again, besides the gears, which had stopped working a while back. The labor had already soaked him in sweat before he even managed to mount the bike.

Ray sped down the dirt road, keeping his eyes locked on the hazy horizon spread in front of him. He wanted to avoid eye contact with other Boilers. He'd been lying low since the fire, fearful that a victim might try and take revenge. The less contact he made, the safer he felt. Also, he still had the gun stuffed in his shorts, if things got really bad. He kept sensing someone behind him. Paranoia, he figured, or some residual effect of the Joy. Either that, or a ghost, stalking him. Every time he turned to look, no one was there.

He avoided riding directly through town and took the ridge road instead, which was smoother and kept him away further from the riff raff. The only drawback was that it was the more commonly used bike route, though he seemed to be the only one brave enough to be biking this time of day. The road spanned the length of the canal and crossed the great divide, the long expanse of desert that separated the Boiltown squatters from the only slightly more civilized rednecks and working class residents of Paradise. He passed all the busted-up trailers and makeshift camps, the scrap heaps and gutted cars painted with bright, swirling colors, the scattered trash, and the stray dogs sniffing out the remains.

The whole town felt emptier and bleaker than he remembered. Still, he was happy to see that *Satan's Outpost* remained, a general store type trailer that a couple of East Coast metalheads had started, whom he'd visit once he had some cash. Also, Nemo's Library & Internet Café still looked lively, a few kids hanging out in the lounge area, glued to their phones, catching whatever limited signal they could. Undoubtedly, they'd still be in the same position when he was heading back hours later. Were they really that much different than the junkies, joyriders, and methheads around? Same disease, different drugs.

Before the ridge road dipped and merged with the main one, he stopped for a quick dip in the canal. The water was clean enough, and he needed the last bit of coolness before the long, dry road to town.

"Nice ass," Ray heard someone say when he came out to dry. He turned and saw Goose, a bearded biker dude who lived nearby.

"Thanks, perv," Ray said.

Ray went to shake his hand.

"Better not," Goose said. Closer now, Ray noticed the festering growth he had on his neck. "I've just been picking at it."

"Are you okay?" Ray asked.

"Besides the dirt, I'm peachy."

"The dirt?"

"Not like dirt but D-E-R-T. DERT. It's a... whaddya-call-it?"

"Acronym?"

"Yeah, that."

"For what?"

“I forget,” Goose said, peeling off his jean shorts and vest, revealing smaller lumps scattered across his skin. “Some kinda technical term. Basically, it’s some condition so new they don’t even know what’s causing it.

“You mean the bumps?”

“Worse. They’re boils. And in Boiltown, no less. Pretty fucking... what’s the term?”

“Ironic.”

“Yeah. You might wanna get yours checked, too.”

“My what?”

“Whatever’s going on between your eyes.”

Ray remembered the pimple, though now that he was reminded, he suddenly felt the swelling. “It’s just a zit.”

“That’s some zit. Have you looked in the mirror lately?”

“I try not to.”

“You might wanna.”

Fully nude, Goose headed towards the water and jumped in.

“Hey, do you think maybe that water has something to do with it?” Ray said. “Like what if it’s polluted or something?”

“Shit,” Goose said. “Don’t ruin the one thing that brings me relief. Ah, fuck it. Too late now, anyway.” He dipped his head under and came up shaking drops from his hair. Ray wished him good luck, and Goose said, “Yeah, you too. Get it checked.”

Ray added the boil to his ever-growing list of concerns. It seemed like Boilers were always coming down with something, always freaked that some kind of new plague was about to strike and they were at the inception point. And there was no shortage of possible causes, real or

imaginary: the lead in the drinking water, the dewormer in the drugs, the fallout leaking from the nearby nuclear reactor, the hormones pumped into cows, the rat meat in fast food, the aliens and their probing, the strange fumes seeping from the top-secret underground military research bunker, the radiation from cellphones, the microwaves, the pipelines, the fracking, the chemtrails, the GMOSs and artificial sweeteners, the soy, the gluten, the gas, the Greys, the zombies, the cannibals, the chupacabras. In short, there was a million ways to die in Boiltown.

Ray picked up the pace on the last leg of the ride, determined not to stop for anyone. He made it the rest of the way out of Boiltown without incident, hit the main road, and pedaled towards Paradise, or the “city,” as Boilers called it, though it was far from it. The smoother asphalt was a relief to his strained muscles, but he was nervous out in the open where everyone could see him. Big rigs blew by periodically and nearly knocked him off his bike. He ignored the blasting horns, the raised middle fingers, the shouted insults like, “Get a car!” “Cut your hair, hippie!” or, the good, ol’ fashioned “Faggot!”

When he finally made it to the strip mall, he felt as though he’d biked through a war zone. The centerpiece of the complex was the Naylor’s, the only local supermarket to survive since the Wal-Mart had opened on the other side of town. Once there were several Naylor’s all over Southern California, but Wal-Mart had choked them all out except this one. Judging by the dwindling number of customers it seemed to have, he wondered how long before it too was gone.

In addition, there was a pizza parlor, a check-cashing place, and a nail salon that was all boarded up. Apparently, pedicures were no longer a priority in Paradise. Ray had worked up such an appetite that he briefly considered going through the dumpsters to see if he could scrounge anything, or else go on a shoplifting run. He decided to stick to his vow of only stealing from Wal-Mart, since at least he could consider it a corporate protest. Soon enough he’d have

enough cash to buy a whole rotisserie chicken and eat it right there in the parking lot.

After locking his bike to a pole, he went to the pawnshop. When the door appeared locked, he feared it was closed, but then a buzzer went off, and he pushed it open. Inside, the A/C was blasting and he took a moment to indulge in it. The owner sat on a stool behind the counter, his eyes on the small television screen beside him. He gave Ray a quick glance, and then turned his attention back to the gunfight on TV. Ray recognized the movie immediately from the whistling on the soundtrack.

“You know, that guy wasn’t even Mexican,” Ray said, approaching the counter. The owner, who looked Mexican himself, turned his head slowly but said nothing.

“The *Ugly* one, I mean,” Ray continued. “Jewish, I think. They made him go brown-face for the role.”

“And I hear they used fake bullets, too,” the pawnbroker said, turning to Ray. “So what? It’s a movie.”

“It is? It’s not real?”

The owner grimaced, not taking his sarcasm well. This was off to a bad start.

“Are you buying or selling?” the pawnbroker asked, staring not into Ray’s eyes but just above. It took Ray a moment to realize he was probably staring at the boil.

“The question really is... can I help you?” he said, pulling the scabbard from his tote bag and placing it on the counter.

“What is it?”

“Take it out and see.”

The man sighed and pulled out the dagger, his expression unchanged as he lifted it higher to inspect it. He turned it around in his hand and then pulled out a pair of eyeglasses from

beneath the counter.

“I ask again, what is it?” he asked again.

“It’s an antique dagger from the Molycan Empire, seventeenth century.”

“What the hell’s that?”

“An empire. Like, a dynasty. A kingdom.”

“Where is it?”

Ray had completely forgotten. He only looked it up once, years ago.

“Mongolia,” he said, the first place that came to mind.

The man kept turning it around, holding it up to the light, rubbing the blade and the handle with a cloth, not like he was appreciating it as a thing of rarity and beauty, but more like he was looking for its flaws.

“That’s a pure jade handle,” he said.

The man said, “Mmm,” but not an agreeable “Mmm,” more like a skeptical one. “Well, it’s not from the seventeenth century, I can tell you that.”

“Oh yeah? What is it? Eighteenth?”

“Try twentieth.”

“I don’t think so.”

“And it ain’t jade. More likely it’s serpentine.”

“What do you mean? It’s made from a snake?”

“No, serpentine is a stone. It looks like jade but it’s much cheaper. Often used in knock-offs.”

“How do you know?”

“Several things: the weight for the size, the sound it makes against another hard surface,

the lack of irregularities in the stone itself.”

Ray leaned his elbows on the counter and rubbed his forehead, forgetting about the boil. He groaned in pain.

“You shouldn’t touch that,” the man said.

“I know. I forgot.”

“You should probably pop it.”

Ray slammed his palm against the counter, making a louder smack than he’d meant. “Look, man, what are you telling me? That this is some kind of cheap knockoff? That my dad got swindled?”

“You need to calm down.”

“I’m calm.”

“I don’t know about your dad, I’m telling you what I see here.”

“So what’s it worth?”

The man considered, tapping his fingers on the counter before placing the dagger down on the counter.

“I’ll give you a hundred for it. And I think that’s generous.

“Generous? It should be worth ten times that.”

“Well, it’s not.”

“My father said it was.

Without another word, Ray grabbed the dagger from counter, so quick that the man leapt back, holding his arms up in front of his face.

“I’m not going to stab you,” Ray said. “I’m just taking my dagger back.”

When Ray got to the door, it wouldn’t budge, and Ray again had to wait for the guy to

buzz him out. Once he left, he paused in the shade to collect himself. Slowing his breath, he considered going back in and taking the hundred. But there was always a chance the guy was lying and it was actually worth a lot more. And he couldn't bear to see the pawnbroker's smug expression when he walked back in. It was a matter of pride now, and that was priceless.

As he stood there considering his options, someone called out to him.

"Hey, you!"

He knew he shouldn't linger in one place too long. He looked over and saw a girl in a baseball cap and a Naylor's apron walking out of the grocery store.

"You're that guy, right? The one in the band?"

As she got closer, he noticed the bandages on her arms and neck, and how short and choppy her hair looked underneath her hat.

"Nope, not me," he said, hustling to his bike and scrambling for his keys.

"It is you. You play guitar."

"Nope. You got the wrong guy." Ray's hand trembled as he unlocked his bike from the pole. The girl had almost made it to him.

"I know what you did," she said.

"Sorry?"

"You're going to pay."

Ray mounted the bike and took off before she could do anything. When he turned to look, the girl hadn't moved from her spot, and was still staring, only now she was holding a cellphone to her ear.

Ray rode off, his whole body trembling. It was exactly as he feared. The whole town hated him now. There was only one place he could think to go, only one man who may be able to

forgive him and help him, in spite of everything. His last chance lay in the hands of Snake.

6.

Despite the initial acceptance, Sera wasn't exactly welcomed back to the Hive with open arms. More like half open. Though Orlanda hid it well with her "everyone has to follow their own path" type talk, she also wouldn't give Sera her old room back until she'd "proved her commitment." For Orlanda, this meant being in charge of setting up and cleaning the meditation room, where Sera was also allowed to sleep at night on a yoga matt. She also had to help in the cornfield and the kitchen, essentially working for the Hive in exchange for room and board. Sera accepted these terms, on two conditions. One was that, since she would be working, she wouldn't be required to attend each and every group meditation and seminar the Hive offered. And, secondly, the promise that, within a week's time, she would be able to perform at the Eden.

