

A Black Deeper Than Death
(Miki Radicci Book 1)
M.E. Purfield

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This is a work of pure fiction

For Mom. The series she has been bugging me for.

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NOT QUITE SO NUMB

The bouncer shoves me out of the Frog Bar. I stumble down the concrete steps, pass the people waiting in line, and fall to the sidewalk. Although I land on my hands, I still hit my head. But with the three vodkas and cranberry juice from the bar mixed with my black market Lexapro and Xanax chaser, I don't feel a thing.

“Don’t let me catch you in here again,” the fat bald-headed bouncer in a bad wool pullover says. “Crazy bitch.” He walks back inside, rubbing his aching nuts that I kicked.

I remain on the ground and inhale a few icy breaths. I slide my arms under my numb head and listen to the people talking. At first I’m pissed that I’m not going to be able to see the rest of Blonde Redhead’s set inside, but I’m also glad to be away from that Guido Jersey Shore wannabe who thought I was going to blow him in the corner of the room. I mean really, what is a wife-beater wearing, tan-skinned, Jersey-accented asshole doing in a place like the Frog Bar?

“Baby, you okay?” some guy asks.

I roll over on my back and glare at the bohemian with a brown leather jacket, jeans, and...earmuffs? His twiggy girlfriend poses next to him and checks me out like I’m some kind of mutant that crawled out of the Hudson. I might as well be compared to her fur jacket and skin-tight black dress. I bet she’s not even wearing underwear.

“Don’t I look okay?” I ask. “What’s wrong, never seen anyone lay on the freakin’ sidewalk? Fucking New York City, asshole. People all over laying on the sidewalk.”

The guy holds his hands up and smiles. “Okay. Okay.”

The fur coat bimbo laces her arms around his waist like he’s some kind of prize. Yeah, a prize that wears sandals in the winter? “C’mon. She’s probably some teenage, runaway hooker or something.” She pulls him away.

“Doesn’t mean she don’t need some help,” he says.

I sit up and mutter, “Runaway hooker my ass.” Do I look like a hooker in black pants, purple sweater, and my \$900 leather jacket, bitch? If they knew who I really am they would probably be sucking my ass. Just as well, I’m so not in the mood for an ass-sucking.

Two agonizing minutes later, I stand and join the rest of the downtown nightlife. Some people glare my way, most just ignore. When you get down to it, having someone thrown to the sidewalk is not that unusual.

I check the time on my cell phone: 10:13 PM. Do I hit up another bar? Or should I go home?

“Fuck,” I whisper. I pull my wallet out of my back pocket to make sure that the bartender gave back my fake I.D. It’s there. Going to another bar sounds like the next best move.

I zipper up my jacket and stick my hands in my pockets as I walk Hudson Street. I curse myself for leaving my hat at home. The breeze funneling between the buildings windburns my ears and makes my nose drip.

I continue down the streets and wonder if I should call Corey to see if he wants to hang out. Then, through my alcohol and chemical haze, I remember he has a date tonight with some rent boy he met in the Lower East Side. I so hate drinking alone, but I also hate crowds.

Feeling dizzy, I stop for a moment on the dark street. Where the hell am I? The huge buildings look like warehouses, but since the windows aren’t boarded up to hide what’s inside, they could be converted condos. I don’t make out any storefronts or entrances to the buildings, just loading ramps, steel shutter gates, and skinny metal stairs. I must be way off course since cobblestone has replaced the asphalt. The average person should freak out a little, but I have my butterfly knife with me if some freak gives me trouble. I

spot cars driving down the cross street ahead and decide to continue on. Where there's traffic there're bars, right?

I walk to the edge of the sidewalk to avoid the dark alley on my right. Last thing I need...

...the hand releases my hair...the knife slashes my face...and again...I scream and cover my stinging face only to have the knife serrate the back of my hands....stumble to my feet and lean against the brick wall of the alley...."Stop please stop," I cry....the dark figure in a short dark coat and derby hat stands over me....knife in their hand....large dripping blade..."Little whore thinks she can do better," the figure rasps...."Help me," I scream....look down the alley and see no one coming...cold steel punctures my stomach.... Blood fills my mouth...liquid warmth down my neck...the blade penetrates...and again...the pain fades...and again...hot breath gasps in my face...and again...until all turns a deep black....

END OF A SHIFT

"Miss, can you hear me?"

I open my eyes to see a cop and a woman standing over me. The name pinned to his shirt reads Ricco. The cop is young and kind of cute. He has one of those square-jaw faces that look like it will only stay cute with a crew cut. I wonder if that's why he chose to be a cop. The woman is older with way too much makeup. She must have slathered on the pink eye shadow all the way up to her forehead with a paintbrush. Catching an odor of onions and shit off the breeze, I'd say she's homeless. But her short black wool overcoat appears new, so you never know.

"I can hear you," I say. "What happened?"

"I was crossing the street when I heard you screaming for help." Crazy make-up lady leans over me and hugs her huge handbag as if the contents are going to rain out. "When I found you, you were laying right here on the street. I pulled you over to the side so that no one would run you over." She smiles wide, revealing white bonded teeth.

I fake a smile back for her. "Thanks."

"Were you attacked, miss?" Ricco the cop asks. "Are you hurt?"

I suddenly remember what happened. I pat my face and stomach and find no wounds. "Holy Jesus," I sigh. I have never felt anything like that before in my sixteen years of life. I can still feel the cold knife slicing through my gut like a paper cut that sends a shiver down your spine.

"Right here I saw her." Crazy make-up lady snuffles. "I didn't touch her. No I didn't. See?"

"Are you hurt?" The cop sighs. The frustration of being with two crazy women finally getting to him, I suppose. "Do you need me to call you an ambulance?"

I sit up and face the dark alley. "No. I'm not hurt. But someone else is." I point to the darkness. "Someone was killed back there. A woman."

The crazy make-up lady's eyes widen while the cop's scrunch up with doubt.

I glare at him. "What?"

"Have you had anything to drink tonight?"

"I'm not playing with you and I am not drunk," I say.

Ricco the cop shakes his head in disbelief. He can probably smell my breath.

"Listen, okay," I say. "Please. I know what I saw."

Ricco helps me to my feet and I walk to the alley. He motions for the woman to hang back while he follows me inside. "Are you saying you saw a woman murdered?"

The streetlights barely penetrate the darkness in the alley.

"You got a light or something?"

He removes the huge flashlight off his belt and shines it down the alley. I lead him in deeper and scan the area. Garbage bags and cans line the graffiti enhanced brick walls and send a horrid stench up my nose. A few metal doors lead into the buildings.

"Listen, my shift is almost over," the cop says. "I'll be glad to help you if you need it, but I am not in the mood to be jerked around here. Were you or were you not attacked tonight?"

I turn to the jarhead cop. "I'm not jerking you around. For fuck sake I saw a woman murdered in this fucking alley."

He stops and shines the light to my side. His face creases. "Step back."

I give him room and he walks past. I can see what he's shining the light on: a foot in a green high heel shoe. I move up behind him and cover my mouth. Although she's laying facedown in a puddle of blood, I know it's the same woman from my vision.

"I said, step back," the cop's nervous voice says.

I obey him, never taking my eyes off the dead woman. Memories of the pain she felt when she died race through me, making me hug my shivering body.

A DELICATE BALANCE OF TRUTH AND LIES

I stand across the street from the alley and wait. Ricco the cop calls more of his co-workers in. Then the ambulance arrives, which is kind of a waste of time. The crazy make-up lady stands next to me and watches them section off the scene of the crime. I try to stand to her side so that the breeze doesn't blow her noxious smell my way, but wherever I move she follows. At least she doesn't talk to me. She just mutters about how terrible it is that the woman was murdered and what not.

Ricco walks back to us and takes out his notepad. He asks crazy make-up lady how she found me on the street. It's kind of weird hearing someone talk about you and what you did when you have no recollection of it. I guess this is what alcoholics go through when their families confront them after their binges. Crazy make-up lady recites the address for the YMCA on 23rd street, breaking down my homeless theory. When he finishes questioning her, the cop tells the crazy make-up lady to go home and that the investigating detectives will contact her if they have anymore questions. But she doesn't leave yet, too into the lights in the sky.

Now it's my turn. After I give him my basic info like name, age, phone number, and address, I start my story. I craft my words and avoid saying "I was stabbed in the stomach", which is exactly how it happened. Instead I say, "I saw the killer slice at her face and then stab her in the stomach until she died. Then I fainted, I guess."

Ricco raises one brow. He's trying to keep that cold indifferent cop expression, but his eyes are giving away his suspicion. I don't blame him. I would think I was lying too. But to tell him the truth would just drop me into a bigger hole.

When we finish up, he asks me to wait here for the detectives. I nod my head and sigh, "Yeah, sure." He walks off back to the scene. I notice the crazy make-up lady is gone and appreciate the cleaner air. By now there're a lot more people standing around watching the scene from the yellow crime scene ribbon barricade. Some people are even

taking pictures. I turn my back to the cameras and hope no one snapped a shot of my face. The last thing I need is Sharon ragging me about bad publicity before a show.

Two cigarettes later, one of those unmarked Sedans with a spinning red and blue light attached to the roof pulls up. Two guys in suits step out. One is a light skinned black man and in decent shape compared to his white partner who could afford to lose forty pounds and benefit from hair plugs. Ricco talks to the two men and then leads them down the alley. I assume after I repeat my story to the detectives I can go home and get some sleep. My alcohol deprived brain pounds against my skull and my eyes need toothpicks to keep them open. I so wish I could lie down on the sidewalk and close my eyes for a while.

The two suits walk out of the alley and stare right at me as they move closer. Their faces sculpt into non-emotion. They reveal their badges. The light skinned black guy says, "I'm Detective Otto Sampson and this is Detective Jerry Hersh."

"Hello," I say.

They nod and put their badges away. Sampson takes out a notepad and pen.

"Miss Michelina Radicci, right?" Hersh asks.

"Yeah, that's me. You can call me Miki if you want." I light up my third cigarette in the last hour to keep my hands warm.

"Had a rough night, Ms. Radicci?" Hersh asks.

I study his smirk and realize that Hersh is the asshole of the pair. "I've had better. Not as bad as that woman in there."

"We understand that you found the body?" Sampson says, his voice is clear, no trace of that annoying New York accent like Hersh's.

"Yeah. Yes."

"Can you tell us about that?"

I sigh and shake my head. Now I know why those actors on crime shows pretend to be pissed when talking to cops. It's kind of annoying telling the same story over and over.

"I was walking down the street here when I saw the woman get stabbed," I say.

"Show us where, exactly," Hersh says.

I walk them over to the curb just in front of the alley. "Here," I say.

The two cops look down the now illuminated alley, then back at me. "Go on," Sampson says.

"And I heard her scream and I saw the killer stab at her face. I think it was twice before she put her hands over it and he sliced her hands too. She fell to the ground, against the wall, and then the killer stabbed her in the stomach four times."

Sampson scribbles notes while Hersh glares at me like I raped his dog.

"Four times?" Hersh asks.

"Four times," I say.

"You're sure?"

"Um, yeah." Based upon the jerk's smile I wonder if I stepped into a trap.

"Let me get this straight. From here to the placement of the murder way at the back, you saw all that in a dark alley?" Hersh asks.

Stupidity washes over me. I nod and drag off my cigarette. "Yes," I whisper.

"Ms. Radicci, did you touch the body before the police officer found it?" Sampson asks.

"No. I was unconscious on the street."

The two detectives exchange expressions. Detective Sampson puts his notepad away and breaks out a pair of handcuffs.

“Whoa, what’s going on?” I ask.

“Ms. Radicci, you are being arrested for the suspicion of murder,” Hersh says.

Sampson swings me around and cuffs my hands behind my back. I look over my shoulder as Hersh reads me my rights and frown at the cameras flashing.

“What’s this?” Sampson asks.

He takes the butterfly knife out of my back pocket.

He smiles and says, “Looks like a murder weapon to me.”

I’m so screwed.

TIMELINES

After they enter my information at one of the desks, an officer escorts me into an interview room while the detectives check out my alibi. He helps me into a seat and opens one of the cuffs. I sigh in relief thinking that he’s going to free my other hand. But the cop just loops the three link chain around the back of the chair and recuffs my free hand, keeping my arms behind my back. When the cop finishes, he says, “Someone will be with you shortly,” like I should expect a waiter, and then he’s gone.

My head continues to pound, but at least the nausea is gone. I try to relax as best I can even though the temperature in the room is way into the 80s and I’m still wearing my leather jacket. I check out the taxpayer-funded design of the room. The drywall is painted off-white to match the only door. Another chair sits across the table, in front of the two-way mirror. I stretch my head over my shoulder and spot a few more chairs in case anyone has plans to put me through a gauntlet. I still can’t believe that I’m here in the police station for no reason. They can’t honestly believe I killed that woman. Then again, knowing exactly how she was killed and having a weapon on me doesn’t help.

The door opens and Detective Sampson enters. He closes it behind him and makes sure it locks. He places stuffed folders on the table and sits in the chair, his back to the two-way mirror.

“Can I leave now?” I ask.

“Not yet. We’re still waiting for a coroner’s report and checking out your alibi.”

“I didn’t do anything. This is so fucked.”

Sampson opens the files in front of him and studies the papers. I guess he doesn’t give a crap what I have to say.

“Did you call your parents yet, Ms. Radicci?” he asks.

“Yeah, right,” I said. “Fat chance of that.”

“You’re a minor.” Sampson looks up. “They’re the only ones that can bail you out, no?”

“You guys didn’t do your homework yet?” I ask. “You don’t know who I am? I guess cops aren’t into the arts.”

Sampson smirks. “I know who you are, Michelina Radicci. You’re an art genius. Discovered at the age of four and selling paintings for thousands of dollars by the time you were five. I’ve been to a few of your shows here in the city. You’re very talented. Although, I prefer your lighter stuff lately. This surreal business is too heavy on my little cop brain.”

I laugh. Sampson flinches.

“Yeah, well, it’s common knowledge that I’m emancipated from my parents. Press had a rave over that one. Surprised you missed it.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah, don’t worry. My lawyer will bring you the paperwork when she gets here,” I say.

“Good.”

Silence fills the room. My body craves a cigarette but I doubt Sampson will give me one since there’re No Smoking signs all over the building.

“So who takes care of you?” Sampson asks.

“Is this part of the questioning?”

“No. Just curious. Sixteen year old girl taking care of herself in this city...” He shrugs.

“I take care of myself. I make more in one year than you do in ten,” I say. “I live with my grandfather. And a friend.”

“I can call him for you if you want.”

“My lawyer will call him.”

He nods and then focuses on the file. The door opens again and Detective Hersh walks in. “Did I miss anything? Did she tell you that she’s innocent?” He grabs a chair from against the wall.

“God, I’m stuck in some bad CSI episode,” I say. “What are you supposed to be, the stereotypical racist cop?”

Sampson smirks.

Hersh sits down next to his partner and flashes me a dirty look. “I suggest you only speak when spoken to, since you’re in such deep shit you’re gonna need a snorkel and goggles.”

“Whatever.” I sigh and lean back.

“We were just getting to know each other,” Sampson says.

“Yeah, Little Miss Art Celebrity,” Hersh says. “I guess it was only a matter of time before you filled in the stereotype. Rich Art Brat Goes Insane, news at eleven.”

I lean forward and wiggle my nose at him.

Hersh glances at Sampson then back to me. “What are you doing?”

“Since my hands are cuffed, I’m flipping you the finger with my nose.”

Hersh cracks his palm on the table. Even Sampson jumps back. He points a finger at me. His eyes flare. “I said, watch it.”

The door opens a third time, and the third time is the charm. My savior sashays in: Sharon May, my lawyer, business manager, and moral compass. Wearing one of her expensive gray suits with a skirt just above the knee to get attention from the average man, Sharon sweeps into the room and places her briefcase on the table. She lays her big blue eyes on me and opens her mouth in a gasp.

“Miki Miki Miki, what are these horrible behemoths doing to you?”

“I’m not sure, but I think the fat one is one step away from bitch slapping me.” I fake cry and sniffle.

Hersh glares at Sharon, like any other asshole would. I know he wants to ask the question. He wants to know why Sharon, as beautiful as she appears - a smart, leggy blonde lawyer with total class - has an Adams apple as big as a golf ball? Well, duh. She’s a post-op transsexual.

“Who the hell are you?” Hersh asks. “And what the hell are you?”

Sharon stares down her nose at Hersh. “I am Miki’s lawyer, Sharon May.” She then slips on her bitch face. “What am I? The one lawyer you don’t want to fuck with.”

I grin at Hersh who looks like he wants to bash Sharon’s head in. Sampson, smart enough to sense his partner’s mood, places his hand on his Hersh’s arm and whispers, “Calm down.” Hersh pulls his arm away.

Sharon opens her briefcase and slaps a piece of paper on the desk. “Are any of you gentleman familiar with the preliminary report on the body of Katherine Moore?”

“Who?” I ask.

“The poor young lady they’re accusing you of murdering, sweetie.”

I nod.

“Well, as a matter of fact, I just received it before I got into the room,” Hersh says, showing his own folder.

Sharon frowns, showing sympathy for Hersh. “Oh, you poor thing. You must have had a hard life climbing the ranks to Detective when you can’t read English.”

“What are you talking about?” Sampson asks, grabbing the report from Hersh.

“As you can see,” Sharon says, “Although they need to do a full autopsy, the coroner at the scene clearly states that the time of death for poor Ms. Moore was between 9:30 and 10:00 PM this evening.”

“Okay?” Sampson says.

I shake my head, feeling sorry for Sampson.

“Did you check out my client’s alibi at the Frog Bar this evening?”

Sampson turns to Hersh who studies his hands.

“Yeah, we checked it out,” Hersh says. “She was there at around 8:30 and wasn’t kicked out until 10:15 and before that time she was engaged in a violent confrontation with a patron and a few bouncers.”

Sharon crosses her arms, glares at me, and shakes her head. “Really, Miki. That wasn’t very mature what you did to that poor man’s testicles.”

“Oh, my God. You know very well why I aim for them,” I snap back.

She turns back to the cops. “Therefore, I believe you have no grounds to hold my client and why isn’t someone taking those cuffs off her. Clearly she’s too young for your kinky sex games, Detective Hersh.”

“Wait a second,” Hersh says. “What about the fact that she has details of the victim’s wounds that coincide with the coroner’s prelim report while she claims that she did not touch the body or a weapon.”

“Let me guess, you think my client had previous knowledge and was in cahoots with the perpetrator. Then the murderer divulged the facts to her? Even the D.A. outside doesn’t believe my client would have enough time to get such detail before she fainted. Plus, why the hell would she even report the murder to the police if she was involved?”

Sampson lowers his head in the coroner’s report and says. “The comparison with the butterfly knife and the wounds doesn’t match.”

Hersh huffs and crosses his arms.

Sampson stands up and frees me from the chair.

“So I’m free to go?” I ask.

“As a bird,” Sharon says, packing away her file.

“Miki, wait,” Sampson says. “I’d still like to ask you some questions.”

“Why?” I ask.

“You know a lot about the details of the murder. I’d like to know how you know it.”

“Cause she’s guilty as hell,” Hersh mumbles.

I turn to Sharon. I would like to help, but I’m so not in the mood right now. Besides, the woman is dead and I don’t know much about the murder besides experiencing it, which is something I don’t want to get into with them.

“It’s up to you, sweetie. You just pay me. But I will be with you.”

“Listen,” I say to Sampson. “I’m tired. Can we do this another time?”

Sampson throws his hands up in defeat and Hersh exhales his aggravation as he stands and walks out of the room.

Sharon holds the door open for me. I glance at Sampson sitting at the table and flipping through the papers. He looks as beat as me and I can’t help but feel guilty about it.

THE MEN OUTSIDE

Sharon escorts me to the window to retrieve my confiscated possessions. The cop behind the window passes me an envelope filled with my personal items and a clipboard to sign. I open it and take out my wallet, cigarettes, Zippo lighter, a little cash, and my cell phone. I give the cop a dirty look and ask, “Where’s my knife?”

Sharon pulls her attention from her Blackberry and reviews the list of possessions.

The elderly cop tilts his head. “Did they arrest you with a knife?”

“Uh, yeah. A 5-inch butterfly. Perfectly legal in this state.” And the one my uncle gave me before he went to jail.

The cop checks out his copy of the list. “It’s not here.”

“Of course it’s not there.” I turn to Sharon. “The cop took it out of my pocket after he cuffed me.”

She frowns. “Then he probably logged it as evidence.”

“But I didn’t kill anyone. God, people are so stupid.”

“I know, sweetie. Just calm down. Once the medical examiner completes their report, we should be able to get it back.”

“Anything else?” the cop asks, looking at me as if I’m wasting his time.

“Fucking’ unbelievable.” I flip him the bird and stomp off. The cop calls after me, but I just give him my back.

Sharon walks at my side. “I know. I know. But that’s the system. I’ll look into it.” She slips her arm around my shoulder as we weave through the mixed crowd of cops, civil servants, and criminals. “Focus on the positive now. You don’t have to spend the night in jail and perform bowel movements in front of a group of desperate women.”

I nod and try to go along with her reasoning until I step into the downstairs lobby of the police station. To the naked eye it would appear that an old Italian man in brown pants and a worn, black wool overcoat is fighting with a fifteen year old, skinny Southern black boy in baggy jeans and a skintight, black denim jacket. But to the trained eye like mine, this is business as usual.

Grandpa Blaise shouts and waves his arms at Corey sitting on a bench. Corey shakes his head and plays bored; probably because he doesn’t understand a single word of Italian that Grandpa shouts. I cringe at the scene as embarrassment runs through my veins. Some stare at them either scared or worried that he will break out into violence. Others are

amused since Corey has his arms crossed with his head back and his mouth open, faking a horrible death. This is nothing compared to what I've seen them get into at home. This time though they're probably not fighting about Corey's homosexuality. I imagine Grandpa's been shitting a cow since Sharon informed him of my arrest. He probably thought another generation of Radiccis would build a rap sheet.

"Would you two shut up, or you're going to get thrown in jail," I approach them and open my pack of cigarettes.

"My sweet bambina," Grandpa Blaise takes me into his arms. I rest my head on his chest, press to his potbelly, and inhale his cologne. I smile, wondering why he had to put on cologne when Sharon probably woke him up in the middle of the night. "Did they hurt you, my Michelina?"

"No, I'm okay." I kiss his stubbly cheek and turn to Corey. He hugs me and I press to his skinny frame.

"This is so crazy," Corey says, showing off his thick Southern accent. "I don't know how they can think you would kill anyone."

"Weeeelllll..." says Grandpa Blaise.

I slap his shoulder and laugh. "I didn't and that is that. It's just a big old cop mistake or maybe they're trying to fill an arrest quota."

Sharon hugs me with one arm and kisses the top of my head. "I'll be in touch, sweet Miki," she says. "Don't forget we have to go over the details for this week's show."

I light up a cigarette and nod, "Got it. Thanks again, Sharon."

"Yeah, thanks," Corey says, rubbing her arm.

Sharon awaits Grandpa's thanks. He rolls on his feet and his scared eyes look to the tiled ceiling. I slap his arm. "What? Huh?"

I make angry eyes at him.

He scratches his bald spot and says, "Oh, yeah. Thank you, Mr. Or Miss. Er, very nice...of you."

Sharon shakes her head, grins, and pecks my cheek. As she walks out, I catch a few guys checking her out. I smirk and roll my eyes.

"What time is it, anyway?" I ask.

As Grandpa checks his watch, a cop shouts, "Hey, no smoking in here. Take it outside."

I exhale smoke and mumble, "Fucking Bloomberg."

"Hey, he's a good mayor." Grandpa puts his arm around me and shows me out of the police station. Corey keeps to my other side and rubs my back. I leave the police station with two of the most important men in my life and I have never felt so safe.

HOME BUT STILL POISONED

In the cab, I sit between Grandpa and Corey. A million volts run through my veins and my heart can't stop it. I rest my head on Grandpa's chest, close my eyes, and try to relax.

"I was so worried about you," he says.

I sigh. "I'm sorry to put you through that, Grandpa. But Sharon took care of it. It's all over."

"No, not the arrest," he says. "I was worried about the other thing. You never experienced that before. No?"

I've experienced various emotions and pain from other people throughout my life. People getting beaten, hit by cars, stubbing their toes, suffering the emotions of losing a loved one, and even the burn from a relationship break up, to name a few. But have I ever experienced a murder?

"No," I whisper. "This is my fist."

Grandpa kisses the top of my head. Although he has never suffered the curse since it came from my grandmother's side of the family, he knows the right amount of compassion to give while also keeping a safe distance and not bombarding me with questions and concerns.

As soon as we get home to my studio condo, Grandpa Blaise kisses my cheek and tells me for the millionth time how glad he is that I'm all right. He then says good night and heads up to his bedroom loft.

I walk to the kitchen and grab a couple of bottles of water. I toss one across the room to Corey. He catches it and plops down on the black, cushy couch in the living room. The space is sectioned off by design with a kitchen, a living room, a work area, and a dining room. Most of the apartment is picture perfect with trendy Formica, wood, and paints straight out of a Better Living magazine. My work section – which takes up almost half of the studio – is an artistic mess filled with oil paints, canvases, wood, easels, and piles of sketchpads.

I stomp over the hardwood floor and sit next to Corey. My body aches too much to sleep and invisible sticks hold my eyes open. We sit, breathe, and listen to the hot water gurgle through the radiator pipes.

"So how did the date go tonight?" I ask, sipping the water, hoping it'll ease me out of a hangover.

Corey turns to me, one leg under his butt. "Horrible to the tenth degree. Ever go out with a rent boy?"

I smile. "No. But I doubt one would be interested in me since I'm not packing a penis."

"True. Well, let me tell you, girl. If you grow one, don't do it. We were having a good time over at the Glowing Chair on Christopher and guess what happened?"

"His dick fell off and you discovered he's really a she."

"Oh, I wish. No, his phone rings. He checks the number and actually answers the phone like one of those Wall Street subway goons. The boy is actually talking to a client and setting up a date... for, like, that moment."

I laugh. "You poor boy."

"I know. So I confront him about it and he asks me if I would mind that he met up with some married guy for an hour so he can do business and meet me right back here."

"And you said yes."

Corey glares at me like I want to bang him on the couch. "You psycho bitch, you. No. I told him to fuck off. I'm gonna be seventeen this year. I'm a little too old to be sloppy seconds. I don't care if the guys are married or I sound like a stuck up queen. I got standards now."

I rub his arm and ask, "So you came home early tonight?"

"Very."

"Shit. I should have called you. We could have hung out and I wouldn't have gotten into this mess."

Corey moves a strand of long black hair from my face. "Are you okay?"
I sigh and rub the cold bottle on my head. "Yeah, just...it was fucked up."
"You want to talk about it?"

I kiss his cheek. "Maybe tomorrow. I'm beat." I stand up, hand him the bottle, and then stretch.

"Are you working in the morning?" he asks, capping off the bottles and placing them on the glass coffee table.

"Yeah, I have to. Do I have any canvases ready?"

"No. But I'll make some." He smiles. "I'll be ready, boss."

I kiss him good night and walk down the hall under the loft to my bedroom. Closing the door, I take off my jacket and clothes. Standing in my underwear, I inspect the wounds. Purple lines criss-cross my palms and belly where the knife stabbed in my vision. I poke at them and spark tender pain. From previous experiences I have learned that bruising is as far as the damage goes. One time when an upstairs neighbor was kicking the shit out of his girlfriend, Grandpa was worried that I might have some internal damage to my stomach or ribs. The doctors found nothing beyond foot shaped bruises. It took me a while to convince the doctor that I wasn't beaten at home. I gave him some story about being mugged.

I plop into bed under the constellations I painted on the ceiling last year and then close my eyes. All I can see is the shadowed killer swinging that knife and feel the blade slicing through my organs. "God damn it." I roll on my side and open my eyes. The clock reads just after 3 AM. My night isn't going to get any easier.

A CLEANER LIGHT

The harsh buzz of the alarm startles me out of a deep sleep. I moan and roll onto my back. I can't believe I forgot to turn it off. The clock reads 7:30 AM. I slam my hand down on the button and the alarm stops. I try to keep my eyes closed, hoping to go back to sleep, but they just shoot open like those old window shades from cartoons. Mustering all my strength I manage to get out of bed.

After using the bathroom, I stumble down the hall and into the kitchen. Corey saws planks of wood for my canvas, acting the good assistant. I then remember that I'm only in a black bra and panties and quickly look up to the loft.

"He left for work an hour ago." Corey glances over. His gesso-stained sweatshirt is already covered with saw-dust. He turns back to his frame and starts nailing the pieces together. Ever since Corey went back to school he's been fine-tuning his process. His hands move fast, like a machine, sometimes I don't even catch him looking at his work, but it always comes out perfect.

"Oh, thanks," I mutter.

For some reason, Grandpa thinks that I shouldn't walk around in my underwear with Corey home for fear that he might attack me. "But he's gay," I tell him. Grandpa just grunts, scrunches his face, and leaves it at that.

In a way I only have my mother to blame. She used to do the same thing when I was smaller. I always suspected she was a nudist at heart and managed to keep the bare minimum for my sake. Maybe I am too.

