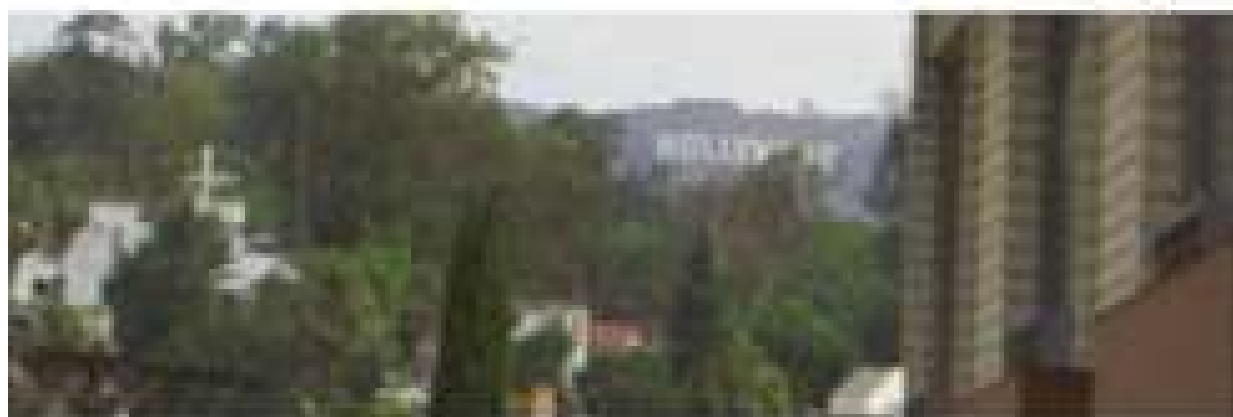


sweet dream,



silver screen



Sweet Dream, Silver Screen

by Moxie Mezcal

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1. I wish we could share something other than blood

I awoke to find myself in the passenger seat of an unfamiliar car, groggy and disoriented, unable to remember where I was or how I got there. Hell, it took me a while to even remember who I was. My head throbbed, my body ached, and I felt like I was going to puke. All in all, there were nicer ways to wake up.

I felt a sharp, blinding pain in my side as I climbed out of the car, a pink '56 Coupe De Ville. Once clear, I lifted my tank top a little to check myself and saw a huge purple bruise spread across my ribs. As I looked down, warm beads of sweat dripped into my left eye, which caused me to curse and instinctively wipe away at it with the back of my hand. Then I pulled my hand away and saw the deep crimson smear on my pale skin, and I realized it wasn't sweat.

Just fucking wonderful, I muttered to myself while looking around to see if there was anyone else in sight. I was standing in front of a derelict service station at the side of a desert highway in the middle of nowhere. There didn't appear to be another soul for miles.

I pulled my top off completely and wadded it up to mop the blood off my forehead. Then I knelt down to look myself over in the driver's side mirror. As I swept back my long red hair from in front of my face, the reflection staring back at me was a mess. A large gash over my left eye had scabbed over and turned purple, and my right cheekbone was swollen and bruised. My tongue slipped out and felt the split in my upper lip, which still tasted slightly coppery. There were bruises on my neck where it looked like someone tried to strangle me. Makeup was smeared everywhere. *Well aren't you just the prettiest little thing?*

Standing upright, I looked over the Caddie again, and this time something stirred in my memory. I saw a vision of this same car parked in front of a bar, a roadside dive with a neon sign that read *Fat Man Lounge*.

This was last night, late at night, I remembered. I had been hitchhiking and got a ride from a middle-aged lesbian in a Mustang somewhere around Barstow, and she agreed to take me all the way to my stop even though it was eight miles out of her way. Her name was Dawn, she had short blonde hair, and she smelled like sandalwood.

Dawn pulled in just behind the Caddie to drop me off, and I wished that I had some way to repay her, but didn't. So instead I gave her the tiny pewter Ganesha charm off my backpack as a token of thanks.

The Fat Man Lounge was a tiny little dive, dimly lit and filled with smoke, that had been decorated along the theme of atomic warfare. There was a large neon sign hanging over the bar with colored fluorescent tubes twisted into the shape of a mushroom cloud, and the walls were lined with newspaper and magazine clippings about the atomic bomb testing that used to take place in the desert near here along with a few items about Hiroshima and Nagasaki mixed in. Even the juke box blasted oldies from the Cold War era like Link Wray's "Rumble" and Lloyd Price's "Stagger Lee" – music to sound an air raid alarm to.

I was easily the youngest person there by at least a decade, possibly two. As soon as I walked through the door, every guy's eyes were locked on me, openly leering like a pack of hungry pigs. I'm used to guys looking at me, at a certain point you just have to give in and write it off as *they don't know any better*, like dogs licking their balls. But for some reason this bothered me, their dead sallow faces, the naked lust, mixing with the noxious dense air, making me feel sick to my stomach. They barely even looked human, but more like fat, mutant rednecks, deformed slobbering lumps left out in the sun and radiation too long.

There was one guy, though, who didn't seem to notice me. He was sitting off by himself at the far end of the bar, perched on his stool as he slowly nursed a whiskey sour. He looked to be a little younger than everyone else, probably in his mid-thirties, with chocolate-colored skin, bleach-platinum hair and a razor-thin, neatly-manicured goatee. He wasn't exactly handsome – his features were a little too the off in their proportions and symmetry to be a pretty boy – but he was in great shape with the physique of an athlete. He was dressed like a cowboy in a black Stetson hat, tight wife-beater, dusty old cowboy boots – and a tight pair of bright pink jeans. *Let's see if I can guess who the pink car belongs to*, I thought to myself.

I walked up to the bar tender, pulled a photograph out of my backpack, and laid it on the counter top in front of him. He looked at me with amusement, his eyes staring at my tits and slowly working their way up to meet my gaze, looking everywhere but at the photo. His thin lips twisted into a mocking smile, and he ran his short, purplish tongue over his teeth. He was in his early-forties with greasy brown hair, leathery skin, three-day scruff, and a scrawny, anemic build.

I tapped on the photo with a black-nailed index finger, "Do you know this woman?"

Reluctantly, the bartender lowered his eyes to look at the picture, which showed a woman in her early twenties dressed in a t-shirt with a silkscreen of Warhol's portrait of Marilyn Monroe; she was posed in front of the Golden Gate Bridge. She looked exactly like me, except her hair was dyed blue instead of red.

The bar tender looked back at me and chuckled. "So I guess you must be Scarlett."

I nodded. "Did she tell you about me?"

"She left something for you," he said, then motioned toward the back of the bar with his head. "I have it in the office, if you want to come see it."

I followed him back to the far corner of the bar by the pay phone and bathrooms. He led me through a door that had been hand-painted in large white letters with the phrase *I am become death, the shatterer of worlds*. This brought us into a cramped little office overflowing with boxes of paperwork, cases of alcohol, and promo items from liquor companies like rolled-up posters, neon signs, and life-size cardboard cut-outs of bikini-clad women with fake tits holding beer bottles. Somewhere buried under all that was a small metal desk. He knelt down to unlock its bottom drawer and opened it to remove a small black box in the shape of a perfect cube. As he stood up, he pulled off the small white card that had been taped to it and handed it to me. It bore my name written in a neat cursive script.

He set the box on the desk, and I sat down to inspect it. When I picked it up, I was surprised to feel how heavy it was. The thing was solid metal, hard and cool to the touch. As I turned it over in my hands, I realized there was no obvious way to open it – no seams, latches, or hinges. The only thing that broke up its smooth, polished surface was a small metal keyhole in the middle of one of its faces, which looked like the keyhole on a filing cabinet.

"Do you have the k--?" I started to ask as I looked over my shoulder towards the bar tender, but cut off my question when I saw him holding an oversized beer stein with a German beer company logo over his head.

He brought it down on my temple, sending me toppling out of the chair and sprawling onto the ground. He was on top of me in a flash and wrapped his hands around my throat. I reached out and clawed his face with my nails, digging chunks of flesh out of him. He screamed and relaxed his grip enough for me to lunge forward and sink my teeth into his nose, sending tiny jets of blood squirting everywhere.

He rolled off me and curled into a ball, crying like a baby. I stood up, grabbed the box off the desk, and bounded for the door. Unfortunately, as soon as I got it open, I found myself facing down a massive bearded skinhead in a muscle shirt. Before I had a

chance to react, he sent his meaty paw sailing into my face, hitting me square on the jaw with a crushing force. I instantly dropped to my knees, and struggled to raise my head just in time for him to land another blow right in my eye.

"Stupid fucking bitch," he spat, as I collapsed into a heap. "You think just because you change your hair color we're actually gonna believe it's not you?"

