



Raena Exe

**Catching
Cassandra**

Catching her was the easy part.

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Intended for Adult Audiences Only:

*Sexual Violence

*Adult Content

*Language

“There is in every one of us, even those who seem to be most moderate, a type of desire that is terrible, wild, and lawless.” Plato, *The Republic*

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Epilogue

1 Veda

Dr. Ashlyn Veda didn't normally make house-calls. Not that criminal psychiatrists make a lot of house-calls. Normally it was her boss, the singularly faceted Dr. Marlin Sullivan that handled most of the crime scene investigations and witness interviews. Of course, that had all changed when Ashlyn had been assigned lead on the Cassandra case. So now she was speeding her way north-west on a six-hour journey that would take her to the Carmelite Convent of the Sacred Hearts, located just outside of Ben, Texas.

"Austin has never faced anything like this, this is gonna be a shit-show, that's for goddamn sure. A goddamn shit-show. You don't mind me swearing? Do you Veda? Goddamn, whoever thought something like this would happen here?" Chief Asencio had growled into her ear as he stood facing the mob of media that had gathered to hear his official statement, which of course was that he didn't, as of yet, have an official statement.

Of course, Ashlyn knew that this case was meant to either save or sink her career. Which of course meant that if it all went tits-up it would be Ashlyn that got offered up to the media like a goddamn sacrificial lamb. At that thought though, the best Ashlyn could muster was a derisive snort, because after two years in Sullivan's rather slimy and repulsive shadow, Ashlyn had been literally counting the days.

But that's how life works isn't it? Because, just as soon as you think you're out, that you don't give a shit, and nothing can touch you, this happens. Because suddenly here she was, fully entrenched in what the media was calling the biggest scandal to hit Hollywood since... well, since Epstein... And Ashlyn wasn't about to give that up for all the money in the world, and she certainly wasn't about to give up until she got to the bottom of what really happened in that dark and bloody basement.

And to do that, Ashlyn was first going to have to figure out who this Cassandra Lethe really is.

Ashlyn had hoped to talk to the woman most likely to answer that question in the comforts of her downtown office. However, the spiritual leader of the Carmelite Convent of the Sacred Hearts, Reverend Mother Mary Teresa, was in no way interested in coming to Austin. Ashlyn had been told this, repeatedly, by the sweet, and cloyingly pleasant Sister Delphine.

In fact, Sister Delphine had made it perfectly clear, in her soft, dulcet tones, that under no-circumstances would Mother Mary Teresa ever leave the confines of the cloister, and if Ashlyn wanted to speak to her, or to anyone else, she would jolly-well have to do it in person.

So there was no hope for it. As the nuns were the closest thing Cassandra had to a family, it was pretty much imperative that Ashlyn speak with them directly. Perhaps then she could at least figure out whom the victim had been.

On that, all Ashlyn had to go on was contradictory at best, because neither the crime-scene nor the evidence on the subjects' bodies matched up with the photos that had been plastered all over the goddamn media.

And then, of course, was the matter of Cassandra's past, a past that was quickly turning into an endless labyrinth of bullshit. Already Ashlyn had made over a dozen phone calls and the only thing she had to show for it was a half blanked-out, thirty-three-page report detailing Cassandra's 'rescue' from trafficking, and then her seemingly odd placement with the convent, where it seems she had remained until nearly three months ago.

So that's why Ashlyn was headed there now. To finally get some answers, or at the very least to begin to understand what questions she should be asking.

For a long time as she drove Ashlyn stared out over the steering wheel, out onto the harsh-looking landscape, with its dry-dusty flats that seemed to go on forever, and picked over her own life, at the series of mistakes and missteps that had ultimately landed her here, at this place and time. And to her, the perfectionist who had never been able to heal her own hurts, or even accept her own flaws, why... it was as comfortable as lunch with an old friend.

Because Ashlyn's was a small life, defined by a small apartment, a ten-by-twelve office space, and a set of routines that rarely changed. And every day began with the maneuvering of every-last thing into easy-to-handle tasks, that one-by-one she would tick off as the day wore on.

Wild, untamed beauty like the piles of white clouds that stacked up end-over-end, for thousands of feet, upon a brilliant blue sky, rarely took precedence over more pressing matters. And the beauty of the dusty-pink sands, dotted over with the small patches of weeds and the silhouetted well-pumps, were things she hardly ever took notice of.

Vistas like this just didn't have a place in her neat and orderly world. Or at least she had nearly forgotten they did.

But perhaps on some level she did remember, and that's why she'd booked the singles cruise - that she was now going to miss. But Ashlyn was not one to ruminate over such things, as she had developed over the years a sort of indifference to her own needs, and her own desires.

And just like that new evening gown with its tags still on, most of her desires never got to see the light of day, but instead, simply got shoved to the back of her closet, never to be seen again.

In truth... it was a crowded closet; already full of secret wishes and ambitions that were just too scary for her to face.

And tucked in there too... was some kinda malevolent-metronome ticking off the moments of her life, with a shredded verse of some half -forgotten song that played on repeat during trying times like these.

Drive off the cliff of what used to be
Cuz there's no defining me
To suck the marrow, I'll have to bite deep
Eyes closed, I'm not afraid to leap.

But Dr. Ashlyn Veda, with her double degrees in investigative psychology and criminal psychiatry, was not a marrow sucker. And she knew it.

More than life, more than anything, she wanted to be one. She envied the ones she spied at the grocery store, singing to their own personal soundtrack, always smiling, always tasting, always talking, extracting from life every ounce of pleasure they possibly could. Why, she'd seen

them at work too, the diligent ones who always took it personal, who rode the perp longer, harder, took more risks, saw more rewards. For them it wasn't a job, it was life... marrow sucking life.

For Ashlyn, life was something witnessed, noted, negotiated, and then handled; something to be quickly moved on from. For her, life was a series of problems an intelligent person overcame one-by-one. For less-than intelligent people, who couldn't overcome... well, that's why she had her job.

And she was proud of her job, proud of her accomplishments, and proud of what her reasoned, analytical brain had provided for her. Her personal life however... well, that was just one of those problems to be managed over the long term. And there certainly wasn't any marrow sucking going on there.

So it was, after six hours on the road, Ashlyn finally found herself creeping along the dusty dirt road that would end at the next problem she had on her list of things to be handled. The long and winding drive left the main road more than two miles back and took a series of hairpin turns before it came to an end at the monastery gate.

The only opening in the huge ten-foot-high adobe wall that surrounded the secluded compound was an enormous wrought-iron gate that was large enough for a full-sized semi to pass through. Looking at the monstrous gate, Ashlyn wondered what army of men would come and pull it open, thereby allowing her to pass through.

But just as she brought her car to a stop, a smiling face materialized out of nowhere.

It was a large, round face with brown eyes and a crooked smile full of yellowing teeth, set atop a woman that appeared to be no taller than five feet, and was as round as an apple. Ashlyn smiled at the woman in her brown and white habit.

"I'm here to speak with Mother Mary Teresa," Ashlyn said brightly through the still-raised window. She'd shut off the car and was now fumbling with the keys, trying to get it started again so that she could lower the window and speak with the woman properly. But before she could, the woman turned and walked away.

Watching the odd woman, Ashlyn could see a large set of old skeleton keys in her right hand, and when she got to the gate she rang the large brass bell that was set high in the wall three times and then inserted one of the old keys into a space just below the bell. When a loud click sounded, so loudly that even inside the enclosed vehicle Ashlyn could hear it, the nun turned and waved her forward.

But nothing happened, the gate didn't move, so Ashlyn remained where she was.

Looking from Ashlyn, back to the immobile gate, the old woman gave an irritable shake of her head, then stalked over to the center of the large gate and gave it a great shove. With a groan of protest, the gate pivoted on its hinges and swung in a wide arc, out into the courtyard beyond.

Turning back to her, the smiling nun waved Ashlyn forward once again. Returning the smile, Ashlyn pushed the paddle on the steering column and the car began to slowly inch forward. But as the nun's weathered face came into and then passed out of view, Ashlyn was left with an intense, yet unexplainable sense of dread.

Inside the compound there was a collection of small buildings that surrounded a main chapel. And at the top of the chapel was a large blue-slatted steeple that housed a large bell. The only thing visible from outside the compound, the steeple now seemed rather more significant given its placement among the circle of old, adobe buildings. All of them short, squat, one-story structures that looked like they were built centuries before, with only one purpose in mind - function.

The chapel however was a different story; at least sixty feet tall, it was made of white adobe that rose brilliantly skyward to meet a blue-slatted bell tower. And inside the tower hung a huge bronze bell that Ashlyn had read on their website had presided over the Carmelite Convent for more than a century.

To Ashlyn, the chapel was more haunting than charming. She also couldn't help wondering where the gargoyles and spires were. Where were the arches and the crosses that Catholics were so fond of? If she hadn't known any better, she would never have guessed this was a catholic monastery.

In truth, the only truly ornate thing sat in front of the chapel itself. It was a large marble fountain with two cherubs pouring water from bright brass urns, and all around it were flowers of every color, and around that was a well-worn stone walkway. Two marble benches placed at opposite angles sat nearby, and off to the right was a small parking lot.

And the parking lot, Ashlyn noted, was empty except for a handcart piled high with weeds. Another nun, this one much younger than the first, stood next to the handcart. Ashlyn directed her car into the parking spot next to the young nun.

"It's such a lovely day to be working in the garden," Ashlyn said as she climbed slowly from her vehicle. But as she righted herself, and could finally get a better view, she realized her mistake. On the phone, Sister Dalphine had made it quite clear that this was a silent convent, and that none of the nuns would feel comfortable speaking, period.

"I'm sorry," Ashlyn said, nodding deferentially towards the nervous looking woman.

"I see you've met Sister Cara Charity. She's our resident gardener," the round nun, now red in the face, and huffing quite noticeably, said as she jogged up behind Ashlyn's car.

"You've done a beautiful job," Ashlyn said to the younger nun with another nod of her head. In reply, the shy nun smiled again, a tiny bit of red flashing across her cheeks, leaving Ashlyn with the stark impression that the doe-eyed nun hadn't believed her praise to be in earnest.

Ashlyn smiled at the woman again, trying to assure her of her honesty, and then began the slow work of gathering up her belongings from the passenger seat of her car.

And since it wasn't in her nature, Ashlyn didn't once stop to consider what the nuns might think of such a flashy automobile, or of the woman who drove it. Instead, thinking only of the task at hand, Ashlyn shouldered her bag and took up her forearm crutches, before turning to the candy-apple nun.

With a smile full of yellowing teeth, the nun asked, "Do you need any help with that, child?" To which Ashlyn merely shook her head no.

"Well then," the round nun said brightly in a hoarse voice. "If you'll just follow me... the sanctuary is this way." The woman had barely finished speaking before she'd hiked up her brown

habit, revealing two warty, hobbit-looking feet, and dashed off towards the double doors set in the front of the chapel.

“Certainly,” Ashlyn replied to her back. Then turning to the younger, mousy-looking nun, with the enormous eyes she said, “She moves faster than you’d guess.” The younger nun giggled and then, startled by her own impulsiveness, quickly covered her mouth with her hand. Ashlyn thought there might be hope for the odd woman yet.

Ashlyn didn’t catch up to warty-toed nun until they were both standing at the great double doors that hung in the center of the large white chapel. And what gorgeous doors they were; carved from some dark and knotty wood, they too looked like they must weigh a ton.

Then, just as she’d done at the gate, the round nun brought forth the giant ring of old keys and began to sift through them one-by-one. This time however, she had to test each one in the stubborn lock.

Looking over her shoulder nervously, the nun smiled at Ashlyn, who was waiting patiently behind her. “I’ll get it in a jiffy...”

After the third try, the woman chuckled softly and then spoke again; her hoarse voice breaking somewhat. “It’s just we don’t get too many visitors up this way. Us sisters. And we use the side door. But guests aren’t allowed in the Papal Enclosure, just the chapel.” She tried another key and then another.

“I forget what this one looks like. The gate’s easy, it’s all crooked. See here?” she said brandishing a bent key, waving it in front of Ashlyn as if she had asked for proof.

“Still works though. This one is newer... so, it should be one o’ the shinier ones.”

Ashlyn took a peek at the keys and decided that most of them looked shiny. And she nearly choked on a sigh as she tried to force it back down before it could escape, and make the poor nun feel worse for the long delay. The last thing Ashlyn wanted was to appear rude, but the clock was ticking, and she still had a six-hour drive home.

“Ahhh here we go.” With a shove, the left-side door swung open, and the nun waved for Ashlyn to enter alone.

“Go on, Sister Margaret Mary will be with you shortly. Let’s see... What time is it?” The woman looked up at the sun, as if it would tell her the time. Ashlyn checked her phone.