I pour myself some coffee and sit on a stool at the kitchen island. The morning paper is spread out, already inspected by Grandpa before he left for work driving a city bus. I

spot a story about the murder of Katherine Moore on page two. The picture the press runs is the first time I've seen her face. The chick is a pretty, dirty blond girl posing with her chin on her shoulder. Based on the bland blue background, the image could be a school photo or something done in a department store. The article says that her death is tragic since she attended the NYU Stern School of Business. She was active with the International Business Association, Beta Alpha Psi, and the Student Social Venture Fund. Her father, a Vice President at Chase Bank, and mother, a social worker from New Jersey, are deeply distraught over their daughter's murder. The article builds her up as the next greatest living human being and savior to the economy. And stupid me thinks her death is tragic just because she was a human.

So far the police have no leads, but there's a witness (me) and because of their age they can't reveal their name.

"Yes."

I check the rest of the paper and make sure no one ran any of those pictures from last night.

"Good news?" Corey asks from across the room.

"Yeah, looks like I can move on with my life."

"Oh, you mean as a famous alcoholic artist?"

"Yes, that one," I say and then flip him a bird.

I skim the rest of the paper when Corey starts hammering nails into the frame.

...my thumb explodes with pain...

Corey and I scream out. He drops his hammer and sucks on his thumb. I shake my hand, trying to throw off the throbbing just under the fingernail.

"God damn it, Corey."

"Gee, like I wanted to hit my thumb on purpose," he mumbles over the digit.

I keep my mouth shut and wait for the pain to subside. He's right. It's not his fault. It's mine for being cursed.

CLEARING THE BRAIN OF PAIN

After Corey leaves for school, I sit alone with my blank canvas. I want to start working on the sketches from my pads, but another image keeps pushing in my mind. Grabbing a pencil and bypassing the early draft stage, I step up to the 4X5 foot white space and clear my brain. Pencil to the gesso, my hand glides across the rough surface. I start on the killer's shapes, angled to look up from the alley floor. I don't remember much in detail. It was a dark alley. But I reveal the bowler, the overcoat with the collar up, and the hand holding the knife, just about ready to stab me in the stomach.

I stop and sit for a minute. There's something else. Or someone else.

I walk to the stereo, pop in a Bowery Electric CD, and return to the canvas. My conscious focuses on the drawing while my subconscious absorbs the eclectic music and drum machine beats. I hold the memory, the moment in my mind, trying to make it clearer. And then I see it. Yes, right there behind the killer, just over his shoulder. I start to sketch the wrinkled face, the angry eyes, the flared nostrils, and the pointed ears.

I step back and shake my head.

"I thought you were there."

Although I don't have a name for him, I've been drawing this evil face for as long as I remember. After I experience someone else's pain - pain perpetrated by another human

being - this face is always hidden somewhere. I know it's not of a real person. Sometimes I would see it in odd and inhuman places like open cabinets or windows five stories above the ground. I'm sure a shrink would have a field day with me if I ever talk about it; probably tell me I have deep issues with my father. Maybe I do. But I doubt the face has anything to do with that.

Anyway, I make myself another cup of coffee and sit in an office chair in front of the canvas. Another part of my process is to relax and let the details float to the top of my brain. For as long as it takes. And it does. I stand up with the fresh bit of information and sketch the shapes by the killer's wrist: sort of like a turd tapered at the end. It has six legs, three on each side. I'm about to stand back when I remember something else. The tapered side has three sticks, one in the center, and two on either side that curve out.

The door buzzer blares over the music.

"Fuck." I slam the pencil down and spin around. I hate when this happens. I check the clock and see that it's too early for Grandpa or Corey, and they would never be stupid enough to ring the buzzer. The mailman? Unless it's a new guy Bernard knows not to ring it either.

I walk to the door and press the talk button.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Michelina Radicci, please."

I hit the wall next to the speaker. "Yeah, speaking. What?"

"This is Detective Otto Sampson of the NYPD. We met last night."

"I remember."

"I would like to have a word with you, please."

I sigh and buzz him in. It's not like he's going to arrest me. I can't imagine that they found new damning evidence. Sharon's too good a lawyer to let that happen. I just hope he doesn't plan on talking to me about the murder. I'm so not in the mood. Shit, I should have told him to meet later.

I wait by the door and spot Detective Sampson walking down the hall. Alone. He wears the same suit I saw him in last. His face droops down and his eyes look sunken. The poor guy was probably up all night.

"Where's your sidekick?" I ask.

"Detective Hersh? He's running a few leads, talking to family." He smiles. Damn. If he weren't a cop twice my age, I would so put a move on him. Yes, I'm sixteen, but come on. A little Lolita action would be fun.

I hold the door open and show the detective in. "Shouldn't you be doing the same?"

"I will. But I'm chasing another lead. That's why they have us in pairs."

I close the door and cross my arms. "Listen, do I need my lawyer for this? I thought I was cleared as a suspect."

Sampson wanders to my work area. "You are. But like I said at the station, I still think you'll be useful to the investigation."

He stops at my latest project and tilts his head to the side. "I'm sorry. Did I interrupt you working?"

I stand next to him, mentally willing him to stop looking at my unfinished work.

"Yeah. So if you don't mind, can we make this short?"

Sampson turns and smiles. "Of course. First off." He reaches into his wool overcoat pocket and takes out a clanky piece of metal. He offers my butterfly knife.

“Oh, my God.” I take it from him. “I didn’t think I would see it again.”

“The medical examiner concluded that the weapon used was much bigger than this one. I see no reason to keep it.”

I flip the knife around like an experienced ninja and open the blade. “Thanks.” I flip it closed and slip it into my back jean pocket.

“Sentimental?” he asks.

“Belonged to my uncle. He gave it to me before he left.”

“Moved away?”

“No. Jail.”

“I bet there’s a long and interesting story to that.”

I cross my arms and give him the hard eyes. “There is. But we shouldn’t waste time about it. You have a killer to catch.”

“Yes.” He grins. “I do. Speaking of, I take it this latest work is of the murder?”

“Yeah. But don’t worry. I’m not displaying it, or selling it. It’ll just be part of my private collection.”

“Why’s that?”

I shrug and act mute. I don’t want to get into why all the works of the evil face are locked up in storage. Not even Corey, Grandpa, Uncle Tony, or my parents have seen them or even know about the face.

“Well, anyway. I guess I came for some answers. My question is how did a young woman who was blocks away from a murder and has not even inspected the body know in such great detail how the victim was killed?”

“I can’t answer that.”

He shakes his head and sighs.

“I mean, I can sort of tell you,” I say. “I just can’t tell you why.”

“What?”

“I have psychic empathy. Sort of like telepathy. Okay?” I shoot out. “If you don’t mind, keep this to yourself. Last thing I need are asshole reporters giving me shit about it.”

I wait for him to laugh or doubt me or flash me a look like I’m crazy. He doesn’t. He just watches me and waits for me to say more.

“It’s like being a psychic,” I say. “I mean, I can’t see into people’s futures or pasts... It’s like... I’m this antenna, a receiver, and I pick up people’s negative emotions, mostly their pain. Then I experience them. Like there was this one time we had this couple living above us, and the guy was always beating the woman. That was so not a good time. I had pains in my arms and bruises broke out around my stomach and back. It took a long time for you guys to finally arrest him. That bitch was crazy, though. You know the story: Girl loves the guy so much she thinks one day he will stop kicking her ass and change. Shit like that.”

“Okay,” Sampson says.

“So why aren’t you leaving?”

“Because I’m still listening.”

“You believe me?”

“I’ve heard stranger. And it’s the only thing that makes sense right now.”

“You’re fucking weird,” I say, walking off to a window.

Sampson laughs.

“Listen, I know you didn’t kill anyone. The victim walked down that alley, probably because she knew her killer. There is no sign of a struggle, and all evidence supports she was killed in that alley,” Sampson says. “We showed your picture to the victim’s family and friends and they have no clue who you are. I double-checked to make sure that you and the victims haven’t crossed paths before and to be honest your lives are on opposite ends of the spectrum. I guess you could say she was a social girl and you’re a hermit. When your lawyer mentioned her name to you back at the station, you had no idea who she was either. I don’t think you’re lying. So yes. I do believe you until there is evidence to think otherwise.”

I turn to him. “Great. Thanks. So what do you want from me?”

“I don’t know. I thought maybe there was something you can tell me. A clue, a lead, something that we missed. So far we have no suspects. The crime scene is a busy area, so it’s hard to gather solid evidence. This girl was a good kid with a bright future. She didn’t run with a bad crowd. She partied like any other college kid, but kept clean and functional; never came to class drunk. She had a boyfriend, but the relationship was still new and he has an alibi for last night. No one has a bad word to say about her. If this keeps up, the killer is going to get away.”

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Yes, you do.” He points to the canvas. “I think you can tell us something by showing us what the victim saw. Maybe there’s a detail that can lead to their identity.”

“You want me to draw and paint every painful moment so you can scrutinize it?”

“Looks like you started already.”

“No offense, but you’re nuts. Forget it. It’s bad enough that I experienced this girl’s death. I don’t want to have to keep reliving it. It was not fun being stabbed in the stomach.”

“I would imagine.”

“No. You can’t imagine. I’d like to forget it. This is the last and only picture I’m doing of it, just so I can purge the memory. Then I will lock this away until I die and some curator finds it and shows it to the world. By then it won’t matter.”

Defeat weighs down Sampson’s features. “I understand. It’s a crazy idea anyway.”

“Uh, you do? Great.”

“Do you mind if I take some notes of your sketch?” he asks.

I shrug. “Go ahead. Knock yourself out.”

I sit down in my comfy chair and wait for him to finish writing.

“What’s this?” he asks.

I turn, hoping he’s not going to ask about the evil face in the background. Instead he’s pointing to the strange shape at the killer’s wrist.

“Dunno. You?”

Sampson shakes his head and carefully duplicates my drawing.

Done, he hands me a business card from out of his pocket. “If you get anything new, would you please contact me?”

I pocket the card. “Yeah. But I’m sure I won’t.”

He nods and smiles grim. “Thanks for talking to me.”

Detective Sampson shows himself out. I sit back into my office chair and stare at the canvas. I try to relax, breathe deep, and stretch my muscles. Nothing floats out to my brain.

“Shit,” I say.

I grab the pencil and try to run it across the canvas, but I just can’t get my hand to do it. I throw the pencil across the room and stomp off to my bedroom. I slip on my Docs and jacket and leave the apartment. Maybe some icy winter air will clear my head.

GIGGLE TREATMENT

I pay for the bottle of whisky and the Indian man behind the counter of the bodega slips it into a brown paper bag. I study his face for a trace of fear or suspicion; for any sign that he knows my ID is fake. None. His expression is so blank. Not like I’m worried. My IDs are pristine. Uncle Tony is a great teacher, and I am a great student. Unfortunately he isn’t a great criminal since he got busted and sent to prison.

Outside, I slip the buds back into my ears and press play on the MP3 player in my leather jacket pocket. The mix folder of Sonic Youth tracks fills my head as I brave the winter winds up West Street to Pier 25. I rush past the basketball courts and the skate park. Even though it’s in the low thirties today, some kids are stupid enough to play ball or ride the curves. Normally the basketball players don’t bother me. It’s rare that a fight would break out or someone would scrape their knee on the court. But the skaters are something to worry about. I am so not in the mood to experience a busted arm or a crack on the head. It’s a shame though. I wish I could just hang out and watch the boys skate; some of them are pretty cute.

I turn onto Pier 25 and walk through the playground. A few parents and nannies supervise bundled up toddlers on the jungle gyms. A couple of old men, probably homeless from the looks of their black stained jackets, sit on the benches. I stop at a bench farther down to avoid any misery that they have in them. I daze off at the Jersey City business district as the boats and ferries trek back and forth across the Hudson. I sip the whisky and ignore the dirty looks people give me for drinking in a park. Not like I’m some hobo, like that crazy make-up lady that found my body the other night. I make just as much as those yuppies that think they’re superior.

As hard as I distract myself and try to concentrate on my art, I still can’t get the conversation with Detective Sampson out of my head. I mentally curse at myself and threaten that I will throw my bottle into the river if I think of the murder one more time. It’s over. I doubt Detective Sampson will bother me again or that I’ll read about it in the paper in a few days. I should just get on with my life.

I close my eyes, sip more whisky, and feel the calming effects as it mixes with my antidepressants. My sleepy brain sways, wrapped in a chemical cushion, as Sonic Youth eases into a long noise solo in the middle of the extended cut of “Diamond Sea.” Oh, yes. I will be so ready to work when I get home.

The phone vibrates on my hip.

“Shit!”

I put the music on pause and pull the cell out of my pocket. The number reads unlisted. I should let it go to voice mail, but sometimes Sharon comes up as unlisted. I press the button and bring the phone to my head.

“What’s up, Sharon,” I say.

No one answers.

“Uh, hello. Sharon?”

“No,” a raspy voice says. They’re right. It doesn’t sound at all like Sharon, not even after she’s done screaming at a witness. But the thing is I can’t even tell if the caller is male or female.

I sigh. “Well, who is it?”

“Who is this?”

“C’mon, you called me.”

The raspy voice giggles. A chill vibrates my spine.

“You got the wrong fucking number, asshole. Good-bye.”

I disconnect the call and go to tuck it back into my pocket when the phone vibrates again. The same unlisted number pops up. I should just let it go to voice mail. I really don’t want to hear that giggle again.

“Listen, asshole,” I say into the phone. “You got the wrong number so just fuck off.”

The raspy giggle again, then, “I have the right number...Michelina Radicci.”

I hug the shivers racing through my body. “Uh, who is this?”

“Don’t you know?”

“No. And you know me, so that’s kind of unfair, don’t you think?”

“All you need to know is that I’m going to gut you like I did that little whore.”

I scan the park as my heart pounds in my chest. Kids scream, parents and nannies shout concerns, and the homeless men doze. As far as I can tell, no one is on their cell.

The raspy giggle. “You know who I am, don’t you?”

I keep quiet. If I say I do, then it will come true, right?

“Speak!”

“Yes,” I say. “I know who you are.”

“And you thought you were so smart. You thought just because the press kept your name out of the paper that I wouldn’t know you saw me. But I know you. I know exactly what you are, you little whore.”

“How did you get this number?”

Giggle again. “Oh, maybe I got it from your Grandfather. Or maybe from that little bum boy you live with. Hmmm? Maybe. And just maybe I’m in your condo and they’re dead at my feet.”

I close the phone and sprint off the bench, leaving the whisky to empty on the concrete. I pump my legs faster than my heart. I weave through the busy streets of yuppies getting off work and people moving in and out of tiny entrances to street stores. Images of that psycho in my private sanctum, standing over Grandpa and Corey’s dead bodies, flood my mind. I think about what they must have felt having the killer’s knife break through their skin and puncture their organs. By the time I reach my building on West Street, tears stream down my eyes and my lungs burn. I manage to get the key into the front door and take the stairs up two at a time to the third floor. I run down the hall and enter the apartment. I stop in my tracks and face my possible reality, one that would have me suffer the deaths of the two most important people in my life.

Or not.

“What’s up with you?” Corey asks from the couch as he watches television.

Grandpa stands at the stove, frying sausages and boiling sauce. He wears his wife beater T-shirt that shows off the dark hair on his shoulders and his gray work pants.

“There’s my bambina.”

I wipe the tears off my cheeks. “You’re here. You’re okay?”

“Uh, yeah,” Corey says, looking at me like I’m high. And maybe I am. Grandpa steps closer and inspects my eyes. “Sweetie, what’s wrong? You been crying?”

“What? Oh, no. It’s the wind. Was blowing right into my eyes.”

He sniffs. I know he knows I’ve been drinking. He sighs, defeated. For the last year he’s been trying to get me to stop. Up until recently he learned that the only person who can make me stop is myself. But I don’t care about that now.

“I’ll be right back.” I walk into my bedroom and close the door. I take off my jacket and sit on the bed. I don’t know whether to be glad or pissed. Grandpa and Corey are alive, but the killer knows a lot about my life. They know how to make me suffer.

The cell phone vibrates in my pocket. I pick it up and the screen tells me I have a message. I dial into voicemail and play the single message on it. No one says anything, but there’s that raspy giggle for about thirty seconds.

I close the phone and realize that forgetting this murder is going to be a lot harder than I thought.

NOTHING MUCH TO DO

I’m back in the little interrogation room at the 1st Precinct. This time I’m not in cuffs or under suspicion. Detectives Sampson and Hersh sit on the other side of the table with the two-way mirror at their backs. I tell them about the killer calling me at the park and then play the message. After the raspy giggle, I close the phone and say, “Well?”

“Well, what?” Hersh crosses his arms over his belly. I can read the boredom on his condescending face. “It sounds like a prank phone call.”

“It’s not a prank call. It’s the killer.”

“How do you know? They didn’t say they were.”

“Oh, my God. What? Do you expect them to say, ‘Hi, it’s me the killer. I’m going to laugh now on your voice mail so the fucking cops know who I am.’ Is that what you want to hear? I know it’s the killer because he laughed the same way in the message as he did when I talked to him at the park just before that.”

Hersh shakes his head and grins.

Sampson leans forward and places his steady palms down on the table. “Okay, first off,” he says, “How does the killer know who you are? Your name was not mentioned to the press as a witness or a suspect.”

“I know. But there were people taking pictures that night, or maybe they saw me and recognized me. I don’t know how? Don’t these psychos return to the scene of the crime or something?”

“Or maybe one of your art fag friends is playing a joke on you. Or maybe you’re trying to make a fool out of me like you did to my partner yesterday,” Hersh says. “I think she’s full of shit like she was full of shit telling you that psychic telepathy story.”

I feel my face redden with anger. Sampson’s blushes with embarrassment. I so can’t believe he told a bullhead like Hersh about my ability.

Hersh stands up. “You need to go home and paint up some crap to sell for six figures and then go to bed. Huh, little girl?”

After Hersh leaves the room, I turn to Sampson and say, “He’s a dillweed.”

“That may be so, but we still have no reason to put you in protective custody. Has there been a physical threat on your life?”

“He said he wants to gut me. Does that count?”

“Yes, but it’s still not enough. Anything else?”

I sigh. “Yeah, he said that he knows me. I’ve been thinking, what if he knows about my thing.”

“You being a psychic?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, who else knows that?”

“My grandfather, Corey, Sharon, my parents, and my Uncle Tony.”

“The uncle in jail?”

“Uh huh.”

“What’s your relationship like with your parents?”

I shake my head. “No. No way. We haven’t spoke in over a year. It couldn’t be them. I don’t even know where they live.”

“Hear me out. What if your grandfather talked to them and told them about what happened to you. Maybe they still have a lot of unresolved anger and want to scare you.”

“If they wanted to scare me they would move in with me,” I say. “Trust me, it’s not my parents. They’re grifters. They love to con people and be sneaky about it. They pride themselves on the game. Something like this is way too loud for them.”

“Petty thieves for parents and an uncle in prison. You sure have an interesting family, Ms. Radicci. Is it just you or do you have any siblings?”

“Just me.” I sigh. “So can you help me or not?”

Sampson’s eyes inspect mine. He nods and says, “Okay.” He takes out his pad and pen and pushes it across the table. “Write down your cell phone. I’m going to check your records and see if I can trace the number.”

“You need me to sign something for that?” I write down my cell number.

“Yeah, actually, I do. It will be easier than getting a judge to sign it.”

“So what do I do until then?” I ask, passing him the pad back.

“You got my number, call me if anything happens. I’ll have them patrol around your building more often.”

I shake my head, not too reassured.

LATE NIGHT SILVERFISH

Grandpa and Corey are sleeping, the silent television behind me plays late night music videos, and there’s no traffic honking or humming outside. Just the gentle gurgle of hot water running through the radiator pipes and the wet scratching of my brush moving over the canvas breaks the silence.

I add color to my portrait of the killer, working my way to the edges and revealing more of the shadowed evil face in the background. I wish that I had details of the killer’s face but that damn hat shadows him out. After that, I focus on the strange shape on the killer’s wrist. I try to conjure a strong image in my head so that my hand can translate the shade and texture perfectly. What’s so hard about this process is trying not to mix memory with creativity. I want the shapes on the wrist to come out the way I saw them, not as I think they should be. Is the object that shade of black, or more of a darker gray?

I hear shuffling slippers from behind and turn to Corey. He stops at my side and scratches his bare stomach under his bony chest. In his other hand he holds a glass of water.

“Aren’t you worried you’ll wet the bed?” I ask.

“Aren’t you worried about getting bags under your eyes?” he says. “Oops. Too late.”

I shake my head and go back to mixing a color on my palette.

“You feeling any better?” he asks.

I shrug.

“You look like shit. You know I can understand not telling your grandfather what’s wrong, but not me. After all I am your BFF of all BFFs. True, I can’t compete with the rank taste of a whisky bottle, but still.”

“Ha ha.”

“C’mon, Miki. Spill it.”

I take a deep breath and work on painting the killer’s jacket. I tell him about the phone call at the park, the threats, and what the police are doing. When I finish, I place the palette and brush down. “So yeah, I’m a little tense.”

“Jesus,” he says.

“Yeah. Jesus.”

He hands me the glass of water. “Think you need a drink.”

I smile. He’s right, but I could use something stronger than water. I take the glass and sip it anyway.

“You think we’re in any danger?” he asks.

“No. Not you or grandpa. I think they’re just trying to scare me. After all, you guys didn’t see anything.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I have two choices,” I say. “I can sit around until the cops catch this psycho and if they don’t I can wait to be killed. Or I can try to find him.”

Corey motions to the picture. “Well, you already know what he looks like.”

“Sort of. The alley was dark. But Otto thinks that Katherine Moore might have known the killer since there was no sign of a struggle and she wasn’t dragged back there.”

“Otto?”

“Detective Sampson.”

“Mmmmm. First name basis are we? Should I expect to find him in your bed soon?”

“Ew. Oh, my God. He’s like twice my age.” I shove his shoulder. “But he is cute. Didn’t see a ring on his finger.”

“You are so bad.”

I grin and swirl the paint on the palette. He’s right, but I’m not going to give him the satisfaction of knowing it.

Corey leans in and studies the mystery shape dangling from the killer’s wrist. “Hm.”

“Hm, what?”

“Looks like a silverfish.”

“How can you tell?”

“The antennas in the butt, I guess. The way the two on the side curve out,” Corey says. “My father had to deal with them on the farm back in Georgia. He hates them with a passion, probably more than he hates me for being gay.”

“Sounds like my kind of bug.” I smile and Corey smiles back. He doesn’t talk much about his father who kicked him out a few years ago. I don’t pressure him about it, just like he never pressures me to talk about my rotten parents. I guess that’s why we make

such good friends and I asked him to live with me instead of on the New York City streets or with whatever man that would take him for the night.

I yawn and weariness attacks my eyes for the first time tonight.

“Want me to clean up?” he asks.

“Go back to bed. I’ll take care of it.”

“Okay, but promise you’ll leave me something to do tomorrow after school. I hate knowing you’re giving me a free ride.” He kisses my cheek and shuffles back to bed.

I stand in front of the painting, sip the water, and stare at the silverfish.

FISHING IN A POOL OF TEARS

The students of New York University are having a candle light vigil for Katherine Moore at Union Square Park. After dinner, Corey and I take a cab down there to check it out. If I’m going to try to find this killer, then getting to know the victim would be a smart first step. I figure this would be the best place to do that rather than at the funeral. I don’t think I can handle a funeral. I would probably soak up every negative emotion from family and friends. Plus, what if I get too close to her body in the coffin and experience the poor girl’s death again.

We hop out of the cab and face the large crowd in the park.

“Mmmm hmmm, I surely have to go to college one day,” Corey says. “Would you check out the beefcake?”

I scrunch my face at him. “How can you tell with all these winter coats on?”

“Baby, I got the x-ray vision. Bam.”

“What you have is a wild adolescent sex-fueled imagination.”

He shrugs. “So. At least I don’t have magazines of tube steak in my room.”

I gasp. “Some people prefer the art of photography to the flatness of a computer screen.”

“Trust me, once 3D Internet porn breaks out, you won’t be complaining.”

I laugh and pull him into the crowd. “C’mon.”

Although there are a lot of sad and weepy faces I find that I can handle the sorrow, thanks to the extra Xanax I took before leaving. Corey and I wander through the mixed crowd of pre-yuppies, socialites, and ghetto poseurs. This is exactly what I hate about this school. If I wanted to hang around fake people, I can just go to one of my own openings. At least I can make money doing that instead of wasting it on tuition.

“Shit,” I say.

“Excuse me,” says Corey.

“Nothing. Just forgot I have an opening tomorrow.”

“I didn’t. I was going to remind you tomorrow morning.”

“Oh. Good. Thanks.”

“So what do you wanna do first?”

“Let’s check out how people remember her.”

We walk over to the George Washington statue where pictures cover a large bulletin board. Seeing that a girl just put one up of her and Katherine, I assume that it’s a mass made memorial. From the table next to it, a black girl with a fur-lined collar coat smiles sadly and hands us two white candles. I grin a thanks and then check out the pictures.

“She was a very social girl,” Corey says.

Based on the pictures, you would think that Katherine Moore never had a bad day in her life. Smiles, smiles, and more smiles. Even the boys and girls she poses with smile. And not one picture is embarrassing, catching her drunk or making a funny, or with red eye, or in bed with a frat boy or animal. I can't help but to wonder if this whole scene is phony. Can someone be remembered so perfectly? Did she not piss off one person? Since most of the pictures are with guys, surely some girl must have hated her. At least enough to kill her.

"Do you need me right now?" Corey asks.

"No. I guess not. What's up?" I ask, turning away from the board.

"I think I found my future husband." Corey motions to a slick looking Latino boy talking to a blah-faced white guy. Based on the way the Latino boy is dressed in tight, tapered jeans, green snug sweater and gray blazer, he is either gay or a metrosexual. Either way, Corey should be okay. I doubt anyone would bash here.

"Yeah. Go ahead. I'm going to walk around a bit."

Corey squeals and strolls over to the two boys.

I wander around with my candle and eavesdrop on the stories about Katherine; some end with laughs, some with tears. A lot of girls lean their heads onto one another's shoulders and offer support. A few times I catch my hand reaching for the pill bottle in my jacket pocket. Bad hand, I scold myself.

I make my way back to the homemade picture memorial and notice the mourners observing two girls. They seem confused why they're here and how they know their dead friend. Maybe they think they're just attention seekers or have some morbid curiosity of the death since they dress so underground.

The white girl has dreaded purple hair and wears a green dress with yellow leggings and a snakeskin leather jacket. The Asian girl has a black leather biker jacket and a black knee-length dress and white t-shirt over it that says NO FOR LIFE which clues me in that she's into the short lived NYC No Wave band No. Both girls are pierced: eyebrows, lips, and probably their tongues and nether region. With their make up so Day Glow, they look like they just came off work from a 1960's Go Go bar. No, they do not appear like the types that would know Katherine.

I stroll over to them.

"Hi," I say, smiling.

The girls give me a cautious glance.

"Feels kind of weird being here, huh?" I ask. "Like I'm Katie's black sheep friend or something?"

The Asian girl smiles. "Yeah, you could say that."

"I'm Miki."

"Fanny," the Asian girl says.

"Liz," the other one mumbles, looking at the condescending eyes of the crowd checking her out. "Maybe we should have come undercover."

"I would have," I said. "But the old lady section in JC Penny was closed."

The girls smile. I'm in.

"So this is fucked up," I say. "Felt like yesterday we were just hanging out."

"I know, right?" Fanny says. "But I guess it's like those religious kooks say. 'Live by the sword, die by the sword.'"

“Oh, my God.” Liz covers her mouth and checks to see if anyone heard. “So throw in the puns of bad taste. The poor girl was stabbed with a huge knife.”

Fanny smirks. “Oops.”

“Excuse her, she’s still pissed about Katie swiping some guy from her last year.”

Fanny slaps Liz’s arm. “I am not.”

I share smiles with them: three girls finally comfortable in an uncomfortable setting.

I lean in closer and say, “So, the cops talk to you yet? I hear they’re scrambling to get to everyone.”

“Nope,” says Fanny. “I doubt they will. We didn’t have that kind of relationship with her. I don’t think her so-called friends even know about us.”

“Yeah, me neither,” I said. “I don’t even recognize her in these pictures taken in the daylight.”

“Yeah. Kinda right,” Liz says.

Fanny stares at me. “You on the site? You look familiar, but I’m not sure. Are you Cherry Bleed?”

“Site?” I ask.

“Red Velvet Pocket?”

“Oh, no.” I shake my head. “Is that where you know Katie?”

“Yeah.”

“No, we’re strictly drinking buddies. And then some,” I add with a grin. “You know, I think she did mention the site. She thought I would be interested in it. God, what was the name she said she used? It’s on the tip of my tongue.”

“Betty Blue Blood,” Fanny says.

I snap my fingers. “That’s it.”

“Always thought it was tacky,” Liz says.

They nod. Looks like I’m still in the club.

“You know, the site is gaining a curse,” Liz says.

“What do you mean?” Fanny asks.

“Uh, Katie is the second girl to die. Remember Chloe Bateman?”

Fanny’s brow furrows at Liz.

“She was tagged as Vicious Ripper.”

“Ohhhh,” says Fanny. “Oh, my God. Don’t say such a thing. Devlin pays too well for me to quit the site over a stupid superstition.”

“I know, right.”

When the conversation dies down, Fanny says, “Well, I think I’m thoroughly uncomfortable and have handled all I can. Present company excluded.”