I started to open my mouth to say something snappy in retort, but then felt like I might end up puking all over myself instead, so I just flipped him off. Meanwhile, the man pulled out a cell phone and hit a few buttons. "Tough gal, ain't you?" he growled while pressing the phone to his ear, waiting for an answer on the other end. "Just sit tight while I call The Saint. We'll see how tough you are when he gets his hands on you."

It was then that I noticed the man in the pink jeans creeping up silently behind the skinhead. He grabbed the larger man by the shoulder and spun him around. With dizzying speed and surgical precision, he hit the man square in the neck to crush his windpipe, then shattered his nose, and finally blew out his knee with a swift kick.

By the time I could even process what happened, he was already on his knees, beside me, scooping me up off the ground.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" he asked in a gentle voice while flashing me a reassuring smile.

"I'm need to find my sister," I mumbled deliriously, clutching the box to my chest as I blacked out.

The black box, I thought with alarm, and I ran back to the pink Cadillac to make sure I had brought it along. Poking my head in the passenger window, I saw it sitting next to my army-green canvas backpack at the foot of the seat and breathed a sigh of relief. I reached inside to pick both items up and set them on the hood so I could dig a fresh shirt out of my pack. I found a faded red t-shirt with a drawing of a curvaceous devil girl waving the American flag.

As I slid the shirt over my head, I heard a voice say, "Well at least you're not dead."

I popped my head through the neck hole and saw the cowboy in the pink jeans walking out of the service station along with a second man, a tall grease-monkey in blue jeans and a light grey work shirt.

"Come on inside," the cowboy said, "You can clean up and have a bite to eat."

One sink-basin bath and two microwavable pita pockets later, the three of us were sitting around the service station's break room table, and I was explaining how I came to be here.

"This is my sister, Violet," I said, showing them the picture I had shown the bartender. "We're twins."

"Obviously," the man in the pink jeans, who I found out was named Tennessee, said.

"Yeah, well she left home when we were eighteen, six years ago," I continued. "She was always the good one – smarter, more outgoing, more ambitious. She got a full ride scholarship to go overseas for college, and she jumped at it. I, on the other hand, was kicked out of school for selling crystal meth on campus. But I guess sometimes that's the brakes."

"Anyway, at first Violet kept in touch from school. We'd trade e-mails regularly, and every once in a while stay up for an all-night IM session. She was having a great time, getting involved in theater, meeting a lot of people, and really starting to discover herself. So it didn't come as much of a surprise to me when she stopped writing. I mean, really, who wants to keep checking in with your podunk hometown when you're busy living a brand new life in a brand new country?"

"That's why I didn't give it a second thought until I got this letter from her." I paused to dig a worn and tattered envelope out of my backpack, and then set that on the table next to the photograph. "It said she was in trouble and asked me to come out to California and find her. It also contained a travel voucher with enough miles to cover a one-way plane ticket out here."

"But by the time I got there, she had already moved out of the address she had given me. So I've spent the past few weeks now trying to track her down, following her from city to city, picking up the little pieces of her trail and trying to figure out what kind of trouble she's in."

The two men exchanged looks. "That's quite a story," Tennessee said. I couldn't tell if that meant he doubted it was true or not.

"So what's in the box," asked the other man, who was named Adam.

"That's a good question," I replied with a shrug. "Figure out a way to open it, and I'll tell you."

He picked it up from the table and looked it over for a moment before asking, "Do you mind if I take this out to the shop and take a shot at it?"

"Be my guest."

He left with it while Tennessee stayed behind with me. "So what's your next move, or do you have one?"

"Well I've got a couple leads. First off, the big skinhead at the bar mentioned someone named The Saint, so I suppose I could start asking around about that."

Tennessee raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, that sounds like a great idea – track down the guy with the large violent thugs who thinks you're your sister and is apparently holding a bitch of a grudge."

I grinned and said, "Well, I do have a Plan B." Then I reached once more into my bag and pulled out a beat-up paperback book.

He looked at me with a perplexed expression, but before he got a chance to press me for an explanation, Adam returned with the box, which was still completely intact.

"Nothing," he said. "I tried to cut through it, put it in a vice, even took a bloody blow torch to it, and it still won't open."

"Did you try to pick the lock?"

"Of course," Adam replied, taking out a giant ring of literally dozens of keys of varying shapes and sizes. He fitted one into the lock with only a modicum of effort, turned the key, and yanked on it; the whole cylinder came out. He passed the box back over to me, and I saw that there was a shallow hole in the box just big enough for the lock to fit back into, but it didn't open into any larger cavity inside or release any opening.

"Weird," I said.

"From what I can tell, this might not even be a box, " Adam said. "There's a good chance it's just a solid block of metal."

I grabbed the box in both hands and slid it back across the table to me. "I wouldn't rule that out as a possibility."

"But there must be something more to it," Tennessee protested. "Why would your sister leave that behind for you, otherwise?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I'll be sure to ask her when I find her."

2. Looking so long at this picture of you

Back at the Fat Man Lodge, a very good-looking man with dirty blond hair and a long scar on his left cheek was settling onto a stool. He smiled pleasantly as he waited for Mitch the bartender to finish wiping off some glasses with a dirty rag. When Mitch was ready, he nodded his head casually toward the stranger. "What'll it be?"

"I'm glad you asked," said the man with the scar, who was wearing a rumpled dark blue suit over a green shirt. "I was hoping you could help me out on two fronts," He smiled broadly and had a gregarious manner that managed to temper the general hostility Mitch tended to feel towards anyone new who came into the bar.

"First," the man continued, "I'd like a scotch on the rocks. Johnny Black, if you've got it. And second..." he paused to dig a folded piece of paper from his breast pocket, "I was hoping you could give me some information."

"The drink'll be five bucks," Mitch responded. "The information will be more, depending on what you're asking."

The blond man grinned and reached into one of the pockets of his coat. When his hand reappeared on the top of the bar, it set down a badge in a leather holder with a neatly folded \$100 bill sitting on top of it. "This should be enough to cover both, I hope."

Mitch snatched away the bill quickly, then proceeded to unfold the piece of paper the stranger had initially produced. It was a computer print-out of a blurry, over-lit photograph that looked to Mitch like it had been taken with a camera phone. It was a picture of me from about a year ago, looking into the camera with one eye while the other was hidden behind the locks of red hair spilling over my face. I took it while holding the phone over my head and kneeling on a bed with red silk sheets, which were faintly visible in the background. I was topless and had my free arm draped across my chest, presumably to preserve a modicum of modesty.

"What kind of a picture is that?" Mitch asked with a scoff.

"The only one of her I have," the man replied with a carefree shrug. "Have you seen her?"

"Yeah, on the security camera," he said and pointed out the clunky old camera perched over the top shelf of booze. "Apparently she and some other guy had it out with Randall, who was the bar tender on shift before me, and his buddy Ian. A customer who followed them outside said they left in a pink Cadillac."

"Pink Cadillac," the man repeated with glee. "So this customer who followed them out, he didn't by any chance get a license plate number, did he?"

Mitch nodded. "As a matter of fact he did, but it'll cost you another bill, though."

The man let out a good-natured chuckle and set a second hundred on the bar. Mitch found the scrap of paper with the number and transferred it onto a cocktail napkin.

"Did you phone in the plate number to the police?" the stranger asked.

Mitch grinned and shook his head. "No, we have someone else who keeps the order around here. Cops tend to just get in the way."

"I couldn't agree more," the stranger responded before taking the napkin from Mitch, gulping down his drink, and then quietly leaving the bar.

Meanwhile, Tennessee and I were back in the Caddie, about to cross the state line on the road to Los Angeles.

He had agreed to come with me as long as we shared the driving, which I thought was an unbelievably chivalrous gesture, but which he assured me was essentially a selfish act.

"Believe me, you've piqued my curiosity enough that you're doing me a favor letting me come with you. Long-lost twins, brutish thugs, a mystery box that can't be opened – it's all like some trashy pulp detective novel, if I don't find out what the hell's going on here I'll go mad."

I was behind the wheel while he thumbed through the dog-eared paperback I had been lugging around in my backpack. It was a cheap murder mystery called *Invisible Ink* that tried to ape the old hard-boiled detective stories of Mickey Spillane and Raymond Chandler with mixed results.

"I think you've just been getting too caught up in that book," I replied. "You should probably take a break before it really starts messing with your perception of reality."

"Too late, I've already decided I want to become a private dick," he declared. "Hang out in seedy dive bars, meet big menacing men in dark alleys – what's not to like?"

I giggled and shook my head. "For the last five weeks my life has turned into one big pulp novel; trust me, it's not all it's cracked up to be."