“It’s just about time for the Angelus bell and our midday prayer... but she should be along after that.” The woman smiled again, this time showing a few missing teeth, which gave Ashlyn the impression of a fat round jack-o-lantern. So distracted by the thought, her own answering smile came too late, as the woman had once again hiked up her habit and was bounding away before Ashlyn had a chance to share it.

Inside, Ashlyn had to stop for a second in order to give her eyes time to adjust because the only light in the dimly-lit entry way filtered through a set of stained glass windows set high above the great double doors, and another set that took up much of the opposite wall at the far end of the long chapel. But when her eyes finally did adjust the room slowly began to take shape.

In the front of the small atrium sat a large round table with an impressive floral arrangement sitting in the center, and just beyond that were two rows of pews, four in total. And a couple feet

in front of the pews stood a great iron portcullis that separated the foyer, in which she found herself, and the rest of the chapel.

On the other side of the thick iron bars was another two columns of pews, however there were twelve on each side this time. That made twenty-four pews all together, she noted, which made her wonder just how many nuns were in residence within the convent. Slipping a pen and small notebook from her bag, Ashlyn made a quick note. From their website, Ashlyn had been able to make a rough guess, but it was something she would like to get confirmed, if possible.

After a short wait, Ashlyn took a seat on one of the pews meant for the few guests that made their way out to the remote chapel to attend mass. However, from the look of the dust that had settled on the silken flowers and the enormous table, Ashlyn didn't imagine the dismal chapel saw many visitors.

Paradoxically, everything on the other side of the portcullis was markedly cleaner, and nicer. The floor for example, a shining marble, had been polished to the point of brilliance, and even the large stained-glass window seemed brighter and more cheerful.

Intentionally done, Ashlyn thought, thinking the silent order of nuns probably did little to encourage guests.

Clearly the dimly lit, sparsely decorated, and poorly cleaned visitors' section was of little importance to the nuns.

Not long after she took a seat, the enormous bell at the top of the chapel began to ring out, high over-head. Three sets of three, and then nine in a row, the bell rang in a deafening sound that reverberated through Ashlyn's head, to her teeth, and down to the base of her spine.

And before the bell had stopped, a silent and somber looking nun, in the same brown and white habit she'd seen the other two sisters wearing, came out and took her place behind the podium. A moment later two long columns of nuns, all dressed in identical habits, filed into the sanctuary.

On silent feet they floated down the corridor and glided into their usual places among the pews. And not a single set of eyes looked up from the rosaries that were clutched tightly in their hands, therefore none of them noticed the curious looks from the woman watching on from the visitor's section.

Unfortunately for Ashlyn, she had never been to a catholic mass before, and therefore she had no idea what exactly was in store, so when the nun behind the podium began to speak, in a clarion-call caw that was both craggy and shrill, Ashlyn nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Because Jesus loved us enough to die for us, we are given the chance to live with Him eternally. By saying 'Be it done to me according to thy word' Luke one-thirty-eight, we honor and emulate Mary's faith in His goodness. It is through the praying of the Angeles that we honor both God and His Mother. For we are blessed to be able to call on both of them during our journey towards spiritual perfection. Let us pray. The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary."

For no discernible reason, at least none that Ashlyn could figure out, she had wanted desperately to escape the moment the service had begun. The chanting... the recitation... and especially the singing, had all been too much for her atheist brain to take in. But the thought of trying to open the large wooden doors, all on her own, with the chapel full of praying nuns... well,

the thought of it alone almost sent her into a panic. Plus, she hadn't driven six hours to be thwarted only by a bunch of singing nuns.

So instead of bolting for the door, as all of her instincts had begged her to do, she instead used the time to go over the questions she would ask. Trying her best to put them into an orderly structure that would make sense, and yet still not reveal too much about the case at hand. There was already enough fuel for that fire, enough information that had been leaked to the media. And though she doubted a bunch of nuns would go running to the tabloids – one could never be sure.

By the end, Ashlyn found herself silently scrutinizing the very detailed sculpture of the crucified Jesus that hung just above the dais. But its blood-stained eyes that were rolled back into its head, and its mouth, curled open into a perpetual scream, only served to further tax her already frayed nerves, because it was horrible, and horribly accurate, and the pain and despair of it had been so real Ashlyn had found it nearly impossible to look away.

And that's the thing about religion, all religion... it all seems revolve around suffering.

In many ways, Ashlyn felt that religion had become nothing more than an excuse to willfully harm others. And despite what any of them said about compassion and love, the mortar that seemed to hold them all together was simply the condemnation of those who are not 'them'.

And the hypocrisy of preaching peace while simultaneously waging war was just too much for her to rectify.

Of course it didn't help that Ashlyn had seen the destruction of religion first-hand when it had cost her her parents.

"Hello. I'm Sister Margaret Mary, and if you'll wait here I'll be with you soon," a voice said, breaking through Ashlyn's mental wanderings, bringing her back with a mental jerk. And when she looked up, the tall severe-looking nun that had run the service was standing on the other side of the portcullis staring down on her expectantly.

"What about Mother Superior? Mary Teresa, I believe her name is..." Ashlyn's voice trailed off as she dug through her notes.

"I thought I would be speaking with her directly."

Ashlyn had found a photo of Mother Mary Teresa on the convent's website and this definitely was not her. For one thing, Mother Mary Teresa was about ninety-some years old, and this woman couldn't have been more than sixty-something; nearly a spring chicken by comparison.

Finding the nun's name, Ashlyn nodded to herself, and then looked back to the now smiling nun. Unlike the smiling nun at the gate, whose face had been a round, jolly sun, this nun's smile was the predatory snarl of a carnivorous cat playing with a mouse. It was such an awful smile, Ashlyn instantly forgot her unanswered question, and was left gaping after her, as she strode off, falling into line with the other nuns as they slowly made their way out of the chapel; each of them barefoot, and as silent as the grave.

About half an hour later Ashlyn heard the loud click of a lock, and then the whisper of metal-against-metal and thought, *they certainly take security very seriously here*. And then a second later the same nun reappeared through a side door.

And again, Ashlyn couldn't help wondering why such security measures were necessary. The high walls, the iron bars that separated the foyer from the rest of the sanctuary; what were

these nuns so desperate to keep out? And what must it have been like for a former child sex-slave to have entered into these walls, only to be locked away here for the next thirteen years of her life? Did she ever once call the convent 'home'?

Ashlyn didn't have long to contemplate these thoughts as Sister Margaret Mary began at once. "I understand you are here to ask us about Cassandra."

Ashlyn got to her feet with the aid of her crutches. "Yes. I was hoping to speak with your Mother Superior as these matters are of a rather sensitive nature." Ashlyn gave the stern woman a polite smile.

"I'm afraid that is impossible. Mother Mary Teresa is not well and has not been able to receive visitors for quite some time." It was unnerving how the woman's eyes never wavered, never moved from her own. Had Ashlyn not been accustomed to the intense examinations of the more aggressive criminals she'd faced during her short career, she most likely would have withered beneath the old nun's glare like a ten-day-old rose. As it was, the woman's glare only seemed to provoke in Ashlyn a sort of protective response, protectiveness towards a woman she hadn't yet met, a woman charged with truly terrible crimes.

"Well, then, I guess I'll just have to make do. Is there somewhere we can talk in private then?" Ashlyn wobbled a bit on her crutches. She was tired, and her muscles ached from the long car ride. And the prolonged period of sitting on the rather hard and unyielding pew hadn't done her any good either.

"Again, I'm afraid that's impossible. We are a contemplative monastery where we have dedicated ourselves to live, work, and pray in silence. And to accomplish this, we do not allow anyone to enter beyond where you are now. Any conversation we have will take place right here." The woman's smile seemed a little too self-satisfied for Ashlyn's tastes.

"These matters are of a legal nature and are not intended for anyone's ears but your own, if indeed Mother Mary Teresa is unavailable, as you state."

Two could play this game.

"I understand the importance you place on such things Ms. Veda. However, should we break our rules for everyone, we would never be allowed the hermetic life that affords us communion with Him, our Father and we have dedicated the entirety of our lives to this goal, and should we forgo them now, our efforts would be wasted, and for what?"

"For the sake of a young woman who may very well spend the rest of her life behind bars." Ashlyn didn't mince words, she spoke directly, as she wasn't about to let some inflated self-important woman belittle her purpose.

Studying the woman's aged face, Ashlyn didn't see a single note of remorse or pity for the girl the nun had once cared for. In fact, the woman just stood there, self-satisfied smile and all, unmoving, unchanging, as if she'd suddenly turned to stone. Ashlyn imagined the woman could very likely stand there like that for the rest of her life, so very much like stone was she. In truth, there was probably very little that would move a woman like this.

"Very well," Ashlyn said in a sigh, giving in to the woman's stubbornness.

"If you don't mind then, I'll take a seat as I am not able to stand for long."

"If you like," the woman said without moving an inch.

Ashlyn backed up a step, until she could feel the pew press against the backs of her calves, and then she sank down onto it with relief. With a tug, she pulled her tablet from her bag and turned it on. The stoic nun watched on with a mild look of interest as Ashlyn used her fingers to sift through the files that she had already uploaded. When she found the one that she was looking for she looked up at the woman, ready to start her interview.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll be recording this as well. That way I don’t have to spend all of my time taking notes.”

And there it was... a glimmer... of something... that flashed in the woman’s eyes as Ashlyn had said the word ‘recording’.

Something, and Ashlyn didn’t know what, made her think this woman did not want her recording anything. Perhaps it was in the way her pencil-straight posture had gotten even straighter, or maybe it was the way her thin lips had nearly disappeared all-together as she pressed them into two fine lines.

“That’ll be fine. But please know, we will only have until one thirty. That is when our free period ends and we are called back to our work. We too have to make a living. Charity, it seems, no longer means what it once did.”

“That’s less than ten minutes...”

“We are on a very strict schedule, had you come earlier we might have had more time.” This time the nun’s smile was full of teeth and venom.

“I see. Very well, then, let’s begin. What can you tell me of Cassandra’s time here at the Sacred Hearts?”

“I have been here for the past forty-two years; I imagine I have forgotten much of what has happened in that time.”

“Were you here the day she was brought to the convent?”

“Yes, I was here.”

“And how did she seem?”

“Tired.”

“Would you say that her time here was happy? Did she exhibit any type of mental problems, or have any difficulties with the other...”

“Sisters? No, not that I recall. Cassandra was a quiet, shy girl who kept to herself mostly, but I do believe she was quite... happy here.”

“And did she ever tell you about her past, her time prior to coming here?”

“Miss Veda, I’m not sure you understand the nature of our monastery. We are a contemplative cloister where we work, live, and pray in silence. No one here does much talking at all, and when we do it’s most certainly about the worship, love, and contemplation we have for our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Ashlyn ground her teeth as understanding sunk in. This woman had no intentions of giving her any real information, she was just here as a mouthpiece for the church, here to cover up, conceal, and obscure any real facts. The question that haunted Ashlyn was *why*?

“Whose decision was it to place the child into such a restrictive convent?”

“Well I don’t know how I could possibly know that. You should speak with the social workers who brought her to us.

“Would you by any chance remember their names, or have their contact information?”

“I can look, we keep immaculate records. However it will probably take some time as I am uncertain where to begin looking.”

Surely not in a file marked Cassandra, Ashlyn thought as she looked over the long list of questions, and then at the time. Less than seven minutes remained in her allotted time, and she didn’t know which of the questions should take precedence. Then, making up her mind, she shut off her tablet, placed it back inside her bag, and then got to her feet.

“Thank you for your time Sister.”

“That’s it then? No more questions?”

“Just one.”

The nun’s left eyebrow crept up her forehead as she waited for Ashlyn to speak.

“Did Cassandra ever see a physician during her stay here?”

Ashlyn had to hide her own self-satisfied smile as the nun’s eyes grew wide as saucers.

“Why, I’m not certain. I’d have to check our records.”

“I’m sure that a young girl of Cassandra’s age must have been immunized, been to the dentist, had at least one physical.” Ashlyn pushed the woman, and the woman pushed back.

“We are not a typical convent Ms. Veda, once we enter the cloister we do not leave. Ever. Not until the day we die. We live, work, and die here. Surely you can understand that trips to the dentist are not considered a priority when our mission is the salvation of the entire world.”

Ashlyn gave a quick snort of derision. “The salvation of the entire world?”

“Why yes, through prayer, through our communion with Him, we give ourselves, our lives, our energies, so that He may save as many souls as He possibly can. It is our duty, our only duty, to serve Him so that He may once again return,” Sister Margret Mary said proudly. Then, with a sad shake to her head she said, “Teeth, you understand, are nowhere near as important as that.”

“No, I suppose not,” Ashlyn said, as she pulled four eight-by-eleven photos from her bag.