We smile at each other. I then ask, “So maybe we can hang out sometime. Where you girls slum these days?”

“Oh, yeah. That would be cool,” says Liz.

“Mostly at the Honkey’s Ladder. It’s over on 56th and 8th,” Fanny says. “Lots of cute boys there. You should check it out.”

I nod like I know where it is.

“See you around, Miki,” Fanny says.

“Yeah, later,” Liz says.

I wave and smile at the girls as they walk off. When in the clear, I take out my mini sketchbook and pencil from my jacket pocket and jot down the names Devlin, Chloe Bateman, Vicious Ripper, Betty Blue Blood, and Red Velvet Pocket.

SOUTHERN COMFORT

I wander the crowded park and search for Corey. I swear to God, if he left without even telling me, I'm going to pop his waterbed when I get home. As I stand on my toes to try to see over the heads, someone's sorrow fills my body.

"Oh, shit," I whisper.

I turn around to see a woman in her early fifties wearing a black dress and an open black coat sobbing in a younger woman's arms. She looks a lot like Katherine Moore. She must be her mother.

"Oh, shit shit."

The woman's grief overwhelms me like a tsunami; it chokes my throat and pushes tears out my eyes. I gasp and release a sob. Fuck you Xanax for not being stronger than a mother's grief.

I rush away from her, trying to get as much distance as I can. Tears blind me and my lungs hitch as I fight the loss breaking my heart. I must look so normal with this crowd. Everyone clears a path, making no effort to stop me or offer comfort.

That is, until I pass the Gandhi statue and I bump into someone.

"Whoa," he says. "Are you okay?"

Through the tears I make out a handsome face with a beautiful pair of lips that form southern-accented words. "Are you okay, miss?"

I can't speak, just nod.

He takes out a handkerchief with CC embroidered on the corner. "Here you go."

I take it and dry my eyes.

"Just don't blow your nose in it," he says. "It doesn't belong to me."

Somehow, a laugh escapes me. He smiles.

I breathe in deep a few times and clear my head. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, please, don't be. It's a perfectly normal reaction."

Not for me, I think. Not even with my own emotions.

"Yeah, I guess."

"I'm Chris."

"Miki."

"Did you have classes with Katherine?"

Dried out and my heart back to normal, I sigh, "No. I didn't go to school with her. You?" I hand his handkerchief back.

"Yeah, we have a few business classes together. Had, I mean."

Chris stands straight with his hand in his pockets. A white shirt, a dark suit jacket, and a Jerry Garcia tie peek out at the V of the closed black wool overcoat. He appears so business and preppy, which brings out his super cute baby face features. I'm digging his brown hair and blue eyes, another contrast I like on him. And my God, those lips. I wonder if I could get away with kissing them right here on the sidewalk. Maybe as a grief stricken friend that could use some comfort?

"From that sexy accent, I would say you're not from New York, Chris."

He smiles and shakes his head. “You got that right. From Mississippi. And from your sexy accent I can say the same about you.”

“Good ear. Many people confuse the New Jersey accent with the New York accent. Specifically, I’m from Jersey City.”

“Ah.” He nods like he knows exactly where I’m from.

“So how do you know Katherine, Miki?”

Unlike Fanny and Liz I have to be more careful here. Chris might not know about Katherine’s secret life or Red Velvet Pocket. And who am I to ruin his good girl memories of her.

“Um, we hang out together,” I say. “The club scene.”

“So basically ya’ll are drinking buddies.”

I shrug and fake reluctant embarrassment: guilty as charged.

“Yeah, Katherine sure could put me under the table on occasion,” he says.

“So you go to NYU to study business, huh? Going to be the next Donald Trump or Bloomberg?”

“I don’t think I can handle getting married as many times as Trump and I’m not into making millions so I can be Mayor of the city,” Chris says. “Besides, there’s something already lined up for me, I just have to get a Masters in business and it’s all mine.”

“Intriguing. Kind of like an inheritance?”

“Kind of.”

“So you’re rich. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Technically, I’m not rich. My mother is rich. If I finish my education as other people planned it for me, then I can be rich too, but with a greater burden.”

“Good,” I say. “I don’t like rich guys.”

“Lucky me.” He grins and lays those baby blues on me. “What about you? Where do you go to school?”

“I don’t,” I say.

“Ah. Independent woman. Already surviving in the world after high school. Sexy.”

I smile so hard I can feel my cheeks burn.

I spot Corey a few feet away behind Chris’s back. He motions to me that he’s ready.

“Listen, I need to get going,” I say.

“That’s too bad.”

“Yeah, I’d like to stay, but I can’t.”

“Then I’ll see you soon.”

“You will?”

“I will. How about tomorrow night?”

“Okay. Great.” I take out my pocket sketchpad and open it to write my number down for him.

“No. No numbers.”

“Um, okay.”

“And no addresses.”

“Then how are we going to meet?”

Chris smiles, stretching those sexy lips. “You let me handle that.” He starts to walk off. “See you tomorrow night, Miki.”

I watch him blend into the crowd and wonder if Chris is really a nut job. Be a shame if he is.

Corey comes up to my side. "Sorry about that."

"How did it go?"

"Let's just say my gaydar was way off. We're talking about major Hispanic Homosexual Panic."

I exaggerate a frown for him. "My poor baby."

"Fuck you." He shoves me a bit. "How about you? Get anywhere?"

"Farther than I thought," I say.

GIRLS

Corey and I order drinks at the Barrel Bar and grab a seat at the dark back corner. I love how quiet it is here. Working class men and women sit around drinking beer, hanging out, and in control of their emotions. Yeah, Corey and I stick out and the patrons probably think we're adventurous college students checking out how the other half live, but they don't give us a hard time, not even with our fake IDs.

I fill him in on what I found out from Liz and Fanny. Out of all the names I mentioned, the only one that sounded familiar is the Honkey's Ladder.

"It's just your standard industrial goth bar on the West side," Corey says. "Been there a few times and found it noisy and obnoxious. They do have good X there, though. You think this Fanny girl might have something to do with it?"

"Killing Katherine?" I ask. I compare the image of the killer with Fanny and then shake my head. "No. She may have some ill feelings towards her, but I doubt it would go that deep. I so can't picture Fanny stabbing a knife into someone."

After two drinks, we make our way home. Grandpa must be sleeping already since he's not around and his door is shut with the light off. Corey plants himself on the couch. Before I head for my bedroom, I doublecheck the locks on the door and windows. Corey eyes me suspiciously, but doesn't give me any shit.

I take off my jacket, throw it on the bed, and turn on my desktop computer. As it boots up, I take out my mini sketchpad and open to the page with the names on it.

The first name I Google is Red Velvet Pocket. Many hits come up. I click on redvelvetpocket.com and two seductive goth girls in Victorian garters and bustiers vamp on the black screen framed in red. They wrap their arms around each other while blood drips from their mouths and look right at the screen. At first I think it may be one of those vampire-modeling sites, but with closer inspection of the image I don't see any sharp vampire teeth. God, I hope it's not a fake cannibal site. Guys can be so weird sometimes.

Since it's a member's only site, I wonder if I should join. Last thing I need is a bunch of porn sites spamming me after joining this one. But if I don't then I can't see if Katherine Moore was a model on it. Fuck it. I break out my credit card and sign up for a three-day trial, which only cost \$3.95. A rate that makes me feel less annoyed than paying the monthly fee of 40 bucks.

Once confirmed, I'm inside the main menu where the words Lick the Pink flash on the masthead. I check out the types of girls that they have. The tabs are broken down into Straight, Bi, Queer, Punk, Goth, and Vamp. I sigh and dread the fact that I might have to brows all these categories to find her. I then scroll down and find a tiny search window. Thank you, Jesus! I type in a search for Betty Blue Blood and hit enter. I'm taken to a model's profile. The main picture is of a pale girl with heavy black eye make-up and straight, dirty blond hair. She wears a ripped black slip and her legs are scratched up as if

a cactus man in the desert attacked her. I study the picture and through all the shit on her face, I'm sure that this is Katherine Moore, sweet, preppy NYU student with a bright future in business. I shake my head and think: isn't this always the case? It's almost cliché that the sweet girl next door would have a double life as a freak.

I check out her photo links. They seem to be divided by either solo pictures of her posing, showing the viewer the barest of private parts or full on nudity with another guy or girl in sexual positions. Some of the goth boy's appendages make my eyes widen. At first I think there's no way she can handle their girth, but then as I click, I see that she can. She has to be faking it and he has to be photoshopped.

I play a few of the videos and find that they're the same scenes from the photos, just live. Having enough of Katherine Moore and her extra curricular activity, I go back to the main menu and do another search.

Vicious Ripper aka Chloe Bateman's page is just the same as Katherine Moore's. I notice that she shares many features with Katherine. Both have long, straight, dirty blond hair, skinny waists, small breasts, and long, narrow noses. Even their goth style is the same, favoring Elizabethan Vamp. I don't spend too much time checking her out. But I do wonder; if she's dead why does the Webmaster still keep her photos and videos up?

Back at the main menu, I scroll down to the bottom to find the tiniest of hyperlinks. One is for the web designer's homepage and one for Jobs. Curious, I click on Jobs. I'm taken to similarly designed screen that has an email contact and advises potential models to send their photos, attn Devlin. I write it down along with the East side 20th street address.

"Now that I got the sex out of the way." I open my desk drawer and take out a bottle of Jameson. I swig from the top, then go back to Google. I search for Chloe Bateman, New York, and Murder in the same box. About halfway down the results list, I find an article from the Daily News dated last year in November. I click onto the link and check out the story. It seems Chloe Bateman, daughter of Charles Bateman, a shoe salesman from Staten Island, and Maureen Bateman, a cashier at Shop Rite, was found murdered in Manhattan. Her body was discovered in a dumpster behind a soup kitchen on 50th Street and 8th Ave. Police confirmed that she died from multiple stab wounds to the chest and stomach with a large knife. It then goes on about Chloe's life, which was not like Katherine's. Yes, she was going to school at Baruch College, but she was not the glowing and perfect girl next door. Chloe's blood was tested and they found large amounts of amphetamine and alcohol in it but all her friends and family agree that she was a sweetheart and her death should not be dismissed. She sounds more like my kind of person than Katherine. I would have hung out with Chloe.

I click a follow up article dated three days later. After the writer reminds us of who Chloe was and what happened to her, they report that although police investigators have a few leads, no arrests have been made. Going through a few pages of the results, I don't find anymore about Chloe. She may have been forgotten, or the newspapers might not have uploaded any stories if they were just more follow-ups or were too small to upload. Or, the police never found anything and the case was just left opened/unsolved.

I turn off the computer, take one last swig of Jameson, and lay down for bed.

LACK OF EVIDENCE

The next morning with Grandpa at work and Corey at school, I call Sampson. The phone rings for a while, but then I hear, "Sampson."

His voice sounds sexy on the phone.

"Hello?" he says, impatient.

Get your mind out of the gutter.

"Detective Sampson, this is Miki Radicci. Is this a bad time?"

"Um, no. Just give me a second."

As I make a cup of coffee at the kitchen counter, I listen to the muffled sounds of him talking to another man. Probably Hersh. After a quiet moment: "Okay. What can I do for you, Ms. Radicci?"

"Please. Call me Miki."

"Okay. Ms. Miki."

I smile. "Just called to see if you had any luck with my phone records."

"Well, yes and no," he says. "The phone company was able to give me a blocked number from your records, but it was traced back to a disposable phone."

"Shit."

"Yeah, I thought the same thing. I can probably trace it to where it was sold, but most likely it was paid for in cash. Plus, I doubt the salesman will remember anything."

"Okay. Thanks for checking."

"No big deal. Anything new on your end? You remember something new that could help?"

I bite my lip and stir the hazelnut creamer into the coffee. I wonder if I should tell him about what I learned of Katherine's double life with the Red Velvet Pocket. But would he know about that already? I doubt he would tell me if he did. I would feel bad about lying to him since he's been kind of on my side from day one. Then again... he only asked about the night of the murder. Maybe I should keep this stuff to myself until I know more. Evidence is what he needs, right?

"Well, I think the killer was wearing something on their wrist."

"Like a watch?"

"No. Maybe a charm. It looks like a silverfish."

"Right. Right. I remember that from the other day looking at your painting," he says.

"Yeah, my roommate verified it. Then I checked online and it does look like one.

Can't ignore the details, right?"

He chuckles. "Right."

"So what do you think it means?"

"Maybe nothing now. But down the line it could be important. I don't think too many people wear silverfish charms."

"It's kind of weird." An idea sparks. I take a breath. "Listen, I was also wondering. I was at her memorial last night and I met up with some interesting girls. Could she have had a double life?"

Silence on his for a few seconds, then, "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I've been reading a lot about her in the press and she sounds like she was going to be America's next Hilton or Kardashian, but smart. Sometimes people like that have other interests. Kinks, you know?"

"I thought the same thing. As of right now we haven't heard anything from her friends and we turned up empty on her dorm room. If she had a secret life, she buried it deep."

"So you guys are still at a brick wall?"

"Well, maybe a Styrofoam wall. We did find something in her bank records. Just between us, there were substantial weekly deposits made into her savings, but no one said she had a job. Could just be money from her parents, allowance and what not. We're still checking it out."

"Interesting," I say.

Sampson muffles the phone again and talks to someone. He then comes back and asks, "Anything else, Ms. Miki?"

"Nope. That's it," I say. "Thanks, Detective Sampson."

"Please. Call me Otto."

"Then thank you, Detective Otto."

He chuckles and says, "You're welcome. Good bye, Miss Miki."

"Bye."

My cheeks hurt from smiling.

OPENING NIGHT

Tonight the Weisz Gallery is revealing my new series of paintings depicting surreal city architecture done on broken glass. I call it Shattered Scape. So far people are into it. I spot critics, artists, and a few celebrities - none of whom I would talk to unless I was bound, gagged, and drugged. Then I spot Kim Gordon with Kathleen Hannah. Kim used to do some freelance articles in Art Forum. I've got to make myself available for her. But first I need to shake this stupid television reporter who's trying to get an interview with me for some Sunday morning news segment.

The reporter is not a real journalist by my standards. She's just a talking head. I've seen her on channel 2 before and all she does is fluff art stuff and free family jaunts around the city. If you look at her you can see she's not made for hard news. She's just about my height and too skinny. Her long blond hair hangs down straight over her gray and black business suit. She also wears enough make-up to add 20 pounds. Isn't she worried her face will appear fat on tape?

Someone in her crew tries to touch up my face while they light us for our interview. I growl at them and they back off. I'm wearing enough, thank you.

So I stand and wait. The reporter quietly argues with curator Jim Koongi and Sharon, who spaces out and sips her glass of champagne. Koongi waves his dark manicured Trinidadian hands up and down and stabs his finger my way. Sharon is so cool about it. A normal person would give me dirty looks for putting them in this position, but I guess she's used to it or she really cares for my interests. After a while she approaches.

"It seems they can't do the interview," Sharon says.

"Oh."

She shrugs. "Well, they could, but then they'd have to block off your shirt."

"So why don't they?"

"It's public news. Anything that hints to something vulgar would be frowned upon, so says Little Miss Wax Face. You know how the FCC has been since the Nipple Slip."

Koongi storms over. The guy has been a complete ass since he arranged my work under his lights. He glares at me like I'm some dumb child.

"What?" I shout, not giving him a chance to give me shit first.

He stops in his tracks and looks around to see if any of the other guests or reporters are spying. I still can't get over that he has gold teeth that match the chains hanging around his neck and tie. "Michelina, I find this so unfair."

"Dude, my work is here and people are seeing it. What's unfair is your percent of the commission."

Sharon nods in agreement.

"Change your attire, just for the interview."

I exaggerate glancing at my college sweatshirt, black pants, and red Doc Martin boots. "What is wrong with what I'm wearing? I am an artist, not some red carpet socialite that gets off on other people's attention."

"Yes, that may be so. But the reporter will not interview you because of your sweatshirt. And a broadcast of your show in my gallery will greatly benefit us."

"What is wrong with my shirt?" I ask. "It's just a college sweatshirt."

His face droops, then he sighs.

"I doubt there's such a place as... as that."

"As what?" I ask, doing what I can to suppress a smile. God, if he could only say it I might take the sweatshirt off and do the interview in my bra.

"That. That." He points to my shirt.

I shrug and shake my head, continuing my fake innocence.

"Okay, I'll take it off, but just so you know I'm not wearing a bra," I lie. "Is channel 2 okay with broadcasting my sixteen year old boobs?"

Sharon stifles a laugh, but Koongi's anger shoots out of his eyes.

"You must train her better for these types of situations." He storms off.

Sharon giggles in her champagne. "My, you would think he never heard of Fuck U.," Sharon says.

"I know right?" I ask. "So should I drop by for my good little girl training sessions tomorrow?"

Sharon rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

I walk the galley and find Kim Gordon and an art writer from the Village Voice. I'm so glad I'm not one on one with Kim because the woman intimidates me so much. Not just because I want her to like my work, but that she's like the mom any freak girl wishes they could have growing up.

Later, I make a break for the bar and swipe a glass of champagne off the tray. The bartender doesn't give me a second glance. I drink half of it down when I notice a familiar face studying the 6x9 foot painting of my World Trade Center Memorial. He's super cute in a dark blue suit and leather boots with those metal wing tips on the end. I approach him, the champagne fueling my bravery, and tap his shoulder.

"Glad I didn't make a bet," I say.

Chris turns around and smiles. "Oh, I don't know. A wager would have been fun."

I wonder what he would have bet for. A kiss?

"Okay, so I'm correct to assume you knew who I was at the park," I say.

He blushes, smiles, and shrugs. "Guilty."

“Well, shit, man. Now I’m at a disadvantage. You have to confess who you are,” I say. “It’s only fair, right?”

“Absolutely.” He offers his hand. “Christopher Chandler. Of the Chandler Chemical Corporation, maker of fine insecticides and house-hold cleaners for the greater USA and most of Asia and Europe. How do you do?” he says in a fake corporate voice.

I smile as he takes my hand and kisses the top of it. Suave.

“Damn, you weren’t kidding when you said you came from money,” I say.

“So you’ve heard of me?”

“No.”

He laughs.

“But, I have heard of your company,” I say. “I might even have some of their products at home.”

He turns to the painting. “Well, I’ve decided that I have to have your product in my home. This is stunning.”

I feel my cheeks burn from blushing. “Thank you.”

“I love how you managed to incorporate the many religions surrounding the original memorial. It’s a true testament to peace and compassion which I’m sure will piss off all those people who protested the mosque.”

“Yeah, I hope so.”

“And the texture with the shards of glass are amazing,” he says. “Is it safe to touch?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“So who do I see about buying?”

I point to Koongi hamming it up with a reporter. “See that little tight ass with gold choppers in the loud suit?”

“Him? Really?”

“He’s your man.”

Chris takes a breath and then shakes his head like he has to walk a mile on hot coals. “The things I do for the sake of art.”

I sip my champagne and watch Chris talk to Koongi. I don’t know what I’m happier about, the fact that I made a high five-figure sale or that he wants me in his home.

LIMOS

After saying good night, I put on my leather jacket and let Chris escort me to the street where a large black limo waits. A driver steps out and opens the side door.

I stop and ask, “No way. This is yours?”

He rolls his eyes and blushes in embarrassment. “Please don’t hate me. Some things my family will not let me do. One of which is travel without the driver.”

Even though I’m lucky enough to make a lot of money I still take taxis or walk the city. Chris’s family has to be millionaires. “No, no. It’s cool. I just wasn’t expecting it.”

I enter the stretch limo and sit on the plush gray leather seat. The damn thing could fit at least ten more people. This is like ‘rock star’ limo. I smile and watch Chris lean over and open the wet bar. “What will you have?”

“You sure this is cool?” I ask. “Don’t want to get your driver in trouble. I heard that some wouldn’t let kids drink in their limos.”

“This isn’t the prom, darling.” Chris laughs politely and pats my shoulder. “I know you’re underage. I am too. I’m only 19.”

“Oh, well. Shit, if you’re going to drink.”

Chris pours us a couple of Jamisons over ice. My kind of wet bar! We settle back and sip our drinks. The golden whisky warms me from tongue to belly.

“Feels good to be out of there,” I say.

“Don’t like crowds?”

“Fucking hate them,” I say. “Don’t get me wrong, I like showing my art off and selling it to people who want it, but...I don’t know.”

“It feels like you have to act a certain way in front of them. Like, fulfill the standard of being a celebrity or someone important?”

“Exactly. I’m no Lindsay Lohan or Miley Cyrus, ya know?”

“Yes, I can see that. Judging by the charming sweatshirt you’re wearing, I’d say you do a good job of breaking other people’s expectations and standards.”

I place my hand on the shirt and run the fingers down the FUCK U. lettering. “You like my shirt?”

“Fantastic. Where can I get one?”

“Can’t. Made it myself. One of a kind.”

I pass him my empty glass for a refill. He pours me another drink and says, “So it’s a Michelina Radicci limited edition? You mean there’s no Fuck University?”

“Sort of. From what I hear all universities either fuck you or you fuck them. So in a way all college sweatshirts are basically from FUCK U.”

I laugh, not believing I said that. Must be the alcohol. Chris smiles and shakes his head.

“You’re amazing, Miki.”

We fall into one of those weird moments where our laughter slows down and we look into each other’s eyes. I love moments like this. I love it even more that he leans closer and graces my lips with his. The drinks settle on the armrest table and our hands hold each other instead. He works his tongue in my mouth and the alcohol swishes between us. I try to take more of him, grab at his coat and feel what he has under it. God, this boy is so intoxicating.

The side door swings open and the driver waits outside. We break off, giggle, and fix our clothes. No way we can erase the blushes from our faces, though.

“Guess we’re here,” he says.

I smile, wishing we weren’t.

BUILDING THE BOY

A line of rich, upper class couples run out of the Midtown Italian restaurant called Fasino’s. They don’t appear too happy and I don’t blame them. The temperature must be 20 degrees tonight. And I’m sure seeing Chris and I walk out of the limo and into the restaurant without waiting on line pisses them off too. I couldn’t care less.

The maitre de smiles at Chris and offers his smooth manicured hand. “A pleasure to see you, Mr. Chandler.”

Chris shakes his hand and asks for a table for two. Before they escort us, a woman in her twenties and a skintight evening gown takes my leather jacket and Chris’s wool overcoat to hang in the coatroom. We follow the maitre de to our table. The dining room is huge. Marble pillars reach up to a high ceiling painted to look like a clear blue sky

while the walls depict an Italian landscape. A violinist wanders through the tables and plays slow tempo classical songs to doe-eyed diners.

I don't know if it's the alcohol or the image of a sharply dressed Chris with a short, dark haired Italian American girl from Jersey in dress pants, red Doc Martins, and a FUCK U sweatshirt walking past tables of women wearing the finest dresses ever to strut down a runway scoffing at me, but I cannot stop smiling.

When we sit at the table and the maitre de leaves us with menus, Chris smiles and asks, "Having a good time?"

"Place could use one of those mirrored glass disco balls. But yeah, I'm kicking."

After we place our order and the wine guy fills our glasses, Chris asks, "Have you ever eaten here before?"

"Nope. Not a big fan of Italian food."

"Really? Radicci is as Italian as you can get."

"Technically I'm Sicilian."

"Oh. Sorry." He holds up his hands in defense.

"Yeah, my people didn't take Mussolini's shit when he bowed down to Hitler in World War II. I guess they were terrorists and helped fight against the Nazis," I say. "At least that's what my Grandfather says."

"Admirable people, the Sicilians," Chris says, sipping his wine. "Is your grandfather alive? Sounds like an interesting man."

"He's alive. He lives with me."

He nods. "Wow, you paint and take care of your grandfather."

"Take care? Hell no. The man still drives a Midtown bus. Sometimes it feels like he's taking care of me. He cooks dinner most nights even though they're my grandmother's dishes. I think it's his way of keeping her alive, you know? My grandmother was great. Funny as the shit in George W. Bush's head," I say. "So, yeah, I kind of stay away from places like this. They don't make it like real Italians do. No soul. Although there's this great pizza place down the block from where I live. Real pizza. Not that Dominos/Pizza Hut shit."

"And he didn't come to your show?"

I shrug. I never know why people keep asking me that.

"Why should he?" I ask. "He lives with me and sees everything. Besides, he has work in the morning."

"Maybe he's like you and doesn't like the crowds."

"That could be true."

The waiter brings over a dish filled with raw sliced tomatoes and mozzarella drizzled with virgin olive oil. Chris and I pick at it, placing some of each on our little dishes. By the time we're done, I'm soaking up the oil with pieces of warm bread and eating it.

"So, if I can believe the press, you have no contact with your parents?" Chris asks.

"None," I say, chewing.

"Sorry if I'm getting too personal."

"Not at all." I shrug "I'm used to it."

"I sometimes get antsy when people bring up my father."

"Oh? Should I dare to ask?"

"You don't know?"

“All I know is I keep your dishwashing detergent under my sink next to your roach spray.”

He smiles and nods his head. Seriousness pulls his face down. I’m starting to wish I didn’t push the issue with his father.

“He was killed a few years ago.”

“Shit, I’m so sorry.” I swallow the bread. “We can just end this right now.”

“No, it’s okay. As long as you don’t mind hearing about it. It was all over the news when it happened. It’s not like it’s some dark family secret.”

“Um, okay. If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure you’ll hear about it later so you might as well get it straight from me,” he says, patting the table. “He and his mistress were murdered at this hotel.”

I shake my head, having no idea what to say. What can you say? Then I feel a sadness radiate off him. He doesn’t appear like he’s going to cry; maybe he’s been telling the story so long he knows how to say it without showing tears. All I know is if my grandfather got murdered I would be sobbing before the first word of the story hit my lips.

“The killer was never found. Not like the police didn’t try. My father was an important man in the business world, even with politicians. Like me, he inherited the company, but he was the one who made it global.”

I look into his eyes - mine wet with tears - and take his hand. “So sorry.”

“Thank you. I’m okay. I mean, I’m still freaked out about it, but I’ve learned to move forward. My mother, though, has had a hard time. She kind of lost it.”

“I’m sure. Going through the death of your husband and to find out he was with another woman when it happened,” I say. “She must have been devastated.”

“She was. She couldn’t talk and her mind was very absent. She couldn’t remember how to do simple things like brushing her teeth. So after a year, I made the decision to go to school up here and to place my mother in a new environment.”

Damn, does this guy get the son of the year award?

“How is she doing with the change?”

“Good. She’s functioning better. She’s able to care for herself. She even leaves the apartment and explores the city to shop. Although she isn’t able to handle the business aspects my father left to her, she’s able to listen to the advisors that run the company until I am of age.”

“Wow. Must be some big shoes they got lined up for you.”

“Overwhelmed would not cover how I feel, but I think I can do it. And I’m going to make sure I’m not my father’s son. Personally, I mean. I just can’t get over what he did to my mother. When I found that out, I just...went crazy, you know?”

I nod my head like I know what he’s talking about but I’m just smiling inside noting what a good boyfriend he would be. In a sad way, through tragedy, he’s been programmed not to cheat. Low maintenance. Big points there in my book.

STUMBLE HOME

I’m drunk off my ass and the world is tilting around me like a see-saw as Chris helps me out of the limo. I giggle and fall into his arms. Chris pulls me up onto my feet and then kisses me. I grab his coat and press close, but it never feels close enough. As he works his mouth down my neck, I notice the driver standing to the side looking the other

way. The street in front of my building is quiet. I think it's around 2 AM. I go back to kissing Chris and run my hands down his open overcoat. I explore his neither region and feel confident that we could get away with sex on the street, maybe on the limo. Why not, the driver is ignoring us.

"We should get you to bed," Chris says, panting icy air.

"Mmm, now you're talking," I whisper in his ear.

Chris wraps his arm around my waist and escorts me to the glass entrance of the lobby. Behind us, the driver closes the door and walks back to his side. I take my keys out of my jacket pocket and somehow open the door.

"Do you need help upstairs?" he asks.

I flinch at him. "Thought you were going to get me to bed?"

"Don't you have roommates? Your grandfather?"

I work my tongue down his neck. "Hmm, then let's go to your place. Should be no traffic on the way to Midtown, right?"

Chris moans and I know I have him under my control. "I wish we could. But my mother lives there too and... you know her condition."

My libido drops like a safe off the Verrazano Bridge. But then the safe stops in mid-air. I motion to the couch next to the mailboxes in the lobby. "That couch looks comfy."

Chris jumps up and down like he's trying to get warm, but I know he's just shaking the horniness out of his system. "No, no, no." He laughs, then pecks my lips. "Another time. Trust me, I so want to. But... we have plenty of time."

The safe splashes into the water. But it floats back up.

He hugs me. I press my cheek to his chest and squeeze him back.

"I'll call you after my classes tomorrow. We can have dinner."

"Sounds good."

I plant one last kiss on his lips, my tongue working with his in a sweet dance, and then back off. Like I wanted, he appears drained by my kiss. "Good night, Christopher Chandler."

He waves and grins, so cute with ruffled clothes and hair. "Good night Miki Radicci."

He watches me board the elevator. I press the three button and we wave one last time before the doors seal. I lean against the railing and close my eyes. I see nothing but Chris. My God, I just may be falling in love.