He screwed up his face and turned away dismissively. "What do you know? I'll just ask this guy when we get to LA and get the professional's opinion." He held up the book with the back cover facing me, showing me the photo of the author.

I had found the book in a cardboard box of Violet's stuff given to me by her landlord in San Francisco. The box contained the sundry possessions she had left behind when she abruptly disappeared. Luckily it was a furnished room, or so the landlord explained to me, so there wasn't any furniture to worry about. All that was left behind were a few articles of clothing, a hand weight set, a shoe box full of photographs, a couple text books, an MP3 player, some half-used toiletries, and of course the book.

I tossed the garbage, took whatever was still usable to the Goodwill, and shipped the box of pictures to our parents. The only thing I kept for myself was the book, although at the time I don't think I could have even explained why. I've never been much of a reader; that was always more Violet's thing. Perhaps it just seemed like the most personal artifact in that box, a stupid little paperback that was so tattered and dog-eared that she had clearly read it a few times over. It helped that it was such a random book, an obscure genre work, rather than something more substantial or well-known. It clearly wasn't something she read for school or because it would make her look smart or be the kind of thing she could reference at cocktail parties; it was something she read just for herself, a guilty pleasure.

Though it was arduous at times getting through the hackneyed prose, it made me feel connected to her in a strange way – reading the same novel, my mind occupying the same fictional space as hers had. It was like now I was following her footsteps through her imagination in the same way that I was following her trail back in the real world. Or maybe I was just already sick of American TV and needed something to help me pass the nights in random hotel rooms in unfamiliar places.

But then, about a third of the way through, I came across a character who matched Violet's description perfectly down to her dyed blue hair, her tattoos, and the mole just below her navel. I was stunned; I literally threw the book down, spooked by the coincidence, like I had just witnessed a supernatural phenomenon.

Then, after a few seconds passed, my reason returned, and I picked up the book again. Flipping to the front pages, I saw that the copyright date was only two years ago, well after Violet had moved to California. Then I noticed the dedication page, which simply said: *To V.*

Clearly the author had known her and used her as a model for the character's appearance. I turned the book over to see the author's photo and the short bio of him. It said he lived Los Angeles.

I had explained this all to Tennessee before we set out on the road. "But you do realize that Los Angeles is a pretty big place, yeah? It's going to be hard to find one single man in a city of millions."

"Actually, I already found him," I replied. "I checked the listings online. There's only one person with his exact name in LA, and it gave his address."

"Diabolical," he responded, flashing a toothy grin.

Four hours later, we arrived at that address, which was a multi-use building near Venice beach. The ground floor was occupied by two storefronts, a taqueria and a pawn shop. An entrance around the side opened to the narrow stairwell leading up to the apartments. The names on the mailboxes told us that our man lived on the top floor, which we discovered meant roof once got up there.

It was actually a converted loft with a rooftop terrace, but you had to go out of the stairwell and cut across the terrace to enter the apartment part.

I gave the front door a couple good strong knocks, and the face that answered was unquestionably the face from the back cover of the novel.

"Ah, right on time. Although I can honestly say I didn't expect to see you again," he said, his expression filled with open astonishment.

I made an apologetic half-smile. "Sorry, but I don't think I'm who you think I am."

He looked confused for a second, but then his face lit up as the realization dawned on him. "Of course, you must be Scarlett."

He invited us inside and had us sit on his small brown imitation leather couch while he disappeared into the kitchen to get us something to drink

His living room was pretty much what you'd expect of a writer – cramped, messy, and full of books. The walls were lined with bookcases of varying sizes, shapes, and colors, all stuffed with as many books as they could hold. The only other furniture that wasn't bookcases were the couch we sat on, a matching love seat positioned perpendicular to it, a small end table wedged between them, and coffee table sitting out in the open space in front of them. Both the coffee table and end table had shelves under the surface that were crammed with magazines and more books, so they almost didn't really count.

Our host returned with a pitcher of iced tea and three glasses, and a picture frame. After serving us, he poured a glass from himself and settled into the love seat. Then he passed over the frame, and I saw that it contained the same photo of Violet that I had been carrying around.

"So, I probably should start by explaining why we're here," I said.

"Seems like as reasonable a place to start as any," he responded before taking a sip of his tea.

I recounted the story about my search for Violet, laying out my copy of the photograph along with the envelope on his coffee table. He picked up each item and looked them over with a studied eye while I spoke, even opening the envelope to read the letter inside. Then I pulled out the copy of his book and explained how I discovered it and found Violet's description, repeating my earlier guess that he must have known her and based the character on her.

"Well, you're half-right," he replied. "I certainly couldn't say I *knew* her, not in any meaningful sense of the word. But I did meet her on several occasions, and on one of those occasions she did me a great kindness, and so I wrote her into my novel as a tribute."

"But you wouldn't know where she is now?" I pressed.

He shook his head apologetically. "I'm afraid not. I haven't seen her in quite some time. But I might be able to offer a theory as to why she wrote to you and what kind of trouble she is in."

"That would be great," I said enthusiastically.

"But before I get started, I need to put my mind at ease as to your intentions."

"What do you mean, her intentions?" Tennessee jumped in, defensively.

He picked up the envelope and letter. "Well, this letter is dated three years ago. That would correspond roughly with the time her current troubles began, as well as the last time I saw her. But I'm curious, if that is the case, why are you only now seeking out your sister?"

I shifted in my seat and picked at the chipped black polish on my fingernails. "Look, when the letter first came, I wasn't really at a place in my life where I felt like dropping everything and hopping on a plane. Truth be told, if I couldn't smoke it, snort it, or shoot it, I really didn't have much use for it. I rationalized that whatever trouble my sister had gotten herself into, she was smart enough to get herself out of, and if anything I would probably just end up dragging her down even further."

"So what changed?"

I chewed at my thumbnail a little, trying to work out what was the bare minimum I could get away with telling him. "I ran into a little trouble, and suddenly a one-way ticket out of town didn't look like such a bad deal."

"What kind of trouble?"

"The kind that doesn't have anything to do with where my sister is or how I find her," I said, perhaps a little too defensively.

He smiled at me somewhat patronizingly. "And now you think finding your sister somehow will atone for whatever it is you've done, is that it? There are easier ways of punishing yourself, you know."

I replied, "Well, that may be, but she's my sister and this is what I need to do. So why don't you try doing some of the explaining for a while?"

3. Stop me if you think that you've heard this one before

Adam was just about to close up shop a little early when he spotted the dusty old black Dakota turning off the highway. He briefly considered saying that he was already closed and just forgot to change the sign, but decided against it when he saw the driver climb out of the cab. The man was definitely gorgeous – big, well-built, muscular without being too meaty, nice barrel chest hiding under that dark blue suit. The suit was a bit rumpled for Adam's tastes, but that face more than made up for it. Square jaw, great smile, perfect teeth, and dimples – God, did Adam love dimples.

"Hi there, I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time," the man said cheerfully as he approached.

"Not at all," Adam replied. "Is the truck giving you grief?"

"No, but you might be able to help me out a different way. I'm looking for an Adam Washington, drives a pink Cadillac, do you know him?"

"Who wants to know?" Adam asked tentatively.

"Don't worry," the man said, flashing him a disarming smile. "It's nothing bad. I just scraped up against his car in a parking lot, and I didn't have any pen and paper to leave a note with. I ran off to find some, but by the time I got back he was already back in his car and pulling away. I couldn't flag him down, so instead I just made a note of the plate number. Then I called my buddy up at the DMV to get his name and address so I can square things up for the cost of the repairs."

"Well I'm Adam Washington, but I don't know anything about any damage to the car."

The man furrowed his brow momentarily. "Well someone else must have been driving your car because the guy I saw was black. He had a woman with him, young gal with bright red hair."

"That was my friend Tennessee. He's visiting from out of town, and I'm letting him use my car while he's here. But like I said, he didn't mention anything about any scrapes."

"Well, do you expect him back any time soon? Because I don't mind waiting around 'til we can take a look at the car together and see what'll be a fair amount as far as compensation goes."

"He probably won't be back until tomorrow. He and his friend went to Los Angeles. If you want to leave your name and number, though, I'll be happy to call you once we get an estimate for fixing the car."

"Los Angeles," the man repeated, losing his accent, and started to laugh. "That's too bad for you because I can't think of a single reason why I would need to go to Los Angeles under this stupid fucking pretext."

Adam looked at him, confused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," the man answered as he pulled a butterfly knife out of his pocket, "that now I'm going to have to find out where she went the hard way."

The writer refilled his glass of iced tea before beginning his story.