“However...” Ashlyn began sharply, as she eyed the raptor-like woman intently.

“I found these...” she said handing the woman the first two photos.

“...in Cassandra’s file. They’re pictures of the injuries and scars she had at the time she was *rescued*.” Ashlyn said the word ‘rescued’ with every ounce of irony she could muster.

“Horrific to say the least. Just thinking about what such a young girl must have endured in order to sustain all of those scars,” Ashlyn said shaking her head. “And yet, as you can see here,” she continued, as she handed the woman the two remaining photos. “...there are a great-many more scars evident in the photos that were just recently taken. Too many scars and injuries to count, and many of them received sometime after those first two photos were taken.”

The pale nun grew even paler as she gave a quick glance to the photos she held in her hand. Yet her face grew even sterner.

“How do you account for this?” Ashlyn asked the woman pointedly.

“She must have done it to herself,” the nun said with a defiant sneer.

“But you said she was happy here,” Ashlyn reminded her politely.

“She was... strange,” the woman hissed.

“She was in your care, is what she was. And I can’t see how you didn’t know.”

“God reveals the truth only as he sees fit,” the woman barked back.

“So you’re telling me you honestly didn’t know?”

“Know? Know what?”

And there it was – the lie.

Ashlyn had heard horrible things about the Catholic Church, about their pedophile priests, their crime-lord connections, and their abuse of power in third-world countries, but to have it staring you in the face, to have it in the guise of an innocent nun, it was enough to turn Ashlyn’s stomach.

“I’m afraid we are out of time,” the erect nun stated through a tight and well-controlled smile, a smile that was the exact opposite of warm and friendly, a smile that made Ashlyn want to run from the sanctuary. If only she could.

“Then thank you for your time.”

The nun nodded at Ashlyn’s words, and then turned on her bare feet and stalked off, back through the door she’d come in by. And a second later Ashlyn heard the click of the lock, and then the metal-on-metal scraping sound.

As she was slipping out of the heavy wooden doors, several nuns in their brown and white habits were coming into the chapel, this time with scrub brushes and mops in hand.

Outside, a single nun stood by the fountain. It was the woman from earlier, the one with the handcart, the one the round sister had called Sister Cara Charity. Ashlyn guessed the woman was in her late twenties or early thirties, but she had a look about her that would make it easy to mistake her for someone much younger. *Innocence maybe... no, naivety*, Ashlyn thought.

“Good day Sister,” Ashlyn said, as she passed the woman on the way to her car.

But she stopped abruptly when she heard the tiny chirp of a voice behind her.

“Excuse me,” it said.

Ashlyn turned and looked at the wide-eyed nun.

“Yes?”

“You’re here about Cassandra?”

“Yes.”

“She was a friend of mine.”

“Was she?”

The woman gave a small, sad nod. Then, with her chin to her chest, she looked up and asked, “Is she okay?”

“No, I’m afraid she’s not. She’s in a lot of trouble. I’m trying to help her. Is there anything you can tell me, anything at all that will help me to... understand?”

Ashlyn knew she wasn’t supposed to be talking to the nun, but she’d be damned if she wasn’t going to take this opportunity to finally get some answers. The shy woman hesitated for a second and then opened her mouth to speak. But before she could say anything, the door to the chapel opened and Sister Margaret Mary’s head poked out.

“Sister Cara Charity, Sister Cara Charity, you’re to have your cell inspected. Come here at once.” Ashlyn wasn’t imagining the flinch the young woman gave as her name was called. Looking back to Sister Margaret Mary, and then back to the nun, she knew she had lost her opportunity. Not wanting to let it go entirely, Ashlyn slipped her hand into her pocket and palmed one of her business cards. Then in a gesture as old as time, she reached out to shake the woman’s hand. Confused at first, the nun hesitated.

“Sister Cara Charity! It’s time for your inspection!” the irate nun barked from the doorway.

Blushing scarlet, Sister Cara thrust her hand into Ashlyn’s, and gave it a quick, delicate shake.

“It was nice to meet you,” Ashlyn said firmly, before she turned and made her slow way back to her car.

2 Mason

There were a multitude of reasons why Mason Harlow should cooperate with the authorities. For one thing - everything he had worked his entire life for was in jeopardy. And Mason knew a scandal of this magnitude would essentially murder his already floundering career. Of course, there were those that would say 'no press is bad press', but Mason knew in his heart-of-hearts that that was simply not the case. And even though it was a well-worn cliché, it was still a lie, nonetheless.

One only had to look at Weinstein or Cosby to see the truth of this. Because, accused or proven guilty, the same holds true – rapists, cheaters, and cowards do not fare well in today's media.

And when one contemplated all the many and horrific ways the leaked photos could and would be taken, well it didn't take a genius to figure out that Mason's career, and his reputation, were very much on the line. But the truth was, no matter how Mason's agent spun it, the images were already out there – open for interpretation, disseminated across all forms of communication, and there was just no way of getting them back, no way of undoing what had already been done.

But what was worse for Mason, in fact, far-far worse to his mind at least, was the statement his assistant Byron had made to the police. Which of course is telling, now when one thinks of it.

And a bit ironic in a sick and uncomfortable way, as it had been 'honor', above all else, that Jack Harlow had tried to beat into his son. By all means necessary, the prominent cattleman from Eastern Australia had tried to impart upon his only son the importance of 'family', and even more-so the importance of 'honor'. And by all accounts, Jack was just that, an honorable family man, and a pillar of the community. And never once did he fail to do what was right and noble, for all that were concerned; except perhaps for his own family, whom he never seemed to forget to neglect, in favor of the 'larger' picture.

Still, 'name' and 'family' was everything to the rough-cut man, and the fact that his only living child was now being labeled a sexual deviant at best, and a sexual predator at worst – well... Mason was sure it was enough to destroy the nearly indomitable man.

Finally, Mason had accomplished what his father had always feared most of his prodigal son – total and utter disgrace. No doubt the pictures alone had been enough to topple the titan.

Of course, later, Mason would come to think of this as karmic, as he still carried the indelible scars his father's strict lessons had left behind; scars that had fused skin and bone, scars that would forever interweave for him the dichotomy of joy and hate, love and fear, suffering and success. Scars that, even though he would never admit it, and even though eight-thousand miles separated them, left him cold with fear. Because even now he feared the man, every bit as much as he loved him.

Oddly it was this ability, to feel both love and enmity towards a person that enabled Mason to excel in his chosen field, enabled him to call forth a cry of anguish on cue, to laugh on cue, and most especially... to rage on cue. And it was all because of Jack, and that bottomless-well of inspiration that had been Mason's childhood.

Because for sixteen years Jack Harlow had been the lease-holder of Mason's life and he had ruled with an iron fist.

And for sixteen years Mason had plotted his escape.

And not just because of his father's temper. But also because ranching had never been for him, for Mason simply had no taste for it, for the blood and shit of it, for the life and death of it. And instead, acting had called his name, and he had answered.

Actually, it had discovered him at the rodeo.

He'd been showing off his roping skills to a bunch of city-girls dressed in polished cowboy boots and designer dukes, when fate had finally stepped in.

'It was out behind the bull tent,' he'd say when he would tell the story to his friends, knowing that his self-deprecating humor was the best part of his personality. 'Knee deep in cow shit and drenched in sweat...' he would proclaim with a devilish, self-abasing grin.

"Oh my god Amelia! He's perfect!" a woman screeched, as she and another woman descended upon him from out of nowhere.

"Wouldn't he be just perfect?" she asked her friend.

Mason, for his part, had just turned sixteen therefore he was too stupid to be scared and too ignorant to be excited, so instead he simply watched on with amusement as the two over-dressed vultures pecked him over.

"He's got the eyes. What color are they?" the taller one asked, clucking like an excited hen.

Mason just chuckled and tossed them a shrug.

"How would you like to be a movie star kid?"

From the stench of over-exaggerated wealth, Mason hadn't for second doubted their intentions. A mistake he would never make again.

But back then, with his rope curling between his fingers, Mason had been completely naive to the vaingloriousness of autocratic wealth. So, with an air of boredom he let the rope slide through his deft hands, to form a perfect loop. Then, with that cocky grin he favored most, he let the loop drop to the dirt before he began to spin it, a couple inches above the ground. Around and around in circles, in an almost hypnotic rhythm, it spun. Then, after a long-lazy moment of watching the rope, he finally looked up and asked, "When do we leave?"

Two days later he was in LA starring in his first music video, and a month after that, his first movie. And it was like that, with a snap, his whole life had clicked into place. Finally something had come easy to him. Well, easy enough that he hadn't once looked back and wished he'd stayed at the ranch. Until now, when he was as far from it as he'd ever come. Until he had hit rock bottom. And bounced.

He was pretty sure this was rock bottom. His producers had called; they'd suspended filming and were quite frank in their desire to replace him as their lead. Apparently there was a clause in the contract about embarrassing or questionable behavior.

No doubt they'd heard what everyone else had heard, what Byron had told the police... that Mason Harlow had been taken prisoner by a woman and tortured for days. Sure he'd escaped,

but now, not cooperating with authorities, there was speculation that it had all been some S&M sexcypade gone wrong. No doubt drugs were involved. Mason had heard every variation on the story, except the one that was the truth.

But of all the stories that were running rampant across every news station, it was the reports of drug use that really stuck in his craw. Because though he was a lot of things: narcissistic, irresponsible, moody, stingy, hot-headed, a bit of a drinker, you name it, there was one thing he most definitely was not, and that was a druggie. Because of all the promises he'd made in his life, and he only really recalled the one, it was the one he'd made to his sister Jullee, just days before she had died, when he'd finally confessed to her his secret desire to leave the ranch forever and never look back, that mattered most to him.

But now the whole world thought he was drinking tiger's blood and snorting cocaine. And the more he kept quiet, the more he refused to tell his side of the story, the more people believed it too.

He wanted to scream. This was all Byron's fault. If he hadn't gone to the police, Mason wouldn't be sitting in the interrogation room, staring at an obstinate Indian woman, wondering if his career was already too far down the toilet to be saved.

Yet if it hadn't been for Perez's photos, which had started the whole thing rolling, Byron's strange accusations might have been brushed off as just the mad ramblings of a disgruntled employee. Perez was the one who had it in for Mason. And it was Perez that had been there, at ever sour turn his life had ever taken. So it was Perez then, that truly deserved his wrath.

Regardless, Mason remained silent, despite the raging firestorm in the media, despite the 'evidence' that was piling up, and despite the certain repercussions within his own family. He held his tongue, in the end, because it was the only thing he had left to offer Cassandra. It was the only thing he could do to finally prove himself to her.

"You don't have to testify," the woman said. She'd introduced herself as a criminal psychiatrist who had been brought in to persuade him to testify against Cassandra. Three days in a row he'd been called in to the Austin Police Department, and every day the doctor had tried to convince him just how prudent it would be for him to tell the truth.

"Between Byron's statement, and all of the physical evidence we've collected at the scene..."

Mason cringed because he knew 'the scene' meant Cassandra's basement, and he had no trouble imagining the kinds of 'evidence' they had found there.

"...we have enough to put Cassandra away for a very long time."

From the look on the woman's face, Mason was pretty sure she had assumed he would be pleased by this bit of information. So then when he frowned, her eyes narrowed somewhat.

"Unless... that's not what you want..." she said, letting her words just sort of hang there in the air, as she scrutinized his face.

He was holding his tongue because it was the only thing he could do for Cassandra. Mason knew that if he told the truth things would surely only get worse for her. And, when he thought about it, he also knew he wasn't smart enough to concoct a lie that would be pliant enough to stand up to the rigorous scrutiny of a major investigation. Surly any lie he could concoct on the fly

would unravel. And that would only make things worse, not only for Cassandra, but for him as well.

“There’s a reason she took you hostage. There’s a reason she tortured you…” the woman continued.

Mason knew that despite the overwhelming ‘evidence’, they would be lacking the one thing that would finish the case, the one thing that would tie it all up in a nice, neat little bow. They needed a motive, a reason the young woman did what she did. After all how often does a woman take a man hostage?

Mason chuckled under his breath when he thought of the absurdity of it. Men on the other hand… well, they could be counted on to be monsters. But women… woman usually aimed their destructiveness inward.

“What’s so funny?” the doctor asked, sounding a bit more annoyed than Mason thought she should.

“Nothing.”

“I need your help Mason. I need you to make sure Cassandra goes away for a very long time.”

Mason contemplated what it would be like to live in a world without Cassandra. He’d only just met her a few weeks ago, yet already the thought of her locked away, out of his reach, forever, sent an ice-cold shiver racing up his spine.