"You remind me so much of myself," Orlanda said as they sat on her altar discussing their terms.

"Why's that?"

"You come to me for help, and now you're making demands," she said, but with a smile. "It's not bad to be assertive, to fight for what you believe. As long as what you believe is noble, and you fight for it in an honorable way. And if you don't, hopefully your community will let you know."

"That's the problem. I think I let my community down."

"There's always time for redemption."

Though Sera was thinking of the Apocalypse community, she was pretty sure Orlanda thought she was talking about the Hive. She didn't bother to correct her.

If Orlanda knew about her involvement in the fire, she didn't say. She was much more

forgiving of her this time around, however, allowing her to bend rules in ways she never had before. Sera suspected she either knew about the fire or sensed how fragile Sera was, how the only thing keeping her going was having something to do, and that if she had to sit around and think about all the pain she'd caused, she might lose her mind.

Ultimately, they came to an agreement. As long as Sera went through a "proper training period," she would be able to have trial run at Eden in a week's time. Most of the preparation consisted of Sera learning the mechanics of the club. It wasn't like a strip club, or even a lot of fetish clubs in which the men were given some, if not all the power. The men were paying for the women's services, but that didn't mean they had any real say in what happened, just as someone who pays for a seat on an airplane has no say in how the pilot flies the plane. Eden's regulars understood how it worked, and, seeing as they came to be dominated, preferred not to have any power, anyway. As for new clients, they either accepted the rules, or would be ejected.

"The goal is never arousal," Orlanda told her. "If overt arousal occurs, the men should be properly taunted, humiliated, and punished."

By subverting the cliché of the innocent, subservient, pliable female, men would become more accustomed to viewing women as powerful, self-empowered beings capable of taking control.

To Sera, it all sounded good in theory, but she still wondered if the men would get it. "Isn't there still a sexual element at play? The outfits, the sensuality, the heightened atmosphere?"

"Certain men will see us as objects regardless of what we do, whether we're in lingerie or burkhas," Orlanda said. "The goal is to reclaim our sexuality, not to lose it."

Sera, having only performed as a powerful woman in a musical context, wasn't sure how

she'd take to utilizing her talents in the BDSM scene, but it did intrigue her. It was certainly more enticing than sitting on her ass for hours. And there was the question of money.

Sera had originally thought that she'd be making lots of tips like in normal strip clubs. But at Eden, all money was to be handled through the "bank." Admission fees and tips were all paid to a woman at the front desk, which would lessen the risk of performers doing anything "illicit" or "clandestine," which Sera assumed meant prostituting themselves on the sly.

The other classes consisted mostly of hands-on training. Whipping, flogging, and binding classes, as well as a class in *Shibari*: the ancient art of Japanese rope tying. There were even lessons in how to walk in stilettos, and a class all about fingernails, which demonstrated how best to clean, cut, sharpen, and scratch.

In addition to the Eden workshops, she also went to some of the group therapy sessions. The women knew about the fire and her involvement, and she initially received a lot of unwanted consolation, and "don't blame yourself"-type talk. Orlanda barely addressed it, saying only "You can share when and if you're ready." Instead of having to face her own demons, Sera focused on listening to other people's problems, and for once she could really listen and invest in their stories. Women like Iris, who'd been a pediatric nurse secretly hooked on prescription pills and an abusive husband. Or Lana, a former B-list actress who'd been used by so many film producers she lost count. So many of the women at the Hive had awful experiences with awful men before they showed up there, it actually made Sera realize that relationships weren't her major problem. As troubled as they'd become, they had never crossed over into abusive territory.

Without the pressure of mandatory silence, she was able to ask questions and offer advice when applicable. She found the loosened rules fit her disposition better than the hard-pressed ones, and the first week passed much smoother than her previous one.

She knew a part of her was still broken inside, covering it up with a new act, this role of the dutiful member of the Hive. At least she was aware of it, and still able to speak her mind when necessary. Like when she approached Orlanda about the craft classes.

“I guess they’re all fine skills to have,” she said one day after a stitching class in which she must have pricked her finger twelve times, barely making any progress on her scarf. “But isn’t it a bit sexist to assume all women would be good at them, or even interested? What about a car repair class? Or metalsmithing? Boxing would be good, too.”

“I’m not sure we want to promote violence.”

“Self-defense? Maybe a martial art.”

Orlanda contemplated in her usual way: by lighting three candles. After the third was lit, she blew out her match and said, “All right. As soon as we get someone in here who has some of these skills, we can do it.”

“Or... we can all learn together. The revolution won’t happen if we just wait around for it to walk through the door, right?”

“True revolution comes from within.”

“Okay. And then what?”

Orlanda didn’t have a clear answer, and neither did Sera, really, though she was still hopeful to find one. In the end, Orlanda agreed, granting her the task of choosing a class. Sera decided to start with Basic Mechanics, figuring, that way they could work their way up to cars, especially since the parking lot was full of ones that were in dire need of repairs. This would also free them up to leave the Hive every now and then.

In this way, Sera began to plant little seeds of what she hoped would be a transformation of the Hive, from navel-gazing hippies who were secretly radical feminists to just plain radical

feminists, engaged in the world around them. The next goal was to rally them around a cause bigger than themselves instead of vague generalities about equality.

Even while searching for this nobler cause, she was still determined to leave as soon as she could. She felt a bit like a double agent, working for the women, at the same time working for her own emancipation. Though she came to care about the other women at the Hive, she ultimately felt stifled, ready to experience more of the world than this tiny pocket. She figured she'd need at least two weeks of working full time at Eden to make enough money for a plane ticket and temporary lodging in Hawaii. Or for a full tank of gas to head east. She still hadn't decided and was hoping the choice would come to her in a revelation, or, as Orlanda described such experiences, "A burst of intuitive illumination, the proper path suddenly revealed."

Such certainty was foreign to Sera. For most of her post-commune life, she'd following a series of forked paths. She made choices out of necessity, but she never felt guided or enlightened. It was more like she was groping in the dark, making choices on a whim. Even her decision to come back to the Hive was made out of desperation more than choice, unable to think of anywhere else to go.

As the week progressed, she was already questioning that choice. She was constantly butting heads with Orlanda. Finally, the day before her debut at the Eden, she couldn't hold back anymore and asked her for a private consultation. They met in the garden by the waterless fountain. "I just want to know what the endgame is here," Sera said. "You're not going to suddenly tell us you're an alien and the mothership has come to take us all away or something, right?"

Orlanda laughed. "I'm afraid not," she said, running her fingers across her bracelets. "I'm mostly interested in people coming to terms with their own lives, freeing themselves from

the shackles of their wounds and finding a path to true love. Where that ultimately leads, I can't say."

Sera wanted clearer answers, but she didn't get them from Orlanda. More often, she got quotes, like the one she gave now: "In the words of Krishnamurti, 'truth is a pathless land.'"

While Sera couldn't argue with that, she also struggled with how generalized it sounded, good in theory, but what did the practice look like? How can you find your way out of wilderness without a path? Or did it mean embracing the chaos, the truth that everyone was lost.

"My mother used to say she never knew what freedom was until she had children," Sera said. "I didn't get it, it seemed like a contradiction. Kids were what kept her at home, in the prescribed role of what a woman is supposed to be. But now I think I get what she meant. Having kids allowed her to go outside of herself, to attend to other's needs. I'm not built like that. I want to attend to my own needs, while at the same time not to be too attached to them."

Orlanda let out a soft laugh. "You and me both, sister. Though I did have a child, I always knew my true calling was not to be just a mother."

"At least you had a calling."

"What about your music?"

"It was. But now I'm not sure I can ever perform again."

"You'll figure it out. Just be patient with yourself."

Patience. Never one of Sera's strong suits.

"Maybe your debut at the Eden tomorrow will reignite you," Orlanda said, and her face immediately dropped, realizing what she'd said.

"Yeah, maybe not the best choice of words," Sera said and couldn't help but laugh a little.

The next day, though, it wasn't so funny. The fire was all she could think about as she got ready, trying to choose the right outfit. How could she get up in front of people again, show her face after what had happened?

Then it hit her. She wouldn't. Like the men in the club, she too could wear a mask. Without a face, she could be anyone she wanted to be.

7.

As Ray made his way up the walkway at Snake's place, he could hear what sounded like a war on the other side: explosions, gunfire, grunts of pain and anguish. Lights flashed like lightning through the glass in the windows. Someone shouted, "Eat it, motherfucker!"

Ray knocked. When there was no response, he knocked again, louder. The sounds of warfare came to an abrupt end, replaced by footsteps approaching and then a voice, asking, "Yeah?"

"Is that Snake?"

"No."

"He here?"

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, I'm a friend."

"I've never seen you before. What's your name?"

"Ray."

"Ray who?"

"Ray none-of-your-fucking-business."

The door cracked open for a second, then quickly shut. Ray could still hear someone shouting to the back room: "Snake, some ugly guy named Ray is here for you."

A moment later, the door swung open again, presenting the bearer of the attitude, a skinny, acne-ridden kid that barely looked out of his teens.

"He'll be a minute," he said, plopping onto the cracked leather couch, reversing his ball cap around his shaved dome and manspreading in his baggy jean shorts. A frozen image was

projected on the wall in front of him, a car in mid-crash. He grabbed a controller and resumed the game. The car continued its head-on collision, while the terrified other driver burst through their windshield. Ray recognized the video game as *Karmageddon*, set in the near future when L.A. had become one huge, traffic jam, and the only way out was murderous rampage.

Not so different from the real thing, Ray thought, settling on the mismatched ottoman, watching the kid drive into a shopping mall and begin mowing down shoppers left and right. The image quality was top-notch, the gore vibrant and life-like, not that he'd ever gone on a vehicular killing spree, but close to what he'd imagine it was like. Seemed that Snake spent a chunk of change on a fancy entertainment system and left the junkyard furniture as-is.

Ray spotted a bag of chips on the couch. "Hey, mind if I have some chips?"

"Go for it."

There weren't many left, but he devoured them all in about ten seconds.

"Jesus, eat much?" the kid said.

Ray then saw the pack of cigarettes on the table and asked if he could bum one.

"Joke for a smoke," the kid said.

"Excuse me?"

"Tell me a joke and I'll give you a smoke."

Ray racked his brain. He never could remember any jokes.

"OK, I got one. Why is smoking the perfect vice?"

"What's a vice?"

"Are you serious?" The guy nodded. "It's like a bad habit. You know, like the game, *Vice City*."

"I thought that was about the vice squad."

“Yeah, it’s the same thing.”

“Oh, okay. So, I don’t know... because it takes a long time to kill you?”

“That’s not bad, actually. But no. Because it always leaves you unsatisfied.”

The guy looked unamused. Before he could stop him, Ray snatched a cigarette from the pack.