I enter the condo and keep the lights off. The studio is quiet, like I expect. Everyone else either has work or school in the morning. I take off my boots so I can soft step across the hardwood floor to my bedroom across from Corey's. I close the door behind me and strip off my clothes. Before I put on an old t-shirt for bed, I check the bruises around my belly and chest. The blood stuck to my skin must be breaking off; the wounds I experienced through Katherine Moore are turning yellow. Bypassing brushing my teeth - I know I will regret this in the morning - I slip under the covers and reach over to the nightstand to shut off my phone and the light. The cell vibrates and gives off a message ring. I check the screen and see that it's not a message but an email. It's blank. The address is from an undisclosed recipient. But there's a JPEG attachment. Normally I would just delete it as if it was spam or some kind of computer virus, but a weird feeling runs over me. I open the JPEG. The breath is sucked right out of my lungs.

The picture is a sketch of the withered evil face from my paintings. I sit up straight as my heart pounds my ribs. Yes, *thee* withered evil face that I have locked up in my private collection. Another weird part is that it's a pencil drawing and, although it's a great depiction, I know I didn't draw it. The killer must have broken into my condo and seen the picture in my studio. It has to be the only way.

Then I realize: The killer broke into my home.

I jump out of bed and into the hall. I open Corey's door and find him snoring lightly on his bed. I sigh with relief. I then find Grandpa in his loft upstairs. The lights are out and I can hear him breathing. Everyone is safe, but my heart still spasms in my chest.

I check the door and windows for signs of a break in. Nothing looks scratched or jimmied. So did the killer have a key? Not even the Building Association has a key to the units and I doubt Corey and Grandpa would let the killer or a stranger inside to see my work.

I go back to my room, sit on the bed, and study the picture on the cell. Okay, so maybe the killer didn't break into my condo. Maybe he broke into my private collection that I have in storage. Either way, it freaks me out and keeps me up the rest of the night.

ROCK STARS

I wake up early to the alarm. The buzzing inflames the pounding behind my eyes. I moan out and roll onto my back. I glance at the time and figure I slept for three hours. After I turn off the head drill, I pull myself out of bed, use the toilet, and wash the sleep gunk out of my eyes. In a robe, I shuffle into the kitchen where Grandpa sits at the island with his newspaper, coffee, and cereal. His bus driving uniform appears pressed and cleaned, matching his freshly shaved face and pomade combed hair.

"Good morning, my sweet granddaughter," he says. "What are you doing up this early?"

I kiss his cheek and make myself a cup of coffee. "Oh, have a few things to get a jump on."

"Never get to see you in the mornings. This makes my day."

I kiss his cheek again, place the coffee cup on the tabletop, and sit down with him. I feel his eyes on me and expect a certain question from him.

"Were you drinking last night?" he asks.

And there it is.

I rub my eyes and growl. I'm not ready for this kind of talk. Besides, I have a killer that's been breaking into my life and threatening my family. That seems more important than having a few drinks; a fact that I don't want to tell him yet.

"Okay. Okay," he says. "Let's talk about something else." He sips his coffee. "We all know it doesn't work when I tell you how sad it makes me to see you drink so much and stay out late at night. I won't even bring up that it's illegal for you to be drinking."

I shake my head as the guilt saturates my heart. I hate making him feel this way. My grandpa means the world. But... like he says. If I want to stop drinking, I'm going to have to do it myself. And right now, I don't want to stop. Why should I? I mean, besides feeling like shit in the morning, I'm having a great time. I had a great time drinking with Chris last night.

"What is that devilish smile for?" he asks. "Some good news from the show last night?"

“Lots of good news.” I tell him about the sales and how I met Chris, minus the Katherine Moore memorial part.

“Oh, I see.” He leans back, crosses his arms, and stares at the table. His brow creases, probably fishing for questions to ask. Grandpa only has two boys, my dad and Uncle Tony. I’m sure living with his granddaughter challenges his traditional Italian mentality that makes him so comfortable as a parent. If I were a boy he would probably pat my back and ask how beautiful the girl is.

“Now what do we know about this boy?” he asks.

I fill him in on Chris and how he takes care of his widowed mother. Grandpa’s face lights up when I mention we might have the Chandler products under the sink. “We do?” he says. “So he is a rock star like you?”

“Grandpa, we’re far from rock stars.”

He walks over to the cabinet under the sink and checks out our cleaning supplies. He picks out a spray bottle and inspects the label. “Son of a bitch.”

I laugh. “So do I have your approval?”

He places the bottle back and closes the cabinet door. “Not yet. I still want to meet the boy.”

I nod. “Okay. He’s picking me up tonight for dinner. I’ll have him come up.”

Grandpa hugs me from behind, resting his chin on my head. “You like this boy? He makes you happy?”

“Yes. So far.”

“Happier than you can make yourself?”

I bite my lower lip and stare at the creamy coffee in my cup. “Yes,” I whisper.

He sighs. I hear the disappointment travel through his lungs. “Then be very careful with him.”

He kisses the top of my head and gets ready for work. I stare at my coffee and wonder what he meant. I give up after a while and drink the now cold, bitter beverage.

STORAGE AND BUSINESS

After Grandpa leaves for work, I shower and dress. I sit at my drawing table and freehand some sketches for the comic script Marvel has hired me to draw. Corey, home from school while his teachers celebrate Professionals Day, putters around the kitchen and knows better than to disturb me while I work. A few hours later when I take a break, Corey approaches and asks if I need him to do anything.

“Nah, you’re free for the day,” I say.

He nods. “You wanna do anything after lunch?”

“Can’t,” I lie. “I have to meet up with Sharon and discuss last night.”

“Oh, that’s right. You’re going to discuss Mr. Wonderful with your lawyer. Probably make a pre-nup.” He smiles.

“Oh, my God. It should be the other way around. Chris is like so rich. We drove around the city in a limo.”

“Ugh! I am so jealous. Think he has a gay brother?”

“Hmm. I don’t think so. He hasn’t mentioned any siblings.”

Corey kisses my cheek, “I hate you and I love you,” and walks off.

I sketch for a few more hours. When my hand cramps up and my eyelids grow heavy, I pack up the sketches and get ready to leave the condo. Before I go, I double-

check the locks and the window by the fire escape. The metal is strong and, in the light, doesn't look like it was tampered with. Out in the hall, I jiggle and push at the door. I'm turning into one of those paranoid Italian ladies from Brooklyn who thinks someone is going to steal their mothball scented Faberge eggs. There's no sign of a break in, stupid. So you know they didn't get the pictures from home, I tell myself.

I pick up a coffee from the bagel cart on the corner and take a cab to the storage warehouse on the Upper West Side. I enter the office and ask if there was a break-in on my unit last night. The clerk behind the counter doesn't have any record of one and assures me that the office would have called me to report it.

We walk down the narrow hallway to my unit. Using his own key, he opens the metal shutters and pushes the door up. I step inside and wander the stacks of paintings and boxes of sketchpads. Although it has been a month since I was here, I don't think anything has been touched or moved. This freaks me out, because now the killer had to have broken into my home. Does that mean they have a key?

The clerk asks if I need to fill out a robbery report. I apologize and tell him that I just had a bad feeling. He smiles, understanding.

Back in a cab, I go to the offices of Red Velvet Pocket. The building is a standard redbrick deal with a bodega under it at the corner of 2nd Ave and 24th St. I approach the buzz box next to the glass door and scan the listed names. I spot RVP, the only non-name. I press the buzzer. I soon realize what I just did and bite my lip. Shit.

"Yeah?" an electric scratchy voice asks.

"Hi," I say, leaning into to the mic. "Um..."

"Who is this? What do you want?"

I look from side to side to see that I'm alone. "I'm here about a job?"

I wait for a response. I wonder if the guy has blown me off or the intercom is broken.

"On the site, it says for models to stop by," I say.

"Yeah, and it also says to send an email with JPEGs and to set up an interview," he shoots back.

Shit.

"Well, I'm here now," I say. "Can you see me?"

Another long pause. And then the door buzzes. I push it and step inside the building.

IN THE RED VELVET POCKET

I walk over the checkered tiles and down the narrow hall. The building has no elevator so I take the stairs up to the 3rd floor. I breathe deep. I'm not all sure what I'm going to say to this guy. I don't have a plan. I'm not even sure why I rang the buzzer. Do I ask him if he's the killer? And if he is, won't he recognize me? I move the butterfly knife from the side pocket jacket to my back pants pocket.

I inhale deep and then knock on the door to suite 3B.

"Yeah, c'mon," the male voice says.

I open the door and step into an office. The room doesn't appear lived in. A man in black pants and a tacky Hawaiian shirt sits with his feet up behind a glossy wooden desk. His worn and lined face is sculpted into a cold emotion. I'm having a hard time guessing his age. Maybe mid-thirties. A few filing cabinets line one side of the wall and a leather couch is at the other. He makes no move to greet me. Or to kill me. I close the door and stretch out my best cute girl smile.

“Hi,” I say. “Thanks for seeing me.”

“Uh, huh.” His dry cracked hands light a cigarette and he tosses the match over his shoulder. It bounces off the closed window. “So you wanna be on the site?” I notice a slight accent. Eastern European? Russian?

I stand at the desk, hold my hands in front, and stare at my feet. Another reason I shouldn’t have rung the bell: I’m totally not dressed for this. I should be wearing something sexy, something to get his attention.

“Yeah, the site is, like, so cool and I want to get into modeling.”

He motions to the chair in front of the desk. “Have a seat.”

I sit and look around the office.

“Nervous?” he asks.

I smile and nod. “Yeah, a little. I guess.”

He grins and drops his feet on the floor. “Don’t be. I’m not dangerous. And this is a legit business.”

I take a breath and try to act calm. “Okay.”

“So how did you hear about the site?”

“I know some of the girls. They told me about it.”

“Oh, yeah? Who?”

“Fanny. Chloe. Oh, and Katie.”

I watch his face to see if there’s any change at the mention of Katherine. Nope. He just drags his cigarette and looks off into space.

“You look underage.” He talks with his cigarette in hand; I hope he doesn’t flick ashes on me. “I don’t do jail bait. I run a clean shop here.”

“Oh, I’m over 18.”

“ID?”

I pull the chain attached to my wallet and remove it from my back pocket. I slip out one of my fake IDs and pass it to him. He takes the license and flips it over.

“Laura Bush, huh?”

“That’s me.”

“Uh huh.” He passes the fake license back. “Could make a good stage name. Unless you already have one in mind.”

I pack the card and wallet away. “No, nothing I’m real excited about.”

“I see you don’t have a portfolio. Or did you forget it at home?”

“I’ll be honest with you,” I say. “I don’t have much experience. But I’m driven. I would do anything to be on your site. I mean, the way you make the girls look is so fucking sexy that... well, I want to look that way, too.”

“Even though you’re going to have a million guys ogling you. Even uh...” His hands try to pull the words out of the smoke in front of his face. “Pleasuring...you know?”

“Well, yeah.” I smile and try to blush. “Who wouldn’t like that?”

He takes another drag. “Stand up. Take your jacket off.”

I do as he says, draping it on the chair. I step to the side and show him what I can of my body even though I’m wearing baggy pants and a flannel shirt.

“Okay. You can sit.” He stubs his cigarette out in a dirty ashtray. “First off, Laura. My name is Devlin. I’m going to give you a shot. You doing anything now?”

Oh, shit.

“Uh, no.”

“Good. We can do some audition photos. Nothing serious, nothing naked, but still sexy. I got some clothes in the back you can try on. But just to let you know, the more you show today, the more daring you are, the more I’ll want to use you. You’ve seen how hard those girls work to create an illusion. I will expect the same from you. Okay?”

I stand and offer my hand to shake. “Okay, Devlin.”

He shakes my hand and stands. “Okay. Wait here and let me go clean up the studio.”

Devlin enters another room and closes the door. All clear, I finally break my silly, smiley girl expression to reveal what I’m feeling inside: Oh shit oh shit oh shit. I knew the guy would want to take pictures of me, but I didn’t think it would be now. Then I wonder if this is all a trick. Maybe the guy is going to trap me in that other room, get me half naked, and then try to kill me.

I stand. “Fuck that,” I mumble.

But still, what have I accomplished here. Do I have any evidence that this Devlin guy killed Katherine Moore? If he is the killer who’s been calling me and sending me pictures, he sure knows how to keep a poker face. Crap, the only proof I do have is that Devlin is a creep and I’m an idiot.

I make a break for the door just as Devlin comes back into the room.

“Something wrong?” he asks.

I stop, turn, and smile. “Oh, no. Just nervous. Trying to work it off.”

He nods, understanding. “Okay. Well, I’m ready for you.”

“Great,” I say.

Devlin opens the door to the studio and shows me inside.

CENTERFOLD

The room is as large as the office with red and black drapes, just like the ones from the photos on the site that cover the two walls forming a corner in the room. The same dirt mattress with holes lies on the floor. A beat up metal garbage can is positioned next to milk crates. The tungsten lights shine on the bed. Although I spot many digital still and video cameras on tripods, all but one point away from the set.

The other side of the room is sectioned off with an Asian design partition. Devlin walks me over to a rack of clothes. I flip through the black, red, and white lingerie and notice that a few of them look familiar. Probably worn by the girls on the site.

Devlin checks my body up and down. “Should have something in your size. If all else fails, just pick something that will be tight.” He grins and pats my ass. I do all I can to smile back instead of kicking him in the teeth.

I hear him wander across the room and light another cigarette. I find the closest thing to my size, a satin white slip with black lace trim. I check inside the hanger and notice that there’re no panties or thong with the piece. I wonder if I can get away with wearing my own underwear.

Jesus, what am I thinking? I have to get out of here.

“Got something?” he asks from across the room.

I pull out the slip and show it to him. “Yeah, this okay?”

“Go for it, Miss Bush.”

I carry my jacket and the slip behind the partition. I drop them both on a chair and look around the sectioned off dressing room. No windows, no doors. Fuck fuck fuck.

I smell dirty, rank clothes from the hamper in the corner. This guy better not be into shit play. No freaking way I'm going for that. I lift the lid and find bloodstained lingerie lying on top. The smell wafts up my nose. One Halloween I made a road kill costume with fake blood out of Karo syrup and red food coloring. No way in hell this is fake blood in here. The stench is far from sweet and the edges of the stains are already turning brown.

Okay. Now I definitely need to get out of here.

"Let's go, Miss Bush," Devlin says. "Don't have all day."

Shit shit shit.

A mix of guitar riffs and club beats fills the room. The song reminds me of an old New Order track. I change out of my clothes, keeping my bra and panties on, and into the slip. Before I step out, I take a deep breath and pray to God that all the cameras are broken and he has to reschedule. I place my clothes on a chair by the door.

Devlin turns from the stereo system and smiles.

"Like the touch with the boots."

I'm sure he does, I think.

"Why don't you have a seat there?" He motions to the bed. "And we'll get rolling."

I kneel down on the mattress. I just know this guy is going to want me to get naked somehow. And stupid me walked right into his office to do it. I bet 10 to 1 that he's going to play the 'mature' card.

Devlin takes the camera off the tripod and snaps a few shots, blinding me with the flash. He pulls the camera from his face. "Feel free to smile."

"Sorry." I come up with something that should look sexy.

Devlin snaps more pictures. "Try not to look constipated."

If I give this guy what he wants, without showing my boobs, then maybe I can get out of here without a scratch. I imagine he's Chris and lounge around on the mattress. I pose my body in ways that I think will turn him on without having to spread my legs or show cleavage. I pout and stretch out, showing as much leg as possible since they're my best limbs.

"Better. That's it."

Yeah, right. I suck at this.

The flashing stops. Devlin stands by the bed and places his dry cracked hands on his hips.

"Something wrong?" I ask.

"Yeah, waiting for you to go the extra mile."

"Oh."

"Listen. I don't deal with little girls here. Only women. If you're not mature enough to be a real model, then we can forget this shit right now."

Well, he dealt the 'maturity' card. He also gave me a chance to get out.

"Um, I don't think I can do that today," I say.

His brow scrunches. "So you're wasting my time?"

I shrug and open my mouth to say something.

"Un-fucking? -believable. I fucking took 50 shots of you already and you just want to end it here?"

"I'm sorry." I go to stand. Devlin steps closer, grabs the top of the slip, and pulls it down past my breast to reveal my bra.

“What is this shit?” he says.

I grab the light stand and pull it. The pole tips over towards him. Devlin drops his camera and catches the hot bulb before it hits his face. For a second I can hear his skin sizzle.

...my palms flare with fire...

“Fucckkkk!”

Fighting the fire in my hands, I stumble past Devlin. He bounces around the room and spits on his palms to cool them off. I run behind the partition and swipe my clothes and jacket. I break for the door only to find his enraged face blocking the way. “You fucking bitch!”

I pull out the butterfly knife from my pants pocket and open the blade. Devlin stares at it in disbelief.

“What? Are you going to cut me?”

He makes a move. I stab the knife into his shoulder.

...warm steel breaks my skin and scrapes the bone...

He screams. And so do I.

Devlin stumbles away and lands on the bed as he holds his bleeding shoulder. Tears swell up in my eyes as I deal with my own pain. I open the door, run out of the office, down the stairs, and out into the winter air. No one seems to mind as I slip my jacket on and sprint across the traffic.

CLEAN UP

I rush upstairs to the 2nd floor dining room of Wendy’s. The people eating their mid-afternoon burgers and fries ignore me as I head to the bathroom. Both the woman’s and men’s room are locked. I knock on the door and woman shouts “Be out in a minute, damn it.” I stand and hug my clothes as I try to shiver off the winter chill around my bare legs. The pain in my shoulder and palms subside to a dull ache. I imagine that Devlin isn’t experiencing the same benefit. The whole stabbing was so surreal. I’ve never stuck anyone with a blade before. Then again, I haven’t been attacked before either.

The bathroom door opens. A large bundled up black woman gives me the evil eye as she waddles out. I ignore her, slip into the bathroom, and lock the door. I sit on the rim of the toilet seat and breathe, calming my rapid heart. I rub my shoulder and twist it around to help work the ache out. With my head more together, I stand up and take the slip off. I put my regular clothes back on and then run cold water on my warm, red palms. When the burn lowers to a tingle, I take the knife out of my pocket and wash the blood off. I wonder if I should bring the slip with me. Fuck it. I stuff the lingerie in the garbage. What I really need is the one in the hamper back at the studio. I shake my head. God, why didn’t I grab it before I left?

Just as someone knocks on the door, I step out of the bathroom and pass an elderly Asian woman who’s not too shy to elbow me as I walk by. I leave Wendy’s, check the time on my cell, and notice I have a message. I hail a cab, hop in, tell him my address, and then check my message. Chris called sometime around when I stupidly placed my life in danger.

“Hey there, pretty girl. It’s me. Just got out of class. So when do you want me to pick you up tonight? I heard about this great vegan place on Vestry. Then maybe we can get a drink at The Hermosa Strand. Call me back.”

Hermosa Strand? Is that place still even around?

I scroll through my missed calls and find Chris's number. I then wonder how he got mine. I don't remember giving it to him. Then again, I was so wasted last night I probably did tell him. God, last night. I can't help smiling.

"Chris Chandler," he says on the other line.

"Hey, it's me," I say. "Sorry I missed your call. Was in the middle of something."

"It's cool. So what time you want me to pick you up?"

I check the time again. "Hmm, I'm in a cab now. But I think I can be good to go in two hours."

"Great. I'll make the reservations and I'll see you in two."

"Awesome," I say, feeling my face in a permanent smile.

"Oh, just wanted to let you know too, that your painting arrived today. Got it hung up in the front room. Love staring at it."

"Oh, great. Glad you're enjoying it."

"How can I not. My mom is flipping for it, too."

"Very cool. I gotta run, babe. Cab is pulling up to my building."

"See you soon."

"Bye."

I pay the cabbie and make my way up to the condo. Comfort and calmness flood my body. Being all the way across the city from a potential killer would make anyone feel secure. But then I curse myself out in the elevator for being so stupid. Never again am I going to pull shit like that. At least - not alone.

Upstairs, Grandpa and Corey are sitting on the couch watching the end of *Dr. Phil*. It seems to be the only show they agree upon. That and *Judge Judy*.

I take off my jacket and approach them. "How are my two favorite men?"

I lean over the couch and receive kisses on the cheek from them.

"Hello, my sweet bambina."

"How did the meeting go?" Corey asks.

"Good," I lie. "Can't complain."

I sit down between them and watch a few minutes of Dr. Phil berating a girl in front of her parents for being a slut. Not able to refrain from punching the television and that fat mustached face for being too stupid to see that the parents are at fault, I excuse myself.

"Chris is coming by soon," I announce.

Grandpa turns. "Your young man is coming here?"

I walk backwards to my bedroom. "Yep. So gotta move."

Grandpa stands, "So do I," and heads to his loft.

I smile, finding him so cute that he has to change out of his bus driver uniform.

When Grandpa is upstairs, I stand at my door and say, "Aren't you going to change, Core?"

He flips me the finger without turning. I laugh and enter my bedroom.

THE SLIP

I think I know which vegan restaurant Chris mentioned on the phone and, if I am correct, it's a five star deal. I have nothing in my closet for a five star restaurant. My wardrobe consists of pants and shirts mostly bought from the men's section at Target. I'm

a tomboy at heart. Not that I don't have nice legs, I just don't feel the need to show them off. I don't even like to wear shorts in the summer unless it's one of those humid 90 degree days.

I pull out a far from glamorous pair of dark brown pants and a thick light blue sweater. If Chris should get so lucky to peel these layers off he'll be rewarded with black hip hugger panties and low cut bra. I slip my feet into black Doc Martin's, which are less scruffy than my red ones, and walk out to the living room.

Grandpa stands up from the couch and shows off his pressed dress pants and red polo shirt. "What do you think?"

"Very handsome," I say.

"I don't know what the big deal is," Corey says from the couch.

"The big deal is that our Michelina likes this boy and we don't want to give him the impression that we are low class peasants."

"Hey, I'm completely comfortable with being a low class peasant and if he can't accept it, then that's his problem."

Grandpa throws his hand at him, "Ahhhh."

"Listen, you two. If anyone has to worry about how they dress it's me," I say, sitting on a lounge by the window.

"What? You look beautiful."

"Yeah, you look fine," Corey says.

Grandpa Blaise steps up to me and takes my face in his hands. "Look at this face. Look just like your grandmother when I met her. A sweet little village girl right off the boat from Sicily."

I blush and move his hands away. "Grandpa, please."

He removes his hands and pats my head, a big goofy smile on his face.

The buzzer sounds off, making Grandpa jump. "I hate that thing."

Corey and I exchange smiles. He gets up before me and moves to the intercom.

"Who is it?" he asks.

"Hi, there. It's Chris. Is Miki in?"

"Chris? Chris who?" Corey asks.

I punch his arm and pull him away from the intercom. I press the talk button, "Come on up," and buzz him in. I point a finger at Corey. "Behave."

"Don't I always?"

Chris enters the condo and all I can do is feel sorry for him. He stands by the door as two Looney Toons confront him. Grandpa smiles and looks Chris over while Corey takes a step further and walks with a scrutinizing expression around Chris. And here I am hoping to God that he doesn't run out of the room, screaming and waving his arms. But he handles it well and smiles. Chris holds out a bunch of flowers, "And these are for you."

Corey swipes them, "Oh, thank you," and buries his nose in the pedals.

"Down, Corey."

He barks, smiles, and hands me the flowers.

"Nice to meet you, Corey," Chris says, offering his hand. "Heard a lot of great things about you."

Corey shakes his hand and puts on his best behavior. "Same here."

"And this is my grandpa Blaise Radicci," I say.

Chris steps up to Grandpa. "Mr. Radicci. An even bigger pleasure."

Corey rolls his eyes.

Grandpa crosses his arms and looks down his nose at Chris. "So you're Christopher Chandler."

"Yes, sir."

"And what are your intentions with my granddaughter Michelina?"

I rub my eyes and bow my head. "Oh, God."

I hear Corey snicker behind my back.

"I assure you, sir. My intentions for your granddaughter are honorable. I have found her to be an exceptional young woman with an amazing intelligence that I can not find in the other women I have encountered."

"This is true," Grandpa says.

"I intent to treat her with the utmost respect and to do what I can to make her happy during our time together."

Grandpa's face softens into a smile. "Very well." He grabs Chris's hand with both of his and shakes it. "You two have a good time, take her someplace special. Have an ice cream on me, eh?"

Chris smiles at him and takes his hand back. "We sure will. Thanks, Mr. Radicci."

I put on my leather jacket, say goodnight to everyone, and leave. We stand in the hall and wait for the elevator.

"Your grandfather slipped me a twenty." Chris holds up the bill. "Am I supposed to buy you ice cream with this?"

"Aww, he's so sweet."

"You didn't tell him I have money?"

"I did. But he never had daughters so, I guess he thought that was what you're supposed to do." I place my hand on the back of his head and kiss him full on the mouth.

"Mmm. What was that for?" he asks.

"For not embarrassing him and giving him back the money."

"Then it was well worth it."

The elevator doors open and we step inside. As they close, we take each other into our arms and kiss until we reach the bottom.

LUV

After we have a few drinks at the Hermosa Strand and see an acoustic show of Bob Mould in the upstairs room, Chris asks, "Ready to go home?"

"Are you serious?" I say. "It's only 11:30."

"Yeah, I should probably get you home by midnight."

"Does this have to do with my grandfather?"

He shrugs, blushing in the dim light of the club. "I did promise him I would treat you right. If you were one of the party girls who're into my money we would hit a few more clubs."

I laugh and hug him. "You are so cute." I kiss him and take his hand. "Okay. Take me home."

At the vestibule of my building, Chris and I stand by the elevator and make out until midnight. I enjoy the way our tongues and lips move now than when I was drunk off my ass the other night.

“Did you have a good time?” he asks.

“Yeah. Was perfect.”

“Just checking. A few times you seemed like you were spacing out.”

I was. I kept thinking about Devlin and what I should do about the bloodstained lingerie back at his studio. I considered telling Detective Sampson about it, but passed on the idea since I have nothing solid that leads to the murder of Katherine Moore.

“Just work on my mind,” I say, kissing his lips.

“I guess I should get used to that, having an artist as a girlfriend.”

“Oh, so I’m your girlfriend now?”

“Hell yeah,” he says. “I don’t want to see anyone but you.”

I smile hard as the sensation of my feet leaving the ground fills my body. “Good. Cause I feel the same way.”

“Good,” he says.

We kiss a little more and then say good night.

When I enter the apartment I find Corey watching some horror movie on the couch. I plop down next to him and ask, “Waiting up for me?”

“Yeah, Blaise would have but he kept falling asleep,” he says. “In a way I’m glad. All he wanted to watch was science shows about nuclear weapons.”

“He’s so sweet.”

Corey checks his watch. “So this is early for you. Wanna hit up some bars?”

I scrunch down on the couch and put my feet on the glass coffee table. “No. Don’t feel like going out. Besides, you have school tomorrow.”

Corey slaps his hands to his cheeks and opens his mouth in fright, *Home Alone* style. “Oh, Lord. You *are* in love.”

I smile at the television and the girl screaming as a chainsaw rips her up. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

LICKING THE PINK

Grandpa kisses the top of my head, grabs his lunch pail from the kitchen counter, “Have a good day, my bambina,” and heads out the door. I sit at the island, sip my coffee, and slide the paper over to skim through the news headlines. I spot a familiar face that hallows out my heart.

“Oh, no.”

Fanny Lee, the Asian girl I met at Katherine Moore’s memorial, was found dead last night. According to the article, a pastry cook working at the Sweet Tart on 14th Street discovered her as he took out the garbage. Her body was positioned next to the dumpster and suffered multiple stab wounds to the stomach. So far the police have no leads and are exhausting all channels. The article then goes on about how she was an art student at the Fashion Institute of Technology and lived with her parents and two younger siblings in Chinatown. I notice there’s no mention of the Red Velvet Pocket and I doubt that the police will find any proof that she was working for the site.

“You look like shit.”

Corey pours a cup of coffee and sits down. I show him the article on Fanny Lee.

“Shit. Poor girl,” he says.

“It’s him. It’s the guy who killed Katherine Moore.” I stab my finger at the story.

“What makes you think that?”

“She was found in an alley the same way as Katherine Moore.”

“Oh, c’mon. We live in the city. People throw their unwanted babies in dumpsters, for Christ’s sake. It’s the only logical place for nuts jobs to get rid of a human life. That and the Hudson.”

“They both worked at the Red Velvet Pocket.”

“The what now?”

“I’ll show you.”

As I boot up the computer in my bedroom, I show him the articles on the death of Chloe Bateman that I printed out. I then open my browser and sign into the Red Velvet Pocket.

He looks at the screen and reads, “Lick the Pink? When did you start getting into goth porn?”

“Wait. Just hold up.”

I find Katherine’s pictures and point them out to Corey. I pull out the newspaper articles with her picture in it.

“Tell me that’s not the same girl,” I say.

Corey looks between the two pictures. Before he can answer, I click into Chloe Bateman’s page. “This is Chloe Bateman.” Corey holds up the news article of her death next to the goth girl posing with a ravaged teddy bear.

“One more, then you can speak,” I say.

Although I don’t know Fanny’s model name, I do a search for Asian on the site. Luckily only two girls pop up. I spot Fanny right away and open up a few of her pictures.

“Holy shit,” Corey says.

“Yeah. Holy shit is right.”