"The first time I met your sister, I was still living up north and she had just moved into town to go to school. It's actually a dreadfully embarrassing story. I was sitting outside a cafe waiting to meet a woman I had been talking to on the internet. You have to understand, I was in the middle of a dry spell that lasted far longer than I care to admit, so in my desperation I had taken to reading online personal ads. One in particular piqued my interest from a young woman who had just moved into town and wasn't interested in anything romantic but was looking to make a few friends who could show her around town. I wrote to her, and after we traded a few e-mails, I managed to convince her I wasn't a complete pervert or dangerously psychotic. So we agreed to meet.

"She had never sent me a picture of herself, so I didn't know who exactly I was looking for, but she had given me a general description enough to have a rough idea. Anyways, I showed up to the café and waited... and then when I still didn't see her I waited some more... and I waited.. and waited... well you get the picture.

"And then two hours later your sister walked in, and while the woman I was looking for had never mentioned having bright blue hair, she did fit the rest of the description closely enough. Also, there was something about her that – I don't know, she just had the look of someone in a brand new city, that wide-eyed look of fascination you get

when everything you see is still fresh and exciting. I figured it was worth taking the chance.

"So I got up and introduced myself and stammered around awkwardly for entirely too long before getting to the point and asking her if by any chance her name is Natalie. And of course she says it is not. And so of course I became very disappointed and my face sank into a look of abject humiliation, which made her laugh, and she said something like, 'Don't look so sad or you're gonna hurt my feelings.'

"I apologized and explained that I was supposed to meet someone who is new in town and wanted to be shown around, but I didn't know what she looked like because I found her on the internet, And as I said this, I realized how much deeper I was digging myself into the humiliation hole and my speech devolved into senseless mumbling as I was consumed by the shame of a thousand neutered bulldogs. Mercifully, she jumped in and said that, coincidentally, she was new to town and wouldn't mind getting the inside scoop from a local.

"Anyways, to make a short story long, we ended up spending the rest of the afternoon and evening together. I showed her the park, and the modern art museum, and she mentioned she likes to read so I took her to my favorite used book store, and then we went out to dinner at my favorite little Thai place, and of course we had to cap it off with a couple drinks at my favorite little dive bar, and we were having such a good time and everything was going so well that I decided to spoil it all by making a sloppy pass at her and getting summarily rejected.

"I was sure I'd never see her again after that. But then a year later – and note that I didn't say *approximately* a year later, I mean exactly one year to the day – I met her again, again by chance. My first novel had just been published, making me a real Writer with a capital 'W' who was making real money for the first time in his life. And though I still couldn't get a date to save that aforementioned life, I did suddenly find myself with the kinds of friends one suddenly finds when one comes into money, even genre fiction money.

"So on this particular evening I was attending a party thrown by one of my newly acquired friends to benefit some noble cause or other, and I was bored out of my mind. And she was there too, playing the part of arm candy to some rich something-or-other who was way too old for her. But she herself looked absolutely stunning in a little black cocktail dress that showed off just enough to be enticing without being tawdry. She looked classic, like an old black-and-white movie starlet, except of course for that hair of hers. As soon as I saw her, though, I was mortified and spent most of the evening artfully ducking behind other guests and staying at the opposite end of the room just to avoid running into her.

"Of course, fate being what it is, the friend who invited me decided I must be introduced to Mr. Rich Something-or-Other, and by the way this is girlfriend Violet. And then after the ensuing dull conversation, her date and my friend both realized there were other more interesting people they could be talking to and left the two of us alone. I of course just stared at her blankly like a deer in the headlight, and then she says that she's offended beyond belief that I had been avoiding her all evening. Loosening up a bit, I asked if there was anything I could do to make up for it, to which she replied, 'Yes. Help me escape from this God-awful stuffed-shirt snooze-fest.' So I did.

"We stole a bottle of expensive champagne, climbed up the fire escape, and spent the rest of the night on the roof, just talking. She talked about school and her acting and the new life she built for herself over the last year. And I talked about what it's like to become a published author and complained probably more than I should have about the sense of disillusionment. And at the end of the night she said she wanted to see me again and gave me her address.

"Suave and tactful as ever, I went the very next day, but when I knock on the door, the woman who answered was not Violet. She was, however, the most beautiful woman I had ever laid eyes on – the kind of woman that seems to glow, like she's got an aura radiating off of her, with the kind of face that's so warm and inviting that you feel as though you've known her your whole life even meeting her for the first time. She was a little older than Violet, which of course made her more age-appropriate for me, and whereas Violet was the type of girl you would be willing to travel to the ends of the earth for, this woman was the type you would be willing stay in one place for – which in my experience is a much rarer breed.

"Anyways, when I asked about Violet, this woman explained that she knew her as a casual acquaintance but couldn't for the life of her think of why she gave me this address. I told her I had no idea either and asked that she at least mention to Violet that I stopped by; meanwhile, I was desperately casting about to come up with some pretext for sticking around a little longer, and the best I could come up with was asking to use the bathroom. She let me in, and I sat in the bathroom far too long, trying to think of a good angle to strike up a conversation, so that by the time I finally came out she already had tea and sandwiches ready and waiting on her dining room table. I didn't end up leaving her apartment until two days later, and by the time I next saw Violet we were married.

"Which of course provides the perfect segue to our next meeting, again exactly one year later to the day. My wife had seen her once or twice in the meantime, and we kept trying to set up having her over for dinner, but things just kept getting in the way the way things do. But it did finally happen, eventually, and we made it a double-date with Violet and her new boyfriend. He was about her age, olive-skinned, big as a house and built like an ox. He didn't really say much, but she was talking on overdrive, telling us

about how bored she was with school and that she was going to drop out to become an actress, and how this new guy was going to take care of her while she got her foot in the door. Which of course sounded like a terrible idea, except that I'm not in any position to lecture anyone about getting a real job, and I had to admit that this guy did look like he had money, judging from the way he dressed and the expensive bottle of wine they brought us. Anyways, we had a nice enough dinner, after which they stuck around just long enough to be polite, and then left.

"That was the last either my wife or I heard from her for another full year to the day, exactly three years ago today. My wife was out with some friends from work, so I was enjoying a quiet evening to myself with a six-pack of Mexican beer and the Lakers game on TV when I heard a knock on the door. I had been secretly waiting for her to show up all day, so I didn't even have to ask who it was before answering.

"Violet walked in perfectly calm despite the blood trickling down in her forehead or the large bruise around her eye. I ran to grab the first aid kit, then helped her get cleaned up and covered the wound. I asked her what happened, and she told me an incredible story about how she and her boyfriend had been running a con on his boss, some billionaire who runs a computer company. They didn't get any money off him, but they took something that was very valuable, some priceless antique or some such thing. Then she double-crossed her boyfriend and took this antique – whatever it was – for herself.

"So now I've got to leave town,' she said, remaining completely stoic, completely emotionless. There was no fear in her voice, no regret, no remorse. She said it as simply and factually as if she were saying she had to go to the store or to pick up the dry cleaning. I packed her a backpack with some non-perishable food, basic first aid supplies, a California road map, and the emergency cash I kept in my writing desk – a few hundred dollars in odd bills. The last thing she said to me before she left was, 'Sorry I probably won't be able to see you again in a year.'

"That was the last time I saw of her, although there is an interesting postscript to the story. The next day, I watched a report on the news about some thug who got arrested. When they showed his mug shot, I recognized him right away as Violet's boyfriend. The police said he was long suspected to be some kind of enforcer for organized crime who went by the alias The Saint. They found him rampaging through downtown like a madman, bleeding from multiple gunshot wounds, but he still managed to take down three policemen before they could subdue him.

"But, like I said, I never saw Violet again. I still held out hope the next year when this date rolled around, but it came and went without any sign of her. It was then that I decided to write her into the novel I was working on, so that no matter what happened, there would still be a part of her that was immortalized. Or at least live on for as long as my work stays in print, which is after all the best I can do."

After the writer had finished his story, the three of us sat in silence for several minutes, staring at each other as if sizing the others up, trying to read their reactions. It was Tennessee who finally broke the silence

"Oh my God, that was the most rambling, pointless story I've ever heard," he groaned. "I could have told the same thing in like three sentences."

"That is quite a story," I said to the writer. "Is any of it actually true?"

"Mostly," he replied. "At least the important parts are. I may be fuzzy on some details, and I do have a tendency towards hyperbolizing. After all, I make up entertaining lies for a living." He stood up and raised his wrist to check his watch. "Look at the time. My wife'll be home from work soon. Would the two of you care to stay for dinner?"

Something about the tone of his voice said the offer was not entirely sincere.