“Why wouldn’t you want to be satisfied?” the guy asked.

“Because then there’s always something left to desire.”

“I don’t get it. Is that even a joke?”

“Well, I guess it’s more of a quip,” Ray said. “Anyhow, I didn’t write it. It came from Oscar Wilde.”

“The hot dog guy?”

“No, not Oscar Meyer, Oscar *Wilde*. A writer, bon-vivant type, British dude, nineteenth century, gay, flamboyant, right up your alley.”

“Whatever. Still don’t get it.”

“Think of it like hunger,” Ray said, flicking his cigarette into an empty beer can. “You know when you’re really hungry and you’re about to eat, and you’re looking at the spread of food in front of you, and you get excited, right? And then you gorge, chow down a plate, maybe go for seconds. You eat for ten, fifteen minutes tops, and then suddenly you’re full. You don’t feel good, just bloated, tired, and maybe a little sick. The anticipation was more satisfying than the result.”

“Don’t mind Ray here,” Snake said from the hallway. “He went to college.”

“Went, didn’t finish. I was too much for them.”

“Hell, Squiggy here didn’t finish the eighth grade. Ain’t that right?”

“School’s for losers,” Squiggy said.

“I came to the same conclusion,” Ray said. “I tried it for a while, but the professors were all too institutionalized, all book and no bite. I wanted to live the ideas, not just read and write papers about them.”

“See what I mean?” Snake said. “Half the time, I don’t understand what the hell he’s saying.”

“Bullshit, mostly. I gave up on higher education a long time ago. Style is everything, Snake, and you’ve got it in spades.”

Snake always sported a casually fashionable ensemble. Today it was a long kimono robe with a dragon on the back, some black leather loafers, and large aviator shades covering his eye-patch. Ray went in for a hug, but Snake flinched, stepping away.

“What’s that on your head?” he asked.

“Nothing. A zit.”

“That’s one big zit,” Squiggy said.

“You get that thing checked?” Snake asked.

“Just gotta pop it, that’s all.”

“You might wanna make sure it ain’t the DERT,” Squiggy said.

“True,” Snake said, leaning in for a closer look.

“It’s fine. Snake, can we talk in private?”

Snake nodded and led him to the back, to the tune of Squiggy yelling, “Pop that boil!”

“Are you babysitting for extra cash, or what?” Ray asked when they were alone in the back room.

“It’s a long story.” Something in the aquarium caught his eye. “Oh no!”

One of his fish, a bright purple one, was floating on the surface of the water, dead. He got a net to scoop it out. “Dammit,” he said. “Poor guy. I knew I probably shouldn’t have put those two together. But I was trying to breed them. I thought she was into him, her colors started to change. But then she just attacked him. With males and females, you never know. Either they fuck or fight. And sometimes both.”

“What does fish sex look like anyway?”

“It’s pretty cool, more like a hug. The male wraps himself around the female, and then she releases all her eggs. Once they’re done, the male has to protect them, or else the female might eat them. Weird, huh? It’s like the opposite of humans.”

“You mean the way men eat their babies?”

“I mean like how women carry the baby until childbirth. Dudes just gotta sit there and support.”

“If that.”

They shared a laugh. Ray was purposely acting more like a “dude,” trying to get on Snake’s good side, and he figured the longer they talked about things other than money owed, the better.

Snake dumped the dead fish into a Ziploc plastic bag.

“What do you do with the body?” Ray asked.

“Flush him down the toilet. Or, I guess not flush, around here. He’ll just add to the compost. Even in death he can serve a purpose.”

“Did he have a name?” he asked.

“I don’t name them, anymore. I mean, we come up with names just for the fights, but I try not to name them before that. Otherwise I’ll get kind of attached and be bummed when they

die. I guess I'm still bummed, anyway.”

Snake sat back in his usual rolling chair and Ray took the stationary one.

“I got a dog today,” Ray said.

“No way.”

“Yeah, she just kind of found me. But I'm going to keep her. I named her Fate.”

“What does Sera think?”

“She... she's cool with it.”

“Nice.”

Snake nodded and looked nervous all of a sudden, leaning one arm on his desk. “Man, again... I'm really sorry about what happened to you guys. I know it can't be easy. Any news on Baby?”

Ray shrugged. “Haven't heard anything. I need to go back and visit him soon.”

“Send him my regards.”

There was a lull, and Ray tried to think of the next conversation starter, but Snake beat him to it.

“So, I know times have been rough, but I hope you're here 'cause you managed to get something for me?”

“Well, in a way, yeah.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, obviously with all that's gone down I haven't really been able to pick up any cash as such. But... I got something better.”

He reached into his knapsack and pulled out the dagger, handling it over slowly in the palm of his hand, to demonstrate how precious it was. As Ray pulled it out of the scabbard, he

gave Snake the whole spiel about his old man, the trip to South Asia, the Mohlar Empire, the works. Snake's eyes widened, looking like he was eating it up. Ray was lucky he was a fan of weaponry, too.

Snake held the carved handle under his desk lamp. "Shit, I probably shouldn't even be touching this. Shouldn't it be in a museum or something?"

"Maybe, but they probably got enough artifacts. Still, you're right, it's meant to be hung on a wall. I think it'd look badass in here. Like, right over your desk. That way, people know not to fuck with you."

Snake held it up, positioning it towards the wall, and nodded. Then he placed it back in its scabbard and gently onto the desk. "Wait, you can't give this to me," he said. "Your Dad left it for you. It's like a family heirloom."

"Think of it as a loan. Collateral. An assurance that I'll have the money for you eventually. And if not, then yeah, it's all yours."

"I'd hate to take something of sentimental value."

"I'm sure you'll take good care of it."

Snake stared at it for a moment longer before asking, "You got any paperwork on it?"

"Paperwork?"

"Yeah, you know, like validating the authenticity, or whatever. Assessing the value. That kind of thing. Not that I don't trust you."

Ray rubbed his hands together, worrying that he rushed it, or pushed it too hard, and now Snake was getting cold feet.

"Well, to be honest with you, I did just take it to the pawn shop, just to see what they would offer. It wasn't as much as I was hoping, so I didn't take it. I figured, better to give it to

someone who appreciates it, anyway.”

“How much did he offer?”

“A thousand,” Ray said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m sure its worth triple that. But it’s not like the Paradise Pawn Shop knows their Ancient Mongolian artifacts, or anything.”

“Right. Still, to get a thousand from that place... not bad.”

Snake removed the blade from the scabbard one more time, slicing the air with it, and then fake stabbing an imaginary foe.

“Yeah, I like it. Fine. But it’s not going to be a thousand dollar deal, especially since you still owe me four hundred, right? So, what did you want, anyway?”

“Just a little more Joy.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. I’m actually out of Joy.”

“Seriously?”

“Actually, it’s been discontinued, because they came up with something even better. Brand new. They’re calling it Love.” Snake’s eyes lit up as he grabbed one of his green crates out of the safe. “The Alchemist has totally outdone himself this time. It’s the next evolution.”

“I can’t even imagine better than Joy.”

“You will when you try it. You’ll never want to go back.”

Clearly, Snake’s mood picked up just from thinking about it. He pulled a bag out, and poured the powder onto a CD case.

“You know how Joy sort of hypes you up? It’s almost like you have to be active on it. Well, Love gives you the choice. You could literally sit in an empty room and feel great. They

should give this stuff to prisoners.”

He started cutting and separating lines.

“It really gives you the feeling of falling in love, you know, how everything kind of brightens? How the world comes alive in ways you never noticed? How, when you look into someone’s eyes you get goose bumps, not just on your skin, but on your heart?”

“So Love is literally like love,” Ray said.

Snake stopped his cutting for a moment to consider. “Pretty much,” he said.

Snake slid the case over and handed Ray a rolled-up dollar. Ray looked down at the lines and realized Snake had cut them on the jewel box for the old Riot Choir demo CD Ray had given him.

“I feel kinda funny doing drugs off my old music,” he said.

“Oh, that’s right. Well, you made most of it on drugs, didn’t you? So it seems kind of fitting.”

Ray nodded, although he wasn’t entirely accurate. That was still in their dabbling phase, before it became a full-time affair.

He leaned in closer. The lines that Snake cut went right across each of their faces: Ray’s, Sera’s, Baby’s. He paused. What if this was some sign from the universe not to do it. Snake was staring at him, wondering when the hell he’d take his line. He couldn’t stop now. He’d come this far.

He sucked it up his nose.

“I do love this CD, though, man,” Snake said, as Ray jiggled his nostrils. “It’s still in heavy rotation around here.”

“Thanks. Though I still don’t feel we quite captured the energy of our live performances.

I wish we had better equipment, more time.”

“Hey, man, you made something. That’s all that really matters. Whether people hear it or not, you made it.”

Ray wasn’t sure he agreed, but decided not to argue. Best to stay on his good side.

“You wanna go slow with this stuff,” Snake said as Ray leaned it. “It’s real potent.”

As Snake bent down to snort, Ray felt something pinching his ankle. He looked down at what appeared to be a giant rat in a suit of armor.

“What the hell is that?” he asked.

“That’s Arnie,” Snake said. “He just wants to play.”

“Well, I don’t,” Ray said, as he realized that “Arnie” was actually an armadillo.

“Arnie, back in your house!” Snake scooped it up and shoved it into a pet carrier in the corner. “I must not have locked the door all the way. Little escape artist.”

“Where the hell did you get that thing?” Ray asked.

“Fucking Jilly,” Snake said.

Jilly, his girlfriend, the dominatrix/animal rescuer – of course it was her. At one point Snake had at least five cats that pissed all over the house and kept trying to eat his beloved fish. One by one the cats had somehow escaped and disappeared. Ray always wondered if it was secretly Snake that let them out.

“She found it injured on the side of the road, nursed it back to health and shit. Now she’s attached. Fucking Jilly.”

Ray settled in his seat, and Snake finished his line.

As they sat and waited, Snake’s eyelids drooped to half-mast while his lips curled into a smile. Ray always envied how Snake held court, how he lit up every room he walked into, the

goddamned Hugh Hefner of the desert drug scene. Even at the Apocalypse, everyone seemed to notice when Snake entered. Was it just his good looks? His strong jaw, his proud mane of hair, like an old-school cavalier. How his teeth glowed when he smiled? How his one good eye seemed to glow? Maybe it was the fact that he had the secret connect, the magical elixir that made everyone lose all their inhibitions, better than booze, clearer than weed or Shrooms, more energizing than the uppers and more euphoric than the downers. Ray missed those days of bliss at the Apocalypse so much. Maybe, in time, he could rebuild it, shake the shadow of the tragedy, call it something else, and make it even better. Maybe Baby would heal and Sera would come to her senses and they could reform the band, play the re-opening of the new club, call it *The Resurrection...*

Before he knew it, the heaviness in Ray's heart began to drift away. What, after all, was he so down for? He still had his guitar and his talent, and soon he'd have Sera back, too. Love was exactly what he needed to bring him out, put his priorities straight. He was still young enough, had his wits, his looks, besides the boil, which would surely go away soon. Every day could be a reset. He had the rest of his life ahead of him.