For him, keeping silent was definitely the worst thing he could do. The crazy stories of ‘out-of-control S&M sex’ and ‘an ex-girlfriend gone mad’ had blazed in an out-of-control wildfire through the media. And after just a couple of days of watching HLN and CNN Mason knew that holding his tongue was nothing short of professional suicide. But what other choice did he have? He would protect Cassandra at all costs, even if that cost was his pride… and his name. And yet even with his silence he didn’t know if there was even the slightest chance she would get off.

And… if he did speak, would anyone understand?

Mason scrubbed at his scruffy beard with his fingers. *Has it really been a week?* he wondered as he gazed into the one-way mirror on the opposite wall. It surprised him how old he looked, how tired and old. *I look like hell*, he thought, which brought another breathy chuckle from the bottom of his belly. He did look like hell, and he certainly felt like hell, and truth be told – he’d gone through hell.

He chuckled again, deep in his throat this time. And yet, he had survived; he’d beaten the beast and lived to tell the tale. He laughed again when he realized how that thought seemed to change everything. Now, suddenly, looking back from this side of things… it all seemed so… funny.

“I’ll be damned,” he said, sounding somewhat mystified.

“Is something wrong?” the doctor asked, puzzled by his sudden outburst. She’d been in the middle of her standard monologue; the same one she’d used the last two times. ‘Mason, I can only help you if you help me. Help me help you Mason. You’re clearly a victim here; don’t take responsibility for what she’s done.’

When they first told Mason he'd be speaking to a criminal psychiatrist he'd assumed he'd be speaking to a balding, old-fart with an exaggerated superiority complex. But instead he'd been confronted by this very unassuming woman, with the most pleasing voice he'd ever heard. Resonant, it seemed to float to him on a wave of relaxation. Mason supposed she must have learned it in shrink school, along with the other nefarious tools; she would no doubt try to use to get inside his head.

He did have to give it to her though; she'd been very persistent, verging on the neurotic even, in her tenacious attempt to get at the truth. He doubted that one-in-a-hundred would have stuck with it so long.

However, from the sound of it, she was just about to give up, only she didn't quite know it yet. But that had been before he'd laughed. It was a small chuckle really; an idle thought that had led his mind astray. *What was it?* He almost lost it now.

Oh yes, I survived... He scrubbed at his face again and smiled. The good doctor took note of that as well. Sitting back in her chair, her gorgeous, brown eyes laser-locked on his, she regarded him intently. That made him smile even more. And the smile in-turn melted the tension that had held him rigid, stuck in what felt like suspended animation, for the past week.

And suddenly it was easy, the smile, the laugh; life suddenly seemed funny again. Almost.

He had fallen, to the deepest of depths, and he had lived. He had survived. And now everything else paled in comparison when he thought about what he'd been through, what he'd survived. Surely anything would be easy compared to that.

Surely he could do something, say something that could set everything to right. *How hard could it be really?* he thought. After everything he'd been through, surely nothing could be so hard as that.

He smiled again, this time a bit less manically, this time with a bit of thought behind it, and then he sat up slowly, from the slouched position he'd assumed just as soon as he'd taken his seat in the dimly lit gray-blue room.

"Are all interrogation rooms this color?"

"Excuse me?"

"It's god-awful really. Almost like a non-color. Not blue, not gray. Like it can't decide. You know what I mean?"

He was coming down from such dizzying heights, rising from such unfathomable depths; it was a bit difficult to keep his eyes on the prize. For the past week he'd been a bundle of broken bits all jammed into a too-small space. His mind having been blown to bits and then reassembled on the spot, he was just now becoming a shadow of his former self. And with that shred of self came... an epiphany.

There would be a right way and a wrong way, to go about what he was about to do; and the sad truth of it was he had no idea which was which, but suddenly Mason knew he at least had to try.

And, even though he was nervous of the outcome, unsure of his own intelligence to navigate the treacherous path he was about to embark upon, the decision lifted an enormous weight

off of his chest, and for the first time in a week he could finally breathe. Mason sucked greedily at the fresh tasting air and smiled a broad, confident smile.

“You seem to have decided something,” the doctor said, getting to her feet with the aid of her elbow-crutches. He laughed again when her velvet voice echoed his thoughts so completely, evaporating any last hint of hesitation within him. And along with the hesitation went the nervous stomach and the grinding sense of doom that had lain upon him these last few days.

“I have.”

The good doctor regarded the bruised and battered man, her eyes steady and unflinching.

Still, when he spoke, he said his words slowly so there would be no confusion. “I want to tell you, what happened, all of it. But... only so you can understand. I don’t even know really, if I can convey it to you in a meaningful way... so that you can understand, but I want to try.”

“For her sake?” the doctor asked, leaning in a bit.

A dark look passed over Mason’s eyes. “No. For yours.” His words were dead calm, flat, and his face matched them perfectly.

How could she possibly understand? the voice in his head asked. And all though it wasn’t his own, he still listened. Because what was left for him? Cassandra had taken away his innocence, or at the very least his naivety, and replaced it with what? Paranoia and an emptiness so profound he was surprised it didn’t take up physical space. It was like a black hole in the center of his chest. And the fact that the pain he now felt, the very real physical pain of it, was just a matter of thought, well... that somehow made it significantly worse.

He imagined that if it were a physical emptiness he could at least attempt to fill it in; with a new car, a vacation to Italy, or a new girlfriend perhaps.

But there would be nothing that could fill the hole that Cassandra left, nothing except for her memories. And if he could tell this woman about Cassandra, if he could talk about her, relive what happened, maybe he could fill in that emptiness just enough so he didn’t constantly feel as though his blood was spilling out of an open wound, at too-fast a rate to staunch.

If not, well... then he’d be dead soon. Because surely he would bleed out and die if he didn’t do something. Physical or not, people didn’t live long with wounds like this, you didn’t have to be a genius to figure that out.

“For my sake?” the psychiatrist asked through a beautiful smile.

With an air of diffidence Mason said, “You can’t see the truth of it now; it’s too expansive to see by glimpses only. To really see her, to see Cassandra, is to view the distant horizon, from west to east, north to south. It’s only then, when you understand the magnitude of her, by stepping back and looking at everything together, that you’ll finally understand.”

Mason borrowed the analogy from Jack, who had often used it in reference to the Australian sky. Jack was a closet poet.

“And you’re going to help me with that, help me understand Cassandra?”

“I reckon.”

“Why?”

“Because the truth shall set us free.” Mason cringed at the stupid cliché his acting coach used to bandy about, but the truth was, he didn’t have an excuse, not one the psychiatrist would believe or even understand, so instead he’d rattled off some nonsense, hoping she’d go along with it. He suspected she would, if it meant getting at the truth, and not just the easy-peasy truth, but the full bloody, gory truth, the naked, screaming agonizing truth.

“I suppose you think that if I understand her she might get some leniency in her sentencing, maybe you could even get her off completely?”

Mason gave a slight nod to his head.

The doctor shook hers in reply.

“Why?”

“Because she tortured you. She held you captive for over three days, nearly killing you in the process. You don’t just slap a person on the wrist for that.”

Mason’s lip and brow gave a tiny twitch as he forced himself not to react to her words. Of course it didn’t help, that he knew Cassandra’s tally didn’t begin or even end with him.

The doctor eyed him curiously as she continued to speak. “She almost killed you.” She looked meaningfully at the very visible marks around his neck. “Nothing you say in her defense could possibly gain her any support. It’s clear you’ve been physically and emotionally traumatized by her. Your testimony then would be biased.”

“But not in her favor... not after what she’s done...” Mason sounded petulant, even to his own ears, and even as he had said the words, he knew what the doctor’s response would be. Even so, he cringed when the words came out of her mouth.

“Stockholm Syndrome is a real and diagnosable condition. It’s not at all rare for individuals to exhibit such traits after such a devastating time in captivity.”

“I’m not... I don’t have Stockholm syndrome.” *Ya, that-a-boy, that’ll convince her.*

He tried again. “If you understood it all, if you understood why she did it, what it’s meant, what it was supposed to mean, then you’d have no choice but to go easy on her.”

The doctor paused at the door with her hand on the handle, as she contemplated his words. And when she spoke again it was with such tenderness Mason could almost overlook the pity in her eyes.

“What you have gone through...” her eyes went to his throat, to his chest, to his thighs, and then came slowly back to his face; ashen and drawn, it was colored in unmasked pain. “You’ve suffered immensely and I don’t want to add to that, but I do need to know what happened. And we need to make sure that this doesn’t happen again.”

“And that’s why I’ll tell you.” Mason’s smile was forced, but for all of his acting lessons he was certain it would simply appear warm and gentle.

But he knew she didn’t understand. *How could she?* He was going to have to explain it to her so that she could. So that she could see what it’s meant... catching Cassandra. How it changed everything. And despite everything, how he would never, ever want to go back to a time when she wasn’t in his life. So he would explain to the shrink how even the very thought of living in a world without Cassandra was... unbearable.



“I thought we’d be meeting in your office but instead you have two policemen escort me from my hotel, in the back of a squad car! With all the press watching! With the whole fucking world watching!” Mason realized he was yelling, that the anger was getting the better of him, but fear was clouding his thinking.

When he’d agreed to speak to the doctor the day before, he imagined she would dispense with the scare tactics. He had assumed that when they met again it would be in her office, and that he’d be sprawled out on her leather sofa, spilling his guts in a nice comfortable setting.

“I said I was gonna cooperate. You don’t have to treat me like I’m a goddamn criminal. After-all, weren’t you the one that said I was the victim in all of this? Is this how you treat victims? If it is, remind me to never come back to Texas.” Mason took a deep breath and tried to regain his focus. It wasn’t going to do him or Cassandra any good if he couldn’t hold it together.

The doctor smiled pleasantly. “We weren’t sure you had a ride, and I’m sorry about their attitude. I guess not everyone is a fan.” She was being smug, and not at all like the woman from the day before, before he’d agreed to talk, without a lawyer. He wondered again if he wasn’t playing the fool for speaking to her.

“Did you hear me?”

“What?”

“I asked if you wanted anything to drink.” Her dark brown eyes were locked on his, so he focused on that, remembered his training and sat back, took another deep breath, and remembered that he was the one in control here, not her.

“That would be great. I’ll take a Coke, and one of the cigs they took from me, if you don’t mind?”

“I thought I read you quit smoking last year?”

“Some habits are just so damn hard to break.”

“I’ve heard that.”

“Why are we doing this here? Why aren’t we in your office?”

“We’re here because this is a criminal investigation, because here we can record it so there won’t be any confusion later on, and here because this is where I work.”

Just then the door opened, and a small woman in her mid-forties came into the dull-gray room carrying a can of Coke and a glass of ice. She set both in front of the doctor and then retreated just as quickly as she’d come. The doctor slid the items across the table to Mason.

“So, I take it people are watching us, listening to everything I say?”

The doctor smiled a very predatory smile, full of teeth and menace.

“Like I said, this is a criminal investigation.”

Mason cracked open the can of Coke and poured it into the glass. Not because he wanted it cold, he actually preferred it straight out of the can, but he needed time to collect his thoughts. This hadn't gone at all like he had wanted it to. He had imagined that once he had agreed to talk, they would have moved their conversation somewhere more private. Now god only knew who was watching. And only god knew how this would all play out in the media.

“Mason?” Are you ready?” She was looking at him again, as if she'd spoken and he hadn't heard. Did he lose time again? He was going to have to be more careful.

“Yeah. Yeah, I'm ready.”

“Well, where would you like to begin?”

“Where all stories should I guess, at the beginning,” he said forgoing the comfy couch, forgetting the silent witnesses behind the one-way mirror, forgetting everything except his purpose... recalling Cassandra.



“I'd been in Austin about a week and already I was crawling the ceiling, because the movie I came here to make, *Bedroom Bandits*, is quite possibly the worst movie I've ever agreed to do. And that's saying something. Seriously, it takes a certain mentality to do formulaic fluff like this. I don't know. Maybe it's something in my DNA that just won't let me relax and have fun unless I'm hacking someone apart, or just being pissy in general.

But... as my rather apathetic agent, Paz Pennick, so poignantly put it... my career was in the toilet and the only way he saw of resuscitating it was to fill out my rather shallow repertoire with a romantic comedy. Of course, everyone thought Jess Kingston was gonna 'knock it out of the park' with her latest and greatest. But if you ask me, it's an inane script, and the talent... don't get me started on the talent.

Of course it didn't help that that Sydney wanker Craig Stone had originally been cast in the lead. Only he ducked out the first week citing difficulties with producers. But everyone knew he pulled out because he got a better gig.

So they called me in... seeing as I wasn't already engaged.

But it didn't help matters that everywhere I turned I was reminded that Stone had been their first choice, and that I was there, merely sucking up his sloppy seconds. Don't get me wrong. I don't want to sound like I'm whining or anything. It's just, it was literally staring me in the face, every day – from the promotional posters that were hung on every available surface, to the writing on my chair – Shit it still says *Craig Stone*. I mean seriously. They couldn't get that changed?