"Sorry, we should really get going," I replied, and Tennessee and I got up to leave.

He walked us to the door, and as we were leaving, I put everything back in my bag except the paperback. Pausing just inside the doorway, I tapped my fingers against it for a second, then turned and handed it to him. "I want you to have this," I said, my voice taking on a serious, almost solemn tone. "I want you to be able to look at its dog-eared pages and creased spine and know how much it meant to her."

He smiled and reached out to gently grip my arm, just firmly enough to keep me from continuing on any further. Tennessee was already across the terrace, and I motioned for him to go ahead and start down the stairs while I hung back.

"Thank you for this," he said. "I didn't know if she ever saw this or not. I find myself wondering a lot if she would ever know what I did, and how she might feel about it if she found out. I--," he paused, at a loss for words. "I can't really explain what this means to me, and I really wish there was some way I could have done more to help you find your sister."

I opened my mouth to tell him it was okay, but he raised a hand to cut me off. "There is, though, maybe something else I can do for you. That man you are traveling with – I don't know who he told you he is or how you met him, but he's hiding something from you. I can't say for sure if he means you harm, but I'd hate for you to back yourself into a corner where you have to find out the hard way."

4. Moved by your screen dream

We rented a room in a cheap little motel just across the street from the beach, a two-story dive with peeling paint and a sun-faded vacancy sign.

I decided to have a long overdue shower before bed and enjoyed it despite the terrible water pressure and the spider that crawled out of the drain.

When I was done, I came out wrapped in a matted grey towel and found Tennessee sprawled on one of the twin beds watching TV. I set myself down on the foot of his bed and looked at the screen, which showed two oiled muscle men with impossibly large cocks writhing intertwined on a tiger-skin rug.

"No room service, no hair dryer, no soap in the shower, but at least they've got free smut," I said.

"Don't knock it," he said. "They're just a couple good small town boys like me trying to break into show biz."

I giggled and moved over to my bed. "Is that who you are, a starry-eyed kid on his way out west to chase a silver screen dream? Maybe you should try action flicks. The way you fight, I would have guessed you were a secret agent or something."

He laughed. "Maybe I am."

I dug the black box out of my backpack set it down on the bed spread, then stared at it silently, meditating on it.

"You're too quiet, it's suspicious," Tennessee said and glanced over to see what I was doing. When he saw the box, he asked, "Do you think that whatever they stole is locked inside that?"

"I was thinking it's possible," I responded. "But then again, it's just as likely that Adam's right and it's just a solid hunk of metal."

"But why would she leave it for you, if that's the case?"

I shrugged. "Maybe she never expected I'd actually come after her, or that I'd make it this far. She could have just left it behind as a red herring to misdirect whoever she's been running from. I mean, those guys at the bar mentioned working for The Saint. If this really is the thing that they stole, why would he leave it sitting around, waiting for me to come collect it?"

Tennessee got up and came over to sit beside me. "Maybe they couldn't get it open, either. Maybe they thought you'd have a better shot at figuring it out, being her sister and all, and they're just waiting for you to get it open so they can swoop in and take it back."

I turned to look him square in the eyes. "You realize, though, that this theory makes your motives seem pretty suspect. I mean, they'd have to keep a close eye on me. And your timing, jumping in to save me when you did, has ensured that I haven't been too far from your sight since getting my hands on this thing."

Tennessee forced a smile and let out a dry chuckle, but his eyes betrayed nothing. "I didn't think about that. Funny, isn't it?"

"Yeah, funny," I agreed, setting the box back on the nightstand between our beds. "Well, it's past my bed time. I'm going to turn in."

I woke up around 2:30 to the sound of Tennessee's snoring. Taking care not to make any unnecessary noises, I grabbed my backpack and shoes and slipped out of the room, leaving the box where it sat on the nightstand. I threw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt while I made my way downstairs, not bothering with underwear, and sprinted off down the street. After about ten blocks I stopped to catch my breath and check to see if I was being followed.

When I was satisfied that the coast was clear, I continued on at a more leisurely pace. The sea breeze made the night air frigid and unforgiving, especially against the cool sweat on my skin. I crossed my arms across my chest as I walked on, trying to stay warm. I thought no one was ever supposed to get cold in California.

Twenty minutes later I had retraced our route back to the writer's apartment building, I went around the side and tried the door leading up to the apartments, but it was locked. They must close it after hours, I reasoned, and decided to double back towards the front to see if there might be another way in.

I circled around to the pawn shop entrance and tried the front door, but it was locked. Just as I stepped back, however, I noticed a TV switched on in the window

display. It was a mid-sized tube model, probably ten years old, tucked in the middle of assorted electronic equipment sitting beneath a row of hanging electric guitars.

As the TV came to life, it showed a local news report from an Austin-based station. I couldn't hear the sound through the double-paned window, but as the middle-aged man with overly-moussed hair silently moved his lips, the caption *Multiple Homicide in Westlake* ran across the bottom of the screen. Then an image appeared in the upper right corner – a photograph of me labeled *SUSPECT*.

The screen paused on that image, and I noticed a movement to the right of the TV, then realized it was the reflection of someone behind me. I spun around quickly to throw a punch at the man, but he caught my fist and turned me back around to pin my arm behind my back. He shoved me forward into the window, and once again I was looking at him through his reflection in the double-paned glass.

He smiled broadly at me, a big friendly grin. He was a handsome man with deep green eyes and boyish good-looks despite the scar on his cheek.

"That was a neat trick, Dominic," I said to him through strained breaths as I struggled to get free of his grip.

"I thought you would appreciate it," he replied proudly, leaning in to whisper in my ear, "Who doesn't like to see themselves on screen?"

Suddenly, I snapped my head backwards hard, breaking his nose with the back of my skull. I felt his grip slacken and was able to twist myself free. Pumping my legs as fast as I could, I took off running down the street. I could hear his footsteps behind me, quickly gaining ground.

I reached out and grabbed the lid off a trash can on the side of the street and swung it back, hitting him in the gut just as he closed in on me. He doubled over with a loud groan, and I wasted no time in bringing the metal lid down on his head to floor him.

I hovered over him and delivered a couple good solid kicks into his ribs while he was down. On the third kick, however, he was able to grab hold of my ankle and pull me off balance. My back came down hard on the pavement, knocking the wind out of me. He was on top of me before I could react, gripping my hair by the roots and pounding my head against the ground repeatedly.

I blacked out.

When I came to again, I found myself in the back of a parked car, handcuffed to the door handle, with a blinding headache and an unsettling sense of déjà vu.

I tried the door, but there must have been a child lock on, and the windows were electric so they were no use while the car was off. I grabbed the chain of the handcuffs and gave it a few strong yanks to see how solid the door handle was. I didn't really expect anything to happen, and it didn't, but at least it was something to do.

Dominic came back a few minutes later. He had changed into a green vest over a blue-grey shirt and dark charcoal slacks, and had cleaned up pretty well from our fight. The only evidence was a slightly crooked nose, and even that somehow managed to look good on him, giving him a kind of rugged cowboy mystique. He was carrying two brown cardboard trays each loaded up with a hamburger, a grease-soaked paper sleeve stuffed with french fries, and a milkshake in a styrofoam cup.

"Isn't this great," he said as he climbed back into the driver's seat and passed one of the trays to me. "The quintessential American road food – greasy, fatty, basically delicious poison. I only wish some it had been brought out by some pretty blonde in roller skates, a cute little airhead with Jayne Mansfield tits in a tight pink cashmere sweater."

"And a poodle skirt," I added.

"Exactly," he said with relish. "You know that less than a mile up that road is the spot where James Dean died in a head on collision? How's that for the American dream?"

I sat silently as he stuffed his face full of that junk, making exaggerated moans to show how much he was enjoying it.

"You're not eating," he said after washing down a mouthful of fries with a gulp of shake. I could see his eyes reflected in the rearview mirror.

I didn't respond, just staring silently back at his reflection.

"This has been quite a chase you've led me on," he said. "Like the great American road trip, following you from city to city as you crisscrossed the southwest. But I caught you in the end, just like I said I would."

I smiled and said, "You may have me for the moment, but I'll tell you right now that I'm not going back to jail."

"You don't know how right you are," he replied with a chuckle. "The old man's wife, that sweet little octogenarian, slipped me \$500,000 before I left to make sure you

never even see the inside of a courtroom. I've already called it in; you died trying to escape. I'm just delivering your corpse back to the proper authorities."

I leaned forward as far as the handcuff would allow me and screamed in his ear, "So why don't you fucking do it? Right now, get it over with!"

Dominic just chuckled and turned the key in the ignition. As the engine roared to life, the radio came on and blared out "The Leader of the Pack".