And it was all thanks to Snake, his main man, such a good guy, the only guy Ray could trust, the only real friend he had left.

"I love you," he said, staring into the green of Snake's one, shining eye.

"You know what I love?" Snake said, leaning in so close to Ray's face that he thought he might kiss him. "Pussy, man. I fucking *love* pussy."

Did Snake think he was hitting on him? Maybe Ray went too far, though he meant it in the expansive sense of love, not the romantic. Regardless of the past or what might happen in the future, or what he thought of the future when it became the past, as long as he was alive in the

present, no regrets, no hopes, no fears, like being the Buddha, like being born again each and every minute into love.

“You okay?” Snake asked.

Without realizing it, Ray had spread out on the floor like a corpse. But he was alive. More alive than ever.

“Never better,” he said.

“Like I said, it’s pretty potent. Not that I’ve found the limit yet, but I was warned no to do too much. There’s such thing as too much of a good thing.”

“Is that true? I mean, if it’s too much then it becomes bad, so it’s no longer good, right? But as long as it stays good, how can it be too much?”

“Yeah, just go easy.”

Even as he spoke, Ray felt both in the conversation and outside of it. His mind was active and alert, but the rest of him expanded beyond the rational world of words. He took in the room, not just with his eyes and ears and nose, but with a deeper, hidden sense. He could close his eyes and become one with the subtle, changeable flow of oxygen as it swirled within the walls. He was one with every fish, every floppy gill and feathery tail, the bubbles and the water they glided through. He radiated with the lights, hummed with the electricity in the outlets, floated with the breeze that blew in through the cracks. He was outside with the birds on the wires as they scanned for insects in the great expanse of dirt. He was the wriggling worm and the beak that sucked it up, a life for a life, through the body, out the ass, and back into the dirt, to begin again. Grow, eat, shit, repeat. It was so simple, this great cycle of life.

“We’re all connected,” Ray said, demonstrating by interlacing his fingers.

“Yeah, I know.”

“And yet, we’re apart too,” he said, slowly sliding his fingers free.

“Yep.”

“Would you do something for me?” Ray asked, sitting up. “Would you show me your eye?”

“My eye?”

“I mean, under your patch. I’ve always wanted to see it.”

Snake eyed him warily. “I don’t think you do, really.”

“I do.”

“You’re curious because it’s a mystery. But, believe me, you’ll be disappointed. Everyone is.”

“You got something to hide?”

“Let’s just say, it’s better left a mystery.”

He was probably right. Life itself was a mystery. You never knew when it was going to end.

“I was going to kill myself,” Ray said.

“What?”

“This morning. I was ready. To end it all. And then Fate showed up and saved me.”

“Fate?”

“The dog.”

“Wow.”

“Yes. Wow.”

Ray pulled the gun out from behind his back. He hadn’t realized until that moment how much it was jabbing into his spine.

“Whoa, what the fuck dude?” Snake said, leaping from his chair.

“No, I’m not...” Ray sat up, looked at the gun, realized what it looked like. He brought it back to his belly, cradling it like a precious thing. “This is an offering. I want you to take this from me as a symbol. My dagger and my gun. All my precious things. In exchange for more Love.”

He put the gun flat into his hand and passed it to Snake.

“I appreciate this,” Snake said. “I do.”

“I love you, too.”

Snake took the gun and put it in his desk drawer. They stood and embraced each other. Ray could feel the beat of Snake’s heart against his chest. He almost cried, realizing that someday their hearts would stop.

Snake gave him an ounce of Love, which he said would go a long way. Ray would sell at least half of it and probably make a tidy sum. Snake saved his life.

Squiggy was still on the couch playing his video game when Ray walked through the front room. Now instead of crashing up cars, Ray watched as Squiggy’s avatar dragged a bloody woman out of a wrecked car. At first, Ray thought maybe he was saving her. But when he threw her onto the ground and pulled down his pants, Ray realized he had other plans.

This was one sick game.

Squiggy was so transfixed he hadn’t even noticed Ray yet. Ray followed the black cable coming out of the game console to where it connected to a power strip. He crouched next to it, and flipped the switch to OFF. The lights went out, and the screen went to black.

“What the fuck?” Squiggy said.

Ray hustled out the door, hoping the darkness would mask his exit. But as he unlocked

his bike outside, he heard the door swing open and Squiggy appeared, holding his palm up to the bright sun, looking like a junkie vampire.

“I know that was you,” Squiggy said.

“It was for your own good, I swear. You’re better than that.”

“Oh yeah. You’re one to judge. I know who you are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You were in that band. The one that caused the fire.”

Ray paused with his bike lock in hand. Not even the Love could keep him from getting upset. Did everyone in town know? Was nowhere safe anymore?

“You’re going to pay, you know?” Squiggy said.

“I love you, too,” Ray said, mounting his bike and taking off. “Don’t take it personally.”

8.

Eden was not the mecca of erotic feminism that Sera dreamed of, but it wasn't entirely far off, either. Overall, she felt a bit silly in dominatrix mode. It wasn't that it was hard for her to be domineering. It was just hard keeping a straight face while doing it. She'd rarely brought bondage into any of her personal relationships. She preferred to be playful in her sex life, and saved the drama for her music.

Luckily, there were also rooms where they could put on little performances, and she enjoyed these especially. Because she wanted to remain masked the whole time, she found a bunch of different animal costumes in the dressing room, and devised different scenarios around them: cat and mouse, lion and tamer, deer and hunter. In each case, there was some kind of tables-turned moment when the abused became the abuser, and ending in mutual harmony between the two. She thought it fitting both to Eden and the overall Hive message of equality.

One day, as she was putting on her makeup backstage, a familiar voice called her by her real name.

“Sera! Is that you?”

She turned and saw Jilly, aka her ex-dealer's girlfriend. Sera had always known she was a sex worker of some sort, but she never knew where.

“Here, it's Valeria,” Sera said. “I'm surprised to see you.”

“Oh, cool. I'm Jade. And yeah, I'm kind of a part-timer here. I used to stay at the Hive, so Orlanda still let's me take some shifts.”

Jilly sat down next to her and gave her a sympathetic look in the mirror. Sera knew what was coming next. “How are you holding up?” Jilly asked.

“Okay. I’m just trying to move on, you know.”

“I’m surprised you can handle this stuff right now. I imagine it’s pretty intense.”

“Honestly, I need the distraction.”

Sera almost wanted to ask if she’d had any contact with Ray, but then she figured she better not open that wound.

“Hey, if you don’t mind, could you not mention to Snake that you saw me here? I left Ray, and I don’t really want it getting back to him that I’m dancing here.”

“Of course, darling. This place is like AA. It’s our secret.”

After that day, she didn’t see much of Jilly, except in the play rooms, where conversation was minimal. Jilly seemed to prefer dominatrixing, and, from what Sera saw, she was one of the best.

The rest of the week didn’t go great. Her hopes that she could shake the Hive out of its routine had been dashed by two events. First, only one other woman showed up for her mechanics class, Iris, the former nurse, and that was mostly out of friendship more than actual interest. When Sera told her she wanted to work her way up to fixing car motors, Iris shook her head. “Not me, honey,” she said. “I’m afraid I’m a little too old to be getting under cars.”

The second setback was when she got paid. Orlanda gave out cash at the end of every week. Sera counted her share and it was much less than she thought it would be. She went to confront Orlanda about it in her office. When she walked in, Orlanda was still sorting through

money. She told Sera to have a seat, finished counting the bills, wrote the total in a ledger, and stuffed them in a large envelope.

When Sera asked why the pay was so low, Orlanda made several excuses: it had been a slow week, Sera did more performances than dungeon work that pays more, and she garnered a less than average amount of tips.

“It’s your first week,” she said. “You’re still learning the ropes. It’ll pick up.”

“Still, from my calculations, I should’ve earned more.”

“There’s also the house share. The twenty-five percent.”

“*Twenty-five percent?*” she said. “I had no idea it was that much. But not of my tips, right?”

“Yes, all earnings.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“I mentioned this. I’m sure I did. And it was in your contract.”

Sera knew she should’ve read that paper a little more carefully.

“I guess I thought that meant just a cut of the overall door. That doesn’t really seem fair. Don’t you make money from drinks?”

“We don’t sell alcohol, remember? Just juice, natural sodas, and bottled water. We don’t want to get wealthy by poisoning people.”

“So instead you exploit them?”

“That’s unfair.”

“Tips are usually sacrosanct. Especially in sex work. Our asses are literally on the line up there.”

Orlanda’s tapped her nails on the desk in quick succession.

“For one, this isn’t exactly sex work, as there’s no sex involved,” she said, her voice tenser than usual, as close to angry as Sera had heard it. “And, more importantly, do you think all this comes for free? Do you think I’m getting rich? Secretly living lavishly while all of you are suffering? No. All the money goes to support the Hive. The food, the lodging, the workshops, the gas for the generator and van, all of it unfortunately costs money. That’s why we call it a collective.”

Sera brought up all the work she did, the cleaning and organizing, but Orlanda reminded her that she’d volunteered to do all that.

“You said service was healing for you,” she said. “Better than meditation, you said. But if you’d rather not, I’m sure we can divvy up your tasks to others.”

“It’s not that. I don’t mind doing it for free.”

“Good. Unfortunately, the grocery stores don’t seem to feel the same.”

Orlanda folded her hands together, leaned her elbows onto the table, and gave Sera a hard stare.

“Do you not have everything you need here?” she said in a low voice. “What exactly do you need more money for?”

She had Sera there. It wasn’t that she needed something more at the Hive. The money was to get away. But she couldn’t tell her that. It would ruin her whole plan. She struggled to come up with other reasons. A dying mother? No, she already knew Sera’s mother was dead. Maybe an aunt or sister? With a sick kid? It all sounded phony in her head.

Luckily, she was saved from the lie when Jazzmina came into the room. “Sorry to bother you, but someone’s causing trouble downstairs,” she said. “They want a refund.”

Orlanda sat up in her chair. “Let’s continue this in a minute,” she said to Sera and walked out the door.

Sera started to leave behind them, but something stopped her, made her turn back, like her body felt the impulse before her mind had caught up. Was this what Orlanda meant by a “sudden instinctual illumination?” She turned back towards the room, and her eyes immediately zeroed in on the envelope with the cash. Her hand reached out and grabbed it as if it had a will of its own. On a quick glance she was sure there was over a grand in there, maybe two or three. It wasn’t a fortune, not enough to make or break the Hive. But it would at least be enough for her to get to Hawaii, or wherever she decided.