“Did you tell the cops yet?”

“No.”

“Well what are you waiting for?”

What am I waiting for? I made a connection to three girls’ deaths, but is it enough for Detective Otto to arrest Devlin? And even if they did arrest him, couldn’t Devlin just shut down the site and act like it never existed? No, I need more evidence. Something solid I can take to the police.

“Hm, that’s weird,” Corey says.

“What?”

“Well, the cursor on your mouse is shaped like a tongue as if there’s a link there.”

I see that he’s right. The tongue rests on Fanny’s cooch.

Corey grabs the mouse and moves it around. The tongue turns into a regular cursor when off the pink spot. He then brings the cursor back over to form the tongue again.

“Has to be a link, right?” I ask.

“Only one way to find out.”

Corey clicks the spot. Nothing happens.

“Weird,” he says. “It’s not a link or some kind of button.”

He shakes the mouse, making the tongue go back and forth over the pink spot. The screen dims. Corey removes his hand from the mouse and leans back. “I’m stumped.”

“No. Wait. Something happened. The screen looks darker, right?”

“I guess.”

Then it hits me: Lick the Pink.

“That clever son of a bitch,” I mutter.

I grab the mouse and move the tongue from side to side over Fanny’s pink spot. The screen sinks darker and darker until Fanny’s picture disappears and a video play button fades up into the middle of the screen.

“How did you know to do that?” Corey asks.

“The site says ‘Lick the Pink’, right? Well. I did.”

“Are you going to play the video?”

“I guess. But I have a bad feeling about it.”

“Me, too.”

“Fuck it.”

I click the play button and the video begins. The camera reveals the same studio set I was in yesterday. I recognize the curtains, the mattress, even the milk crates and metal garbage can. From the right of the screen, Fanny falls onto the bed as if someone threw her. Under normal circumstances, she would look beautiful in the little bustier and garter belt with her blond wig, but the gray masking tape on her hands and wrists kill the arousal aspect. She squirms and screams through the ball gag in her mouth. A man steps into frame. He wears a leather head mask and a black leather g-string. The rest of his body is covered with myriad tattoos. I recognize some prison ink like my dad and Uncle Tony have from their stints. All of them are scary looking, but the vicious panther on leatherhead’s forearm is the worst. Judging from his muscles and thickness, I don’t think the man is Devlin who I remember being a lot scrawnier.

“This is not good,” Corey says.

The masked man takes out a large hunting knife.

“Okay. This has to be fake,” Corey says. “Please tell me this is fake.”

Fanny’s fear overwhelms me into silence and perverse curiosity.

A second man enters the left of the frame. It’s Devlin. Although he’s also wearing a black leather mask, he still has the same shitty Hawaiian shirt I saw him in yesterday. Even the bloodstain where I stabbed his shoulder is there. He moves closer to her as she tries to squirm away. Devlin manages to slip a blindfold over Fanny’s eyes and then backs out of the shot.

The masked man runs the knife around Fanny’s arms, then breasts, and then face. The poor girl screams and shivers. Her belly rises up and down so fast. My heart pounds and my skin shivers.

“Miki, you okay.”

I hug myself, trying to keep from shaking out of my flesh.

Fanny screams and shakes as loud as she can. I doubt anyone is going to hear her.

“Turn this off, Miki. Please.”

The masked man turns to the camera and looks at us. I hear a faint chuckle. With both hands, he brings the knife up and stabs down...

...the knife plunges into my belly and slices through my stomach...I shiver...I thrash...the knife stabs over and over...the masked face leans over me ...a popping explodes inside me... his enraged blue eyes stare into mine...coughing blood...his grunting...stabbing... over and over...grunting...giggling...as...

...all...

... goes...

...deep...

...black...

THE PLAN

“Miki? Wake up.”

I open my eyes to Corey’s pasty concerned face. I smell puke.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

For someone who died two times this week, I could be better. This time by video which is so weird. I have never felt this way when watching a horror movie. Then again, those films are staged. Fanny’s death was real.

I hold my stomach and feel the flesh under my sweater. It’s smooth and tight, no sign of stab wounds even though the muscles and stomach ache underneath and there are black and blue marks where the knife entered.

“I hate this shit, Core. I really do.”

I sit up and look around the room. I’m on the floor, next to the tipped over chair. The computer is off.

“Did you puke?” I ask.

“Yeah.” He shrugs. “Don’t worry. I did it in the pail.”

“Help me up?”

Corey grabs my arm and places me on the bed. He sits down at my side. I breathe deep hoping to relieve the pain in my gut. It feels like it was punched a billion times. At least I’m not nauseous.

“You have to call the police, Miki.”

“I know. I will.”

“I have never seen anything so sick in my life.”

I smirk. “Try experiencing it.”

Corey lies back on the bed and curls into a fetal position. I reach over for my cell on the night table and dial Sampson’s number. It goes to voice mail.

“Shit,” I mutter.

After the beep, I say, “Hi, Detective Otto. This is Miki Radicci. Listen, I think I might have something for you about Katherine Moore. She worked for a site called Red Velvet Pocket. So did a girl named Chloe Bateman who died last year and the girl who was killed last night, Fanny Lee. If you swipe the pink over the pictures like the site says, you know, with your mouse, then I think you’ll have proof of their deaths. Yeah, I know this sounds crazy. Listen, just call me back when you get this message, ok?”

I hang up and sit on the bed. The pain in my stomach is almost gone. My hands shake, but not from fear. I should be doing something. I just know that this Devlin guy is slicker than owl shit and wouldn’t be running a site like Red Velvet Pocket if he thought cops could access it so easily. They might have a firewall that detects state funded computers and servers.

“We need something hard,” I tell Corey. “We need proof in our hand.”

“Miki, I really don’t think...”

“Corey. We have to get this guy.”

“Miki, did you see what kind of fucking monster that guy is? And you want to do what? Break into his place and get the murder weapon?”

I remember the bloodstained clothes behind the Asian partition. If they’re so lazy about getting rid of stuff like that, then chances are Fanny’s clothes will be there too.

“Maybe it’s there. The murder just happened last night. I doubt they’re the kind of guys who would clean up right away. They’ve been doing this a long time. They feel safe. They probably have the fucking knife sitting on the floor next to the bed.”

“No.”

“Please, Corey. I need you to help me.”

“No.”

“Please.”

Corey sighs hard. “I hate you.”

I smile and kiss his cheek.

COFFEE AND PATIENCE

Corey and I sit in a diner across the street from Red Velvet Pocket’s office. The sun starts to set as we order our third coffee from the waitress who doesn’t appear too thrilled. I ignore her dirty glances and check out the entrance of the building.

Before we took our seats, I went to the payphone on the corner - one of the few that are still around or even work in the city - and dialed the office number. When Devlin (at least it sounded like him) picked up, I hung up.

“Still think this is a bad idea,” Corey says. “We should just let your cop friend handle it.”

“I’ve been calling him and leaving him messages,” I say, trying to hold back the aggravation in my voice. “The guy is not taking my calls.”

“Yeah, well. I still think it’s a mistake.”

My cell phone vibrates on the table. Corey and I look at it. I’m sure he’s hoping its Detective Otto. In a way I am too. But the ID on the screen shows Chris’s number.

“I better take this one. I’ve been avoiding him all day.”

“Hey, cutie,” I say into the phone.

“How’s my sexy little artist?” Chris asks.

I smile. “Doing good. How is the future CEO of Chandler Chemicals doing?”

“Well, to be honest, I could be better. Today’s classes just about kicked my ass. When can I come pick you up?”

I bite my lower lip, then say, “I can’t. I have plans with Corey tonight.”

“Oh.” I can hear the disappointment in his voice. “Okay, then.”

“You’re not mad?”

“No. Don’t be silly. Girl needs to see her friends. I’ll just stay home and study tonight.”

“Yeah, I was wondering when you get that stuff done.”

“Lately, so have I. Been wanting to spend all my time with you. I’m a little glad you’re blowing me off tonight. I do have some papers to write.”

“I’m not blowing you off. But if you ever need to get work done, I completely understand. Okay?”

“Okay. Call you tomorrow?”

“You better.”

“Bye, super sweetie.”

“Bye.”

I close the phone and put it back on the table.

“God, that grin is so horrible on your face,” Corey says. “Reminds me of The Joker.”

I smirk and sip my coffee. "Fuck you."

An hour later, Devlin comes out of the building. I can't make out his face, but I can see him wearing one of those ugly, loud Hawaiian shirts under his open coat.

"Alright. You're on." I leave money for the coffee and pocket my cell.

Corey slips on his winter denim jacket. "Not too late to back out."

"Fuck that. This will be so easy." We rush out the diner. "If someone is there still, I'll call you and we can try later."

"And if you go in, I give you an update in ten minutes or if he heads back."

"See. You do get it," I say.

I push Corey down the sidewalk. He takes off in the same direction as Devlin. I walk back to the pay phone and call the office. No one picks up and it goes straight to voice mail. To be safe, I try again in case someone's in the bathroom. Nope. No one picks up. But the muscle guy from the video could be around and not be interested in talking on the phone.

At the glass door of the building, I press a few of the buttons. Voices blare out of the intercom asking who's there. I keep silent until I get the response I want. And I do. The door buzzes and I push my way inside the building. I slip my hands in my pocket, walk up to the 3rd floor, and try to act like I belong here if one of those people I bothered steps out to question my existence. When I get to the office door of Red Velvet Pocket, I press my back to the wall and knock on it. I wait. I knock again, a little louder. No one's home. From my inside jacket pocket I take out Uncle Tony's lock picks ("Just hold them for me until I get out.") and kneel down. Like he taught me years ago – all tweens should know how to pick a lock - I gently manipulate the metal inside. Ten minutes later, the door opens and I pack them away. Back on my feet, I grab the doorknob and slowly open the door.

The office is empty. I take the bright penlight from my pocket and turn it on. I close the door and walk to the room opposite the studio. I kneel down to the locked door and work the picks as I hold the light with my teeth. This one is easier than the outside lock. I open the door and step inside. The room is sparse with a few digital camera and lighting equipment. It must be a storage closet. I notice a desktop computer set up in the far corner. I sit down in the chair and scan my light over the desk. To the right of the flat screen monitor is a plastic case filled with CDs. It has one of those cheepo locks on it. I don't even need to use the picks. I take out my butterfly knife and twist the lock open. Each disc is dated. The latest one scrawled with the same date as Fanny Lee's murder. Looks like the discs only go back one year. They probably have the earlier ones locked up safe somewhere. That is, if they have been doing this for a long time. Oddly enough I don't see one with Katherine Moore's date. Hmm, then again, would I? She was murdered in the alley and I didn't notice a camera during the act. Which only leads me to believe she might have been killed for other reasons. Maybe she knew what was up with Devlin and they had to take her out.

I slip the Fanny Lee disc into my inside jacket pocket and lock the case up. This proof is better than the dirty clothes.

I leave the room and relock the door from the inside. Curious to see if my assumption is right, that they're too comfortable with their crimes, I walk across the office to the studio. For some reason, it isn't locked. I step inside and find a browning blood stained mattress reeking of death.

“Oh, man.” I cover my nose with my free hand and breath through my mouth.

I back away and take out my cell phone. I snap a few shots of the bed. The flash breaks the darkness like lightning. Shit. Will someone see it through the windows? Then I notice that they’re curtained off.

I move to the Asian partition and the hamper filled with bloody clothes. The same slip from yesterday is on top. So what did they do with Fanny’s clothes? The material crunches and feels hard as I shove them into a plastic zip-lock bag I keep in my pocket.

I tuck the bag into my jacket when the cell vibrates in my pants. I take the phone out and see that it’s Corey.

“What’s up?” I whisper.

“He’s on his way back,” he says. “And he’s not alone.”

“Where is he?”

“They just left a bar about three blocks away.”

That should give me plenty of time to avoid his path.

“Okay. I’m on my way out” I say. “Meet you at the diner in a few minutes.”

“Okay. Be careful, Miki.”

I close the phone and slip it into my back pants pocket. I scan the room to make sure I didn’t move anything. I step out into the office and head to the front door.

The doorknob jiggles as someone on the other side unlocks it.

Fuck!

I rush back into the studio. Just as I close the door, I hear someone walking across the hard wood floor in the office. I scan around the room for a place to hide. Next to the partition and behind the rack of clothes is another door. I open it and find a tiny bathroom. I slip inside and lean against the closed door. The other side is quiet. The guy outside must still be in the office.

Shit. Shit. Shit!

Judging from the silence in the office, it isn’t Devlin with the new person who left the bar. The footsteps grow louder; someone’s in the studio. I turn to the bathroom and spot a tiny window that would barely fit my head. Directly across the stained toilet is a bathtub. I ease the curtain to the side, step in, and avoid crunching the dead water bugs. The plastic curtain seems thick enough that no one should see me in here.

The bathroom door creaks open and the light turns on. I keep still, holding my breath. The steps cease. Porcelain tapping together breaks the silence. The sound of a busted pipe and a man groaning. Okay, I think, just calm down. Once he’s done pissing he’ll leave. Fat chance he’ll take a shower. I look down at the tub and see a red rim stain by the drain. I imagine that big tattooed guy washing Fanny’s blood off in here.

A zipper rips up, followed by the toilet flushing.

Yes!

The cell vibrates in my back pocket.

No!

My eyes widen. I pull the phone out and squeeze my hand around it. I silence the vibration and catch Otto Sampson’s name on the LED screen.

I breathe slow through my nose and listen hard. I don’t hear any footsteps, just the pounding of my heart.

C’mon, c’mon, c’mon leave!

The curtain whips to the side and a huge bald guy with vicious brown eyes and tattooed vines reaching for his face grabs my neck. He presses me to the tiles. I gasp, drop my cell, and try to pull his meat hooks off my esophagus. I rip my nails into his flesh, but he doesn't budge or seem affected. Unless smiling counts.

He pulls me out of the tub by my neck and tosses me across the bathroom. My head smashes into the mirror and my butt lands in the sink.

Blackness.

THE BENEFITS OF GOING ROGUE?

I wake up and try to move my arms bound tight behind my back. My feet are roped together, too. A stinging throbs the back of my head, probably where it broke the mirror. I recognize the scent of decayed blood and realize I'm on the soiled mattress in the studio.

The bullhead, baldy guy who kicked my ass in the bathroom sits in a chair next to the stereo system. He smiles, smokes a cigarette and stares with his cold eyes. He wears a black wife beater t-shirt which shows off the vicious panther tattoo on his arms. He has to be the guy that wore the mask and killed Fanny Lee on the site. He uncrosses his denim-clad legs and stands up from the chair.

"She's up," he shouts. I can hear a slight Russian accent, or maybe Polish.

Devlin and some other guy walk in from the office. He stands at the bed and crosses his arms. The guy next to him, a skeezy looking white guy with long dreaded blond hair wearing the usual dirt bag, junkie uniform of jeans, flannel shirt, and black boots lingers at his side. He seems out of his element, unsure where to lay his eyes. Maybe he's new to the gang.

"Well, fucking, well," Devlin says. "Came back to finish me off?"

I don't answer him. I'm sure he doesn't want one. I just squirm on the bed and try to free my arms, which is a useless endeavor since they tied them so tight.

"Heh?" He taps his foot to mine.

"What? You want me to answer you?"

He and Bullhead smirk. Devlin kneels down and grabs my face, almost making my cheeks meet in my mouth. His features twist in pain, probably from where I stabbed him. "You really fucking hurt me. Laura Bush, right?"

"Good."

He spits tobacco soaked saliva on my face and then slaps my cheek lightly.

"Well, consider it your one free pass. Hm?"

"What are we going to do with her?" Bullhead asks.

"Oh, I know exactly what to do with her. But first I want to know what she's doing here."

"Asshole, you know what she's doing here," Bullhead says. "We found the clothes and the disc on her."

Devlin glares at him. "I'm talking, so would you kindly fuck up your mouth?"

Bullhead shakes his head and sighs.

Devlin turns back to me. "Last time you were here, you mentioned some of my girl's names. Fanny was one of them. Now we catch you with her disc. But if you knew that I filmed her that night, then you must know Chloe? Hm? Came here to be a hero. Avenge your friend's death?"

“No. Not Chloe. Katherine.”

“Who?”

“She means Betty Blue Blood,” Bullhead says. “The girl from last week.”

“Her? No. No. I don’t believe it. You think I’m that stupid?”

“It doesn’t take much to think you’re stupid,” I say.

Bullhead laughs.

Devlin stands up and kicks my ribs. I scream out as tears rush to my eyes.

“Whatever your reason, you’re gonna get your chance. You want to be one of my Red Velvet Pocket girls, then that’s what you’re going to be.”

“Hey, D,” the Skeevey Guy behind him says. “Are we gonna call this a night?”

Devlin peers right into my eyes. “No,” he says to him. “You want to get one of my girls. Then I will keep my word and you will get one of my girls.”

“Wait a sec,” Bullhead says. “Won’t someone come around here looking for her?”

“Please,” says Devlin. “You really think she told anyone she would be breaking in here.” He looks back into my eyes. “Did you tell your mommy and daddy? Hm?”

I stare back as a Cheshire smile stretches across his slimy face.

ACTION!

Loud industrial music blasts out of the stereo speakers. Bullhead uses a knife to remove my clothes and strip me down to my underwear. I lay with my legs taped together and my hands bound tight behind my back on the reeking mattress. As the men discuss what to do next, I wait to die. But I still cling to hope even though I can’t stop leaking tears on the ball gag in my mouth. Corey has to be smart enough to realize that I’m in trouble and I never made it out. He’ll contact Detective Otto or even Grandpa and then the police will bust down the door any second now.

Right?

Bullhead positions the lights while Skeevey Guy paces the room and smokes a cigarette. He keeps glancing at me, but only for a second. Maybe, since he has to kill me, looking into my eyes will make me seem more human than a disposable girl like the others. I wish I could talk to him, try to make myself seem real to him.

Devlin walks back into the office and hand’s Skeevey a black leather thong and head mask.

“You shitting me?” Skeevey asks.

“Trust me,” Devlin says. “You’re going to get a shit load of her blood on ya. You don’t want to be wearing your clothes and I’m sure as shit not going to let you wear a rain slicker. Right?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re getting shy. Afraid someone is going to be jerking off to *your* body?”

“No! Fuck you.”

“Well, don’t. The only thing they’ll be jerking off to is her dying. Trust me.”

Skeevey sighs. “I don’t know, man. I just didn’t think I’d be doing this tonight.”

“Dude, look at it this way. Think of it as a promotion. You’ve been doing good work for me the last few months. Now you’re in the big time. Bigger money. Plus, you get to show off in front of the world and no one will know who you are.”

Skeevy smiles. “Yeah. True. Be good to kill one of them bitches without having to worry about getting caught.”

Devlin claps his back. “There you go. Now go change and let’s get this shoot rolling.”

Skeevy nods, smiles, and walks off into the bathroom. Devlin lights up a cigarette and stares at me. A smirk threatens his mouth.

“All set.” Bullhead bums a cigarette from Devlin. They stand around and chat about baseball. Skeevy steps out of the bathroom wearing nothing but the thong and leather mask. Various tattoos cover his arms and chest. I recognize some of the same prison tattoos on Bullhead.

I cry harder, making my lungs and stomach hitch and burn. I scream out into the gag and sit up. I plead as hard as I can with my eyes. I don’t want to fucking die. Not like this. Not at the hands of a bunch of psychosexual scumbags.

Skeevy moves closer. His dark eyes peer through the eyeholes and his tongue moves across the zipper mouth. Bullhead brings him over to a small table displayed with knives and tools. I hope he picks a blade instead of a hammer or chisel so my death will be fast and painless. But I doubt that. I’ve been killed so many times by these guys that I know it’s not going to be painless.

Skeevy glances into my wet eyes, then back at the table. He must have read my mind. He picks up a large kitchen knife, kind of like the one Norman Bates from *Psycho* would use.

Devlin kneels down at my side and smiles wide. “Ready, girly? In the big time now. Gonna have a lot of men watching you. Getting off to you. Bet it makes you feel so dirty, huh? Makes you wet.” He laughs. “Gonna get even wetter.”

He stands back up and pats Skeevy on the back. Bullhead stands behind the camera. The little red light over the lens starts blinking. “Action,” he says.

Skeevy towers over the mattress. I scream for him to stop, to please let me go, but everything comes out muted through the ball gag. He keeps his head and eyes down. His shoulders rise up as he takes deep breathes as if psyching himself up. Somehow I manage to back up to the red curtained wall. Maybe I can kick my bound feet at him. But then what?

A door buzzer goes off.

Everyone stops and exchanges glances.

“What the fuck?” Bullhead says.

“Just keep filming. I’ll take care of it.” Devlin walks out of the room.

Bullhead takes the cam off the tripod and brings it in closer. Skeevy kneels on the bed and pulls at the tape around my legs, bringing me closer. I scream and try to kick. He presses the knife blade to my belly. I freeze. The memory of Katherine and Fanny being stabbed clear in my mind and body.

Skeevy caresses the sharp metal over my shivering skin. Bullhead films it and says, “Good. Good.”

The blade drags up between my breasts and stops at the soft part of my neck. I close my eyes tight and sob so hard snot shoots out of my nose and fresh saliva spurts from around the gag.

The door to the studio closes. “Would you believe that was the pizza guy?” Devlin says. “Where the fuck is Sampson Pizza anyway?”

I open my eyes.

Sampson Pizza?

An explosion of wood, stomping feet, and shouting breaks in from the office. Men dressed in dark blue uniforms, helmets, and arm bands with NYPD storm into the studio, aim their rifle machine guns, and order everyone to freeze. Devlin and Bullhead back up to the wall and raise their hands. Skeevey drops the knife and scoots to my side. From the door, Detective's Otto and Hersh rush in with their weapons drawn.

The officers manage to push Devlin to the floor and cuff him. They point their guns and shout at Bullhead to drop to the ground, but the surly fucker keeps dancing in place as if he's going to find a way out. When one cop makes a grab for his wrist, Bullhead punches him across the jaw and sends him into another cop. Both fall to the ground.

Bullhead dashes for the desk with the weapons and reaches into a drawer.

"Don't move," screams Otto.

"Keep your hands up," shouts Hersh.

Bullhead pulls out a revolver and aims it at Otto.

Skeevey, knife in hand, dives for Bullhead and...

...a warm metal blade rips into my skin just below my ribs... then pops out the other side...

Bullhead screams, aims at Skeevey, and fires his gun...

...a bullet plows through my shoulder... shattering the bone... and pierces it's way out the other side...

Guns explode through the room.

...with a revolver in my hand... bullets penetrate my lungs, stomach, and neck...the air sucks out of my body... my back slams the wall...my head hits the floor...I'm numb... Otto and Hersh step closer with their smoking guns aimed at me...fear in their face... Otto shakes his head... "Stupid." ...then...

DEEP BLACK

I feel nothing. Not a damn thing. Then again, I might be nowhere. Blackness surrounds. No floor under my feet. Just my Doc Martins floating over the darkness. The dim star of light below.

Harsh laughing echoes through the void. I look around. Who's laughing at me? No one. Nothing... until I turn and the devilish old man from my paintings floats above. Actually, he doesn't float; the wings on his back keep him from falling. For the first time I get a good look at him from the neck down. The skin on his naked body is leathery and wrinkled gray, devoid of blood with slight bluish bruising. He raises his clawed hands. Black fingernails graze my cheek. His orange and pink eyes look into mine. I'm not scared. I should be. He's laughing at me. His mouth hangs open so wide that his jaw must be unhinged and his black tongue drips clear saliva into the darkness. But I know he doesn't want to hurt me. He wants me alive. I can feel it. Like some kind of magnetic force inside of him that pulls at my heart, pulls me to him and into his arms.

"No," I say.

I shove his hands away. He backs off and appears indignant, like I have some nerve to push him away.

Well, I do have nerve. It's what got me here alone with the face that has been haunting my mind for years. And it's the same nerve that closes my eyes to him. I imagine the light below. I feel myself drop and the wind pressing.

"Clear."

My body jolts. I focus on the light beneath. I drop. Faster and faster. The wind pushes my shirt up to my chin and my pants up to my knees.

"Clear."

Heat warms me. A sharp jolt snaps through my heart. I open my eyes. The light surrounds. I stop dropping and float.

Stable.

Solid.

ONCE

The white tiled ceiling hovers above. My body aches like some monster chewed it up and spat it out into a meat grinder. I don't try to move. It will just hurt. I moan. That doesn't hurt so I do it a lot.

Someone squeezes my hand. Until now, I had no idea anyone was even holding it.

"Shhhh. Don't speak, my bambina."

Okay, I think. So, I close my eyes and let the black suck me back in.

...AND AGAIN

I open my eyes. A man in a white lab coat stands at the foot of the bed. His skin is dark. He may be Middle Eastern Indian. Or from Trinidad. I always have trouble figuring out which is which. A woman around the same age as the doctor stands by my bed and changes one of the bags hooked up to the tubes in my arm. She wears pink scrub pants and a worn sweater.

"So, you're awake, Michelina?" the doctor asks.

"Yeah. I guess so." I sound hoarse.

The pain throbs all over my torso, stomach, and neck. Although it's deep inside - hiding under the surface of pain meds - I know it's there.

"Almost lost you," he says. "Your heart stopped a few times. Once in the ambulance and again in the ER. I'm glad you came back."

I nod.

"You are at the Cabrini Medical Center. Although you were not harmed at the scene of an arrest, your body has suffered some interior bruising on the stomach, lungs, and heart that match a few fractures and skin wounds. You're breathing better and there's no blood in your urine, so you seem to be healing nicely."

"My shoulder hurts, too."

"Yes. X rays have found a bone fracture there."

"Swell."

"Surely you must have suffered a vicious attack. But there's a mystery to your wounds. You have internal injuries, but your skin has not been severely damaged," the doctor says. "But...the placement of your wounds match the same ones of the Officer and the man who was shot at the scene."

Wait. An officer was shot? No, just the scumbags were. Unless Skeevey was a cop.

I nod and say. "Uh huh."

The doctor flinches. "And you are not surprised by this?"

I shake my head, too tired to talk now.

"Neither was your grandfather." The doctor sighs.

"I think I would like to sleep now."

The blackness takes me before I can hear him respond.

TONGUE LASHING

I wake up and turn my head. Grandpa Blaise sits in the chair next to me. He's still holding my hand. He smiles with his puffy red eyes. Corey lounges in a chair next to him and he doesn't look much better. I sigh and realize what I must have put them through. I avoid their eyes, not able to handle their pain.

"I told you it wasn't a good idea," Corey says.

I chuckle and quickly regret it. Pain explodes through my body.

Grandpa throws Corey a dirty look. "Why you have to do that, huh?"

Corey smiles.

"Where am I?" I ask.

"Cabrini hospital," says Grandpa.

That's right. Someone else told me that before.

A curtain divides the room. My secret roommate watches a game show on his television. At least I got the window side even though it looks out to another building.

"What happened? Am I all right?" I ask.

"You're going to be fine. You have some interior bruising that the doctor can't explain," Grandpa says. "But I'm sure you know why."

"That guy you were in the room with was made into Swiss cheese," Corey says.

"Ohhhhh God. I remember," I moan.

"I remember your Uncle Tony had a similar experience. Stupid kid, then." Grandpa shakes his head and then rubs his red eyes. "I hope to God you don't follow in his footsteps."

"Jeez, Grandpa. I was not hanging out with criminals like Uncle Tony was. I was trying to...shit, I don't know."

"I know what you were trying to do. Corey told me," Grandpa whispers. "On one hand, I am proud of you for giving a damn about that poor girl who was murdered. On the other, I am mad at you for thinking you are better than the police."

I sigh and wipe the tears from my eyes. I manage to keep the choking in my throat from turning into a sob. "I'm sorry."

Grandpa pats and kisses my hand. "I know. I know. I'm just so happy that you're all right now."

"Knock knock." Detective Otto stands at the divided curtain. I smile at him, making him smile back. "My hero."

His lower lip rises, making him frown. He then smiles at Grandpa and Corey and asks for a moment alone, police business. They move out of their chairs.

"Need anything from downstairs?" Grandpa asks.

"Um, don't you think we should be trying to get her out of here and not prolong her stay?" Corey asks.

Grandpa pushes Corey out of the room and curses him off in Italian.

I grin and start to miss them.

Detective Otto sits down in the chair next to my bed. “How are you feeling, Miki?”

“Like I was stabbed and shot up by cops.”

He nods. “Must hurt.”

“Morphine would feel good right about now. But I think they have me on prescribed Tylenol.”

“Good.” He stares right into my eyes. For the first time he expresses anger, and I don’t know what to do. Should I curse him out or take the abuse like a bad little girl.

“Maybe you’ve learned your lesson.”

“Excuse me?”

“You really fucked up back there, Miki.”

I sigh and look away from him. I take the bad little girl route. “Sorry.”

“Sorry? Oh well, then that makes everything fine.”

“I am. God, what do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know. But you should have called me and stayed away from that shit hole studio.”

“Why?”