So, as you can imagine, when they called it a wrap early on a Wednesday, due to technical difficulties or some such thing, I practically raced out the door. Shit, I didn't even tell Byron where I was going. Not that I really knew myself.

And Mac's just happened to be the first pub I came across that didn't look like a hipster hang out or a honky-tonk joint. And I guess you could say it was luck that put me in Cassandra's section. Not that she was my type really, or that I was looking for someone to fill in the emptiness that had started taking up too much of my time.

But there she was...

Long hair tied back in a sloppy bun, a million stray strands sticking out in a thousand different directions, no make-up, showing off her perfectly freckled nose. Hell, even her clothes weren't anything special. In fact, you could say they had the distinctive look of a thrift-store plundering, sort of a sloppy haphazard disarray of things. Like her floral dress that looked to be too short and her knotty wool sweater that looked two-sizes too big. Even her white runners left me with the feeling she'd been plucked from a homeless shelter.

Everything about her seemed out of place in that loud Irish pub. Even the way she moved was a contradiction, as if she were at odds with her own body; at times slow and graceful, she seemed to float around the room, moving from one place to the next, without the slightest hurry or misstep. And then there were other times, when that grace would falter, and you could see a trembling fear beneath the surface. You could see it in the way her eyes darted from one person to the next, then back to the bar, and then over each of the exits. It was as if she was in a near-constant state of fear.

And then sometimes... with her face a dark thundercloud of worry, with her brow scrunched into a tight knot in the middle of her forehead, her eyes would become the still, dark pools of time unending, locked and fixed. And they held with the gravity of greed.

"What can I get you?" she asked arriving at my table.

"What do you recommend?"

"A beer," she said tiredly, as her eternal eyes stared right through me.

"That's helpful. What do you have on tap?"

At that, her face fixed into a new scowl, one dappled in concentration, as she tried to recall the first thing every decent waitress learns; the beer list.

Tell me, have you ever delighted in another person's discomfort?

Enjoyed in another person's moment of panic?

As if you could absorb their adrenaline through osmosis, when you can just feel it radiate off of them, like a toxic breach? It was like that with Cassandra, from the beginning.

After an enthralling ten seconds, she began the slow recitation of the beer list.

And when she was done, a short-redhead walked by and jabbed her in the ribs – hard. Reflexively, Cassandra smiled a huge, fake smile. And I had to bite my lip – hard, so I wouldn't laugh out loud. Clearly she had attitude issues. And I guess you could say I've always been a sucker for trouble makers.

I imagine most people probably saw her as just some awkward young woman, with dead-of-night eyes, and a piss-poor disposition. But all I could see was a wonderful mystery.

Like the way she dressed, like a young girl, all innocent and such. But her hips... what she could do with them... and the way she walked... and moved. I could just tell she was anything but an innocent girl.

“What do you prefer?” I asked by way of coaxing her into speaking.

Cassandra gave a lifeless shrug and looked back to the bar, to the huge man pulling drinks at the tap. Fortunately, his attention was elsewhere; otherwise I’m not sure what might have happened.

“So? What will it be?” she asked turning back to me, her pen rapping rather aggressively on her notepad.

“A Guinness,” I said, quickly recalling the first thing she’d said.

“You want a twenty or a thirty-six?” she growled.

Clearly she was not impressed, which made me all the more determined to stay, so I ordered the thirty-six. But before I could say anything else, she walked away.

I spent the next thirty-five minutes trying to talk to her, despite her obstinate mood, or perhaps because of it. Because part of me was desperate to make her smile, to see her full mouth curl into what I suspected was a perfect bow.

After a while though, some of the other people in the pub were starting to look and mumble at each other. Some of them were even beginning to place me as *that* actor. For good or for bad, my status as an actor follows me, and there’s not much I can do about it. Except duck my head and hope that nobody makes a big deal about it. Thankfully, Austin has seen its share of actors lately, and for the most part everyone left to me to my drink, which the enigmatic waitress had deposited in front of me, without ceremony, before quickly walking away again.

It was fascinating watching her those first few hours, and I suspect that’s when I first came under her spell. It sounds funny, to say it like that out loud, I know. To think it is one thing. And saying it now makes me feel just like a school boy talking about his first crush. But please believe me when I tell you it’s so much more than that.

And to merely say she was stunning simply wouldn’t cover it. Nor could I say she was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen, which simply wouldn’t be the truth, because it’s so much more complicated than that.

And even if I were to tell you about the deep chestnut color of her hair, and how the tiny wisps that fell at her neck drove me mad with longings, you still could not begin to understand. Even if I told you how her skin, the indeterminate hue of a number of races, all blended together to make the most perfect color, made me ache desperately to touch it, you could still not begin to fathom it. Nor even if I told you how her ass bent, at the most perfect angle, to kiss the tops of her thighs, it would still surely fail to convey the urgency I felt whenever I looked at her.

Everything about her was like some wonderful mystery waiting to be solved, a puzzle needing to be put back together. Was she the fidgety nervous girl that at times looked as if she was ready to bolt out the door, running at full-speed from some unseen danger, or was she the

marble statue that could be so still, so quiet, for minutes on end, you would swear she was not real?

Almost fetishily timid, there were moments during those first long hours I spent watching her, that she seemed quite lonely and depressed, and then at other times a flirtatiousness and boldness seemed to leak out of her, in the most unexpected ways, and suddenly the opposite seemed to be true.

Which was the façade? Which was the truth? I suspected that perhaps the truth lie somewhere between. But suspecting was the intoxicant, and I was already addicted. From those first few moments, I wanted to unravel this strange girl, to plumb her depths, to discover who she was and what made her the saddest creature I had ever seen. And I guess a part of me wanted to be the one, the only one, who could fix her; who could make that elusive smile come and never again disappear.

3 Cassandra

“Ask a slave what freedom means and they’ll tell you it’s a song on the wind, the uptake of clean fresh air after a storm, it’s the dark night filled with stars and the gentle moans of your lover, why it’s the whisper of a dream and the sound a newborn makes just before it cries. But those are just the imaginings of people who know-not the true meaning of freedom because the word itself has been held hostage, held hostage by the very-same people that have held them captive, held fast their lives in too-small a grasp, chain-taut, whip-ready.

Ask me now what freedom means and I’ll tell you it’s an upraised fist, it’s a cry in the night, and it is war, endless, eternal war, and I should not give up a second of it in place of the first. For dreams cannot replace reality, they only lull us into forgetting, into complacency, into silent obedience, and in that obedience we find not ourselves, but our captor, reflected back a million fold. Freedom is not safety; it’s not some lover’s embrace. Freedom, true honest to God freedom is cold hard fear, and the embracement of possibilities, and nothing more. And yet that’s everything.

When they came for me I didn’t know I was a slave. I mean, how can one know such a thing, when one’s life has been wholly defined by the prison they were born into? And my captor, Sykes, Well, he was a colossus, a tyrant, larger than life and for me, the definer of heaven and hell, of life and death. And in his world I was but a toy, a doll for him to play out his wicked fantasies with.

I was also the oldest; exceeding the age of all the other girls by three years at least. And yet I remained his favorite, which afforded me some respect, and a certain degree of power. And though by no means would I describe my life as happy or even content, the day they came for me I was as close to it as I’d ever been.

They came before the noise on the street had started for the day; and the rains from the previous night, that still soaked the roads and walkways, muted the harshness of their boots on the pavement. The sounds of their arrival, eaten up by the clouds that hung low in the sky threatening another bout of rain, were the sounds of muted thunder long off. And everything was a hazy gray; the men, their faces, the guns gripped firmly in their hands, as I watched from my high window perch as they filed out of five big, black vans; while Sykes lay snoring on his overly-large bed that encompassed much of his small back bedroom.

We were on the third floor of an old warehouse in the poorer part of downtown El Paso. I knew that because in the months prior to the raid I had been planning my escape. And I often wondered in the months, then years, after my ‘rescue’ what would have happened had I not quivered at the thought of the unknown, had I the guts to free myself in those days, and weeks, prior to the bust.

But there is one thing I did know for certain, that I would never have found my way to the Carmelite Convent of the Sacred Hearts. Nor would I ever have met Father Cormac. And I would never have endured all of his pain-filled lessons.

Even now I wonder sometimes where I might have ended up.

In the first days after being ‘rescued’ I allowed myself the fantasy that all would be well, and someday I would find my way into a loving home complete with parents, a dog, maybe even a sister to braid my hair. Though, if I’m being honest, I don’t care much for children, and only ever considered them as competition.

However, just like Sykes often said... and the months and years of my internment also proved... *‘life is a cruel mistress’*.

Late at night in my cloistered cell, I often wondered what I had done wrong to warrant such a punishment. Then once, when I was less than careful with my words, I wondered that very thing aloud. Unfortunately Father Cormac overheard, and was more than willing to enlighten me.

But... I get ahead of myself.

You asked what life was like before I came to the convent. Well it’s hard to say really. One day blends so completely into the next when all of them are punctuated by the same horrors. But, should I try to remember back as far as I am able, I see only Sykes and his fat face and meaty fingers, that often smelled of chicken wings.

I did ask him once, how it was I came to be *his*. And though he had often joked that he found me in a rubbish heap, or alongside the road, this one day he was particularly happy, and not yet drunk enough to slur, nor yet sober enough to be needlessly cruel, which was his typical way.

“Those were the old days baby, old times and dead years,” he said laughing into his beer.

“Please,” I begged, and he smiled even more.

“I won ya in a poker game,” he laughed. “And you were only an itty-bitty thing. But I knew... I knew,” he pounded his words into the table with his right index finger. “...you were gonna be a looker. And to this day you’ve been my number one seller,” he said to me with as much pride and conviction as I’d ever seen.

“To this day... Yes, ‘n deedy. I made a great haul that day... and the Welshman’s never once forgiven me.” The last of his words were said more to himself than to anyone in the room. And he said them with a fog in his voice that sounded an awful lot like regret.

But still I cringed when he said the name *the Welshman*. We all did. Because he was our boogeyman. A nightmare that came in the night and stole away all the pretty little girls. And there were always little girls to steal. For a substantial fee Sykes would make sure of it.

But a trip to the Welshman’s meant you were never coming back. So, for as bad as he was, Sykes was still preferable. And even though it meant living in Cockaigne, we all knew it was far better than spending even a second with the Welshman.

In Cockaigne, my days were spent cleaning up after Sykes and his guests. And Sykes always had guests, because within Cockaigne there were half a dozen rooms that Sykes would rent out, along with *time* with one (or more) of his children.

That’s what he called us, *his children*. And we were supposed to call him ‘papa’. I alone was special in that I could call him Sykes. And I think now that’s because I alone shared his bed, but perhaps it was because I was the only one not too frightened to try.

But it was my name that gave Sykes the most pleasure. Or rather my lack of one.

“What’s your name dear?” the angry woman in black asked as she pulled me to one side.

“She’s the *Witch of Fuck*, and her name is Git, Gimp, Trollop... Daisy.” Sykes was missing a few important teeth, so he said all of this with a lisp that made him sound like a lecherous old fool. The man that backhanded him said as much, as I watched a dribble of blood mixed with spit, leak from the corner of his mouth, as he laughed and laughed, because that was Sykes; too stupid to be scared, and too smart not to find it all so very amusing.

Sykes had an excellent lawyer, and he would be off in no time. He told them as much, over and over, as they drug him from his home and loaded him into a van.

“Mostly he calls me Squirrel Tooth Toni,” I told the angry woman in black.

In total there were eleven of us that day, and each of us received a number, mine was the number eight. And next to the number eight she wrote my age as ‘fifteen’. And though I couldn’t read at the time, I did know my numbers. Sykes had been sure to teach his children that much at least, lest one of his clients try to short-change him.

But when they took me to the physician, a little weasel of a man, he informed them my age was more likely thirteen. Of course he came to this conclusion only after a lengthy and thorough examination where his cold fingers kneaded my small, budding breasts and explored all of my various openings. And in his learned opinion I was pre-pubescent at best.

Yet if any of them had asked me, though none ever did, I would have told them that my ‘rescue’ didn’t seem to be much different than my time within Cockaigne; although there was now a steady stream of strangers telling me that everything was going to be ‘okay’, and that I was ‘safe’ now.

And yet the days that followed, well, I could easily say were some of the worst days of my entire life. So long as you don’t account for the time I spent with the Welshman, after he’d won me back in poker game. Fortunately for me though, Sykes had been reluctant to relinquish his favorite pet, and so it had only been for a month. But that had been long enough to understand why no one ever came back from visiting him; none except for me that is.