Then again, what if Orlanda called the cops and Sera became a fugitive? It seemed unlikely, but maybe she’d do it out of spite. And maybe taking all the money wasn’t fair. Her twenty-five percent was fair, but not a dollar more. She slid the calculator over and, based on her total, quickly figured how much it would be. Then she pulled that exact amount from the envelope, wrote an IOU note for the same figure, and shoved it back in.

She left the room, running quickly through the empty hallway, down the stairs, and out the back door, where her van was parked.

She felt good, a little high, even. It wasn’t enough money to get away to Hawaii but she’d made her point. Maybe she’d even go back to the Hive and see if Orlanda ever said anything. Or she might just call it quits. She was completely on the fence. The only thing she was sure about was that she really needed a cigarette.

9.

As Valero cruised around Boiltown, the first thing he noticed was the unholy aroma of burning trash. He couldn't imagine how they lived with that stench. Maybe they got used to it. For a lot of Boilers, the squalid living conditions weren't exactly by choice, but more by last resort. The place was like the dark side of the California dream, as far as you could get from the beaches, the glamour, the glitter, the swimming pools and girls in bikinis. If Hollywood was where dreams were born and Vegas where they died, then Boiltown was where they went to be buried for good.

Valero knew from all the hard luck cases he'd handled in his time as a cop, that when you fell low enough, the climb back up could be daunting. And some hadn't even fallen. They started at the bottom and never had a chance. Others had burned all their bridges, stolen from friends and family members, squandered their government aid. Most Boilers never had anyone, until they had each other.

Life in Boiltown seemed to be a mixed bag. On the one hand, a lot of the residents were artists, and driving through it felt like roaming through a derelict art museum. Almost anything that could be considered wall space had been painted over with a mural or a design, though some of them were covered over with bad graffiti. Some of the living structures were almost works of art themselves, large scale installations that doubled as homes. This is what drew the snowbirds and tourists, and what set it apart from just being Skid Row in the desert. That, and the Apocalypse Lounge, when it was still standing.

Other sections were as close to a shantytown that America got, heightened only because of the extreme wealth they could feed off. As much as some of the more eco-conscious, environmentalist Boilers wanted it to be a self-sustainable, solar-powered, compostable paradise,

others were moochers and thieves who'd just as soon burn their garbage or bury it in a hole rather than figure out a collection service. Some were diehard druggies living in tents or boxes, treating the place like a refugee camp for addicts. And then there were the hardcore anarchists, for whom any form of organization was met with suspicion that "the man was taking over," signaling the end of total freedom. The truth, as Valero saw it, was that "the man" wanted nothing to do with Boiltown.

He'd driven for hours looking for Ray's place, even stopping at a taco truck, one of the few eateries around, to have lunch. Most of the time he felt uneasy. Part of it was the general climate of the country that had seemed to affect people everywhere he went. They'd become hostile towards cops, especially the poorer, marginalized communities, believing they were treated unequally. And no doubt they were. But Valero couldn't see a good way out of the mess. In those areas, there was generally more crime, which meant they needed more cops. But when cops were afraid of people, they did stupid shit, like shoot unarmed kids. Valero tried to be fair and even-keeled, not rush to judgment or pull his gun unnecessarily. But if he was attacked, he was going to defend himself. He'd been lucky, so far. But when would his luck run out?

The longer he drove, the less he felt like he was driving through a hostile war zone. It was more like a place where the battles had been fought and the dead disposed of, leaving only a funereal silence in its wake. Maybe it was from the many flags he'd seen flying at half-mast. Or how few people he saw out and about. And those he did see didn't look at him with their usual suspicion and scorn. Instead, there was a yearning in their expression, more like they were pleading for his help.

What could he do? He couldn't bring back the lives lost. He could only punish those responsible. And maybe no one was.

Or maybe Raymond Barrett was.

Despite the lack of aggression in the locals he saw, Valero remained on edge. The tragic fire seemed to have driven some of the more affluent RV crowd away, and left behind the more dire cases. With some of the money people gone, work also tended to dry up, adding to the destitution. Boilers were a malnourished bunch; multiple that by meth, gun-hoarding, and the delusions of some anti-government conspiracy and survivalist nuts and it could lead to some tense situations. There was often talk of a real crackdown, of “kicking out all the squatters,” but nothing ever materialized, mostly because no one had an adequate answer for the obvious questions: where would all these people go, and who would want to take them?

He began to give up hope of ever finding Ray’s trailer. After a while, they all blurred together. It was even possible he’d passed it already and hadn’t realized it. He did, however, find the local “*Library and Internet Café*,” where several people were sitting around staring at their phones and drinking “*kinda cold coffee*.” It was already mid-afternoon, and he was ready for another pick-me-up. As he passed the computer crowd, he could sense them tensing up, wondering why a cop was here. He said hi to Nemo, the owner and one of the friendlier Boilers, who gave it to him on the house.

“Please, let me at least tip, then,” Valero said, stuffing a five in his tip jar. “I was hoping you might be able to help me out with something, too. I’m looking for a Raymond Barrett. Goes by Ray. Guitarist. Lives somewhere around here.”

“Yeah, I know him.”

“Know where he lives?”

“Not exactly.”

“Seen him recently?”

“Why?”

Already, he was giving himself away. Valero decided that lying couldn't hurt in this case.

“There were some things recovered in the fire that we think may belong to him. I guess he had a practice space in there, too?”

“Yeah, I heard about that.”

“Well, a lot of stuff in there was undamaged. I'm sure he'd be happy to have it back.”

“I'm sure he would. Not sure he's home though.”

“Why's that?”

“'Cause I saw him not too long ago biking up the ridge path. Other there.”

He pointed to the other side of the road to a thin bike path that skirted the edge of an irrigation canal.

“What time was this?”

“Couple hours ago maybe? Sorry, I wasn't really paying attention to the time.”

“And I don't suppose you'd have any idea where he might be heading?”

“Well, the path goes by the old ghost town, and then hits the main road to Paradise, so your guess is as good as mine.”

Valero thanked him for the information. It wasn't much, but at least he knew that Ray wouldn't be home.

He walked across the road and up to the path. There were several bike tracks in the dirt trail along the ridge. Any one of them could be Ray's. He could get lucky and follow the right one, but even then it might disappear once he hit the main road, leaving Valero no closer to his goal.

From the top of the ridge, he could probably see clear to Paradise, if there was much to

see. As he stood there, trying to find something to admire about the view, his phone went off, several times in a row. He must've just gotten a wave of service. *Five missed calls*. Before he could check the phone, the phone rang again, coming from an unfamiliar number.

"Valero," he said.

"It's Kyle!" said the agitated voice on the other end.

"Kyle?"

"Grover. You met me in your office."

"Oh, right. What's up?"

"I've been trying to reach you."

"Sorry, bad reception here."

"I saw him."

"Who?"

"Ray. Not more than ten minutes ago."

"Okay, where?"

"I was biking around Boiltown, figuring you could use a hand in the search. He biked right by me. I tried to tail him, but he was going too fast."

Valero headed down the ridge towards his car. "First off, we really don't need you out looking. You're not a cop, and it might be dangerous. And definitely don't follow him."

"I'm sorry. Just trying to help. You seemed a little overworked."

Valero cradled the phone against his shoulder as he started his car. "We can handle it. Now, tell me where you saw him."

"Near the old ghost town, the one where Boiltown begins."

"Got it. I'm actually not that far from there. Now please, go home, Kyle."

“Yes, sir. But will you let me know if you catch him?”

“Sure. Go home.”

He put down the phone as he drove ahead, slow enough that he could scan both the ridge trail and the road, as well as the other side where most of the Boiltown dwellings were. Kyle seemed so overeager to catch the guy that Valero wondered if he could even trust his judgment. Maybe he just saw someone who looked like Ray and made the call. Either way, he was planning on heading that way, so at least he wasn't totally wasting his time.

He passed by a few other bicyclists who, on first look, could've been Ray, but up close he could tell they weren't. About every other Boiler was a skinny, long-haired white guy, so it was easy to be fooled. Ray, though, had a distinguishing feature: a large and crooked nose that looked like it might've been broken once. He also had several tattoos on his arm, though that, too, was fairly common in these parts.

By the time he saw that the sun was close to setting, Valero began to give up hope. It looked like it was going to be another fruitless search, another waste of the day.

He started thinking about what to have for dinner. His son would be home by the time he was, and he wanted to cook up something special. Maybe some frybread, his grandfather's old recipe, and some chili or stew. He'd have to stop at the Naylor's on the way because he didn't have much at home.

He was so lost in thought about dinner, that he almost didn't see the naked man in the middle of the road. He swerved at the last second, just missing him, and skidded to a stop. Looking in the rear view mirror, he saw he wasn't hallucinating. A man was definitely standing in the middle of the road, arms spread wide towards the sky, body glowing red from Valero's brake lights.

Valero stopped the car, got out, and approached slowly, one hand on his gun holster. The man still faced away from him, seemingly unfazed by the fact that he'd just missed being run over.

“Sir? Are you all right?” Valero said, standing at a safe distance, just in case, though it was clear the man wasn't armed.

“Am I alive?”

“Yes. Lucky for you. What are you doing out here?”

“I was taking in the sunset. Then I saw the lights, and figured they'd finally come for me.”

“Who?”

“Angels. Aliens. Whatever.”

“Well, you got me. You mind telling me where your clothes are?”

The man still hadn't turned around to face him, perhaps being modest, although it was more likely that he hadn't figured out where Valero's voice was coming from. Clearly he was high on something.

Scanning the area, Valero spotted a pile of clothes, a tote bag, and an overturned bicycle, all in different spots on the side of the road.

“Sir, have you taken anything tonight?” he asked.

“Taken?”

“Have you consumed any drugs or alcohol?”

“Just love, that's all,” the man said, finally turning around. “Is there a crime in that?”

The first thing Valero noticed was that the man had an erection. The second thing was that the man was Raymond Barrett.

“It’s you,” he said.

“Yes, it’s me. Is it you?”

“You’re Raymond Barrett, correct?”

“I used to be. Now I’m not so sure. I’d rather not be labeled, if you don’t mind.”

Valero didn’t have time for this shit. “Do you have any I.D.?”

“There you go again. Like I need a card to prove who I am. I’m standing right here.”

“Sir, I’d rather not arrest you, but if you don’t answer my questions, I might have to.”

Ray seemed to take him in for the first time. “Wait, do I know you?” he asked. “You’re that cop.”

“Deputy Valero. We met about a week ago.”

“Why are you going to arrest me?”

“Well, public nudity, for one thing.”

“Are we in the public? Before you came along, I hadn’t seen a soul for miles.”

Thankfully, the more Ray talked, the more his erection seemed to wilt.

“Can I ask what you’ve been doing out here, Ray?”

“What are *you* doing out here, man?”