“So I could have done my job.” He exhales hard and leans forward. “Did you know that they’ve been investigating Red Velvet Pocket for the last three months now? Although we did not know the little Lick the Pink thing, we knew that the girls who died were models for that site. Remember that rise in Katherine Moore’s savings account? Well, most of them were cash deposits except for one check, a check made out by Silver Rocket Enterprises which has various legitimate websites attached to it for adult entertainment. But it also has a few that aren’t so legitimate, one of them being Red Velvet Pocket. Seems like they paid their girls in cash on a regular basis, but for some reason they paid some of the girls with a check. Probably an accounting screw up. A screw up in our favor.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh. When I found the connection, I contacted the 13th Precinct and they told me that they’re aware of the website and have someone undercover. All should have been fine after that until I got a call from your friend Corey who told me what happened with you.”

“Thank God he did.”

“No, not really. Because the undercover detective had no idea he would have to kill a girl last night and back up wasn’t ready. You come swooping in there out of the blue and no one was prepared. So if you weren’t breaking into his office and playing Encyclopedia Brown Boy Detective, one officer wouldn’t have been wounded, a suspect would not have been killed, and you would not have been rushed to the hospital where they had to shock your heart to get it going.”

God, could he make me feel even lower than shit?

“Encyclopedia who?” I ask, raising my brows and smiling, hoping to calm him. It doesn’t. Otto continues to stare holes into my soul and fill me with shit. “I’m sorry,” I say. “But you know, you should have answered my messages.”

“If I would have known you were going to do something so stupid as break in their studio I would have, but I was working another case.”

I grab his hand. He looks at mine. “I’m sorry, Otto. I really am. Trust me, I’m not going to do something like this again. It’s just...I know what it’s like to be at the mercy

of these psychos. I went through what Katherine went through and...I don't know. Maybe it's my stupid Sicilian revenge mentality, but I wanted to find the guy who killed me...her. I didn't want anyone to feel the way Katherine and I did."

His face softens up as he stares at our hands.

"I understand that you're different, Miki. You know you're different. But you're still a kid. You can't go chasing killers."

"Not without you, right?"

He smiles and shakes his head. "What am I going to do with you?"

Take me on this bed and kiss me while the painkillers are pumping through my brain? Instead I ask, "Have you found her video yet?"

"Not yet. But we found many that solve a lot of murders committed the last few years."

"That's good."

"More I think about it, we might not find her tape. All the girls were killed in the studio and Katherine was killed in an alley. You didn't see anyone else during the murder, right? Someone with a cam?"

"I was thinking the same thing. No. At least Katherine didn't."

"Hm."

"Maybe she was onto them and her death was to silence her."

"Maybe."

As I stare at the wall, I feel Otto's eyes on me.

"What is it?"

"Have they searched the studio yet or his apartment?"

"Yes."

"Did they find the long coat and derby?"

"Not that I know of, but I didn't get the list yet," he says. "In the end you did a good thing, Miki. Sure, you did it the wrong way. But, you had a hand in helping to get this guy behind bars. Everything will fall together in the end. Just takes some time."

"I hope so."

Otto pulls his hand away. "I'll come back later and get a statement from you. And another team taking the officer's weapon discharge report will come by too."

"Great. Can't wait."

"Hey, you want to be a detective, you gotta do the paperwork."

Otto flashes one last grin, walks through the curtain, and leaves the room. I can't help but smile back, keeping his cute face in my head. The cute face of the man who saved me.

A BREAK

Grandpa Blaise and Corey sit with me until a face that I've been waiting for pops out from behind the curtain.

"There you are," says Chris, holding a dozen roses. "This place is a maze."

"Here I am," I say, opening my arms while I lay on the bed.

Grandpa and Corey give us time to be alone and stand with the cop guarding my room. Chris shakes their hands and exchanges smiles with them. When we're alone, he hugs me.

"You can squeeze harder than that," I say. "I won't break."

His mouth by my ear, he says, "From what the doctors said about your injuries, I wasn't sure."

"I'm feeling a lot better."

He hands me the roses. I bring them to my nose and inhale.

"So, how are you feeling? Really getting better?"

"Yes, I am. I'm a quick healer. Doctor said the tests on my heart turned out good and I shouldn't have to stay much longer. Just need to take it easy."

"Great. Can I give you a ride?"

"Limo would be better than a cab."

Chris looks around the room as if it's natural to be visiting me in the hospital for no reason. "Nice."

I study him. "C'mon, Chris. Don't you want to wring me out for what happened? Call me stupid? I mean, everyone else has."

He smiles and looks into my eyes. God, I could just eat him up.

"No. I'm not going to yell at you. I'm sure you know how stupid you were," he says. "Although I am just as curious as the doctor about how you got your bruises. From what they say, you're a marvel of medicine."

"Yeah, well. They'll have to keep wondering."

"Will I?"

I rub my finger over the rose pedals. "One day. I'll tell you one day."

"Fair enough," he says. "So, Detective Radicci, what about this case you're on?"

"Oh, please."

"You know Corey told me the truth about you and Katherine. You didn't really know her."

Oops.

I shrug. "Um, that's sort of true."

"Must have been horrible for you to find her body like that."

"Yeah, it was."

"But...you found her killer. Kinda makes you a hero. Chick heroes are sexy."

"Oh, shut up."

He laughs. "What? Why not? We can get you a sexy tight costume."

"You're drunk. I'm no hero. But I am glad it's over."

"Believe me, I am too." Chris leans over and takes my hand. "Do you think you can live a quiet life as an artist in New York and have a boyfriend who wants to be with you all the time?"

I pull him closer onto the bed, "Most definitely," and kiss him.

THE CURSE NOW?

Grandpa and I are alone in the hospital room. My roommate on the other side of the curtain snores softly. I still have no idea what they look like. I've crossed their bed to get to the bathroom, but like me, they always have their curtain closed. Funny. The hospital reminds me so much of the city. You have all these people packed together, yet they keep themselves divided. They live and heal sectioned off.

I stare up at the television while Grandpa sleeps in the chair. I insisted that he go home when Chris offered them a ride after visiting hours, but he refused to leave my side. Corey and Chris said their good byes and promised to be back in the morning since

tomorrow's Saturday. I lie in the bed and think about how lucky I am. From what the doctors told me, I almost died the other night suffering all those shocks to my body at once. My heart actually stopped. So weird. Before I experienced Katherine's death, my life had been so nonviolent. Sure, I witnessed many fights and abuse perpetrated on other people, but I had never lived through death. I hope I never have to do it again.

Grandpa jolts in his sleep and sits up. "Whatta?"

"Shhh," I say. "You're fine. You were sleeping. Bad dream?"

He looks around the dark room, at the television hanging from the wall above us. With his face relaxed I can make out all the stress and worry-lines on his sixty-four-year-old skin, all the product of raising two sons who ended up being career criminals. His natural expression ignites the crappy feeling in me for putting him through such hell this week. "Oh," he says. "Was so real."

"I bet," I say.

Grandpa smiles, then frowns.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Just thinking."

"Oh," he says. "You have a brain?"

"Stop it," I giggle. I love how he can always make me feel like I'm ten years old.

Grandpa stands up and motions me to move. I scoot over to the safety rail and make room for him. He lies down on the bed - his skinny body doesn't take up much space even though he has that potbelly - and puts his arm around me so I can rest my head on his chest.

"Been thinking about the family curse," I say.

"Ahh. The Curse."

"Well, what good is it?"

"I don't know. I never had it. Your grandmother did."

"I wish she was here."

"I do, too." He sighs, releasing a sad breath. "I could try to understand. I've seen a lot of it."

"I don't know. After what just happened, I think I should live out in the desert."

"Not the forest."

"Or the forest," I say. "Why not?"

"I don't think I would like the desert. Or the woods."

"Who said you're coming with me?" I grin.

"Please. Who's going to take care of you? Corey?"

"I can take care of myself."

"My sweet, dear granddaughter. You are sixteen years old. You may think you take care of yourself, even me and Corey, but that's not altogether true."

I know he's right, but I say, "I guess." I nuzzle close, blink, and release the moisture from my eyes. "I just wish I didn't have to feel other people's pain."

"Hmm, in this day and age, so many people never get to experience what other people are feeling. They think the other person has no feeling, no emotion. In some way I'm a little jealous of you."

"Me? Oh you must be in the early stages of Alzheimer's."

"Don't you dare," Grandpa says. "I'm being serious. Sometimes I would get mad at someone, a real bastard, you know, and your grandmother would tell me to go easy on

them, that I did not know what they're feeling. I didn't know the pain they had inside of them. She was right. She was always right. Sometimes when we stop to look deep into people, the hate or anger we feel for them drops away and we end up helping them or having compassion for them."

"Never thought of it that way."

"No? You thought of it with that Katherine girl. You felt her pain. I saw your painting. You looked past her pain and saw something. True, you couldn't heal her, but you did help her family by finding her killer."

"I did."

"Yes. But don't do it again. Did I tell you how stupid you are for doing that without the police?"

"Yes. Unless you want to say it another thousand times."

"No. I'm too tired."

Grandpa yawns, triggering one from me. We lie quietly on the bed and stare up at the silent television. After a few minutes I hear his heavy breathing turn into a light snore. Then, like I used to do when I was smaller, I fall asleep in his arms.

HOME

I'm dressed in a pair of black pants and a red sweater that Grandpa brought from home. I sit on the bed and lace up my boots while he washes up in the bathroom. Doctor Shah stands on the other side of the bed and has the most pitiful look on his face, like he's witnessing his prized racehorse being shipped to the glue factory.

"Please, Ms. Radicci. Please reconsider staying for a few more tests," he says.

"Sorry, Doc. I have work to do at home."

"You don't seem to understand your situation. Don't you want to know what happened to you? Don't you want to know why your body mirrored the wounds of the other men?"

"I do know what happened. Don't need tests to prove it."

Laced up and ready to go, I face him and stand. An orderly enters the room with a wheelchair. The doctor turns to him, then to me, then sighs.

"Fine," he says. "But please don't dismiss it altogether. Give it some time. Think about it. You may learn something about yourself because of it."

The last thing I need is a bunch of eggheads poking and prodding my brain trying to figure out my family curse. True, the guy must be going out of his mind wanting to figure out how I suffered exterior bruising and bone fractures that coincide with the people wounded at the studio, but he's just going to have to deal with it. Maybe one day he'll decide that I was suffering from the same condition husbands get when their wives are pregnant or in labor. Sympathy pains, right?

"Sure, Doc," I lie. "I'll keep it in mind."

I ease down into the wheelchair, igniting the sting in my muscles and bones. Outside the room, Grandpa waits.

"Corey's at school, right?" I ask.

"Yes. I almost had to walk him myself," Grandpa says. "He really wanted to be here with you."

"I know. He's sweet. But I already have you and Chris," I say. "I don't want him to miss anymore days."

Outside the hospital, the wheelchair stops at the automatic doors. Grandpa helps me up and we walk down the sidewalk to the limo.

Chris stands at the open door with his driver behind him. "You look great," he says and kisses my lips.

"Feel like shit," I say.

"Then you're in line with the rest of the world," he says.

We exchange smiles. Chris helps me inside while the driver takes my bag. He shakes Grandpa's hand and eases him in, too.

When we're all sitting and ready to go, I notice Grandpa's face. He smiles wide like a little boy on the merry go round. Chris notices his expression and says, "Been a while since you were in a limo, Mr. Radicci?"

"Never been in one."

"Really? Not even to one of Miki's shows?"

"Nah. She takes cabs or walks. She is the most unspoiled person I've ever known." Grandpa wraps his arm around my shoulders and squeezes me to him. I stare at my lap as my cheeks tingle.

At the condo, Chris and Grandpa escort me to the couch where I plan to spend most of my day. Chris and I watch DVDs that he brought over while Grandpa prepares a big Italian meal. He slow cooks meatballs in sauce and bakes veal Parmesan.

The phone rings a few times, but I just let the answering machine take it. Most of the messages are from friends and art colleagues who heard I was in the hospital. Although they're shocked to hear I was there, they have no idea why. I smile, appreciating Sharon and her solid PR skills. All the callers wish me well and hope to see me soon.

There's one message that almost makes me pick up the phone: Mrs. Moore, Katherine's mom. Her voice sounds shaky like she's been crying for weeks, and maybe she has been. She starts off the message saying that she talked to Detective Sampson. She thanks me for what I did and that she would like to thank me in person as soon as I'm able.

The grief in her voice invades me, makes my throat choke up and my eyes water.

At the end of the message, Chris asks, "You okay?"

"Yeah," I say. "Her message just got to me."

BACK TO NORMAL

The next few days I stay at home and paint. With Corey at school, Chris at classes, and Grandpa at work I'm able to blast music and pour my mind out onto canvas and paper. I'm not sure if it's the healing process or the pain medication the doctor prescribed, but I have never felt so happy. And when I'm happy, I'm creative. I work on a painting from the shoot out at Red Velvet Pocket studio. The image is taken from Bullhead's point of view, looking at Detective Sampson and Hersh firing their guns and the uniformed cops in the background. I love painting Detective Otto. God, does he have an amazingly handsome bone structure, such a subtle mix of Caucasian and African features. One of these days I'll have to ask him if he's mixed race.

The one thing I notice as I'm painting is that wrinkled demon man isn't hiding anywhere. Was he in the room when the violence happened? Or maybe what went down was not evil and he had no reason to be there?

Interesting.

I sit on a stool and space out for a moment. No, the old demon man was there. I remember...the void...his wings...

Or was I somewhere else?

My cell rings. I shake my head and answer it.

"Hey, baby," I say into the phone while I turn down the music.

"Hey yourself," Chris says. "How are you feeling?"

"Perfect."

"Without me there?"

"With you here I'll feel phenomenal."

"Ah, I was just kidding."

"Shit," I say. "I'm not."

"I'm glad you're doing better. Listen, do you feel like going out tonight?"

I pace the room and stare at the painting. "Dunno. Depends. I don't think I'm in the mood for crowds."

"Well, what if I told you that where we can eat has no crowds. In fact, it's not even a restaurant."

"You hooked my interest." I sit in a chair. "Where would such a place be?"

"My apartment."

I lean forward. My elbows press into my knees. "You sure. What about your mom?"

"She has her support group tonight. She'll be there for hours. Plus, she might be in such a great mood when she gets back that you two can finally meet."

"Wow. This is getting serious."

"You know, when your girlfriend almost dies you start to think about life and what you do with it. You are someone I want in my life, someone that makes me happy. I don't want to waste our time."

My cheeks ache from smiling. "Okay, then. Dinner at your place tonight."

"Perfect. I'll pick you up at six."

"I'll be waiting."

"Love ya."

He clicks off before I can respond. Did he say what I think he said?

I shiver from joy and stomp my feet. Chris loves me. Which I'm glad about, since I think I may love him too.

To celebrate his unconscious confession of love, I make a pot of coffee. As it brews I sit at the island and flip through the paper. The headline: Suspect in Internet Murders Escapes Custody. And right there is a mug shot of Devlin Straub.

A THING

"Don't tell me to stay calm. This guy is not stupid, he is going to want to get me," I say.

"Miki, you don't know that," Otto says. "If he's smart, he'll try to leave the state and not stay in his own back yard where we can find him."

"Oh, okay. So I'll just go on living my life with my doors unlocked and maybe ten years from now he'll return to his backyard and fucking kill me," I say, pacing my studio floor. "Yeah. Yeah. It's dawning on me. That is a good plan."

Otto sighs and then grips my arms. He tries to look into my eyes, but I won't offer them to him. "Miki, calm down." His voice turns to chocolate, softening me and making

me squirm. “First off, he doesn’t know who you are. You were kept out of the paper and the only name he has for you is Laura Bush.”

“That doesn’t comfort me. He could ask around. He could see my picture in an art magazine or the Voice. He may have a best friend who’s into surrealist painting.”

“Okay. Okay. Maybe. But I doubt it. Just to be safe, we’ll watch your building anyway. Also, when you leave the house, two detectives will tail you. If this guy is going to make a move on you, then we’ll catch him.”

I shake, trying to get the damn tension out of my body, and walk over to the couch. Otto stays where he is behind me. I sit down and rake my fingers through my hair.

“You know, you’re a good looking guy,” I say.

He chuckles. “That’s an interesting way to steer a conversation. Thanks.”

“You got a girlfriend?”

“No.”

I smile. “Boyfriend?”

“No. Not my thing.”

I smirk. “Good answer.”

He steps closer to the couch. “Where is this line of questioning going?”

“Oh, was just painting you today and thinking about how good looking you are.”

“Me? Really?”

I turn to him. “Yeah, the one on the easel. Under the sheet.”

Otto walks over and moves the white, paint-stained sheet off the large canvas.

“It’s not done yet, so don’t bother complimenting me.”

He nods as if he likes it. “Okay. I won’t compliment you.”

“You’re mixed race, right?” I ask.

He drops the sheet and walks back over to me. “Yeah. My mother is white and my father is black. They met in Germany. My father was stationed there.”

“You’ve been to Germany?” I walk over to him.

“Many times. Family visits.”

“So you speak it?”

“Fluently.”

“Damn, that is sexy. Love guys who speak other languages.”

Otto rolls his eyes. “You know, if I didn’t know any better I’d say you have a thing for me.”

“A thing?”

“Not what you kids say today?”

I stand and approach him. “I don’t know. I don’t go to school, but I never heard Corey use that term.”

“What would your friend Corey say?”

“He would say I have a wet spot for you.”

He blushes. We laugh. “I must be getting old,” he says.

I keep as close to him as I can, enjoying how he tries to hide his nervousness. Something about his scent makes me hungry. I wonder what his neck taste like.

“Um, don’t you have a boyfriend?” he asks.

“I do.”

I step closer, looking up into his eyes. I could kiss him long enough before he could react at this distance.

Otto then holds his hand up, but doesn't touch me. "You're sixteen."

"A very mature sixteen."

"I don't doubt that."

"So I can't get a kiss out of you."

"Call me in two years. But that's a big maybe."

I step back and hold my heart as if it was punctured. "Oh."

"I should go." He makes his way to the door. "You going to be okay now? Someone coming home soon?"

"Yeah, Corey and Grandpa should be back, and tonight I'll be with my boyfriend."

"Okay. You have my number. So you know, I'll be on the team tonight that watches you."

"Shouldn't you be chasing Devlin Douche Bag?"

"Hersh is handling that end."

"Bout time he was good for something."

Otto shakes his head, smiles, and then leaves.

PERSONAL TOUCH

Chris picks me up right at my door. He doesn't want to take a chance and leave me unprotected in case Devlin Straub has any ideas about getting me alone. He promises Grandpa that I'll be safe, and then escorts me to his limo. As the driver opens the door, I look around the dark street to see if I can spot Otto or any of the other officers shadowing me tonight. Either they're very good at their job, or he was lying. All I see are people walking up and down West Street either coming home from work or getting ready to go out to have fun.

"Miki, you okay?" Chris asks.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

Chris and I sit in the limo and the driver locks us in. We drive up 6th Ave to Midtown. Chris lives in one of those huge white stone buildings across the street from Central Park. The architecture is so Gothic that gargoyles peer down to the street as pigeons nest on them. I step out of the limo and look up at the thirty-story building.

"Man, you live here?"

Chris kisses my cheek. "Yeah, it's small, but it's home." He walks me past the doorman and into the lobby.

"Small?" I ask. "Where did you live before?"

"In a mansion."

I don't doubt him.

The lobby reminds me of a five star hotel except there's no one sitting around reading magazines on the chairs and couches. A man behind the front desk next to the elevators greets Chris and calls him Mr. Chandler. Chris says hello and introduces me to the man as if he doesn't want the concierge to forget me. I'm so impressed how Chris shakes his hand and has an honest to God smile on his face and doesn't show any superiority.

I smile at the middle aged man in a dark suit-like uniform and say how nice it is to meet him. Yes, I can be classy and rise above my Jersey City roots.

We ride up in the quietest elevator in the world. I touch the walls and can't believe that they're lined with red silk. The doors open to the 14th floor. A dim red hallway with

white trim greets us. Chris takes my hand and we walk down the hall and around the corner. I notice that there're very few doors, which leads me to believe that these apartment/condos take up soooo much space inside.

We stop at apartment number 1405 and he unlocks the door.

"Welcome to my home," Chris says.

I walk into the Chandler apartment...or is it a museum? The front room is right out of the richest hotels of America. The basic theme is white. The couches are white with wooden armrests that form lion heads. The marble coffee table keeps a safe distance from the huge fireplace. The walls are white with wood trim. The bookcases are stained white, but very old looking. White, white, white. And then there's my painting on the wall where everyone can see it. My statement about the World Trade Center mosque on glass covered canvas. I walk up to it, not sure I'm seeing it right. This is the first time I have seen my work in another's home.

"I replaced the frame," Chris says behind me. "I thought this was more fitting."

Oddly enough the new frame isn't white, but a nice black and gray metal. I turn to him. "Looks great."

"Looks beautiful, which shouldn't be anything less coming from you," Chris says.

"My mother loves it, too. She thought it would look great here."

Chris takes my jacket and hangs it in a closet with a sliding mirrored door. He then pulls his keys out and locks the bottom lock on the front door. Weird, why does he need a key for an inside lock?

"I hate these doors," Chris says. "I want to change the knobs and get easier locks but the Association are being pricks about it. All knobs have to match the outside ones in the hall."

"Think that's their job, being pricks," I say. "Written in the Bylaws most likely."

I check out the bookcase filled with original hardcover classics. I would take one out, but I'm afraid they'll crumble in my hands. Asian vases are strategically placed on end tables and in glass display cases against the wall. Then it strikes me. There's nothing personal here. No pictures of Chris and his family. I find it a little sad that his home appears so emotionally sterile. But then again they must still be going through the motions of mourning his father. All their pictures probably have him in it.

Chris wraps his arms around me from behind. He kisses my neck and sets off an army of chills down my spine. "Want a drink?"

"Sure."

As he moves to the bar, I walk to the curtained glass doors. I peek around it and discover a large balcony. The chairs and tables outside are metal and black, which would make sense considering the weather.

"Want to go outside?" Chris hands me a glass of red wine.

"No. Just being nosey."

"Good. The wind is murder in the winter. Not only is it cold, but it can knock you around. The summer is a lot better."

I sip the wine and scan around the room.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Yeah, just...I don't know. You have a beautiful home, it just seems..."

"Like something out of a sales floor?"

"I'm so glad you said that."

He smiles. "You're right. My mom designed it. It's not homey, I know. When we moved in I tried to add some personal touches, but mother just took them down. I think it has to do with my father and what happened. She's just not ready to face the past, I guess. I don't know."

Sadness pulls his face down. I hug him, careful of the wine glasses.

"I'm sure she'll come around. She's been through a lot."

"She has. I have, too. Your painting is the first personal touch in here. And here." He places his fingers on his heart.

I smile and squirm. "Well, she's got a great son."

He kisses my lips. "So, you ready to eat?"

"Starved."

Chris takes my hand and leads me into the dining room. Although the décor continues to be impersonal and I feel like I'm eating dinner in a high-class furniture showroom, I do enjoy the food and Chris's smile at the end of the table.

FAMILY OF SILVER

After dinner, Chris and I go back to the living room and finish off the bottle of wine. My head spins a bit and my body melts into his arms. I've been waiting to be alone with him like this since I met him. And here it is. Even though I've only been with one other guy in my life, I can't help but feel like a pro with him. Our wine tainted lips and tongue move together, tasting and teasing, and our hands explore. I feel how hard he is under his shirt, my fingers pressing into his chest. When he makes a move to cup my breast over my top. He's cautious with his moves, giving me a chance to draw the boundary. I don't stop him. I doubt I will stop him from doing anything with my body tonight. I've been through so much the last few weeks that I need this kind of healing, this kind of tender attention.

As I start to massage his lap, Chris moans and says, "We better go to the bedroom, no?"

"Your mom should be home soon?"

Chris cranes his neck to the clock above the white marble fireplace. "No. But you never know, we could lose sense of time. Better to be safe."

"Mmmm, the prospect of losing sense of time is a big promise."

He grins. "I'll try not to disappoint."

Unlike the rest of the apartment, Chris's bedroom should not be in the magazine. The white theme is gone, giving ways to browns, blacks, and some grays. The standard bed with sharp boarding school edges, dressers, and desk occupy the room. Framed posters of Aspen and Hawaii hang from the gray painted walls.

"Should I get another bottle of wine?" Chris asks.

"Yeah, that would be great."

Chris, his hands on my waist, plants another sweet kiss on my lips. "Be right back."

When he's gone, I wander to the pictures taped to the mirror over the dresser. Most of them look like they were taken when Chris was in high school. I smile and touch his cute face, which was more of a baby face then. The snapshots on the other side are more recent. I notice he's with a lot of girls in the pictures. I'm not surprised, but one of them catches my eye. From the background it looks like they're at a booth in a bar. Katherine Moore sits on his lap. The kiss looks serious. Their hands are all over each other, and I

spot tongue. Right below that is another picture of just Katherine holding up a drink and smiling at the camera.

“Here you go,” Chris says.

I take the glass of wine and point to the picture. Jealousy percolates and sharpens my movements. “You dated Katherine Moore?”

“I wouldn’t really call it dating.”

“But you didn’t mention that when we met.”

“I said we were friends. And we were. Sometimes we were... friends with benefits. Doesn’t mean I didn’t care about her.”

I sip my drink. My mind spins, I don’t know if I should be mad at him for not telling me the truth or be okay with it. No, he didn’t lie to me. But I lied to him when I met him and said I was a friend a hers.

“Does this bother you?” Chris asks, his face lined with worry.

“No.” I kiss him and put the drink on the dresser. “It’s fine. Just surprised me. God, can’t believe I got jealous over a dead girl.”

“No. It should bother you.” He swipes the pictures off and slaps them face down. “I feel so stupid. That’s not how my life is now. Besides, I want new pictures up there. I want you there.”

Chris puts his drink down and kisses me. As my lips move against his, I forget about the pictures. He’s right. It’s in the past. And he wants me in his future. And I want him in mine.

I lead him to the bed. I push him down on the blanket and straddle him. He smiles, clearly enjoying my assertiveness. I don’t stop. I start to unbutton his shirt all the way down, pulling it out of his pants. I part the shirt, caressing his skin. He lifts up and helps take it off. When he lies back down, I see something that stops me.

Hanging from a gold chain is a quarter-sized silver pendent of a silverfish. It’s exactly the same one from my painting, the same one the killer wore when Katherine was killed.

I freeze. I hear nothing but my heart racing in my ears.

“Miki? Are you okay?”

The memory of the knife going through Katherine’s stomach resurfaces in my gut.

“Miki?” He notices what I’m staring at. “Is it the pendent?” He smiles. “It’s just the Chandler company logo. The primary product is insecticide. God, don’t make me sing the jingle.”

I stare down at Chris’s concerned face. Otto said that they have not found the video of Katherine’s death. And they won’t. How could I have been so stupid? She wasn’t killed in the studio. She was killed in the alley.

“Miki?”

He seems so genuine, so sweet. But underneath he has to be evil. He has to be Katherine Moore’s killer. He didn’t run into me by accident at the memorial. He knew exactly who I was. And my unlisted cell phone number. I wasn’t too drunk to give it to him. He was the one who called on my cell phone and threatened my family.

My tears drip down on his chest. “Oh, Chris.”

He tries to take my cheeks in his palms. I slap his hands away.

“What?” he asks.

“Don’t touch me.”

I jump off him and the bed. I face him, not daring to give him my back. Chris sits up, keeping his confused act going.

“You killed her,” I say. “You killed Katherine Moore.”

His concern cracks. His eyes look around the room like he’s following a fly. I can see it, just the slightest bit of worry. “What are you talking about?”

“It wasn’t Devlin Straub and his web site. It was you. That’s the pendent I saw in my vision. That silverfish.”

“Miki, y-you’re confused. This is the logo for my family’s company. It’s on all our products in the store. You-you had to have seen it before someplace else.”

“Doesn’t matter. I still saw it that night. I know what I fucking saw.”

Chris stands up and slowly walks closer. I back to the closed door.

“Miki, just calm down. Okay. I swear I did not kill Katherine. I loved her.”

“Oh, now you love her? Before she was just a fuck buddy.”

“I... You don’t understand.” Tears stream down his cheeks. “I love you. Please don’t do this.”

He reaches out. I slap his hand away.

“I told you not to touch me,” I say. “Don’t ever touch me again.”

Chris rushes me. I slam my foot into his groin and then punch him in the jaw so hard he falls to the floor. Pain flares out in my knuckles and jaw, but my fear is stronger. I turn around, open the door, and run down the hall.

“Miki,” he screams. “Don’t”

I cross through the living room to the front door. I grab the knob and pull. It won’t open. Shit! I need a key. I scan around the room and realize there’s no place to hide...except for outside. I rush to the glass doors and step onto the balcony just as I hear Chris call out my name. The wind blows so strong that I feel my flesh turn to ice. I crouch down between the couch and the stone railing. My back to the loud traffic, I take my cell out of my back pocket and text HELP ME!!! to Otto’s phone. If he’s really watching me tonight, then he can get up here faster than my screaming his name down to the windy street.

“Miki?”

I keep still, fighting the urge to peer over the lawn couch to see where Chris is standing. It’s hard to tell with the winds, but he could just be by the door.

“Miki, please come out,” Chris says. “I know you’re out here. C’mon. Come back inside so we can talk.”

I slip the phone back into my pocket, wrap my arms around my legs, and try to keep my teeth from chattering too loud.

“I swear to you, Miki. I did not kill Katherine.” His voice sounds closer.

Yeah, right.

“When I heard what happened to her, I nearly fell apart,” Chris says. “I couldn’t believe it. I didn’t want to believe that it happened again.”