Over the course of the next three days I was shuffled between two foster homes and a group home, and the first place I landed was with a family of six. There I didn’t even last the night, because Darcy, the woman who ran the foster home, found me practicing my fellatio techniques on a ten-year-old boy and, well... threw a royal hissy-fit, right then and there, pulling me by my hair out into the hallway and then locking me in a closet, until the social workers could come and collect me.

To my defense, I was only proving the stupid boy wrong, I did in fact know what I was talking about.

I spent that night, and the better part of the next day, at the second foster home before once again I was made to leave. They had chosen that home because it was run by a couple who only took in girls. Of course, the reason they only took in girls was apparent within the first ten minutes of my stay there, the fact that the social workers were oblivious, well... that just tells you how well a liar can lie.

But, it’s like Sykes always said, ‘you can’t lie to a liar,’ so I confronted the man almost immediately. Though, looking back on it, I realize now some discretion would have suited me far-far better than the bold-faced truth.

You see, I wasn't looking to get him into trouble when I climbed up on his lap and put his hand between my legs, I was simply trying to fit in, to play my part, and show him I understood what was expected of me. Put simply, I was just trying to behave.

So I was more than a little shocked when he flat-out refused me. Because I knew he wanted it. And I knew his wife and the other girls all knew he wanted it too. Surely his predilections weren't a secret, not with the way his eyes lingered over breasts, and his hands brushed over flesh.

Why his not-so-subtle cues were so glaringly obvious; a blind person could have seen them. But there I was, being refused. And I was sure it was because of me; because something about me that was bad or distasteful, something about me turned him off. And I hated him for it.

Of course, knowing my history, the man and his wife blew off my behavior, thinking it was me, being my deranged and damaged self. And so I was sent to my room, to eat supper alone.

But later that night Mr. Foster Care paid me a visit.

"You don't ever do that sort of thing in front of my wife. Do you hear me? If you do I will beat you within an inch of your life. I swear to god. Here, now suck my dick," he said, obviously not understanding the kind of men I'd grown accustomed to. If a beating was the worst thing he had to offer, well... that just wasn't gonna do it, now was it?

You see, in all things patience is best, so I played along, performing magically. I daresay I gave him the best night of his life. And the next day, when I begged for a repeat, even though the intelligent part of his brain was screaming 'No!', he couldn't resist slipping into the shed with me. The fact that I had bribed one of the other girls to bring Mrs. Foster Lady out to the shed exactly ten minutes later... well, that was just me telling him he'd have to do a lot better than an empty threat if he hoped to control me.

Later that day Mr. Foster Care was taken away in handcuffs and I was hauled off to a group home filled with what I was told was similarly-disturbed youth. But after four hours in general population I was remanded to my room, and a conference had been called to discuss arrangements for my long-term care.

I believe it was the fact that, even in the confines of my room I still managed to find trouble that cinched the deal that sent me to The Sacred Hearts Convent. An orderly named Jinnifer had come in with my lunch, and she'd left crying and cradling her neck, where my teeth marks could clearly be seen.

I can't really say why I did it. I suppose I was just lashing out at the only thing I could reach. It wasn't her. It was me. I was broken. Clearly.

Maybe I am better off dead.

It was a thought that had been percolating at the back of my brain for as long as I can remember, and right then it was screaming at me. There was nothing to my life. I was a hollow shell, with nothing anybody wanted, except Sykes and he was gone. I stopped eating, stopped drinking, they couldn't even get me to shower or to move about at all.

I figured that death wouldn't care if I smelled and I didn't much care if anyone else did. What did they care for my happiness? I didn't owe them a thing.

The doctor arrived just before supper the next day with medication he injected into my arm. And as it took effect they loaded me into the back of a large SUV. But over the course of my short

and pathetic life I had been given a veritable pharmacy of drugs, so I never lost consciousness, like I'm sure they'd hoped I would.

Still, people will forget, or just dismiss what they don't want to know, and so for the entire three-hour ride to the convent I got to listen to the horrors of my life played back, as the two social workers, one man and the angry woman from the raid, discussed my cursed history.

As it turned out, the man, I never learned his name, was devoutly religious and was hoping that the nuns could save my soul, or at the very least, stop the darkness that was consuming me from infecting anyone else. He was more than certain a demon had taken up residency in my soul and would eventually consume me completely.

The woman on the other=had thought I was simply damaged and beyond repair. And at one point an argument broke out about whether or not I could even be saved.

"It's simply disgusting. I don't think anyone can overcome something so horrendous. Honestly, I don't think anyone really can, it just becomes part of you. You are what you are made of, and that sick bastard made her into a whore. And as far as I can tell that's all she'll ever be."

That brought a breathy chuckle from the man, who replied smoothly, "You can take the whore out of the brothel, but not the brothel outta the whore eh?"

They both chuckled at that one which infuriated me. But in my drugged stupor I didn't bother to do anything about it, or their constant barrage of insults and condemnations. Instead I let it seep into me like a poison, turning my blood to acid, and my heart to stone.

What can you do to the judge and jury that has weighed your soul and found it lacking? I could have raised the roof with an ear-splitting tantrum. I could have jumped from the car, hoping the pavement racing by would wipe clean the slate that I could never forget. Perhaps it could carry away all the weariness my fractured soul carried. After all, how much can a human heart hold?

None of that seemed worth the effort though. And chances-were I'd miss the pavement and wind up broken and bruised, but still very much alive. It just didn't seem worth the effort.

We arrived at the convent just after dark, when all of the nuns were gathered in the chapel for their evening prayers, all except for one. One, whom I later learned was a novice named Cara, was working in the gardens in the front enclosure. When we arrived she was there watching on, as Father Cormac lead us into the monastery, through a side door and down the front hall, to the business office.

I remember her presence not because she was the first nun I ever saw, which certainly was the case, but rather because of her enormous eyes, and the shocked look upon her face that made them grow exponentially larger as she realized that outsiders were infiltrating the Papal Enclosure. Something, I later learned, had not happened since Mother Mary Teresa had had her stroke a year before. Prior to that, no lay person had been allowed inside the Papal Enclosure for the better part of a century.

Cara, watching with wide eyes, followed us inside, and when Father Cormac turned to her and asked if she would fetch Sister Margaret Mary she nodded so fiercely I almost laughed as it seemed as if she'd just been asked to go face-to-face with a dragon.

Which I suppose was rather prescient as far as first impressions go.

In the end I was dumped into a chair in the corner of a small, tidy office, where I was once again forced to listen on as the people around me conversed openly about the state of my soul.

So there I was, in a convent of some god I did not know, my very soul on the line, and none of them thought to include me.

It was then I realized that captivity isn't so much a condition of one's body but rather a state of one's mind. Though, to be perfectly honest, it was a very long time before that salient thought did me an ounce of good.



Dr. Veda's wide eyes had been locked onto Cassandra's as she spoke. Cassandra, for her part, regarded the doctor coolly as her story drifted to an end.

Looking at the stunned and slightly horrified woman, Cassandra wondered briefly if maybe she should have started off on a slightly softer note. Perhaps she should have slowly eased the woman into the deplorable depths of her life, rather than pushing her in all at once. From the look on her face, Cassandra guessed she had misjudged the woman's fortitude.

When she'd first seen the frail-looking Indian woman with the metal arm crutches and twisted legs, she'd been impressed by what she had assumed was a pervasive optimism that enabled the woman to defy all of the unfortunate limitations placed upon her. And because of this, Cassandra had assumed the woman was made of tougher stuff than your normal human. But now, from the look of her, Cassandra had to admit there was a very real possibility she'd been wrong.

"That's what you asked; how it was I came to live at the convent?"

"Yes, that is what I asked." The doctor's voice was solid and a little of Cassandra's hope returned.

"Well, unless you're the type to want all of the sordid details, I guess that about sums it up," Cassandra said, as she snugged her arms more tightly around her knees, pulling them closer into her chest.

It'd been a lot to process, not only for the woman, but for Cassandra as well. And though she'd intended from the very beginning to tell the truth, the whole truth, or at least her part of it, she hadn't been at all prepared for what the telling of it would do. How each word would cinch tight the knots in her intestines, tighter and tighter, until they very nearly strangled the words from her, until the pain of it threatened to take her to the ground, and the only thing she could do was pull her knees up to her chest and pray for the pain to ease.

"How do you think you're dealing with your past? With the terrible things you've had to endure?" the doctor asked, her eyes never wavering from Cassandra's face. And now it was Cassandra's turn to feel uncomfortable. She'd given this woman the keys to the closet where she kept all of her darkest secrets, and at first Cassandra didn't really think anything of letting her in.

But, in seeing them herself, in owning them, as it were, well... that might have been more than she'd bargained for.

"It is what it is. There's no changing that."

"No, I suppose there isn't."

"How about we pick this up tomorrow afternoon?"

Cassandra wasn't quite sure why the doctor was asking. She was the one with all of the power here. Cassandra didn't even have the power to decide when she showered or what she ate. Those things were decided for her by her jailers, the staff at Austin General, where she was on an extended psych hold. The only time she ever got out of her room was for her meetings with the investigating psychiatrist, who preferred to conduct her interviews in a stark-white room, with nothing more than a table, a couple of chairs, and a video camera as company. There wasn't even a window.

Perhaps the good doctor thought Cassandra might jump if there was a window to jump from. Or maybe she thought Cassandra would push her out. You just never know with psychotics.

"What was that?" the doctor asked, as she was stuffing her notepad into her bag.

"What?" Cassandra asked a bit befuddled.

"You said something, about psychotics."

"Oh, no, I was just mumbling to myself."

The doctor gave a grunt and a nod as she struggled with her crutches and briefcase at the door. "I'll see you tomorrow then," she said, smiling warmly.

But there was a pity behind the warmth, and Cassandra couldn't help thinking that pity was the ugly step-sister to empathy and compassion. And truth be told, it always made her skin itch.

"Just when I was starting to like her," Cassandra mumbled to herself, as an overly-large orderly came in and lifted her to her feet. His large hands under her arms were warm and Cassandra didn't fight them, as she knew it was likely to be the only human contact she would have for the rest of the day.

4 Veda

“Do you think it was murder?” Detective Eric Pfluger asked as Ashlyn entered the break room in search of him.

“I don’t know,” she said shaking her head. “What do you think?”

Ashlyn handed the detective the photos that had just moments before been delivered by courier to the Austin Police Department. “They were addressed to me personally Eric,” she said as Dt. Pfluger studied the photos silently. “Damn,” he said a moment later, shaking his head. “It sure as shit looks like it. Damn. And I was just starting to like the fella.”

Detective Pfluger, a 12-year-vet of the Special Investigations Unit, was the deceptive type of old that was easy to mistake. Nearly 40, he looked, at once, both much older, and much younger... Not unlike Luke Evans really.

Ashlyn just stared up at the mercurial man.

“What?” he asked with his mouth half-full of Round Rock donuts.

Ashlyn had first met Police Chief Emile Asencio at a symposium on forensic psychology two years earlier, when, just about to graduate, she’d been given a spot as a featured speaker. Her topic, *Competency Evaluations Pertaining to Dissociative Disorders*, had been thought of as ground-breaking, and upon the completion of the symposium she’d received a number of appealing job offers.

But it had been Police Chief Asencio’s proclamations of developing of a new Profiling Unit that he envisioned Ashlyn would eventually head, that had influenced her decision the most.

Yet, here it was, two-plus years later, and Ashlyn was still playing second fiddle to a less competent boss, in a unit that only saw sporadic activity at best.

For all practical purposes... Ashlyn’s career was totally and completely stalled.

Of course, that had been before the Cassandra case.

Before the entire department, no, the entire force, had been placed under the severe scrutiny of the International Media. Even now the media trolls were turning the sleepy music town on its head.

“I’ve got Pfluger and Ely running down the currier now, but so far it looks like it was paid for with a stolen card.” Ashlyn looked up at the man that was significantly taller than her. Detective Pfluger, an ever-observant man, slumped into a near-by-chair.

“It was addressed to me personally,” Ashlyn said the last flatly.

“How did they know I’m working on the case?” She asked of the native Texan

“That fact wasn’t released in any statements. How did they know?”

Dt. Pfluger, his left hand deep inside a box of sugar-coated donuts, shook his head twice. “We have a leak.”

For the next few minutes the two silently scanned the handful of photos spread out on the break-room table.

“What do I do?” Sadly, Ashlyn’s voice hadn’t come out sounding anywhere as confident as she’d hoped it would.

With his chin in the palm of his hand, and his deep, hazel eyes a flat-mirror of everything she already felt, Dt. Pfluger said softly, “I don’t know. If you press charges he shuts up. Right now he’s talking. So why not let him sing while he’s sings? In the meantime I’ll put a tail on him and make sure he doesn’t go anywhere.”

It was the answer she’d been hoping for, and Ashlyn didn’t bother trying to hide her sigh of relief.