All of a sudden, Ray’s knees gave way, and he slumped and sat cross-legged on the side of the road.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “What’s your name again?”

“Valero.”

“Is that Mexican?”

“Salvadorian.”

“But you look Indian.”

“Well, my mother was half, her father was Cahuilla, her mother was Mexican with a white grandmother, and my father was mostly Salvadorian, so you tell me.”

“A mutt. Just like Fate. Fate, shit, I’ve got to get back to her.”

“To who?”

“My dog.”

Valero decided to help him by grabbing the pile of clothes off the ground and handing them to him.

“Can you put these on for me?” Valero asked.

“Should I be ashamed of my body?”

“No. But I’m afraid it’s the law.”

“It’s Boiltown. There are no laws here.”

“That’s not entirely accurate.”

“What are you, a cop? I’m kidding... I know you are.”

“Please. For me.”

Ray shrugged and began slipping on his shirt and shorts.

“So you’ve got some Indian blood?” he said. “That’s so cool. I mean, it kind of sucks, too, because of what happened. I’m sorry for what my ancestors did. Some of them, maybe. I don’t know, to be honest. But probably.”

“I won’t hold you personally responsible for the genocide of my people, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Valero said, leading him back to the car now that he was clothed.

“Thanks. That’s all I wanted to hear.”

Valero couldn’t ascertain exactly what drug Ray was on, but he assumed it must have been some sort of psychedelic. He was completely out there in moments, but then suddenly calm

and lucid, so he doubted it could be anything speedy or tranquilizing. He thought to search him and find out, but, really, it was better if he didn't arrest him at this point, drove him to the station, and let him sleep off his high. Luckily, he seemed quite amenable to being led and told what to do in his current state.

On the way to the car, Ray grabbed his bag. "Oh, what about my bike? I got a flat."

"We'll come back and get it later."

He helped Ray into the backseat.

"Wait, you're not arresting me, right?"

"Did I put handcuffs on you? Did I read you your rights?"

Ray nodded. Valero shut his door and then took the driver's seat.

"Where are we going?" Ray asked.

"Just somewhere to grab some coffee and have a chat. That sound good?"

"Yeah. Coffee sounds rrrreally good. Cream and sugar."

"Sure, cream and sugar, too."

"I'm so glad you found me, man."

"Me, too."

"I love you."

"Uh-huh."

Valero started the car. Ray started singing to himself in the back. His voice wasn't half-bad.

He'd driven less than a mile when a call came through. A carjack and stabbing. Near the Naylor's on Industrial. Woman in critical condition. All units in the area to the scene. Details to follow.

“Goddammit,” Valero said under his breath. “Looks like we gotta take a little detour.”

He looked in the rear view mirror, but Ray was out of it, oblivious. His eyes were half-closed, staring out the window, smiling, his lips still moving, but not making a sound. For a moment, Valero wished they could trade places.

10.

Sera kept looking in the rear view, making sure no cops were behind her. She didn't know why she was so on edge. It wasn't like she stole that much money. But she wouldn't put it past Orlanda to call the cops after all. Every time she saw a car coming in the distance, Sera braced herself, ready for her heart to sink when she heard the sirens. But each time the car passed, it was never the police, just another local getting on with their lives.

Sera needed to get on with hers too. She left in such a hurry that she had little time to process what she'd just done, or what exactly she would do now. Hawaii kept flashing through her mind, the vision of her sister with her happy family playing on the beach, tossing out sticks to their chocolate labs, digging their toes in the sand, the fresh ocean air, the tranquil breeze and golden sunsets and fresh fish and tropical cocktails. That was the kind of retreat she needed, not the cramped quarters and forced spirituality of the Hive, the constant reminder of where everything had gone wrong on the other side of the hill.

She stopped at Naylor's to get cigarettes and snacks. She raced through the store, afraid to linger for fear of running into someone she knew, or who recognized her. She filled her basket with two apples, several protein bars, a jar of peanuts, two bags of beef jerky, a large jug of water, and two energy drinks, figuring that should keep her set in case she decided to drive somewhere far. While she waited in line, she thought of all the times she and Ray had gone shopping high off their gourds, buying what they could, and stealing the rest. It felt odd not to have her pants full of fancy cheeses.

While the cashier went to retrieve a pack of cigarettes from the locked shelf, she sensed someone staring out of her periphery. She turned to a young woman, a cashier in another

checkout stand. Sera ignored her, checked her phone, but every time she glanced over, the woman seemed to be stealing glances.

When the cashier came back with the smokes, Sera almost left without getting her change. She walked quickly past the other checkout without meeting the girl's stare.

Outside, she needed that cigarette so bad she couldn't wait. She walked over to the side of the building near the loading dock where no one could see her and lit one. Her nerves were on edge. Now that she had bought all the supplies, it dawned on her that maybe she was really going to leave this time. She at least had enough money now to drive to another town, set up camp in her van somewhere, maybe find work. But it all seemed so empty without music. She still wasn't sure if she could ever get on a stage again, but that didn't mean she couldn't write songs and play them for herself. Maybe, eventually, she'd let this weight go. And maybe music would help with that. She imagined whatever she played now would be totally different, less political and radical, less flag-waving. It would have to be something more personal and emotional. It would probably be really sad. And maybe that was okay. She liked sad music sometimes, too.

She thought of poor Ray, hoping he was handling it all better than she was, but knowing that was unlikely. He was probably hermiting, wallowing in his self-imposed depression, making their love out to be more than it was. Not that it wasn't great at times. But she never gave herself fully to it. It was always more about the music. The love was almost an afterthought, convenient under the circumstances. But he might've fallen for her. He might have actually opened his heart, and she shut it down. And left without a word.

Now she knew what she had to do before she left. She had to see Ray.

She put her cigarette out on the wall of the store, and had just left her hiding spot when she saw a familiar face leaving the pawnshop next door. The eye patch was the giveaway: it was

Snake.

She stepped back, got down low, and peeked out intermittently. Snake walked with someone else, a teenager from the looks of him. They walked into the parking lot towards his parked Harley. Then Snake stopped suddenly. Sera swung back, fearing he spotted her. When she peeked out again, he was walking up to her van. Clearly he knew it was hers. All the feminist bumper stickers didn't help disguise it much.

He went up one side while the teen walked up the other, peering in the windows. Then they met up again at the back, where she could see Snake saying something to him and pointing at the Naylor's. The next time she looked, Snake was heading for the store while the kid waited outside, smoking. There was no way she could escape now. But what the hell did they want?

All she could think of was that Ray owed him money. Which, to him, meant she did, too. She thought of going out there and just paying him off, but it might even be more than she had. And fuck that, anyway. It was Ray's responsibility more than hers.

She looked around for somewhere to run, but she was fully sandwiched in. Either she entered the store, or she went to the van. She decided it best to wait where she was.

Five minutes later, she heard Snake's voice again. She peeked out. He was talking to the teen. Then he went up to her van again and traced something in the built up grim on the back window. When he finished, he went back to his Harley, the kid got on the back, and they took off.

She waited for several minutes to see if they were going to return. When they didn't, she ran to her van. She took a moment to see what he'd traced. It was a picture of Ouroboros, the coiled snake eating itself. What did it mean? A warning? Was it just his calling card? His: *Snake Was Here*.

She didn't have time to ponder. She got into the driver's seat and pulled out of the spot.

At the end of the lot, she paused, considering her options. If he was heading to Ray's next, he could be in trouble. But what could Sera do? He'd get there first, anyway. And, really, what would Snake do? If the guy didn't have money, there wasn't much he could do. Rough him up, but even that seemed unlikely. They were friends, after all. She decided the best thing would be to check in at the Paradise Motel for one night, go to Ray's early in the morning when he was sure to be home and Snake was unlikely to be around. She cranked the wheel and pulled out of the lot.

As she turned onto the main road, she heard a loud thunk on the right side of the hood. Had she been so lost in thought she didn't notice someone in front of the van? She'd hit something. She braked, but she couldn't see what it was. Then she heard a groan, someone say, "Fuck! My leg!" She pulled the keys and left the van, walking around the other side. But no one was there.

"What the fuck?" she muttered.

When she turned back to the driver's side, she came face to face with the teenager she'd seen with Snake.

"Stand back," he said.

"Or what."

"Or I cut you."

He pulled out a blade from underneath his shirt. It was an odd-looking knife, more of a dagger, a familiar one.

"Where did you get that?" she asked.

"Just back up," he said with a slight quiver in his voice.

“You stole it, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t steal shit.”

She slowly edged her hand to cover the mace strapped to her key chain.

“Yes, you did. That belongs to Ray.”

“Not anymore. Now step away from the van. I’m taking it.”

“Oh really? Aren’t you going to need these?”

She jangled the keys in front of him, aiming the mace, and spraying it in his face. He screamed. She felt something go into her belly. She looked down. She had a hole in her shirt, blood coming out. The teen dropped the dagger and wiped his eyes with his shirt. She leaned against the van, trying to stay up, but soon she went down, too.

“I didn’t mean... you made me do that!” the teen screamed, rubbing his eyes with his shirt.

Blood seeped from her wound and trickled to the ground. She didn’t feel it, not at first. Not until she watched the teen struggle to grab the keys from the ground in front of her. She reached for him, but she was weak, could barely move, could barely get a breath in. She watched, helpless, while he got in the van, started it, and drove off.

That’s when she felt the first wave. It came over her like an electrical shock, like a jolt straight to the heart. All the pain, from all the people she’d killed or hurt in the fire. All the weight of all the souls, pressing on her. She let out a wail like a wounded beast, loud enough for the heavens to hear.

11.

“That’s her,” Ray said when the car came to a stop.

She was laid out on a stretcher. Paramedics were lifting her off the ground.

“Who?” the cop asked.

“That’s Sera. My love. Let me out. Let me out!”

The cop opened his door and he ran over to see her. Sure enough, he wasn’t hallucinating. It was really her. Sera. She had blood coming out of her belly.

“What happened?” he asked the paramedics.

“Stand back please.”

“What happened?”

“Ray!” the cop called out.

“She’s not dead, is she?”

They didn’t answer, but he could see her chest, heaving. They wheeled her to the waiting ambulance, and lifted her in. Ray followed behind.

“Let me go with!” he called.

“Sorry, not possible, sir. We’ll do everything we can.”

They closed the door behind him and took off down the road.

“Sera! Fuck!”

He turned and saw the crowd for the first time. The cop, Valero, was talking with one of them, taking notes. A couple of them were staring and pointing at something in the road. He looked over, and saw a pool of blood, still bright and wet on the asphalt. And, closer to him, he saw the dagger.

“I know who did this,” he said.

But no one was listening.

“I know who did this!”

“Ray, please, try to be calm. I need to figure out what happened here.”

“But I know. It was Snake. Snake!”