Again?

“I really thought she was getting better. I had no idea it was going to happen,” Chris says. “And when I heard that she called you...I...I just couldn’t let it happen. I know this sounds stupid and cliché, but I didn’t think I would fall in love with you. I love you Miki and she promises she’s not going to hurt you or anyone in your family. Please. I know

you love me, too. I know you love me enough to...accept her. To keep quiet and help her.”

Who the hell is he talking about?

Chris kneels on the couch while his upper body hovers over. “Miki?”

I scream out.

He grabs my arm. With my other, I slam the heel of my hand into his nose.

...a crunchy pain flares in my nose as the world flashes white for a few seconds...

Chris releases me and grabs his busted face. He screams out and falls to the ground.

I gasp and stand out from behind the couch. My eyes flood with tears as the phantom pain in my nose throbs. I make a run for the glass doors. Chris moans, holds his bleeding nose, and rolls around on the floor. Just as I grab the knob, he grips my ankle. I fall into the doors, opening them, and land inside. Chris barely stands and glares down at me. Blood and tears coat his rage-sculpted face. His body hunches over and his shoulders hitch for air.

“Get up,” he growls and offers his hand.

I take it. For a flash I feel sorry for him for being so gullible. As he pulls me up, I slam my fist into his nose.

...white lightning and cracking bone...

Chris and I fall back. I land on the floor, but he stumbles to the stone railing. He must be so disorientated that he leans too far back, loses his balance, and flips over the edge.

Instead of reaching out to save him (I know I’m not going to help him in time) I scramble as faraway from him as I can. Just as I clear the couch...

...stars above me...millions of pounds of asphalt slam into my back and head and legs and arms...an explosion of jelly within my pulverized bones...the air escapes my body...

...all black...

PARENTAL RAGE

I open my eyes and wonder how I got home. My painting of Chris wearing a raincoat and derby and holding a large knife hovers over me. The silverfish charm dangles from his wrist. But the lighting is different. And he’s breathing. And I can make out the face under the brim of the hat.

No. It’s not Chris.

Where the hell am I?

“I knew you couldn’t be trusted,” she whispers in that harsh voice. “Where’s my son?”

I recognize her make-up job. Eye shadow that reaches up to her forehead, red lipstick smeared across her lips, and lashes as long as mosquito legs. It’s as nutzo as the night Katherine Moore was murdered. I moan. She didn’t just find me that night. She was never homeless. She probably woke me to find out if I saw anything, if I saw her kill Katherine.

Crazy Make-Up Lady kicks me in the ribs. “Where is my son, you disgusting whore?” She shakes the large knife at me, like she doesn’t know what to do with it.

I gasp and point to the balcony.

She keeps the large knife raised and her eyes on me as she walks to the glass doors. “Christopher?”

With the ache of falling fourteen stories and landing on my back, I manage to get on my hands and knees and crawl to the front door, which is now open.

Crazy Make-Up Lady, aka Mrs. Chandler, screams and sets off a bomb in my head that makes my eyes water.

I feel her foot press down on my butt and flatten me to the floor.

“You killed my son,” she screams over and over.

Her foot stomps on my back as if she’s killing a thousand roaches. I flop like a fish and do my own screaming, trying to find a break in her pounding so I can roll away. But she’s too fast, too determined to snap my spine. After a while, I feel my body go numb with defeat. She won. She promised to kill me and it looks like she’ll do just that. God, why can’t she stop stomping me and just stab me with the knife?

“Put the weapon down NOW!”

I recognize the voice. Detective Otto.

The stomping stops. All is quiet but heavy panting. Is it from me?

I roll onto my side, but not able to bend my back just yet.

Mrs. Chandler backs away, keeping the knife raised. Her fear-filled eyes dance around in her heavy eye-shadowed face. Otto and an officer keep their weapons aimed at her.

“She’s a filthy whore,” she screams. “She deserves to die just like the others. All they want to do is take the ones I love away from me. Why do they want to take them away?”

“I said put the knife down,” Otto screams.

She slams the blade onto the hardwood and releases such an animalistic roar that a shiver overwhelms the pain in my back.

As Otto keeps his gun trained on her, the other cop sends Mrs. Chandler to the floor and cuffs her hands behind her back. As he recites the Miranda Act, Otto kneels down next to me and places his hand on my wet cheek. His fear breaks through his cop mask. He takes his radio out and calls for an ambulance.

“Miki, are you all right?”

I look into the handsome face of the man who saved me again.

“Next time, let me save you, okay?” I whisper. “This is getting embarrassing.”

Otto smiles.

ALL CLEAR

I lower the back of my shirt as the EMT sits down on the coffee table. “You really should get some X-Rays,” she says.

“I’m fine.” I place a blue icepack to my ribs. “No more hospitals. Not now anyway.”

I sit on the couch while the crime scene team works behind my back. Mrs. Chandler was taken away a half hour ago. She kicked and screamed and threw me a lot of evil looks. But I didn’t start crying because of how she acted. The tears broke out when I thought about poor Chris who fell to his death. I cried because I murdered him.

“She okay?” Otto asks. He stands next to the EMT who nods and packs up her med box. When she leaves, Otto sits down next to me on the couch. He places his hand on my knee.

“So how are you really?” he asks.

I stare at him. My face feels like a fragile jigsaw puzzle. He wipes the tears from my cheek. “Are you going to arrest me?”

“No,” he says. “From what you said it sounds like self-defense and an accident.

Coroner confirms the wounds to his face. Whenever someone gets their nose smashed twice like you did to him they are not going to go out and walk a high wire. He probably didn’t even realize he was falling.”

“I wish that would make me feel better.”

“You’ll be okay. With forensics, your testimony, and her confession, she’s going to probably get life. Plus, there’s the fact that she was under suspicion for her husband’s murder a few years back.”

“Why didn’t they arrest her?”

“Dunno. Haven’t spoken to the investigating officer yet. But when we interviewed Christopher about Katherine, he said that he was home studying that night. Mrs. Chandler confirmed it. Maybe, when Mrs. Chandler murdered her husband and mistress, he lied for her and said she was home with him.”

“Okay, so Mrs. Chandler killed Katherine Moore fearing that she was going to take Chris away from her like some other woman stole her husband away?” I ask.

“Most likely.”

“I can’t believe how stupid I’ve been this week. I should have just stayed home and watched TV.”

Otto smiles. “Not easy being a cop, huh?”

“No easy being human.”

He pats my hand. “C’mon. Time for you to go home. You can give me a statement tomorrow.” Otto walks off. With the sleeve of my shirt I wipe the tears from my face, suck snot back up my nose, and straighten my aching back. I make a promise to myself that I am not ever going to search for killers again. I’m just going to stay home, avoid the world, and paint. Can there be anything better than that?

“You ready, miss?” the officer asks.

I stare up at him and smile. “Take me home, jeeves.”

HOME

I come home to the welcoming arms of Corey and Grandpa. They say nothing about Chris. No expression of shock or dismay that he didn’t turn out to be the greatest guy in my life. They just hold me and offer to make me tea or get me food.

“I just want to be alone,” I say, then smile.

They smile back and watch me as I enter my bedroom. Not able to take standing or walking, I drop down on my bed, curl into a fetal position and release the aching pain that has been hiding in my heart. I sob and pound the mattress and whine Chris’s name a few times.

And no matter how many times I beg his ghost to forgive me for killing him, I don’t get an answer.

TWO CALLS

I sit on the bench of Pier 26. The whiskey in a brown paper-bagged bottle fills me with shots of warmth. I stare out at Jersey City and the coasting boats. I feel so good out

here all by myself. The temperature is almost 20 degrees today and I'm the only one crazy enough to be out here. But I had to leave the condo. I've been sketching and painting all day. I think I may make the deadline Marvel gave me for tomorrow. I take another sip to celebrate that fact and the fact that it has been two days since I cried about Chris. I often wonder what might have happened if he didn't fall over the edge. Would we still be together? Could I still love a boy whose mother was a killer? Then again, there's my family, who're not a bunch of saints.

I just don't know.

My cell rings. Otto's name shows up on the ID screen.

"Detective Otto." I smile. I think my voice may be slurred.

"Ms. Miki. How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good. Bruises are going away. Doctor didn't find any broken bones."

"Glad to hear."

"So what do I owe the pleasure of your sexy voice?"

Okay, I may be drunk.

Otto chuckles. "Um, I'm afraid this is a business call."

"Oh, God. Devlin Straub didn't escape again?"

Police found Devlin Straub trying to sneak out through the Lincoln Tunnel. He was hiding in the trunk of a family's car. He threatened the parents that he would shoot the kids through the back seat if they gave him any trouble at the police checkpoint that was set up outside the entrance. The family played it cool. Devlin almost got away except for the unfortunate fact that the trunk was broken and the door opened right as they passed the cops. Before he could harm anyone, he was arrested and brought back to jail.

"No. He's locked up tight. He isn't going anywhere this time."

"Good."

"This has to do with Valerie Chandler."

"She escaped?"

"No. She died last night. Suicide."

A tsunami of depression crashes my heart.

"Miki?"

"Yeah." I sigh. "I'm here."

"They found her this morning," Otto says. "Her wrists were cut with the plastic casing of a pen. She was on suicide watch, but... no one knows how these things happen."

"Yeah. Okay."

"You don't sound okay."

"Listen, I have to go. I need to get back to work."

"Okay, Miki. Take care of yourself."

We hang up. I swig a few gulps of whisky down to keep from crying. What if Valerie Chandler killed herself because her son is dead and she couldn't live anymore? That would make me responsible, right? Or maybe she couldn't live with being a murderous psychopath. I don't know. Maybe I don't want to know. Everything is so fucked. How could this day get any worse?

The cell rings again. I have a new email. It's from an undisclosed recipient. Maybe it's from Sharon. Sometime she emails me PDF contracts to look over. But it's not a PDF. It's a JPEG. I stare at the blank email as dread replaces my depression. I open the file and the evil old man face from my paintings stares at me. Like the last one that was

sent, this is also in stippled pen and ink. The date and time the email was sent is for a few minutes ago. If Valerie Chandler died this morning and she didn't email me the first picture, then who sent this too me?

November 2010 – April 2011

To be continued in *In A Blackened Sky Where Dreams Collide*

Keep up to date with his next release by signing up for the newsletter at <http://eepurl.com/jufar>.

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Preview of Party Girl Crashes the Rapture

TREK ACROSS THE GARBAGE FIELD

"Lorelei," she whispers. "Remember."

I look up at the blurred red void. The throbbing pain attacks my head. I close my eyes to see if that will lessen the ache. No luck. I'm screwed either way.

I remove the scarlet blanket from my head and sit up on the floor. My consciousness rushes with memories of last night's party. Jorge lays face down on the couch, still naked except for Arianna's thong and push-up bra. Arianna doesn't seem to be around unless she's in one of the bedrooms. I spot a few snoring guys on the floor and one stretched across the wooden coffee table. None of them are Foley. He must have left already. He likes to get a full six hours of sleep before he starts his shift.

So who called my name?

I shrug and then rub my temples. Doesn't matter. I'm up.

I take the cell phone out of my skirt's back pocket and check the time. Damn, it's 4:36 A.M. No wonder Foley left me here. I probably told him to do it. It's happened before. I get so engrossed in the music and the dancing and the people that I don't want to leave.

I use the tall lamp in the corner to help me up to my feet and walk across the shrapnel of chips and popcorn on the floor, trying to be aware of bottles and cans that will surely make me trip and land on my face.

Blinding green lightning flashes through the room.

My legs weaken as the floor drops.

I stare up at blinding white lights.

Thin paper crinkles under me like I'm on one of those doctor's tables. My legs are spread. My calves float above the table even though ice coats them. A little girl's upside down face blocks my view. She may be around six or seven. Her long light brown hair dangles close to the sides of my face. Her old pink eyes stare into mine. I might know her but I'm not sure.

My heartbeat increases.

Chills clamp my spine.

“Say it,” she says.

“S-say what?” I ask.

“I can’t see you anymore.”

“What?” I ask.

Green lightning flashes again.

All is gone for a sec until...

The back of a man’s head. He has cropped brown hair and hunches over.

Thunder.

A crimson explosion from the back of his head.

I open my eyes and grab the throbbing pain in my skull. I’m at the other side of the room. How the hell did I get here? The last thing I remember is walking across the floor. I must have blacked out. Figures.

I check my cell again. 5:03 A.M.

I’m going to be so late for my first day of senior year.

THE UNBEARABLE PRESSURE OF TARDINESS

You would figure by now I’d be used to going to school with a hangover. I guess there’re some things that you just can’t adapt to.

I run down the school hallway as the final bell rings. After crossing the threshold, I stop short inside homeroom. Even though I’m the last one to enter, I can’t help but be impressed with my stamina since my brain is thumping against my skull and my stomach feels like it swallowed a thousand centipedes.

Instead of desks, large stations with black stone tops, sinks, and propane gas spouts for science experiments form three rows. Each station has two people on stools. Mr. Gulager glares at me from behind the master station at the head of the class. I flash him a smile and point to the only empty stool in the middle row towards the back, the one next to Tara Cunningham who I’ve been sitting next to for the last four years.

“Um, over there?” I ask.

“You’re late, Lorelei.” Mr. Gulager frowns so hard his bushy eyebrows and ridiculous graying mustache look like they’re going to collide around his nose and hold it hostage. “How many years have you had homeroom with me? By now you know I don’t tolerate tardiness.”

I nod my head and zip up my hoodie before he can see that I’m wearing a Fuck Buttons spaghetti strap tank that shows off my belly ring and the wings of my tat. Why hand the man more reason to give me shit?

“Yes, sir,” I say.

He glances at the same faces from the last four years and begins his speech about ‘tardiness’ and how it screws up the whole morning. And there I am: standing by the door, watching everyone’s bored face and trying to keep from falling asleep standing up. When he finishes, he motions for me to sit.

I exhale a gracious, “Thank you,” and walk to the stool as the man continues to talk.

“Being late is no way to live your life,” he says. “Punctuality is the structure of life, Lorelei.”

With my back to him, I roll my eyes. Holy guacamole! This guy has such a hard-on for lateness. It's effin homeroom. Not like I'm late for my period. Now that would be something to freak out about. Besides, it's the first day of school, you know?

Mr. Gulager stops talking as I sit on the stool. I slouch forward, cross my arms, and close my eyes. The room is quiet (the way Gulager has trained us to be) and I'm so tempted to take a 5-minute power nap. I think twice about it since I'm in deep shit as it is for my first day of senior year. Man, I wish I had some weed on me so I can sneak right off after homeroom, but my stash is in my locker.

After attendance, faking the pledge of allegiance, and the start of morning announcements, I sneak my phone out of my hoodie pocket. I cross my legs and hope to God Mr. Gulager can't see the phone hidden behind the table.

I check my text messages as the kid over the loud speaker spouts bullshit club information and when try-outs are for the lame sports the school takes way too seriously. I have two messages from Fatima and one from Foley. Fatima's first message asks where I was last night. We've been friends most our lives so she probably knows the answer to her own question. I open Foley's. He asks if I need a ride to Chuckie's party tonight. Chuckie? Ah, in Lakehurst. Right. I sneak a quick text back to him: f yeah, baby. The coast clear, I slip the phone back into my hoodie pocket and case the classroom.

At the table up one row and to the right, a new guy throws me a smile. He needs to lose that mini Mohawk. His clothes seem too perfect - khaki cargo shorts, tennis sneakers, and solid blue T-shirt - like his mommy picked them out for him. He's kind of cute, and I might give him a throw if the chance arrives this year.

For kicks, I open my hoodie and lean forward so my cleavage presses out over the low cut collar. He might be able to see some of the biker demon on my right breast, maybe even some of my bra. I catch his eyes staring and his mouth smiling wider. To seal the deal, I flash a slight kiss. The guy blushes and places his hands over his lap. Yeah, like I don't know what he's trying to hide. Mission accomplished, I turn away and congratulate myself on a job well done.

I spot another new guy sitting to my left. He's a super cutie in jeans, black Doc Martins, and an old Fear T-shirt. He scores major points for the T. I've only met one boy during my four years who has ever heard of Fear. New Super Cutie's black, curly hair stops at his neck and his bangs dangle over his eyes. Hands down, I want him. I'm already imagining how he looks naked and on top of me. But the boy pays me no mind. For some odd reason, he focuses on sketching in a notebook. I keep staring, waiting for him. C'mon, I mentally scream, what is so important that you have to draw instead of check me out?

He finally looks up. New Super Cutie stares into my eyes, his face blank. I smile, wink at him, and give him a view of my thigh. He glances at my legs, but his expression doesn't change. He looks back into my eyes and then continues his sketching.

Holy guacamole!

I feel my face flush red. What is his problem?

I turn forward. Brian Callahan leans over his desk and grins at me. He's probably remembering the time we fooled around at that party in Point Pleasant last month. He arches his blond eyebrows and motions to my breasts. I pout and ease my shoulders together. I doubt he can see much from that distance, but the action sets him off. He fakes a death on his stool and smiles.

Yeah, New Super Cutie has to be gay.

THE GAP OF IMMATURITY

Leaving homeroom, I walk down the hall and find Fatima waiting for me at my locker. She looks good in a Radiohead T-shirt she bought when we saw them live last summer in Jersey City and tight jeans even though she has those stupid Hello Kitty patches on the thighs that match the Hello Kitty earrings and charm bracelet. You figure her obsession with Hello Kitty would be a cause for alarm. But it's her hair that makes me flinch. I'm still not used to the amount of bleach she used on it. I want to tell her that because of her pale skin she almost looks albino, but I don't have the heart to make her cry since she thinks she did such a great job.

"So tell me tell me tell me," she says as I open my locker.

"God, put a plastic bag over my head," I say.

I rummage in my backpack for the spliffs I stashed earlier.

"You went to that party last night, didn't you?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So?" She pouts. "You promised to take me with you."

I turn to her and inhale. "No, I didn't."

But I also didn't say I wasn't going to take her. I glance into her extreme light blue eyes. People always say Fatima has one of the freakiest stares in school. I never got that feeling. I always thought there was something childlike in her eyes. Throughout high school we always had a lot of classes together and got the same kind of grades. Where I just didn't try for my Cs, Fatima studied hard for them. For some reason her brain just couldn't wrap with ease around information. I've often wondered if she was slightly retarded or had a learning disability or something. Then I would grow mad that her religious parents or the thick teachers never picked up on it to help her.

"You went off with Foley again, didn't you?"

"Yeah, what's the big deal?"

She studies her shoes, the weight of her sadness holding her face down. God, I just want to slap her. Instead I say, "I asked him if you could come with us. But he wanted to be alone with me. Okay?"

The lie lifts her head up, but the sadness still remains. "Yeah, okay."

"Listen, I'm working on him. I'll keep trying."

I'm amazed at how the lies just keep falling out of my mouth. I've been stringing Fatima along ever since she found out about my nightlife. No way in hell I'm going to bring her along. She's very pretty and has a nice body and isn't even aware of it. Some guy could easily persuade her to some bedroom or bathroom and take advantage of her, take her virginity and flush it down a toilet. I just wish she would move on and focus on other things.

I pocket the weed, grab my Wayfarer sunglasses, and close the door.

"Just like you keep trying to set me up with one of Foley's friends?" she asks.

Problem number two: Fatima wants a boyfriend. But no guy in this school wants to date a girl he thinks is retarded. Have sex with that kind of girl? Yes. But not date.

I decide to stop lying and say, "Trust me, Fatima. You don't want to go out with Foley's friends. They're jerks."

She shrugs and picks at the corner of her notebook.

The bell for first period blares. The hall clears out.

“Wanna light up with me?” I ask.

“Nah, gotta start off the year like a good girl.” She steps away. “What’s your first class?”

“No idea.” I say.

She laughs again. But it’s true.

As she rushes to make her first period class, I run down the hall to the back of the school.

ILLUSIONS OF SMOKE

Owel High School is not really in Owel, New Jersey. Some idiot built the building just on the border of Farmingdale. Acres of barren land and trees surround the school. If you stand on your toes you can make out an old rock quarry and the train tracks that run past it. We’re so far from civilization that if a bomb explodes no one but the yokels in the few clapboard shacks in the woods would hear us die. A baseball field, a few tennis courts, and a football field that hosts the games of our sub par team - the Rebels - frame the huge two-level building. I rarely go to the sporting events, unless some guy wants to drag me to one and promises to take me to a party afterwards. Oddly, I have never been in the East wing of the school where the college prep and advance placement classrooms are rooted. I would never be caught dead in those rooms and the faculty would never make the mistake of putting me there either. They like to keep all the remedial classes together. Sophomore year I had all my morning classes in one corridor. I just zigzagged across the hall at the sound of the bell. Maybe the faculty thinks we’re so stupid we might get lost roaming the corridors.

I sneak out the entrance by the gym and slip on my Wayfarers before my eyes freak from the bright sunlight. No one’s around this time of the morning. I look out to the woods and the back corner of the parking lot. It’s almost the perfect place to smoke. ‘Almost’ meaning that everyone knows to smoke here, even the teachers and security guards. To keep from suspicion, I take apart cigarettes and mix the weed with the tobacco to create spliffs. To the average eye it appears like I’m just smoking an unfiltered cigarette. They could also pass for clove cigarettes, which a lot of kids have been smoking lately. I still don’t take any chances, though. As soon as a guard or janitor walks by, I’m out of there.

I finish the spliff and stub it out with my checkered Chuck Taylor sneaker. I still have twenty minutes of first period left. The nausea starts to fade from my stomach, but this headache is relentless. I figure I can drop down to the school nurse and score some aspirin. It would be a good excuse for why I missed first period. I smile, proud of myself. Looks like today might not be so bad.

BI - DO OR DIE

By lunch the aches in my head and body are gone, but my eyelids weigh a ton and I’m not sure how long I can keep them open. I sit at the table in the cafeteria and pick at a banana nut muffin and sip a carton of milk. Eric Dornoff sits to my right. He’s looking fine in jeans, high top sneakers, and a black T-shirt. While he eats pizza, I tease my fingers through his spiked brown hair and finger the new stud in his ear. Temptation urges me to trace the dragon tat that sticks out from his shirt at his neck. Since we’re in a

public place, I practice self-control even though he doesn't. His free hand rubs up and down my bare thigh. I don't think he has any idea that Brian Callahan's on my left is doing the same. I pretend that nothing's happening and talk to Fatima sitting across the table. She goes on and on about how her parents, strict Russian Orthodox, grounded her for coming home late from the mall. I half listen and anxiously await the scene that will result after Brian and Eric's hands meet between my legs. Will they fight or will they pull their hands away in fright and hope the other won't say anything?

As I zone out from Fatima's whining, I spot New Super – possibly gay - Cutie a few tables away with his lunch tray. He's alone, which is expected for a new boy. I bite my lip ring and consider approaching him, making sure he's straight or at least bisexual before I waste any time with him this year.

"He just won't listen to me about it. I really don't get it, you know? You're really smart Lorelei. What do you think I should do about it?" Fatima asks.

"Fuck 'em," I say.

"Huh? My dad?"

Anger rises into my face. I glare at Fatima like she's the stupidest girl in the world and sometimes she really is. "Ew! No. That's sick."

Glad so I can get away from Fatima's stupidity, I stand and feel Eric's hand move away.

"Fuck what?" Eric asks, then smirks.

"Mmmm fuck me," I say in my best little girl voice, tucking my anger away. I kiss the top of his head and say, "Be right back."

As I step away I hear Brian Callahan say, "Damn, Fatima. You've been looking so fine since you bleached your hair."

Hoodie open, I stroll over to New Super – possibly gay - Cutie. He has half of the table to himself while a gaggle of kids in polo shirts, khakis, and pen-stuffed pockets pound numbers into a calculator and argue over the results. He reads a comic book opened on the table while he picks at his meat dish and vegetables. I sit at his side and turn the chair towards him. I cross my legs, lean in, and smile.

"Hi," I say.

He looks up; his face blank. "Hey."

His voice is dark and rich, like chocolate. I can't wait for him to say my name. I bet it'll send a shiver up my legs.

"You're in my homeroom, right?" I ask.

He nods. Not much of a conversationalist.

"I'm Lorelei. Lorelei L. Cox."

Usually guys smirk when they hear my last name, hoping the L stands for Loves. He just has a stone face. "Rick Collins."

I squeeze his arm. "Nice to meet you, Rick Collins. You got a sexy name."

Eureka! The boy smiles.

"Thanks."

He glances at his comic. I can't believe he finds men and women in tight costumes more interesting. Even the boys next to him are checking me out and probably memorizing my image for future masturbation reference.

"So you wanna guess what the L stands for in my name?" I ask.

He shrugs and connects with my eyes. "Lorraine?"

I laugh, squeeze his arm again, and scoot closer. My knees touch his denim-covered thigh. “No. Oh, my God. No!”

I wait and give him a chance to guess again. Boys never guess what it really is, but I’m not looking for the truth.

Rick shakes his head and shrugs. “Sorry, not good at this game.”

I frown and sigh. Maybe he has a learning disability. He wouldn’t be the first boy who does. I rub his arm, “It’s cool. Maybe later,” and then take my hand away.

As he looks down at his comic (again!), I glance back at my table. Fatima flashes me a questioning expression. I want to give her the middle finger, still pissed about her dad fucking comment. Instead, I make the one-minute sign.

I turn back to Rick and catch him checking out my breasts. I smile. The boy is so not gay. At least, not all the way. He connects with my eyes and blushes. Caught!

“I got to get going, Rick,” I say. “I’ll see you later.”

He nods.

I stand up and walk back to my table. Looks like I won’t be wasting my time this year.

I find Brian sitting next to Fatima in a similar fashion to how I was sitting with New Super Cutie. He has his hand on her thigh and his head close to her ear. Fatima smiles so wide she could pass for Ronald McDonald. I grab a chair and pry my way between them.

“Excuse me,” I say.

Fatima giggles and turns away from Brian who looks like he wants to beat my ass.

“What the fuck, Lorelei?” Brian says. “What are you doing?”

I sit on the chair and turn my head to him. “Sitting next to my best friend. Deal with it.”

Brian sighs and shakes his head. “Crazy bitch,” and then walks off.

I turn back to Fatima and say, “So what were you saying about your dad?”

ART IN SEDUCTION?

Out of my four-year high school career, Art is the only class I get As in. I do like to draw and paint and stuff. By no means do I create brilliant works of art. But my teachers don’t seem to care. Maybe I get an A for effort.

This year my Art teacher is Mr. Hanson who I haven’t had since Art II sophomore year. He’s a middle aged divorced guy who could be cute if he stopped dressing like a hippie in bell bottoms and tasseled shirts that look like someone puked paint on them. Plus, he could use a haircut. Other than that, he’s cool. Unlike my other teachers, he’s the only one that sends out good vibes. He looks like the kind of guy who could give advice on how to get rid of a hang over.

I walk in and scan the classroom for a spot to sit. Thick planks of paint-stained wood screwed into the tops of short filing cabinets form the tables with battered stools circling around them. The walls are still bare. By next month, paintings and drawings from the classes should be covering them. I then find the perfect place to nest: right next to New Super Cutie Rick. But he isn’t alone. Sarah Powers sits with him. Even though they’re on two different sides of the table, I hate that she shares air with him. Since she’s in those Advance Placement/College Prep courses, we never had any classes together except for gym. By the way she walks and gives smug looks like she knows more than everyone is more than enough reason to hate her. It also doesn’t help that Sarah is actually pretty

even though she styles her dyed black hair long and straight with the bangs cut above her brow and has a fetish for black jeans and ugly puppy-patterned tops.

I stand by the easels, pretend to search my notebook, and watch them talk. They smile and look into each other's eyes, but they never touch. That's a good sign.

"Lorelei?"

Mr. Hanson stands at my side. I smile at him.

"Lose something?" he asks.

"Not yet," I say. "I hope."

He smiles back and nods as if he's responding to some crazy person. "Um, yeah. Why don't you take a seat? We're going to start soon."

I walk to Rick and Sarah's table, drag a stool over to his, and sit.

"Oh, hey," Rick says. "Lorelei? Right?"

"Exactly," I say and tap his forearm.

I glance at Sarah who just stares at me.

"Hi, Sarah." I flash her a smile, too. Why not?

"Hey," she says, not returning it. Figures she wouldn't.

Rick turns back to Sarah. "So, yeah. I don't mind that about him. I kind of like that his writing is flawed, just a little rough but still tight and minimal, you know?"

"I guess," Sarah says. "Just sometimes I'm reading this funny passage, like when he's delivering that certified letter to that crazy woman, and the writing trips me up. And I feel I would be laughing harder if I wasn't so distracted by the flaw."

Rick holds his fists out and moves them like he's bending an invisible metal bar. "You got to bend," he says. "And also remember that Bukowski wasn't some college trained university writer. He wrote for the common man and they never cared about flaws, just the bigger picture."

The boy didn't have this much to say to me during lunch. Was Sarah holding his tongue for him then? I sigh as anger burns my cheeks.

Sarah raises her penciled eyebrows at me.

Rick finally turns around and says, "Shit. Sorry, Lorelei. Didn't mean to leave you out."

"No, it's okay."

"What do you think?" he asks.

"About?"

"Charles Bukowski's novel Post Office?"