“Besides,” he said, almost as a side, as he shoved another donut into his mouth.

“If we charge him now and the photos turn out fake, we’ll be the one looking like complete fucks.”

Dt. Pfluger stood up and dragged his left sleeve across his powdered-sugar covered lips. “If not... we’d have to call in Homicide.”

Ashlyn nodded her agreement. Dt. Pfluger nodded once and then patted her on the back. “We also have to consider whether or not our mystery informant is gonna to send the photos to the media.”

Ashlyn’s wide eyes were enough to tell the detective she hadn’t yet worked her way around to that option yet.

“Don’t worry. I think we’ve got at least a few hours, maybe even a day or two before that happens.”

“Why do you say that?” Ashyn asked, truly perplexed.

“Because they don’t already have them.”

Eric looked meaningfully at Ashlyn from the doorway, “look, I’m getting it from every angle on this one. Get your answers and get ‘em fast.”

Ashlyn nodded once.

Then, before he could walk away she added in a low, thin voice, “Eric, this... woman was once somebody’s daughter, somebody’s baby, and then at a very young age she became someone’s sex slave, and whipping post. For her - words like ‘love’ and ‘affection’ don’t have the same meaning as they do for people like us. When she hears the word ‘love’, she sees grown men abusing frightened little girls. And when she thinks of ‘affection’, pain and humiliation are the only things that come to mind. For her everything about the world has been reversed.”

To Ashlyn’s great comfort the middle-aged man returned her gaze with a look of a great, and sad understanding.

“Cassandra wasn’t born evil Eric. Someone made her this way.”

“Then go and get them.” Dt. Eric Pfluger’s voice was sharp and offered little evidence of the compassion that had just been present in his eyes.

But Ashlyn recognized the look almost at once as it was a common look among the former remnants of the Texas Rangers. A look that said; BY JUSTICE BE IT DONE. And simply put, it meant that no matter what stood in their way... Justice would be done.

Ashlyn was hopeful that this time, the sentiment would win out, over church, and politics and all the other regular bullshit that often stood in the way.

Back in her office, Ashlyn tried once again to reach Sister Cara Charity, the young nun she's spoken to at the convent. She'd tried a number of times over the past few days to reach the young woman, to see if she might fill-in some of the many gaping holes in Cassandra's past.

However, she'd been thwarted each and every time, either by the befuddled ramblings of Sister Dalphine, or by the equally ancient sounding answering machine.

So far, Ashlyn had left a half-dozen messages and was in the middle of leaving another, somewhat testy message, when the breathy-voice of a young man with a thick Irish accent picked up the line.

"Carmelite Convent of the Sacred Hearts."

"Yes! Hello. Yes, hello." Taken aback by her sudden turn of luck, Ashlyn had to search her brain for the reason she'd called.

"Yes, is a... is Sister Cara Charity available?"

"I'm sorry dear, she's at Vespers."

There was a short pause as Ashlyn wasn't quite certain what the young man was telling her. Obviously sensing her confusion, the man clarified. "She'll be in chapel 'til five-thirty, after that her cell for silent prayer. Can I possibly relay a message to her?"

"Yes, please. This is Dr. Ashlyn Veda of the Austin Police department and I'd very much like to speak with Sister Cara Charity... about the Cassandra Lethe case." Ashlyn realized she sounded like she was asking the man a question.

"Sister Cara you say?"

"Why... yes."

"How about I bring Sister Cara to you? When would you like her?"

"...Really?"

Ashlyn knew she sounded incredulous, but Sister Margaret Mary had made it perfectly clear that there was nothing on God's green earth that would compel these nuns to leave their convent.

Once there, they remained... interned forever.

"I think it might be best, don't you?" The friendly voice asked, once again reminding Ashlyn that she had no idea whom she was speaking to.

"I'm sorry, but who... who are you?"

"I'm sorry dear. I'm Father Mahoney, Father Cormac's replacement. I was away when you visited last time. You see, I divide my time between the Sacred Hearts and our church in Ben.

Had I been here when you visited, we might have cleared things up then. But... now..." His voice trailed off, as if he was weighing his words carefully.

"Tis probably best if you speak to Sister Cara on your turf."

"Sister Cara won't be punished for leaving the convent?" Ashlyn asked, fearing how stupid she sounded, yet still unable to not ask it.

The priest's breathy laugh was instant, and genuine, and thankfully, Ashlyn thought, not at all shaming. "Oh, my, no. Sister Cara won't get into any trouble. I can assure you of that."

"I'll just tell them it's a legal matter. You are requesting an official interview on behalf of the Austin Police Department, are you not?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well then, it's settled. When would you like to speak to her?"

"Is tomorrow too short of notice?"

"I'll have her there by eight."

"Perfect. Thank you Father."

"Don't mention it."

There was a brief pause. An inhaled breath. And Ashlyn could almost hear the unspoken words fighting upon the tip of the man's tongue.

Ashlyn let the silence linger as he worked up his courage. But when he did speak, the priest's words were not at all what she'd expected.

"How is she? Does she need for anything?" The concern in his voice was real, and bone deep.

Instantly Ashlyn began kicking herself. All along she had assumed the priest didn't know Cassandra because according to the records Ashlyn had, Cassandra had left the convent the day after Father Cormac had passed away.

"She's as well as can be expected. She's a survivor, if anything," Ashlyn told him truthfully.

"Aye, she's always been that... tankfully"

Ashlyn had always been an incredible judge of character. From as far back as she could remember she had possessed an innate sense of people. Call it intuition, call it perceptiveness, whatever it was, it was the reason she had become a psychiatrist in the first place. And she trusted this sixth-sense more than anything she'd ever learned in school.

And just now, that sense was telling her Father Mahoney had something to hide. Maybe it was how his voice went from light and breathy to low and resonant, or perhaps it was the slight tremble at the end. Whatever it was, Ashlyn knew Cassandra meant a great deal to this priest.

"In the morning then," the priest said, his words lifting up at the end, as if he would make the sentence a question.

"Yes, Thank you."



Falling asleep that night was impossible. Everything about the Cassandra case pricked at Ashlyn's mind as she lay there, desperate for sleep. And as her four-thirty alarm loomed ever-closer, she could tell sleep was no closer than when she'd first climbed into bed. She blamed it on the sinking feeling she had, that tomorrow things were only going to get worse. For some reason, Sister Cara's interview came to mind.

Still, staring up at the shadow-cast ceiling, Ashlyn dared to hope that maybe, just maybe, Sister Cara could at least shine some light on what had motivated Cassandra's immense cruelty.

And then there were the photos. If they're real, then Mason Harlow was a murderer and maybe, just maybe what happened in Cassandra's basement had been an act of revenge, or desperation.

As the night wore on Ashlyn's mind went round-and-round, over every little detail until finally, late, late into the night, she fell asleep.

Waking late the next morning, Ashlyn missed her lap-time, something that almost never happened, as the pool was one place Ashlyn didn't feel deficient. But though she hated missing it, she also knew that after the rough night before she wouldn't have had the strength for it anyway.

So, already off to a bad start, Ashlyn arrived at work much later than she'd planned. And already frustrated, she quickly became even more so when she was once again forced to deal with the obstinate lock on her office door. It was an old feud that began the first day she'd taken possession of the office. Originally assigned to Dr. Sullivan, the larger, more accessible office had been assigned to her shortly after her arrival in Austin.

Dr. Sullivan of course had never gotten over it. And apparently neither had the lock.

Sleepy, and loaded down with files, her laptop, and a medical reference book the size of Texas, Ashlyn confronted the stubborn lock by roughly jerking her keys back and forth as she tried, rather feebly, to force it into compliance.

"Why don't ya let me get that for ya dear?" a soft voice asked from somewhere over her shoulder.

And a moment later the files, and the ridiculously large reference book, were lifted from her arms. Free of the burden, Ashlyn was finally able to fit the key properly into the lock.

"Thanks," she said to the mysterious stranger who was looming somewhere behind her. "Normally it only sticks on Wednesdays and Fridays," she quipped, trying to make light of what was quickly becoming a reason for those telling-tears that always crept up in times like these.

But now the key was stuck and refused to turn. Ashlyn, growing redder and redder by the minute, wiggled the noncompliant key violently in the lock, and when it simply refused to work,

she contemplated for just a split second, hurling her body against the door until it was beaten from its hinges.

“I don’t understand why it’s *so* difficult to keep even the simplest things functioning in this place,” she complained aloud, trying quite unsuccessfully to keep a lid on her rising anger.

Of course, it was then that Ashlyn realized she didn’t have any idea whom it was she was complaining to. Suddenly apprehensive, Ashlyn took a quick-peek over her right shoulder. And what she saw... the unrecognizable features of a stranger with a square jaw, high cheekbones and amazing green eyes, was definitely not anything she’d been expecting.

“It sticks sometimes. I just have to give it a...”

It was somewhere between the door flying open, and the moment it pulled her from her feet, that Ashlyn gave up any attempt at controlling the situation, along with any hope she was going to find a painless end to what was quickly becoming the most humiliating experience of her life.

A second before she could let out a scream of shock, a strong-arm encircled Ashlyn’s waist and pulled her back to her feet.

And then suddenly there she was, miraculously, in the very place she’d always wanted to be – encased in the warm, firm-grip of an attentive man.

With her back pressed firmly against his too-warm stomach, Ashlyn felt the sweep of his breath across the back of her neck.

Through the thick taste of embarrassment in her mouth, Ashlyn manage a startled, “Oops”, and nothing else.

“You okay there dear?” the man asked, his mouth so near to her ear that all of the tiny hairs on her neck stood on end.

And suddenly she was laughing again. A full and throaty laugh this time. Straight from the bottom of her belly.

How many times had all-too-helpful bystanders, that, seeing her disability, rushed in to help? And no matter how polite they’d been, or how genuine their desire to help had been, it had ALWAYS offended her. And now, well... that offence was a well-worn reflex.

“I can do it!” she would often snap back.

She should have offered them ‘thanks’ instead of her aggression. For their intent, if not for the actual assistance itself. But the truth was, Ashlyn was just plain sick-and-tired of saying ‘thanks’, tired of needing help, and tired of people thinking she was somehow less-than just because she was different.

What do they say? ‘Doctor heal thyself’? It would sound like good advice if only Ashlyn could get past her anger. But that didn’t appear to be happening any time soon. Even now, as the strong arm of her would-be savior cradled her waist, there was still a small part of her that was screaming those four petulant words, “I can do it”. But this time there was also another part of her, an entirely female part, that was screaming for her to *shut the hell up, and enjoy being in the arms of a very attractive man.*

Then, a second after being pulled into his arms, another thought occurred to her. *Oh my fucking god it's the priest!*

And suddenly Ashlyn was laughing again. Only this time, someone was laughing with her. Which of course caused her insecurities to quickly get the better of her, and soon her laugh turned into the strangled choking sound of a chicken with a wrung neck.

“You all right there dear?” the man asked, this time his voice distinctly accented.

Reluctantly, Ashlyn pulled herself away from the too-warm body. Then, with an embarrassed smile, she turned to face the priest.

“Yes, thank you,” she replied, in a voice that was steadier than she'd expected.

But seeing him standing there was way worse than she'd expected. And like firecrackers going off inside her head, Ashlyn's inner tourette went ballistic. And not because she had been scared, or even because she was horribly embarrassed. No, that would be entirely too sane. Instead, neurons were committing mass suicide, left and right inside her brain just then, because to her ever-lasting-chagrin, the most perfect man to ever have walked the planet was standing right *fucking* in front of her. And he was *a goddamn priest! Fucking cunt shit monkey slutting ho dogs* she thought; thankfully quite silently to herself.

But it was this irony, on-top-of-ironies that'd sent her reeling. Because if Ashlyn had a type, and she most certainly did, it would be this: six-feet tall, lean yet not lanky, well-muscled but not affected, light skinned, full lips, and hair the color of brass, that shoots out in all directions in a haphazard disarray of curls.

And his eyes, deep pools of green that seemed to bleed a steady-stream of warmth into the small space between them, were just the *fucking icing on the cake*.

Ashlyn recognized the irony at once, because in that split second, in learning that this perfect man actually exists, he was at the same moment snatched away, and held beyond all reach... promised to... of all things... *the fucking Catholic church*.

Fortunately, Ashlyn was in possession of herself enough to suppress the contemptuous snort she felt pulling at the back of her throat just then, but just barely.

Thankfully, her attention was quickly pulled away from the gorgeous priest and his unnerving smile and was instead cast upon the doe-eyed nun that was standing directly behind him.

Ashlyn gave the nervous woman a full and welcoming smile.

Then, turning her attention back to the priest, Ashlyn said, “I'm sorry. I'd say I'm not usually this clumsy... but that would be a lie.” Ashlyn couldn't help the blush, as she gave her legs a significant look.