“Okay, Ray, I’ll get to you in a second.”

But Ray didn’t have a second. He had to get to Snake’s. He looked around for a solution.

There was always a way, and all he had to do was find it. The universe provided.

And just like that, his path was clear. He saw the golden keys dangling off the policeman’s belt. He was busy taking statements, and wouldn’t notice. All he had to do was approach, slow as can be, stand next to him long enough for him to get used to it, then slowly slide his hand down, gently reach out, carefully squeeze the clip so he won’t even notice, let the keys slide right into an open palm, a soft landing, then slowly back up, a little more, a little more, and then turn, walk, not too fast, but with purpose, to the car, open the door he of course left unlocked, then get in stick the key in the ignition, start the car, hit the gas, and burn out of there.

He heard the cop yelling after him but it was too late, the plan went just as he’d predicted, and he felt great, only not so great when he remembered what happened to Sera, sweet sweet Sera, it was his fault, it was all his fault, but really, it was Snake’s and Snake would pay.

What are you going to do, tough guy? Kill him?

The impish voice came from close by, from the place above and directly between his two eyes, from the boil.

“Sure. Why not?”

How the hell are you going to pull that off? The guy has all your weapons.

“I’ll think of something.”

You don’t have the guts.

“He might’ve killed my love.”

You killed your love. A long time ago.

“No, there’s still hope.”

Even if she’s alive, it doesn’t mean she’ll want you back.

“I don’t care. It’s not just for her. Or for me. It’s for justice.

Justice. What a laugh. If there were justice in the world, all those fans of yours would still be alive.

“It was an accident.”

Was it?

“Yes.”

Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, there’s no bringing them back.

“So what’s your point?”

My point is she won’t care. She left you.

“Maybe she was on her way back to me when it happened.”

True. Or she could’ve been on her way....anywhere else.

He was done talking. It was time to focus. The road was up ahead. Slow down for the turn. Then speed up. He knew this road. He’d driven it many times. He could drive it in his sleep. With his eyes closed. With his hand tied... well, maybe not that.

Faster. Don’t let the fear catch up. The doubts. Remember the mission. Remember the goal. Ask questions later.

He made it to the street. Desire. He turned. Drove to the end. Drove until he saw the

house. The Harley. He was home.

He parked down the street, left the car, and quietly approached. Was he being watched, or was that just his paranoia? He spun around, looking at every possible opening that someone could see him. He saw no one.

Just because you don't see them, doesn't mean they aren't there. But, on the other hand, just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they're not after you.

“Shut up, okay? I’m sick of you.”

How do you think I feel? At least you got a bunch of other body parts to play with. I just have your head, which really never shuts up.

“Well, I don’t really have a choice. Without a head, without thoughts, what am I? I think, therefore I am.”

Oh, don't get all Shakespearean on me. You can survive without a head. Look at me. That's the only thing that's keeping me alive. And thoughts? What are thoughts anyway? Your thoughts aren't you. They're labels you put on everything. But they're not the thing itself. They're made up.

He let the boil babble on. It didn’t matter. He was no longer listening. He was walking straight ahead, towards the destiny he created, step by step.

Now was the time for action. No thought, no feeling, just pure instinct. Everything else was theoretical, a waste of mind. Energy and impulse was what had gotten him here, to Snake’s place, and it was the only way he would take control of the situation inside

There were no flashing lights in the windows this time, no sounds of automotive mayhem, or any sound save the muffled generator in the back, the sure sign that someone was home. The shades were drawn on all of the windows in the front and around the sides, too. He

crept to the locked back gate, immediately hopping it, and landing among Snake's sculpture garden. The creatures stared with maniacal smiles, arms outstretched as if to grab him. In a horror movie, they would come alive and tear him apart. But this was no movie. This was real. And in this world, he was the monster.

There were two windows in the back, one with a small opening at the bottom. On his tiptoes, he couldn't quite reach it. He scoured the edges of the yard for something to stand on, and came upon a pile of cinderblocks. He carried one over to the window, using it as a boost so he could see inside.

The back room was empty. He could hear a shower running. He saw no one.

He stepped off the cinder block, got three more, and stacked them one on top of the other. Then he stepped on top, slowly slid the window open just enough, reached his hands on the frame, and hoisted himself inside.

He landed on the floor with a thud. The shower was still running. The door was open, and he could see down the empty hallway. He went straight for Snake's desk and slid open the door. His gun was still inside.

He pulled it out. The shower stopped. He waited, aiming the gun at the hall. After a moment, he heard someone sliding down the poll in the other room. The next moment Jilly walked into the hall. Ray held the gun behind his back. She spotted him.

"Ray?" she asked.

"Hey, Jilly."

"What are you doing here?"

The bathroom door opened between them, and Snake stepped out, wearing only a towel. He saw Jilly first, her confused expression. Then he turned to Ray.

“Hey, Snake,” Ray said, lifting the gun and aiming it at him.

“Ray, what the hell?”

“Why’d you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Why’d you stab her?”

“Don’t shoot him, Ray!” Jilly screamed, walking towards him.

“I told you to go easy on that stuff, man.” Snake said.

“I’ll do the talking.”

“Fair enough. You got the gun.”

“Fair,” Ray said. “Interesting choice of words. Do you think it’s fair to attack an innocent person?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You stabbed Sera.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Come on, Snake. You left the dagger.”

“Goddammit.”

“You admit it?”

“No. It wasn’t me! That fucking guy. Squiggy. I told him to get some money. Money or the van, I said. But don’t hurt her. I specifically said that.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s true. It’s because of you. That knife was a phony. I checked. Shit. I know, I lost my temper, it’s true. I couldn’t believe you’d lie to me like that. But I told him not to hurt her. I swear.”

Snake fell to his knees, near weeping.

“Great performance, Snake. But somehow I don’t believe you.”

“I’ll prove it. I’ll call the guy!”

“I don’t think so.”

“Come on, Ray? You really want to kill me? Spend your life in jail? I’m your friend.”

“I don’t have any friends.”

“Please. Let me call him. If it turns out I’m lying, you can fucking shoot me.”

Shoot him.

“Shut up! Let me think.”

Ray was losing his nerve. But what did he have to lose? Shoot him now, or shoot him later. Same thing either way.

“Fine,” Ray said. “You do anything funny, I swear I’ll shoot you.”

“Babe, hand me my phone on the counter there.”

Ray watched Jilly as she reached for the phone and handed it to Snake.

He faced it towards Ray as he dialed, to show him it was calling “Squiggy.” He put it on speaker.

It rang several times.

“Come on, pick up,” Snake said. “Fucking kids! No one answers their phone anymore!”

He picked up on the fifth ring. “Snake,” he said, sounding breathless.

“What the hell happened, man?” Snake asked.

“I got the van,” Squiggy said.

Snake made a face towards Ray.

“What happened?” Snake repeated.

“Shit got crazy. I was maced. Had to stop and wash my eyes out. But I’m just turning on

your street.”

“You got maced? But you didn’t hurt her, right? Hello?”

“Shit got crazy.”

“Yeah? And?”

“I think I stabbed her.”

“What? You think?”

“Not that deep, but yeah. She fucking maced me.”

Snake looked at Ray like *i-told-you-so*. Ray walked slowly to the phone and took it out of Snake’s hands. Doing his best Snake-impression, he said, “So you’re close?”

“Yeah, I’m driving up the street right now.”

Ray walked past Jilly to the front of the house and peeked through the shade out the window.

“I see you,” he said.

“What’s that cop car doing here?” Squiggy said.

Ray saw him stop the van and look towards the house. They locked eyes.

Ray ran to the front door, unbolted the deadlocks, and ran down the walkway. There was a squeal of brakes as Squiggy backed the blue van down the road. Ray ran out to the middle of the road and aimed the gun.

He heard sirens. Another police car drove fast up the road. Squiggy was stuck between them. The cop car swerved to the side, blocking the road. Squiggy slammed the brakes. Ray walked closer to get a better shot. The police car stopped, and Valero leaned out the passenger window, gun drawn.

“Drop your weapon,” said Valero through the loudspeaker.

Ray let the gun fall by his side but didn't drop it. He took another step.

Another cop exiting the driver's side aimed his gun over the hood of the car.

Come on. Do it. Do it for the dead ones.

“Drop your weapon now!”

Ray took another step, the gun still in his grip.

Do it for Baby, for Sera, for me.

Ray lifted the gun and pressed the barrel into the boil.

“I told you to shut up.”

I dare you.

“Don't do it, Ray!” Valero said.

“Shut up!”

12.

Sera drifted in and out like a flickering light, like a bulb on its last gasps.

She found herself alone, in the dark, standing on the edge of a cliff. The wind blew hot and strong and her knees ached, but she did not fall. Digging her bare heels into the sand, she gazed out over the dusky desert landscape. On the horizon, the sun dipped into a distant ocean. Orange clouds gathered in a deep purple sky, and a few stars began to show their light. Somewhere closer, smoke rose from a smoldering fire, and a gang of coyotes howled, their yips and yaps echoing through the canyon. Beads of sweat ran down her brow. Despite the heat, snowflakes fell all around her. When she opened her hand to catch one, it slipped through her fingertips, turning to dust.

She saw something approaching from a distance. When it came close, she saw it was deer with tall antlers and kind eyes, standing in the middle of a road that stretched long and wide and eventually headed straight into the sky. She wanted to reach out and embrace it, until she saw something in its mouth. It was a jackrabbit, caught in its maw, wriggling. “*Why did you leave me?*” asked the trapped rabbit, in a voice she recognized. It was Ray.

Sera flickered back into consciousness. Light flooded the room like a match struck in the dark, too bright to see at first. She rubbed her sore eyes and took in her surroundings. At first she could only see the flowers, floating and billowing all around her. She quickly realized they were only prints on a curtain. Somewhere close by, an alarm was going off, a steady beeping, but when she moved to stop it, she found her arm tethered to a machine. And on her side, at the point of entry, she could sense soreness behind a bandage. Her slight movement caused a sharp pain. She leaned back against the mattress, and soon felt a familiar, narcotic numbness.

That's when she knew they were feeding her morphine.

She fell back and stared up at the ceiling where a spider dangled on a thin stream. She half expected it to speak, offer advice like in *Charlotte's Web*. Then she'd know she was still in a dream. But the spider stayed silent, continuing on as though Sera wasn't watching, its long, spindly legs pulling itself back up its web. She admired this divine creation, one of the millions of lives on the planet that, by some miraculous set of circumstances, happened to intersect with her own. This "celestial synchronicity," as Orlanda might've called it, gave her a warm sense of comfort.

Or maybe it was the morphine.

The haze took her, snippets of dreams and visions coming and going until it was hard to tell the two apart. She lay like that for hours, days, it was hard to tell, and she didn't much care either way. She was back in the sweet spot, the clear comfort of the opium void.