Back in Los Angeles, Tennessee was lounging in the dining room of a steak house, picking disinterestedly at a porterhouse while *The Magnificent Seven* played on the old TV mounted on the wall over his table.

His cell phone rang.

"Hey boss," he answered, then paused while the person at the other end spoke.

"Hang on a minute while I find something to write with." He dug through his pockets until he found a pen, then cradled the phone between his ear and his shoulder so he could write. "Okay, shoot."

He scribbled the information down on a paper napkin. "You're sure that's where they're headed?" he asked.

He paused again, nodded his head, then said, "Got it. It'll take me a little while to catch up with them, but I'm not worried about. I'll call you back when I've got some good news."

He was about to hang up but was stopped. "No," he said, "The Saint hasn't crawled out of the woodwork yet, but I'm sure it's just a matter of time."

Another pause, then he ended saying, "I will. Bye."

5. Born again

The sun was setting over the Pacific as we pulled up to a sea cliff hotel, which was a four-story lodge with a wood facade near the top of a densely-forested coastal mountain. The sign in front that bore the hotel's name – Brocken Mountain Inn – didn't quite fit with the rest of the exterior; it was a large granite rock carved into the shape of a triangle with an eye painted in the middle.

The decor inside were just as unexpected. The foyer was flanked on either side by four foot tall brass Sphinxes, and the walls were covered with meticulously painted hieroglyphics. Everywhere you turned was more Egyptian imagery – scarab beetles, winged spheres, sarcophagi.

Dominic walked me right past the front desk. The clerk was too busy with her nose buried in a paperback to notice the pair of handcuffs that joined us together. I thought about trying to yell for her attention and calculated the possibility that I'd be able to keep Dominic busy long enough for her to run for help. Dominic's free hand was cupping the butt of an upturned seven-inch shiv hidden in his shirt sleeve, and I knew he wouldn't hesitate to use it on me if things came to that. That wasn't much of a risk, though, since I was dead anyways if I didn't escape. The problem was that he also had a snub-nosed revolver hidden under his vest, which meant that if he overpowered me too quickly, or if the clerk panicked and froze up, then he would almost certainly be able to kill her, too. The same went for any other idiot who ran over to see what all the commotion was. And that was something I just couldn't deal with right now.

Dominic looked at me with a grin that said he knew exactly what was going through my head. He led me down a hallway that took us out of the main lobby. We passed the kitchen, the exercise room, and a few numbered guest room doors, finally coming to an unmarked door at the end. Dominic dug a key out of his pocket and opened the door.

I door opened to a short flight of stairs that brought us down into the boiler room.

He unlocked the cuff from around his wrist, raised my arms over my head, wrapped the cuffs around a pipe, and refastened the loose cuff to my other wrist.

"You know what the sad thing is – I'm going to kill her anyways," he said once he had backed away out of the range of my legs.

I didn't respond. He continued, "I'm going to walk back upstairs, lean on the front counter, and flash her the pearly whites. I'll invite her up to my room, and you know she'll agree. Then I'll play coy for a little while, act like I'm nervous, maybe scratch at my palms a little, let a few stutters slip into my speech. And I'll move in real close, and ask her to close her eyes, and when she opens them again, her guts will be spilling out all over her lap. I will wrap her intestines around her neck while I fuck her, and I will jizz on her fucking spleen."

He smiled that wicked fucking smile of his at me, and I wanted nothing more than to shatter every single tooth in his mouth.

But I was still stuck to the pipe, so I could only watch as he walked back up the stairs and locked me in.

As soon as the door shut, I was pulling down as hard as I could on the pipe, hoping that either it or the cuffs would give way. After that didn't seem to work, I grabbed a firm hold on the pipe with my hands and jumped off the ground, hoisting myself up to wrap my legs around the pipe, hoping that having my whole body weight hanging from it would be enough to pull it loose. Unfortunately, this didn't work either. I shifted and squirmed, hoping the force of my movement would help, but still to no avail. I found myself wishing I was a heavier, and thought maybe I should have had that burger earlier.

I soon wore myself out and, exhausted, resigned myself to hanging from the pipe and waiting for Dominic to return and carry out whatever twisted fantasy he had planned.

At some point I must have dozed off or passed out. I'm not sure which. I remember hearing the sound of water splashing, which made me think of how close we were to the ocean, and I thought maybe somehow I could hear the tide crashing against the shore. Then another wave came, and I realized that the water was splashing against me. Finally, the third splash brought me fully into consciousness, and I saw Dominic standing in front of me, holding an empty bucket. I tried I looked down and realized that I was both naked and dripping wet – and I wasn't happy about either development. I tried to yell a slew of suitably filthy slurs at him, but realized that I also had a ball gag in my mouth.

I looked back up and saw that he was holding something new in hands – definitely not the bucket, but I couldn't make out exactly what it was. There was a bright source

of light behind him that cast his front side in darkness. He took a couple steps towards me and off to the left, and I saw what the source of light was.

Directly behind him, there stood an eight foot tall pull-down projector screen on a tripod stand. The image being projected on it was a video of me – right now, naked and wet and handcuffed to a pipe with my arms above my head. I tried once again to struggle free and watched my own futile efforts projected on the screen.

He took a couple more steps to me and was close enough now that I could identify the thing in his hands. It was the disembodied head of the front desk clerk. Her head had been shaved and her mouth was frozen in a silent scream. Her left eye had been removed and replaced with a camera lens.

I wrapped my fingers around the handcuff chain and lifted myself just slightly off the ground, enough so that my full weight was being supported by the chain itself. The pipe itself was too strong to give way, but I could feel that the chain was starting to weaken so I decided to focus my efforts on it.

Meanwhile, Dominic set his grisly camera on a crate and positioned it carefully toward me.

"What's the camera for?" I asked him.

He grinned. "Let me ask you this. What is the single greatest achievement in American cinema?" He paused just long enough for me to make it clear I wasn't going to respond. "The Zapruder film. Think of how many people have seen those few seconds of footage, and think about the visceral emotional response they evoke, stronger than any Hollywood blockbuster."

He raised his right arm and swept it in a semicircle. I looked around and saw that there were other projectors set up around room, along with other cameras filming me from every angle. No matter where I turned, I saw myself; similarly, no matter where he stood, Dominic could see me from any angle he pleased.

"This was the octogenarian's request, if you can believe it," he continued. "We are being broadcast live for a private audience of her and a few hundred of the internet's most discerning perverts. Think about the rarefied company you will be in – not James Dean, not even Marilyn died on film. Just you and JFK. Exciting, isn't it?"

He started undressing himself,

"Is this supposed to impress me?" I asked.

"It should," he said. "Dying on film is the truly American way to immortality. I was thinking about it because of all that stuff upstairs. The Egyptians tried to preserve the

physical appearance so that the body could continue to serve the soul in the after life. But flesh rots. It is corruptible. Only media is forever. The old screen heroes died young and stayed that way, perfectly preserved on screen for all time."

The chain was giving way. *That's it*, I thought, *just keep talking asshole*.

He pulled off his shirt, revealing the ten-inch bowie knife strapped to his ribs. He was down to his underwear now, which did little to hide his arousal. Finally, these were discarded as he walked toward me, moving in close to whisper to me.

"So let's say you be a good little movie star and give the audience a nice big scream."

The chain snapped, and I quickly brought my forehead down on his face, giving him a Glasgow kiss. He staggered back in pain, leaving me the opportunity to reach for his knife. Holding it blade-down with both hands, I swung it down as hard as I could, slicing straight through his belly from his sternum down to his pelvis.

I scrambled frantically up the stairs, and tried the door, but it was locked. At that point, I screamed – the loudest, most blood-curdling noise I had ever made – partly to draw attention but mostly just to let out all the frustration and anger and terror that had welled up inside me. I was startled by the noise that came out of my voice; it didn't even sound human.

"Now that's more like it," I heard the strained, raspy voice say behind me. Dominic was on his feet, limping towards me and leaving a trail of blood in his wake.

I had been distracted by him enough that I jumped in fear when I felt door handle move in my hands, then realized that someone on the other side was trying to open it. I slammed my hand against the door hard and yelled, "It's locked, I can't get out."

"Stand back," the muffled voice on the other side said, and it struck me as vaguely familiar.

I stepped away as the other person started kicking against the door, trying to break it open. In the meantime, Dominic had found his gun and was making his way up the stairs, bearing down on me. I leaped over the hand rail and hit the ground under the staircase hard, my legs buckling on impact.

I looked up to see Dominic leaning over the rail at the top of the stairs, gnashing his teeth and glaring at me with hateful, bloodshot eyes.