From a small pile of schoolbooks next to her, Sarah picks up the novel and shows me the cover. I have no idea what it's about. The post office maybe? I wish that my step dad were here since he works at one. He could possibly save my ass.

"Um, it was ok," I say. "Better than the movie."

Rick flinches.

Sarah drops the book down like it's a dirty tissue and shakes her head. "Factotum was made into a movie. Not Post Office."

"Oh." I hold onto the stool to keep myself from shrinking and falling into the cracked wood. How am I supposed to know that?

I open my mouth to say something, something smart I hope, when Mr. Hanson starts attendance. We all sit in silence and only speak out when our name is called.

"Enrique Collins?" Mr. Hanson says.

“Here,” Rick says. “But I prefer Rick.”

Mr. Hanson looks at Rick and then down at his attendance sheet. “Rick it is.” He writes the correction in the attendance book.

“Enrique,” some wiseass kid squeals in a fem voice a few tables away. Aaron Pegg and a few other jerky guys laugh from a table on the other side of the classroom. Rick ignores them. Sarah sighs and shakes her head like she needs someone to save her from this gaggle of idiots that trapped her. The funny thing is that if Rick wasn’t in the class, I would be sitting at Aaron’s table.

“Assholes,” I whisper.

Rick smiles at me. I smile back.

When attendance is over, Mr. Hanson explains our first project. He wants us to find a picture from a magazine and blow it up to a larger scale. We can use any medium we want: pencil, charcoal, oil paint, whatever. One by one he asks each table to send a representative to the supply room to take out some magazines.

As we wait to be called, Rick and Sarah start talking about some book called Naked Lunch. They keep bringing up homosexual sex and creatures called Mugwumps. The book sounds like something I could get into until their conversation turns political. What the hell do I know about politics? I barely passed US History II last year.

Mr. Hanson points to our table. We’re next. I silently thank God for the chance to leave the conversation and stand. “I’ll go.”

“I’ll help you,” Rick says.

I try to refrain from doing a back flip and say, “Thanks. Such a gentleman.”

I glance at Sarah to see if she’s jealous. She just sits and inspects her black painted fingernails. Maybe she share’s Rick’s sexual retardation.

We walk into the supply closet where a mountain of old donated magazines are piled from floor to mid-wall. Mr. Hanson has collected everything from National Geographic, Travel, and Rolling Stone. I then realize that Rick and I are alone in the room, away from authority and away from Sarah Powers. In the past, I have flirted with boys in this room. Nothing major, just some serious above the clothes stuff. Why break tradition?

I pick up a huge pile of mags and pretend that I’m having trouble holding them.

Rick grins and offers his arms out to take the pile. “Let me get those.”

I lean in, look up into his eyes, and smile as he takes the magazines. Instead of stepping away and letting him gain some balance, I stretch my head up and press my lips to his. For the first few seconds he’s kissing me back. I then place my hand on the back of his neck and offer the tip of my tongue.

He releases an aggressive moan, but not the kind I expect. “Wait,” he says.

I remove my hand and lips. A flustered expression covers his red face. I want to eat him up.

“What’s wrong?” I ask in my best little girl voice.

“W-what are you doing?”

He stares at the pile of mags in his arms. His face is drawn down and red. His confused expression sends a jolt of depression through my heart. Did I do something awful?

“I was kissing you.” I sound so stupid. I never had to explain myself before. “I thought...I...”

Rick turns to the door, “Better get back,” and walks away.

I pace the closet, not sure where to go. My mind reels like a CD that can't decide on what track to play. I have to be dreaming. I must have gotten my signals mixed. Maybe I'm still hung over from last night. Maybe he has a girlfriend. Then again, that has never stopped a guy before.

"Lorelei?" Mr. Hanson says at the doorway. "You lost?"

I grab a bunch of magazines and walk past him. "Sorry."

As I head for the table I notice the room tilting. I stop. Rick flashes an embarrassed stare at me then turns away. The sensation of the room spinning faster pushes my balance, trying hard to knock me off my feet. The next table representative walks slowly to the closet. Not like they're taking their time, but like slow motion video. Then I notice that everyone is moving slow.

As I wonder if someone slipped me acid during lunch, the florescent lights turn green. I pant as my head heats up. My heart pounds in my chest. I drop the magazines.

"Lore..."

The magazines finally hit the floor.

"...lei?"

I close my eyes. The floor drops out. So much pressure hugs my eyes that I want to cry, but I just can't bring out the sob. I can open them, though. I'm not in the art class anymore. I'm in a back yard. A black picket fence surrounds the manicured blue lawn. The new red house is one level high with pink trim and window shutters. I turn to my right to see a little girl sitting in one of those small plastic pools. Instead of water, it's filled with mud. The girl wears red pajamas with feet. She could be six or seven years old. It's hard to tell with the wrinkles around her eyes.

I float towards her and stop at the pool. The girl looks up at me. She smiles. Chubby, kissable cheeks round out her face. The sadness from her pink eyes infects me but still can't get me to sob. She seems so familiar.

"Dar uh uh bee," she says. "Dar uhhhhhh beeeee."

Darby? I want to ask her if that's her name but I can't find my voice.

"My daddy loves me," she says. "Does my mommy love me, too?"

My heartbeat increases. It's going to burst. Fear paralyzes my being.

Her wide smile slowly turns into a frown. A purple tear runs down her soft cheek, trailing like paint.

I try to move. I want to hug her. I want to tell her that everything will be okay. That I'm scared, too. She doesn't have to be alone.

"You say, 'I can't see you anymore'," the girl says.

Is she talking to me?

Green lighting breaks the sky.

A gunshot thunderclap.

White void. Silence. Another thunderclap.

The top of a man's head explodes.

Thunderclaps again, followed by green lightning.

Then all goes black.

WHAT I SHOULD BE LOOKING AT

The Devil glares at me, tugs her midriff denim jacket, and places her hands on her hips. “What are you looking at, bitch?”

I turn away and stare at the Garden Apartments across the street. I wait and hope that Zenaida Cepeta (aka the Devil) grows bored, satisfied with embarrassing me in front of the school and the world. But then she shoves the back of my shoulder. I turn around.

“I’m talkin’ to you,” Zenaida says. She stands with Tamika Williams and Mary McKay on either side of her. All three girls are in the same class as me, but way taller. “You deaf or somethin’? I said what you lookin’ at?”

I press my binder and books close to my pounding heart. I know that she already knows the answer to the question. I was looking at her kiss Tommy Quinn by the bus stop in front of the school gate. I couldn’t help myself. For just a quick moment, I imagined that he was kissing me.

“Maybe she’s checkin’ out your clothes,” Tamika says. “Look at hers. Dresses like some kind of Amish bitch or something.”

“She ain’t Amish. Freaky Jesus Freak,” Mary says. “Isn’t that what they call you?” Tamika and Mary laugh.

“You like to look at me, Jesus Freak? Huh?” Zenaida asks.

I search for help. All the kids are either smiling with anticipation of a fight or too scared to move.

Zenaida pushes my shoulder again and then knocks the books from my hands. The binder hits the sidewalk and the pages blow away with the winter wind.

“You like the show, huh?” she asks.

“I...I wasn’t...” I say.

“Why you getting all up in my shit? You pata or somethin’?”

“What?”

“Lesbiana? You get off on my shit?”

I open my mouth, look her in the eye, and gasp. I know little Spanish, but I know what lesbiana means.

“No,” I say. “What?”

“Better be careful, Zenny,” Tamika says. “God might strike you down with lightnin’.”

“Or maybe you hot for my man?”

I study the ground, hoping to hide the truth from my eyes. It doesn’t work.

“Bitch.”

Zenaida punches me in the face.

I grab my stinging eye. My brain flashes black and white.

She grabs my hair and punches me in the head a few more times. When she releases me, I fall to the sidewalk and lean against the metal school gate.

“Where’s the lightnin’? Thought you were special, freak?” Zenaida looks up at the clear sky. “You see any lightnin’?”

“Nope,” Tamika says.

“Nada,” Mary says.

All three of them laugh.

“Keep your eyes to yourself,” Zenaida says.

They walk away.

I sit on the ground, whimper, and keep my face covered. I'm afraid to let it go, afraid it will fall apart. I had never been punched, never been in any kind of fight. I tap my nose to see if it's bleeding or broken; all I find is mucus. I should stand up and go home, but I don't want to face all the strange and staring eyes. I don't want to see the world. I pray to Jesus to give me strength, to help me.

"Hey, you okay?"

I look up. A black girl with straight, red-streaked hair looks down at me. She holds my binder and schoolbooks. She smiles, but not in a vindictive way. This wave of compassion radiates from her.

"I think I got all the pages back," she says. "But you might want to walk down Newark just in case."

I grab the gate and pull myself up. I show my hands to the girl. She passes me the books.

"You sure you're okay?" she asks.

I nod. If I speak I know I will cry.

"Okay," the girl says. "I'm Miggy by the way. You need help getting home?"

I try to smile a thank you, but I'm sure it comes out funny. I shake my head and then start to walk home.

"Bye," the black girl says.

"Bye," I say back, but regret it because by the time I turn the corner the sobs come out.

TAKING A PUNCH LIKE GRANDMA

I run to my grandmother's third floor walk-up apartment. I rush through the door, drop my books on the couch, and call for Grandma Donna. She isn't home.

I lock myself in the small bathroom and check out my face. The reflection in the mirror makes me gasp. The skin around my blood shot eye and cheekbone has turned purple. I release a sob, cover my mouth, and sit on the edge of the tub.

"Please, Jesus. Help me be strong."

I then realize that my face could be worse. My nose could be broken and my vision blurry. I could have lost consciousness on the street. I might have been mugged or kidnapped and used for pornography – or even raped.

"You're okay," I say. "Thank you, Jesus."

I turn on the cold water and wash my face. Feeling stronger, I walk to my tiny bedroom at the back of the apartment. I change out of my school clothes and into a long, ankle-length black skirt and a blue long sleeve blouse. As I fasten the top button, I hear the apartment door close.

"Grandma?"

"Patty?"

Smiling, Grandma Donna approaches the doorway of the bedroom. She's wearing jeans and her favorite blue flannel shirt and her gray, thick hair is cut short. Mom used to say that her mother always looked like a tomboy, even way before Grandpa Jake met her in Ireland. I used to worry that I would look like one too, that it would skip a generation. It didn't. I am as girly as my mother was in her life.

"Jaysus," she says. "What happened?" She places her palms on my cheeks and inspects my face. "Are you in pain?"

“No. Not too much.”

“Lay down. I’ll get you some ice.”

I lie on the bed, keep my legs together, and lace my hands over my belly. Grandma comes back in with an ice pack. She sits on the side of the bed and hands me the cold, blue plastic block used to keep sandwiches cool on picnics.

“Please don’t lay like that,” Grandma Donna says. “You remind me of your mother in her coffin.”

“Sorry.” I unlace my hands. One hand takes the ice pack and places it on my eye while the other lays at my side.

I explain to her what happened.

“I’m so sorry, Patty.” She shakes her head. “Bunch of savages in this world”

“It’s not your fault, Grandma.”

“I wanted you to go to a private school.”

“Daddy would die if I went to a Catholic school. Besides, we can’t afford it.”

“I would have helped. Private schools are so much safer.”

“Well, this didn’t happen in school. So please don’t worry.”

“Okay.” She smiles. “Such a brave girl. Can take a punch like her grandmother.”

Grandma cares for me the rest of the day. She offers to bring her television into my room, but I decline. Television repulses me with all its talk shows focusing on weak-willed people. Instead I re-read Corinthians II to relax and then start my homework. Grandma changes my ice pack every half hour and makes my favorite dinner of ravioli and meatballs.

Although I have Grandma Donna, homework, and the Bible to distract me, I still worry about Dad’s possible reaction to the fight. Not that my father is a violent person and would punish me, but because he’s been under a lot of stress since Mom died of breast cancer three years ago. I don’t want to create any more problems for him.

Later that night, I hear Dad come home from work. I’m dozing in bed when he sneaks into the room and kisses the top of my head. He tells me that he loves me, his breath laced with strong mint.

Grandma Donna must not have told him about the fight. Or maybe he wants to save the conversation for the morning and let me rest. I hope he doesn’t know yet. I don’t want him to lose any sleep.

Unfortunately, I do.

SEXUALITY IS PERTINANT TO THE STORY

“Oh, my Jesus,” Dad says.

He sits at the kitchen table. He wears powder blue pajamas under the dark green robe Mom gave him for Christmas many years ago. He holds a cup of coffee over the table. Instead of sipping it, his mouth drops in shock, then disgust.

I stand in my school clothes at the entrance of the kitchen. Today I’m wearing a skirt. I need to wear one, to feel womanly and sophisticated and not like some bruised ghetto thug. Skirts are forbidden in school, but the one I wear goes down to my ankles and is the right shade of tan. If I bend over no one will see my youknowwhats.

I shift my weight from foot to foot, not sure if I should look Dad in the eye. He places his coffee down and approaches me. He studies my bruised face, gasps, and then

hugs me. He whispers into my ear, "Thank you Jesus for keeping my daughter in this world and not taking her."

I shrug away, look into his glassy eyes, and give my best smile.

"I'm okay, Daddy. I was just in a fight. She was not going to kill me."

"A girl did this?"

"A savage one." Grandma Donna stands at the kitchen counter and prepares a bowl of cereal.

"What is happening to this world where even the girls are acting out the Devil's violence?"

"Please. I'm fine. It shouldn't happen again."

"I should hope not. I'm going to call the police."

Dad moves to the cordless phone on the wall.

"No." I step after him. "Please don't"

I want to tell him that it was my fault that Zenaida beat me up. If I wasn't staring and having those thoughts about Tommy, she would never have attacked me. But I don't. I think I've been punished enough.

Dad moves away from the phone and hugs me again.

"Okay. Why don't you sit down and tell me what happened."

As I eat the bowl of cereal Grandma made, I tell Dad the short version of the fight. I make sure to keep Tommy out of the story.

"You mean she attacked you because you just looked at her?" Dad asks. "That's crazy."

"Insane," Grandma Donna adds from the counter, sipping her coffee.

"Hell is certainly on Earth," Dad says.

I then ask Dad to change the subject. He agrees and talks about the Godlessness in the bookstore where he works.

"The store needs Jesus," Dad says. "Those kids need Jesus. Again I had to overhear about their disgusting sex lives and how they take all these drugs and drink. They actually sound happy about it."

"That's terrible, Daddy." I touch his hand from across the table.

"And if that wasn't enough to deal with, while I was on register some customer ripped me off. He gave me a hundred to pay for his small purchase and when I gave him the change, he said I shortchanged him. I insisted I didn't. So I did what the manager always tells us to do and I called that homosexual assistant manager up to count my till to see if there was a difference."

"Wait a second," Grandma says. "Is the assistant manager's sexual preference important to the story?"

Dad glares at Grandma. "It will be when I finish it."

"This ought to be interesting."

"So I call him up and he counts my register. While he's counting, the customer, or crook I should say, is whining about why this is happening to him. He just wants to go home to his wife and kids after dealing with a hard days work. I tell the crook that he should be ashamed of himself, trying to spread lies when he knows and God knows he did wrong. I told him how pathetic he was. Then the next thing you know, my homosexual assistant manager gives the crook his change. I couldn't believe it. The crook smiled and ran out of the store.

“Then my homosexual assistant manager pulls me away from the register and begins reprimanding me on my behavior, how I’m not supposed to be talking to customers like that. Especially when we have a long line of them waiting behind him.”

“That sounds horrible, Daddy.”

“Yeah, horrible,” Grandma says. “Now why is it pertinent that your boss is a homosexual?”

“Isn’t it obvious? My till was short last night. That so-called man gave the crook the cash. Evil always helps evil. I wouldn’t be surprised if they were both pedophiles.”

“Lord, you’re impossible.” Grandma flinches in disgust. She then takes her coffee and goes to her bedroom.

“‘Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind, it is an abomination’ Leviticus 18:22,” Dad calls out after Grandma.

Dad turns to me.

“Catholics are so ignorant. Even if they just read Genesis they would know that God meant man only to be with woman. What do you think would happen if everyone in the world stuck with having relations with the same sex?”

I shrug. “I’m afraid to answer, Daddy.”

“Life would end. That’s what. How would we reproduce?”

Even if Dad didn’t sound so grave, the idea sounded scary. Life is a gift from God. Why would you want to throw that gift in someone’s face?

After breakfast, I gather my books, put on my coat, and kiss Grandma and Dad goodbye.

“I can walk you to school today if you want. I don’t have to be in until noon,” he says at the closet in the hall.

“Daddy, I’m not ten years old. I should be fine.”

“No, you’re not ten years old. You’re brave like your mother. Praise Jesus.”

I love it when I remind him of Mom, that I can still keep her alive in the world, in my father’s heart.

“Be good,” Dad says.

I leave the apartment and walk to school. Even though I look beaten on the outside, I feel so strong inside.

THREE MORE YEARS OF SICKNESS

Normally I do not attract much attention in school, but today no one can keep their eyes off my bruises. I don’t blame them. I look horrible. But I also find their constant attention surprising. Richard Williams High School is a three-story building with two basements, on top of a hill, and on the border of the Heights. Thousands of kids from many nationalities and religions go to Richard Williams. And not one of them has anything better to do than gawk at my face.

I pass Zenaida and her friends in the hall. She stares right into my eye, smiles, and says, “Nice make up, Jesus Freak.”

I look away and walk on, tensing for another fight.

Zenaida and her friends laugh, paying me no mind.

I figure my body can relax at my locker, but it just tenses up again. Someone taped another drawing to the door. It’s a picture of a girl wearing black pilgrim clothes and

hanging on a crucifix. Although the girl's face looks like me, I would never be caught dead in those clothes.

I pull the picture off, not caring who sees me or it, and switch books for my next class. I'm so sick of this place and I have three more years left to go. How could I possibly survive?

The bell rings and I walk to English class. As I sit down, Mr. Malonzo settles behind his desk and sorts out yesterday's quizzes. I turn to Tommy Quinn a few aisles away. He leans back in the chair, stares up at the ceiling, and sighs. Is he upset about Zenaida beating me up? I don't recall him being there. He might not even know about the fight.

After Mr. Malonzo gives my quiz back (I got an A), I place the test in my folder and then turn to Tommy again. He looks right at me. His beautiful pale face is blank of emotion. His clear blue eyes peer through dirty blond bangs. He's so rough, dangerous, and perfect.

I feel my face flush and my body tingle. I look away and pretend to flip through my textbook. I can feel his staring eyes. I squirm. Why? Because it's the first time he notices me, or I am upset that it took him this long?

Mr. Malonzo starts talking about sentence diagram breakdown. I don't have to pretend to look at the book anymore. I put my chin in my hand and my elbow on the desk. I glance over at Tommy and pretend to move a lock of brown hair behind my ear. His head is down and his arms cover his face, probably going to sleep.

I look around the classroom to see if anyone saw what just happened, maybe one of Zenaida's friends. No one is paying attention, not even to the teacher. I thank Jesus under my breath and focus on what Mr. Malonzo writes on the chalkboard.

I steal glances at Tommy sleeping during the rest of the class. I wish that he would look back up at me just one more time. But I could never be so lucky.

JUST THE USUAL

I enter the apartment and close the door. I'm surprised I didn't hear the fight out in the hall. I hug the schoolbooks and peek into the kitchen. I can't see them but I know they're in there.

"You can be so sick. What is wrong with you?" Grandma Donna asks.

"Oh, look at who is judging me," Dad says. "You don't even know what is inside the Bible and you call yourself a religious woman."

"Bible bible bible. I'm glad my head isn't deep in His words. I'm sure God doesn't want me to have tunnel vision instead of a life."

"Spoken like a true Catholic and nonbeliever."

"At least I'm responsible, more responsible for Patty than you are."

"I'm responsible, woman. I take care of my daughter."

"Then explain today."

"I don't need to explain anything to you. It's none of your business."

Dad walks into the hall and stops short.

"Oh, Patty."

He smiles and approaches me as if nothing is wrong.

I place my books down on the coffee table and spot Grandma looking in from the kitchen. She then disappears.

"What are you doing home, Daddy? Thought you would be at work."

“Hm? Oh, there was a schedule mix up. I actually have off today.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Yes. Yes. Oh. You heard us back there?”

“Just a little.”

“It’s nothing. Just the usual between your Grandmother and I.”

“Okay.”

Dad opens the closet door and takes out his coat.

“I’ll be out for bit. Want me to pick you up something?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Dad kisses the top of my head, smiles, and then leaves.

I walk into the kitchen. Grandma stands at the counter and pours hot water from the kettle and into a cup for tea.

“Want some, Patty Girl?”

“No, thank you.” I kiss her cheek. “Everything okay between you and Dad?”

She drains the teabag and throws it out. Her eyes focus on her actions. “Yes. Fine.” She starts on the sugar. “Just the usual.”

“Okay,” I say. “I’m going to do my homework.”

I walk to my bedroom and wonder what just went on. Why were they lying to me?

THE PERFECT DAUGHTER?

After Grandma Donna leaves for Saint Joe’s Church, Dad and I clear the kitchen table and wash the breakfast dishes. When we finish, I walk to my bedroom to change for church.

“Patty, I’d like a moment with you, please.”

I stop and turn to Dad. “Okay.”

“In the living room.”

I follow him inside and sit on the unmade sofa bed where he sleeps.

“Is everything okay?”

Dad opens the closet door and reaches inside on the floor. “Everything is fine. I just want to give you something.”

I have no idea what he could want to give me. My birthday isn’t until the summer and Christmas is long gone.

Dad carries out a large cardboard box and places it on the floor in front of me. He sits down at my side. He has the biggest smile on his face.

“Open it.”

I pull up the flaps. The box is filled with dresses.

“I’ve been saving these in storage for you since we, um, I lost the house.”

I pull one out and recognize it.

“These are Mom’s church dresses?”

“Yes. I thought, since you are turning into a woman now, you would want to have them. They should fit you, I think.”

“Oh, Daddy. I love them.”

I hold the dress to my nose. Mom’s scent lingers in the fibers.

“I remember how envious you were of them. I also remember how she always planned to pass them on when you are of age.”

“She always looked so beautiful in them.”

“Now you can make them beautiful. You remind me so much of her. I’m so blessed to have you.”

I place the dress in the box and hug him.

“Than you so much.”

“Thank you for being the perfect daughter.”

I wipe the tears off my cheeks. I’m not crying because of what he said, but for the way I lied to him the other day about the fight, for not telling him the truth about Tommy Quinn.

“Oh, and if you find my winter coat, would you please let me know,” Dad asks. “So strange how it disappeared when we moved here.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

Knowing what I need to do today, I carry the box to my room where I try to decide which dress to wear.

BASKING IN LOVE

The Church of Clear Water is a few blocks from our apartment. Although it is a Pentecostal church, it is not an order of Oneness. Dad was skeptical of taking me there our first time. He couldn’t wrap his head around the fact that someone didn’t believe that God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; He is all and not of separate forms like the Catholics believe. But there isn’t a Oneness Pentecostal Church in Jersey City, at least none that we know of yet. So even though Dad doesn’t like the congregation, he still connects with God during the sermons.

The congregation is a wide mix of people. There are black, white, Philippine, Japanese, and Spanish and they range from the low to high class. Sometimes it’s strange to see Mr. Spalla, who is a Vice President at a bank, embrace Mr. Jungmann who is unemployed and on welfare with a sickly wife who can never make it to church.

Most of the congregation has sinned hard before they were born again. I heard a lot of stories during the confession part of the worship about their past drug use, adventures in prostitution, and violence towards others. Dad never had a past like that; neither did my mother. I always feel lucky about that fact.

The church is a two level red brick building nestled between an abandoned deli with a For Sale sign in the window and a check-cashing place. Unfortunately, the church doesn’t have a parking lot.

Most of the congregation who come from somewhere outside Jersey City drive around the block to find a parking spot on the street, often dodging a lot of signs dictating zones.

Going to church is now my most favorite part of the week. Not only do I get to be with my father and feel God in me, but I also get to dress up and be closer to my mother. I can’t wait for the warmer weather so I can wear the summer dresses; they’re the most beautiful.

Dad and I sit on the back bench. People greet us and stare at my beaten eye. No one asks about it, though. I’m a little uncomfortable, but then I start to feel the presence of the Lord and I feel right at home.

The room is huge, managing to hold over a hundred people. Wooden picnic benches form two rows with an aisle down the middle. A podium stands at the front of the room for Pastor Buck to rest his Bible on. I have yet to see him use it. When he goes into his

readings of Genesis, Exodus, or Psalm, he just looks at us and recites the Word, wandering around the congregation and making eye and physical contact with us, never glancing down at the open Bible.

A band sets up on one side of the room towards the front. There is an old compact piano on wheels, an acoustic guitar, a trumpet, a saxophone, and a snare drum. Members from the congregation play the instruments, but they never had a lesson, as far as I know. In a way it doesn't matter, once you have God in you, everything comes out beautiful.

Pastor Buck approaches the podium. He smiles. He wears the sharpest used suit I had ever seen on a man. Whatever money Pastor Buck collects from the congregation, he gives back to the community and the church. He loves to brag about how he keeps a day job at a distribution warehouse in Secaucus, unlike his contemporaries who make their living off the congregation's money.

For the next hour Pastor Buck leads us in worship through song. We start off with The Comforter Has Come. It's one of my favorites. It gets my blood going, and I'm not the only one who feels that way. The congregation tumbles into the song, so into the love of God that they're jumping up and down and singing. Some fall to the floor and bang their hands along with the beat on the dirty wood. Some shake and shimmy as their eyes roll to the back of their heads, getting ready to take the Lord into them. And some scream out in tongues where God takes complete control of their body and speaks to us.

And I'm with them. I'm a part of the worship, the love, and the happiness. I sweat and dance and swing my body and arms. And as I sing the refrain of the song-

The Comforter has come, the comforter has come!
The Holy Ghost from heav'n, the Father's promise giv'n
O spread the tidings 'round wherever man is found
The comforter has come!

-the world spins. The congregation's singing grows even louder and, for some reason, the only instrument I hear is the off key saxophone. The sweat plasters the hair to my scalp. I keep singing, but the words don't sound like the lyrics. I have no idea what I'm saying. And I don't care. I am beautiful. I am light. My legs collapse from under me. I lift off the floor. The world flashes black and white until I pass out. The last thing I remember is Dad catching me in his arms.

When I wake up, I'm sitting on the bench. Dad has his arm around my shoulder, holding me up. He smiles and sings. He looks so proud. My heart swells. I smile back and then stand to join the congregation for the next song.

Usually we sing and dance for an hour, but today we go over. No one minds.

When Pastor Buck signals the band to stop, some people keep singing, so into God, God so into them. The ones who stop sit, wait, and catch their breath.

After we settled down, Pastor Buck opens his Bible and preaches the Word. During the sermon, I cheer along with the rest of the congregation, shouting Praise Jesus. I'm so happy. I don't want to keep quiet. I want the world to know how happy I am. They are all too glad to hear me, as I am glad to hear them.

Pastor Buck finishes and walks to the chair against the wall. The congregation falls silent in the hot and humid room. He crosses his legs, places the Bible on his lap, and waits.

The first man stands. He looks around to make sure that he is not cutting in front of anyone and then walks up to the podium. He's a good ten years younger than my father, heavy and balding.

His face looks tired and his eyes are sad.

The man introduces himself as Mr. Bradley Kriegel. He talks about his deaf son. One unsupervised day last year at a schoolmate's home, Mr. Kriegel's four-year-old son lost his hearing. The doctors believed it was from lead poisoning. They had no hope of the boy regaining his hearing. But Mr. Kriegel had hope. He has God. With a few friends, neighbors, and family members, he formed a prayer group to pray around his son three nights a week.

Then one night while they were praying around the boy, the child shouted Praise Jesus and Amen. The boy heard them! Though not loud and clear, he did hear them. The boy, through the grace and power of God, started to regain his hearing.

As the congregation shouts their praises to Jesus, Mr. Kriegel leaves the podium. He dries his eyes and sits back down at his spot at the bench.

Before the next person can stand, I rush to the podium. The voices lower. All eyes are on me. My heart races.

I introduce myself and tell them where I go to school. I confess that I was looking at Tommy Quinn in an impure way and how this sin has led to Zenaida's attack. The Devil's control has led me to pain and suffering. Tears drip down my cheeks and my legs weaken. I reveal the pain in my soul and the fear that I could have died right there on the street and I would never see my father and Grandmother again. But then God came down in the form of a girl. He sent this girl to me. The girl (God) helped me up and brought me back to my feet.

The congregation follows my every word and cheers praise. The congregation's love - God's love - strikes me like a tidal wave. I try to stand and dry my tears, holding on the podium for balance.

Pastor Buck comes up beside me and places his hand on my eye. I fall to my knees, feeling the righteous power of God through his hand.

"Please, God. Come down and take the mark of the Devil off this girl's beautiful eye."

Tingles run under my eyelid.

He takes his hand away. I feel someone pick me up by my arms. It's Dad. He ushers me back to the bench. He cries and shouts his praise along with the others. We sit back down. The band starts up another song, and we bask in the love.

God, do I love church.

BIO: M.E Purfield was raised in the Jersey 'burbs. At 18 he moved to Jersey City to attend The School of Visual Arts in NYC. He has never returned to the 'burbs.

He is the author of the Young Adult Noir Fantasy Miki Radicci Series and the Tenebrous Chronicles.