The next time her eyes flickered open, a clean-cut, smiling man in scrubs sat beside her, asking her questions and writing notes into a clipboard.

"Can you tell me your name?" he asked.

"Sera," she said in a groggy voice. "Seraphina Love."

"And do you know why you're here, Sera?"

"That's a big question. I've been trying to figure it out for a while."

"I mean, in this hospital."

"I think so. But I'd like to hear your take."

"You've been the victim of an attack. You were found with a stab wound in your stomach. You lost a lot of blood."

As he spoke, the whole scene came flooding back. Snake. The teenager. The guy she hit,

or didn't hit, with her van. The mace. The dagger in his hand. Ray's dagger.

She looked down and saw a large bandage where the blade had gone in.

"I was stabbed."

"That's right."

"But I'm alive."

"Yes, you are. Luckily someone found you right away, and the ambulance was able to get to you in time."

"Did they catch him?"

"Who?"

"The guy that did this."

The nurse slipped the clipboard back in its slot. "That I don't know. I do know that there's a policeman eager to talk to you, if you're ready."

Before Sera could answer, a wave rippled through her stomach and up to her head. She felt the pain down to her bones.

"More morphine," she said through clenched teeth.

The nurse moved a lever on the drip, and within minutes she drifted again, no pain, no worries, floating out the window, mingling with the clouds. She wondered: *Why couldn't this be life?*

13.

He made the drive at night.

With the moon a mere sliver, there wasn't much light for Valero to see by, though the stars, away from all electric light, shone with a stubborn brightness. He scanned the horizon and saw them, one bright and solid, the other dim and flickering. They were the ones in the folktale his grandfather used to tell him when he was a child.

It concerned the Deer Hunter and a woman known as White Corn Maiden. They both showed great promise in their youth, he at hunting, she at embroidery. They became the handsomest couple in the village, and the other villagers expected great fortune to come to them because of their union. Unfortunately, the opposite came true. They fell so deeply in love that they spent all their time together, and ignored their talents. Soon, the town began to suffer as a result. Then one day the Maiden unexpectedly contracted some horrible disease and died. In the tribe's tradition, there was a four day period in which a dead person's soul would wander the village, seeking forgiveness for those it may have wronged, and giving the mourners a chance to let it go. The soul could appear in various guises: as a wind, an animal, a disembodied voice, in a dream, in human form. The suffering hunter wandered the edge of the village, seeking her out, and came upon a burning bush (Valero remembered noticing the biblical connection, as his Christian mother had him in bible school). From the fire, he pulled out her body. He was warned by the villagers to let her go, but he refused, it was too painful to lose her a second time. So they stayed together as her body slowly decomposed, horrifying all the other villagers, and bringing them ill luck. Then one day, a giant appeared in town, wielding the largest arrows anyone had ever seen. He claimed to come from the spirit world, and was there because the lover's

selfishness had nearly brought the town to ruin. He told them, since they insisted on being together, that they would get their wish. And like that, one by one, he propelled them on his arrows up towards the sky, where they became stars. The brighter one was the Hunter, while the dimmer the Maiden, and they remained like that, night after night, forever chasing each other across the sky.

Valero's grandfather had said the lesson had something to do with following tradition, and that's why the couple was punished. But when he thought of the story as he drove through the night, all these years later, he thought of another lesson. It seemed to say something more about chasing dreams. That the dimmer star, the dead one, will always be seeking the brighter one, the one still alive. But it will never reach it.

Luckily, people weren't stars, fixed in the same place every night. People could move on, change, start over. After all that had happened in those months and weeks, Valero was finally ready. He just had one last mission, one final loose end.

In their interviews, both Sera and Jade had mentioned a place called the Hive. Though he wasn't sure of the connection, he had a hunch it was wrapped up in the story somehow, especially their figurehead Orlanda. Could she be the true "Alchemist," the one that Kyle had claimed was the source of the drugs, but refused to give any more information. Because Valero had no evidence for a warrant, he decided to go on his own and see what he could dig up.

He followed the directions the women gave him. When he found the road that led through the two painted boulders, he knew he was close. He thought it was just a bad joke, driving between a woman's open legs. But on the other side, he did feel a shift. It felt as though he'd passed into a different atmosphere. Even the bugs that splattered on his windshield looked different: bigger, bloodier. The landscape had an intentional feel, as though the view had been

curated, the towering mesa in the distance perfectly placed to compliment the backdrop of constellations that began appearing in the sky. Even the random rock formations no longer looked so random. They were too precariously balanced, like even the lightest gust of wind could've toppled them.

The white bunker appeared like a mirage, like one of those 3-D pictures that you have to squint to see, that looks like a jumble until you stop trying to find it and then suddenly it appears. It was exactly where it should be, hidden in the perfect pocket of desert. He drove towards it with the sense that he was driving towards a dream.

He stopped the car out front in the empty lot. Exiting his vehicle, the first thing he noticed was how quiet it seemed to be, an intentional silence, as though something was lying in ambush. He strode up the walkway, alert to every flicker of movement: the light breeze, the lizard that scurried by, the beetle burrowing in the sand. Before he'd even made it to the two large planks that served as the dome's entranceway, a wind blew them open. He was startled, drew his gun. But no one stepped out to meet him. He went to the threshold, called out, "Hello?" No one answered. He stepped inside.

The place had been hastily abandoned. He combed the inside, the main hall, the bedrooms, a private area in back, and office. Though it clearly had been occupied, he could find no substantial traces of who lived there.

While he was exploring the garden area, a rustle came from the cornfield. He drew his gun. "Who's there?" he called out. The rustle came closer, the corn stalks swayed. From the darkness, a mule deer stepped out, his black eyes fixed on Valero. At first, he thought he might try to charge. But he approached slowly, kindly, sniffed the air around him before leaning in for a scratch. This tame deer seemed to be all that was left of the Hive.

< >

Over the next few weeks, Valero was able to plug all the holes in the case, but this one. From questioning Kyle, who, as it turned out, was actually a twenty-two year old with a baby face, Valero was able to ascertain a few things. Firstly, that Kyle also went by Squiggy and was part of a small time drug ring that was run through Snake's place. Snake had pegged Kyle as the middleman, the one who delivered the drugs. No matter how much Valero pressed, how many offers he tried to make, Kyle wouldn't give him any more information about this "Alchemist." He seemed genuinely frightened of the character, though, to Valero, it sounded like more myth than fact.

Though Kyle tried to stick to his story about Ray starting the fire, it didn't hold up. He kept changing the details, even at one point saying that he saw Ray light the curtain on fire. Multiple sources confirmed that the Apocalypse had no curtain. Even his mother claimed that all she had to go by was his word, though Valero had the feeling she might be covering for him somewhat. He also considered that Kyle himself might've started the blaze. Maybe it was a cry for help, or attention, or he'd been carried away by the fervor of the crowd, or he'd even caused it accidentally somehow, Valero couldn't say for sure, and there was no evidence to indict him on it. With community pressure to close the case, Valero finally ruled it an accident, and moved on.

Later that week, he'd gone to dinner with Jade. With Snake in jail, Jade was cleared of all charges in exchange for giving up all the information she knew about his drug dealing. It had clearly driven a wedge between them. The next time Valero went in to Eden to see her, he found

that the place had closed down. He called her cell, asked if he could meet her. “Not for a session. A proper date.”

They’d been casually dating ever since. It was fun, light, and that’s just what he needed. He’d given up on hope of getting back together with his wife, which was really what held him back for so long. That hope. That unattainable dream.

They were at dinner a few days after Kyle’s verdict had been decided: guilty of aggravated assault, as expected. Valero talked a bit about the case, including his initial meeting with Kyle and his mother, how something never sat right with him. Though he believed Jade when she’d said she also only ever heard the Alchemist story, some details of Valero’s re-telling of the case reminded her of something. Kyle, or Squiggy at the time, had often mentioned his mother in fearful terms, like he didn’t want to displease or cross her.

“And, there might even be a resemblance...” she said, and trailed off. “Do you have any pictures of the mother?”

He didn’t, but he managed to dig up an article online that showed her in the courtroom.

Jade took one look at the photo gasped.

“*Orlanda*,” she said.

Valero tried for weeks to track her down to get the whole story. But he couldn’t. She’d vanished without a trace, as people seemed to do in Boiltown.

Epilogue

Ray flipped channels. Every news report showed another disaster. First the flood, then a wildfire, then a forest fire in California. The world was really going to shit. He was glad to be in the desert, where everything that could kill you was already dead.

Finally he settled on a soap opera, rich people in fancy rooms, emoting.

Sera stirred beside him. Her eyes fluttered open, and looked across the room.

“Ray?” she said.

“Good morning.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Not long.”

She went to stretch her arms overhead, but, with the IVs still attached, could only get them halfway.

“So... you got out?” she said.

“Yes.”

“That cop got the bail money from my van?”

“Yeah, what was up with that?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Well, I’ve got time,” he said, leaning back in the chair.

“Later.”

“How’re you feeling?”

“Much better.”

“Morphine?”

“No, I’m on lighter stuff now. That shit was making me loopy.”

“Good. If you don’t need it…”

“Exactly. How’re you? How’s your head?”

He rubbed the bandage that was still around his forehead. “Healing,” he said.

She smiled. “So what are you doing here?”

“Making sure you’re okay.”

“I am. Okay.”

Her attention drifted to the television, the rich people’s drama unfolding above them.

“Ray, remember when we used to watch soap operas on mute?” she asked. “The game we played where we dubbed their voices?”

Ray nodded. “Those were good times.”

“Can we do it now?”

“Um… I guess.”

They stared up at the screen. A woman was in a doctor’s office, having an examination, though it was clear from their body language that they were lovers.

Sera started: “I’ve just had the most explosive diarrhea, doctor. Do you know the cure?”

Ray said, “Well, what you might need is a rectum probe.”

“Why, Dr. Carrington. I didn’t know you were a fan of sodomy.”

“I don’t know about you, Mrs. Chatsworth, but for me, a finger up my bum is the closest I’ve ever felt to God.”

They both laughed, until Ray had tears in his eyes.

“Oh God, don’t make me laugh,” she said. “It hurts.”

“Sorry.”

“I think you might actually split my stitches.”

“I should probably go. Let you rest.”

“No, stay. I’m so bored in here. You can just sit there, and we can watch TV, and not say a word. Right now, that’s all I want.”

Ray nodded. They sat in silence a while. The soap opera turned to a commercial, rich people selling detergent.

Sera said, “Hey, Ray.”

“Yeah?”

“You wanna start a band?”

Vita

Eric Layer was born in San Francisco, California. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Acting & Playwriting from the Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, WA. He obtained both the Emerging Voices and Mark fellowships from PEN Center USA in Los Angeles, CA. He entered the Creative Writing Workshop for his MFA at the University of New Orleans in Fall of 2014.