Suddenly the door burst open, and Tennessee dived into the room. He lunged at Dominic, who nonetheless was able to fire off two shots at close range right into Tennessee's gut before the latter could disarm him.

The two men tumbled down the stairs, and I took advantage of the situation to make my own escape while they struggled on floor together.

Still naked, I sprinted through the hotel lobby past a half dozen stunned guests and employees and tore out into the parking lot. I came to Dominic's car and tried the door, but it was locked. While I was looking around for a rock or something else to break a window, I noticed Tennessee's pink Coupe de Ville parked nearby. Incredibly, it was unlocked with the keys still in the ignition. Obviously he had been anticipating needing to make a quick escape.

I peeled off down the highway without looking back.

In the middle of my third hour on the road, I noticed the car was running low on fuel and finally calmed down enough to process the fact that I was driving a stolen car completely naked and covered in blood. I pulled off the highway onto a deserted dirt road and checked the trunk to see if Tennessee was carrying a change of clothes I could wear. Luckily, he was.

I used one of his shirts to wipe most of the dried blood off my skin, then threw another one on to wear. It was way too big and fit me more like a dress, but at least it would keep everything under wraps until I could get something that would be a better fit. When I got back in the car, I decided to check the glove compartment to see how careful I had to be about getting stopped. Thankfully, the registration and insurance card were both in there, but they weren't the only thing. I also found a plain white envelope stuffed with cash and a photograph. The photo was me, and it had my name and the address of the Fat Man Lodge scribbled on the back. I set that aside and counted the cash – a couple hundred dollars in mixed bills. It wasn't much, but at least it would keep the car running.

A few miles down the highway I stopped again at one of those big travel centers that had a gas station along with gift shops and fast food. Most of it was closed, but I was able to grab a couple changes of clothes and fill up the tank.

While I waited for the gas to pump, I ducked into the restroom to wash the rest of the blood off myself and change. When I hit the road again I felt refreshed, rejuvenated, reborn.

As I drove, I felt overcome by a wave of ecstatic joy and saw in the rearview that I was crying. For some reason this struck me as funny, so I started laughing too. Flying down the highway, breaking into rapturous laughter while tears streamed down my face, I started to scream.

"I beat them," I said, savoring the sound of my own voice. "I fucking beat them. I'm still alive, you fuckers!"

6. Sometimes

Sometimes the best you can do is delay the inevitable.

Sometimes you don't get what you want, Dominic thought to himself, not quite remembering it right, *but sometimes you get what you need*.

No, that's not right, he thought, but soon decided it didn't matter. He was laying on the floor of a hotel boiler room, rapidly bleeding to death. That was the type of thing that tended to eclipse all other concerns.

He looked up and saw himself projected on the far wall of the room. That particular camera was positioned just above the projection so that it looked like the image of himself on the wall was looking right at him. *Watching me watch myself die*.

This made Dominic smile. Blood poured out of his mouth over his chin and dripped down onto the concrete ground as he breathed his last breath.

Sometimes you get what you need.

Sometimes the best you can do is delay the inevitable.

Sometimes you need to take one step back before you can take two forward. Tennessee certainly believed this, which is why he wasn't bothered by his temporary set back. He was sitting on the hood of the Caddie, which he found dumped in a ditch just off the interstate. His open Hawaiian shirt was blown back in the breeze to expose the white bandages wrapped around his midsection. The safe house medic had done a good job patching him up, even though he complained the bandages made him feel like a mummy.

He was happy to find the car and even happier to learn that the black box was taken from it.

That means she's still looking, he thought. That means it's only a matter of time.

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I had been staying at the Royal 9 motel for three nights and was getting dangerously close to exhausting the cash in Tennessee's envelope.

At first it had been nice to settle down at one place for a while. I had arrived just before dawn after walking all night to put an adequate distance between me and the car. I spent the entire first day in bed, not leaving the room until dusk, enjoying the solitude. I finally left the room to watch the sunset. That night I headed to the bar down the street for an epic bender and woke up next to some trucker in his early twenties with a wedding band and a name like Lance or Lars or Larry or Lenny.

The next morning I went out to the pool for a swim. I got a lot of stares, and I wasn't sure if they were because of the skimpy little bikini I had picked up or the massive bruises it revealed all over my body. One of the hotel maids finally got up the courage to come and ask me about them. She was a short, thick-set woman with cracked brown skin and sad, pitying eyes, and while we spoke she kept running her fingers over the rosary hanging out of her uniform pocket. She asked if I needed any help, and she said it so sincerely that I couldn't help but laugh and tell her I just had a rough week.

On the way back to the room I walked past an elderly married couple and caught the husband leering openly at me, poking the tip of his tongue out just enough to lick his lower lip, admiring the way the dark purple bruises contrasted with my pale skin. I suddenly felt very exposed and vulnerable, and I spent the rest of the night locked in my room.

That second night was when the novelty of doing nothing started to wear thin. I stayed up until four a.m. staring at the digital clock on the nightstand while the TV droned on in the background with its relentless barrage of talk shows, reruns and infomercials. I needed to stare at something and had settled on the clock after the TV had proven woefully inadequate at holding my attention. I just needed something else to keep me from looking at the black box sitting on top of the dresser.

When I finally did fall asleep, I dreamed about my sister.

The third day I started running through the different scenarios in my head, reviewing everything I had done and seen over the past weeks, all the leads I had followed, all the places I had been. There was only one more person I could think of,

one last lead to follow – but I didn't want to go down that road unless there were no other options.

That evening, just before dawn, I decided I needed a second opinion to help me get some perspective, so I tried calling the writer. I reasoned that since he knew Violet, he was in a good position to help me out. If I went over some of the facts I had compiled, the little tidbits I had uncovered about her life on the run, he might be able to pick up on something significant, some tiny clue that I had overlooked. Writers are all about that, I figured; they are used to reading deeper into things than the rest of us. I found his number in the directory easily enough just as I had his address, but when I dialed, it said the line was disconnected.

As I hung up, I happened to look over and catch sight of the fucking box. An overwhelming sense of frustration came over me, so intense that I had to leave the room. I started walking down the street just to blow off steam, and before I realized it I had walked all the way into town and was standing in front of the hardware store. Taking this as a sign, I went inside and bought a hammer, brought it back to the room, and decided I was going to open the fucking box. I hit it until the head of the hammer came off. I hit it until my hands bled. The fucking thing wouldn't yield.

I tore up one of my white tank tops into strips to bandage my hands, then went down to the pool deck for a smoke and a drink. Some time around three in the morning, I had my epiphany.

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Some time later, I found myself perched on stool at a bank of pay phones in some random Greyhound station in a city I had never heard of before. I was on a layover and trying to convince the shrill harpy at directory assistance to help me find the phone number for the Fat Man Lounge.

My head itched like crazy from the bleach, but I couldn't scratch it. My hair was all wrapped up inside a big floppy knit cap.

Finally, she connected me, and a voice answered after four rings.

"Hello?"

"It's me," I said.

"Who's *me*?" he asked.

"*Me*," I repeated with emphasis. "Tell him I'm coming back. Tell him I want to see him."

7. The more I try to hurt you, the more it backfires

I awoke to find myself lying in bed in an unfamiliar room, groggy and disoriented, unable to remember where I was or how I got there. Hell, it took me a while to even remember who I was. My head throbbed, my body ached, and I felt like I was going to puke. All in all, there were nicer ways to wake up.

My head fell over to the right, and I saw the rubber hose still tied around my arm; then it all started coming back to me. This was his bed, his place. It had been a few weeks now since I got here – or at least it felt like a few weeks, but I had no way of knowing for sure.

I could still remember the day I arrived, so at least I had that much. They drove me out to an abandoned warehouse in what used to be the manufacturing district back when this town still had manufacturing jobs. They dropped me off in front, and as I got out of the car a strong breeze kicked up and blew the wild strands of my bright, freshly-dyed blue hair into my face. I raised a bandaged hand up to sweep away the stray locks. Then I gathered up all my worldly possessions, which at that point consisted entirely of the clothes on my back and the black box in the crook of my arm, and went inside.

He had set up the warehouse as some twisted parody of a real home. Tall black drapes served as partitions to separate “rooms”, suspended from an intricate system of steel cables crisscrossing overhead. The individual rooms looked like they were furnished entirely from salvage yards, flea markets, and second hand stores. Couches were missing cushions or had exposed springs and missing patches of upholstery. All the tables had missing legs, which were replaced in some cases by legs ripped from another mismatched table and in other cases by miscellany like cinder blocks, stacked weights, or half of a mannequin's leg.

Speaking of mannequins, he had for some inexplicable reason apparently decided they made good company. He had at least two or three of them in every room, dressed like thrift store refugees in tattered rags and garish colors, posed in various scenes of domesticity. One stood just at the front entrance, dressed in an outfit that was somewhere between a butler and a pimp, posed as if inviting guests in and taking their

coats. He actually had a couple coats slung over his forearm. A group of them sat on the couch in the living room dressed in random professional sports apparel, holding bottles of soda and bags of chips, cheering on a broken TV set missing its screen. In the kitchen, a female mannequin dressed like the maid from *The Brady Bunch* was bending over to look inside an open oven that clearly had not been functional for decades. Meanwhile, two more mannequins occupied two of the four chairs at the dinner table.

Then I turned the corner and saw the altar room, and that's when things really got creepy. The room was just that – a giant altar made from tables draped in black sheets and containing all sorts of tacky, horrible religious iconography. Every gaudy Virgin statuette, every terrifying painting of the crucifixion that had been thrown out by the owner's grandchildren after they died, he had collected them all and brought them here. All told, he had to have over a hundred pieces ranging from a collection of tiny prayer cards featuring the saints to three life-size plastic Magi presumably taken from a nativity scene. The center of it all was a three-foot fiber optic Jesus illuminating the whole room in an eerie blue glow.

I passed through as quickly as possible and came to the bedroom – or perhaps it was just the sex room. Either way, it was very dark, illuminated only by a small table lamp with a red shade sitting on the floor in the corner. The only furniture was a bed, or rather a mattress, covered in red silk sheets. A half dozen or so mannequins were scattered throughout in suggestive poses. They were dressed alternately in leather, latex, lace, or nothing at all, but all of them had on ornate half-masks as if they were going to a Venetian masquerade. Some were in restraints, like dog collars or foot cuffs. They were also holding various whips and outlandish sex toys. One mannequin's foot had been removed and replaced by a sex toy shaped like a foot that had a vagina built into its heel. Another was on her knees, and the lower half of her face had been replaced with a suction mouth sex toy. A couple others had enormous dildos affixed to their groins, hanging down to their knees. Mercifully, it didn't look like any of the toys had ever been used by an actual human being.

I continued deeper into the warehouse and came to the next room, which is where I found The Saint. He was perched on a bar stool at a tall formica table like you would find in an old malt shop. His right elbow rested against the table, propping his head up with his fist planted under his chin. He was as perfectly still as any of the mannequins except for the slightest movement in his chest, betraying his breathing. He was also more lifelike, obviously, but no less outlandishly dressed. He looked like some kind of glam rock star in silver lamé stretch pants, knee-high jackboots, and a floor length blue coat with lush fur trim around the collar, which hung open to expose his bare, muscular chest and abs. His eyes were circled heavily in coal black eyeliner, and his full, thick lips were painted dark purple. His left hand was spread flat on the table, and each thick, meaty finger was punctuated by a long black nail.

I walked right up to him, stopping literally only a fraction of an inch away, before he reacted. Even then, only his eyes moved, shifting quickly to the side to look at me. Slowly, he began to move the fingers on his left hand, clicking his nails loudly against the table.

"You brought it back," he said.

I nodded. "I figure that's the only reason I'm still alive."

He grunted in agreement. I set the box down next to his hand. "You still haven't got it open," he said, and I wasn't sure if it was a question or just a statement.

"No," I replied.

Quickly, moving with the elegant fluidity of a jungle cat, he brought his right hand down to slide the box across the table away from me. Then he hopped off the stool and stood up straight. He had well over a foot in height on me; I guessed him to be easily 6'8", and he was built like a heavy-weight prize fighter.

He looked me deep in the eyes and reached out to run his fingers through my blue hair. "It's good to see you, kid."

He wrapped an arm around my waist and led me back into the bedroom. We sat down on the mattress, and he reached into the space between the mattress and the black curtain to pull out a small metal lunch box embossed with a colorful picture of *Superman* on its face. He popped it open and removed a plastic bag filled with white powder and dirty, corroded metal spoon.

"This is what you came back here for, isn't it?" he said as he gave me a smile that was unmistakably bittersweet.

I picked up the bag and turned it over in my hands, telling myself that to refuse would arouse suspicion. Then I handed it back to him while I reached into the box and took out the rest of his works. When he was done cooking, I tied the hose around my arm and held it out for him to stick the needle in.

Now it was many weeks later, and I still had the hose on my arm.

He was gone, ran off to wherever he runs off to during the day. I sat up, resting my weight on my elbows, and saw that I was naked. I also had gobs of dried semen covering my stomach and tits. He seemed to like it better when I was unconscious, I mused, then slowly clambered up to my feet. That would also explain why my pussy felt so raw and sore; he doesn't really believe in slow and gentle. To him I'm really just

a glorified fuck doll, an object to surround himself with like these creepy fucking mannequins. I don't feel pleasure, and I don't feel pain.

Actually, that last part wasn't too far off base, just as long as I kept a steady stream of poison pumping into my veins. It did hurt during the first few times I was with him. But after a while I learned how to just lie there and become numb. Do it well enough, it doesn't even feel like it's actually happening to you anymore. It's like your just watching it happen to someone else on a movie screen; you become a disinterested observer. Sometimes when this is happening I close my eyes and I can actually hear the sounds of film projector and smell the butter of the movie theater popcorn. And I look up at this sad girl on the screen and I can't understand why she's crying so much when she should know that it's all just make believe.

I arched my back and stretched my arms, feeling my joints creek, then started hunting around for a pack of cigarettes. I found several, but they were all empty. I crumpled them up in disgust and threw them on the floor.

I wandered aimlessly into the kitchen, not realizing at first that there were now three bodies sitting at the dinner table instead of the usual two. I opened the dead fridge to get a pack of cigarettes, unwrapped it, stuck one in my mouth, and lit it off the small portable gas stove that sat on top of the larger inoperable vintage model. Only then did I realize there was one person too many in this room.

Tennessee was tipping back in his plastic chair with his dusty pink cowboy boots kicked up on the table, resting just inches away from the black box, which was open.

"So you finally figured it out," he said and tapped the box with his foot.

I looked at him dispassionately and responded in a low monotone voice, barely more than a whisper, "It wasn't that hard in the end, once I realized the trick."

He lowered the front end of his chair back to the ground, then stood up and picked up the two separated halves of the box. Slowly lowering his eyes, he checked inside to make sure the contents were still there. "Well, I can't tell you how happy my employer is going to be to get this back."

Cradling the box under his arm, he headed out toward the front door. Just before exiting, he turned back to add, "He was right, you know. There are easier ways to punish yourself."

I was alone again, back in bed. I could see through the skylight in the roof that it was getting dark, and knew he'd be home soon.

I closed my eyes tightly, and tried in vain to fall asleep when suddenly I heard footsteps. They weren't his, I was sure of that. They were a softer, sharper sound, like a woman in heels. Then, inexplicably, I thought I also heard the faint sounds of a film projector. When I finally opened my eyes, I saw Violet sitting in a chair beside the bed, her legs crossed. She looked just a like a movie star, wearing a form-fitting black dress with a plunging neckline, silk elbow gloves, a wide brim hat, and oversized Jackie O sunglasses.

"You're not really here," I said. "It's just the smack making me see things."

She didn't respond to that, but just sat there silently and looked at me.

"You never came for me," I said. "I was sure that when you heard that I was with him, you'd come. But you never did, and I just kept waiting."

She laughed. It was a cruel, condescending laugh. "Is that what you've convinced yourself is the reason you're here?"

"When he gets home and sees the box is missing, he's gonna kill me," I said. "He'll think I double-crossed him again. I mean, you double-crossed him again."

"So why don't you run away?" Violet asked. Her voice sounded tinny and mechanical, blending with the background noise of the film projector.

I just shook my head. "This is what you wanted all along, wasn't it? For me to take your place. You knew everyone would think I was you."

"Are you sure it's what I wanted? Maybe you really mean to say it's what you wanted."

I just turned over on my side, looking away from her. The sound of the film projector grew louder, the mechanical cranking becoming deafening, like it was right inside my ear. "You could save me, but you won't. You could stay here until he comes back and he'll see us both and realize the truth, but you won't."

I felt her breath on the back of my neck and smelled the sweet honey scent of her perfume as she leaned in over me. "Would he? I'm not so sure. No that it would make any difference. You're dying, Scarlett. You took too much that last time you fixed and it's shutting down your body even as we speak."

"Shut up. Just shut up. You don't know anything. You're not even here. You're not even real."

I shut my eyes tight. The sound of the film projector was painfully loud. I clenched my teeth and pictured the girl up on that big silver screen with all the makeup and lights and wondered how she could be so sad.