“They're stronger than they appear.”

“I imagine very strong, to do this job,” the priest replied, as Ashlyn turned to enter her office. And whether it was his thick Irish accent, or just her insecurities getting the better of her, Ashlyn just couldn't help turning to see if the man was being sarcastic.

But by his bright smile and unassuming eyes, she was relatively sure he was being sincere. And yet any surety would be hard to come by with a man such as this. Because of course her attraction to him would no doubt cloud any assessment she would make of him.

Fortunately though, reading Sister Cara looked to be as easy as reading a primary school book.

With a sigh, Ashlyn slid into her chair and motioned for her guests to take a seat as well.

“Thank you again for coming. And thank you again...” she said directly to the priest. “That would not have been a graceful landing.”

“Happy to help,” he said returning her smile, as he held the chair for the nun.

Looking at the priest just then, in his sleek-black cassock and brilliant-white collar, Ashlyn could very well imagine that he too had fought his own battles with superficial assumptions.

Of course, that didn’t keep Ashlyn from watching and assessing, and even assuming all kinds of things herself, as he took a seat across from her.

“Thank you for bringing Sister Cara Charity here to talk. I hope you didn’t have to get up in the middle of the night to make it here so early,” Ashlyn said quickly.

For some reason, she’d envisioned the priest and the nun slipping away from the convent under the cover of darkness, trying desperately to avoid the hawk-like scrutiny of Sister Margaret Mary. However the priest’s answering smile, while both warm and pleasant, made Ashlyn realize just how stupid her assumption had been.

“We left yesterday, shortly after you called. We stayed in a lovely motel just north of the city. The trip was quite pleasant really.” The way his eyes danced when he spoke, Ashlyn couldn’t help thinking that he was enjoying himself immensely.

“That makes sense,” Ashlyn said, feeling more flustered than ever.

“You want I should wait outside?” the priest offered after a moment of uncomfortable silence.

“You can stay,” Ashlyn replied quickly. A little too quickly.

“So long as Sister Cara, may I call you Sister Cara?” Ashlyn looked directly at the woman who nodded meekly in reply. “... well then, if Sister Cara wants you to stay then it’s fine with me.”

Interviewing the nun in the presence of the priest was highly irregular, but something told Ashlyn that the extremely shy woman would be more forthcoming with the priest’s support than if she were on her own. No doubt he’d already taken her confession, on numerous occasions. And chances were he knew her better than she knew herself. After-all, Father Mahoney had been the Covent’s head priest ever since Father Cormac had died.

“You want I should stay, dear?”

Ashlyn estimated Father Mahoney to be the same age as, or perhaps slightly older than the terrified nun, but right then she could have easily forgotten that, as just then he seemed every bit the wise, old priest. And that extra sense of hers was giving her to think that this man, this priest, was so much more than he seemed.

Something about him, and Ashlyn didn't know what exactly, made her think the priest had suffered a great deal in his short life; had suffered and survived. But looking at him, looking into his bright, verdant eyes, Ashlyn knew, bone-deep, that though he'd survived he'd paid a terrible price.

Unfortunately, Ashlyn's sixth sense couldn't tell her what that meant, or how it affected her case, if it did. But she eyed him a bit more suspiciously, as he consoled the nun.

With a weak smile, Cara nodded at Ashlyn.

"Wonderful. Then, please, if we can get started. I have another appointment in a couple of hours and I'm assuming we'll need every minute. You've got quite a lot to tell me, don't you?" Ashlyn realized she'd said the last as if she'd been speaking to a child. But oddly enough, the sister didn't seem to mind.

Sitting perched on the edge of her seat, as if at any moment she would leap up and take flight, the nun looked first to Father Mahoney and then to Ashlyn. Father Mahoney, with his long, lean legs stretched out to one side, had one ankle resting on top of the other, and his hands folded neatly across his stomach, which gave him the look of being utterly relaxed.

Ashlyn by contrast, was a bundle of nerves.

With a smile to the pensive nun, Father Mahoney nodded for Ashlyn to begin.

"Ok then, since we all seem to be here for the same reason, to help Cassandra, and the only way I can do that is to truly understand her, and since I would have no idea what questions to ask to accomplish this, I think it would be best if you just told us in your own words, the story of how Cassandra came to the convent and of her time there, as you know it. Do you think you can do that?"

That bug-eyed, deer-in-the-headlights, look was back, and for a second Ashlyn wondered if she shouldn't have come up with some preliminary questions, if only to get the ball rolling.

The young priest gripped the nun's trembling hands and gave them a squeeze. Then he nodded his head again, ever so slightly, towards the doctor.

"I... I don't know. Where do I begin?" The woman's accent, while still sounding strongly of her Irish heritage was nowhere near as thick as the priest's.

"How about the day Cassandra arrived at the Convent? Do you remember the day she was brought to The Sacred Hearts?"

"Of course I do. I was the one that told Sister Margaret Mary we had visitors."

"Good. Then why don't you begin there. And, just try to tell me everything you remember, as it happened... like a story... the story of Cassandra. Okay?"

"Alright then."

The woman pushed back in her chair, so that her short legs dangled in front of her. And a moment later all fears Ashlyn had of a long and painful interview flew from her mind, as the girl threw herself into the task of telling Cassandra's tale.



“I was tending the strawberry plants in the front courtyard when I saw them. Sister Ita must have been out at the gate to let them in, but I didn’t see her. There were two of them, a man and a lady. And when they got down out of their truck they asked right away if they could speak to Father Cormac. But he must have been expecting them since he was at the door before I could even get my gloves off.

“Hello, hello” he said, coming out the side-door.

“Thank you so much for meeting with us so quickly,” the man said, taking up Father Cormac’s hand to shake it.

Then, they opened up the back door and started pulling at something inside, I saw her for the first time. As each of them grabbed an arm, I could see Cassandra’s eyes rolling around in her head, but I couldn’t tell then if she was sick or just tired, but she looked nearly dead.

“Novice Cara,” Father Cormac hollered for me, as I wasn’t a nun yet, just a novice still.

“Yes, Father,” I said putting down my trowel and gloves.

“Go and find Sister Margaret Mary for me.”

“Right away Father,” I told him.

But I was stunned when Father Cormac led them through the side-door, into the Papal Enclosure, cuz no one is allowed in there. No one from outside that is. Father Cormac knew this of course, so I was stunned when he turned and held the door for them, as they drug the poor girl behind. You see, I knew Sister Margaret Mary would be more than upset, so I took off as fast I could.

“Tell her we’ll be in the office,” Father Cormac called after me. And him saying that only made me run that much faster. You see, Sister Margaret Mary isn’t the head of our order, that would be Mother Mary Teresa, but she had a stroke before I arrived and ever since Sister Margaret has been filling in for her. Though no one really asked her to.

I found Sister Margaret in the sanctuary where most of the other sisters had already started to gather for our evening prayers.

“Sister Margaret Mary!” I called to her in my excitement, breaking the Grand Silence, which of course is strictly forbidden.

“Father Cormac’s brung visitors into the Papal Enclosure,” I said in a rush, thinking to get my disturbance over with as quick as possible.

But Sister Margaret was so upset she forgot to be mad at me, and instead just looked at me like I’d sprouted another head.

“Inside? You’re certain?” she asked giving me a good shake.

I nodded, not wanting to add to the damage already done.

“Come with me,” she said before she took off for her office.

Father Cormac and the others were already inside when we got there. And the door was shut but we could hear them talking softly inside.

That’s when Sister Margaret told me, “wait here”.

So I waited outside, and she went in.

It wasn’t right I know, and I’ve already asked for forgiveness, and done my penance. But the truth is, I was so curious I listened at the door. I was new you see, new to being a nun, or a nun in training, so at the time I didn’t understand how wrong I was. But Father Mahoney says it might help you now, so I’ll tell you what they said.

“Father Cormac, you didn’t tell me to expect visitors,” Sister Margaret Mary said in a sweet voice. But unlike with most people, when Sister Margaret talks sweeter it’s usually cuz she’s more than a little mad. And just then her voice was so sweet it could rot your teeth.

“You’re looking well Sister,” Father Cormac said, saying the word ‘sister’ like he was trying to remind Sister Margaret she weren’t Mother Superior yet.

“We don’t ... often receive visitors. Welcome,” Sister Margaret said a little less sweetly.

“Our visitors here have come with a special request. But maybe it would be best if I let them explain,” Father Cormac told her.

Then, after a second, I heard the woman’s voice say, “Yes, well... just recently the FBI in conjunction with Interpol, made an enormous breakthrough in the trafficking of...” The woman’s voice broke off and there was silence for a moment before she cleared her throat and continued.

“...the sex trafficking industry. There were over two hundred arrests worldwide and more than one hundred and fifty children have been recovered. As you can imagine, it’s been quite a challenge placing that many children at one time. Most are too young to identify themselves or family members, and many of them we suspect were sold by their parents, for whatever reason, so returning them, you can see, is not really an option.”

There was another long pause before she continued again.

“Many of them have... difficulties...” the woman said, her voice sort of weakening.

“We ah...” she stammered. “...haven’t been able to place some of the children because of certain *traumas* they’ve experienced. You see... the trouble is...”

There was another long pause, and then it was the man’s voice that continued.

“The trouble is that some of the children have become hyper-sexualized. And Toni, that’s what we’re calling her, has been with them for as long as she can remember, so she doesn’t know anything else.” His voice lowered to a whisper then, and I had to press my ear to the door to hear his next words. “She can’t be placed anywhere there are men.”

“Sister Margaret Mary, what they’re asking is if we can accept this poor child, with open arms, until such a time as a more suitable home can be found.” Father Cormac’s voice was just as it was during his sermons, soft but strong.

I was glad he was fighting for Cassandra. I couldn't begin to imagine the horrors she'd had to endure, and I was sure some peace and quiet was just what her soul needed. That and God. And we had both at the convent, so it made sense they brought her to us. That's when I wondered if anyone had ever told Cassandra about God. And it made me sad to think that maybe no one ever had. But apparently Sister Margaret Mary didn't feel the same way.

"I'm afraid that what you are asking is just not possible. We're a cloistered order. With vows of silence. We have devotions seven times a day. And there are other things to consider.... Issues of cleanliness that just simply cannot be ignored," Sister Margaret Mary said.

"It wouldn't be for long. We understand that you aren't set up here to take children, or at least children who..." Once again, the female social worker's voice trailed off.

And it was Father Cormac who spoke next.

"I'm afraid Sister that the issue has already been settled. I am simply informing you of the decision that Mother Mary Teresa and I have made. We will accept the child here at the Sacred Hearts Convent, and in fact, Bishop Truvel is well aware of and has approved the decision. We are not the only convent that has been asked to assist in this monumental task, and we will not be the only one that decline the mission."

Sister Margaret sounded like she wanted to say something then, I guess Father Cormac must have heard it too, because his tone changed to the one he uses in the confessional. "It's just a short time, I assure you. Certainly, there's a novitiate that can oversee her care."

"Certainly," Sister Margaret said. And that's when the door opened up and I was called into her office.

"Novice Cara, please take our guest to the kitchen, and see that she gets something to eat. But first, if you could find her some clean clothes, and get her a shower." Sister Margaret blinked a lot as she spoke; using the sing-song voice she saves for when she's really beyond the tip.

"You'll need to find her some bedding as well. Put her in the room next to the kitchen when you're done."

I felt bad for the girl, cuz it seemed to me like Sister Margaret was regarding her more as an object than a person, and not a very nice object at that.

The thing is, I didn't see the girl when I first walked in. Not really. I mean, sure I'd glanced over to her when Sister Margaret first mentioned her, and I'd seen she was sitting there. But I didn't really see her. So, when I turned to motion for her to follow me, I was shocked to see a zombie was staring back at me.

I wouldn't say it, but Father Mahoney said the truth is a gift, and not telling it the whole way through is the real sin. So I'll tell you, she looked like hell. Like she'd been dead a long time. Her clothes were worn and had stains all over them, and her hair was a ratted mess. And when she looked at me, she didn't really look at me. It was more as if she was looking through to the wall behind me. And though I'd never seen a dead person's eyes, I imagined they'd look a lot like hers did just then, flat black saucers that had no life in them what-so-ever.

I guess I stood there staring for a bit because Sister Margaret gave a loud cough, reminding me to say something. So, I put a smile on my face and asked her, "Are you hungry?" cuz she looked like she should be.

But she just stared off into space, as if I didn't even exist. So I looked at Sister Margaret who just nodded in irritation.

So, smiling as best I could, I motioned for the girl to follow and said a silent prayer she could because I'd seen the two social workers practically carrying her into the convent, and I wasn't entirely sure I could carry her. Fortunately though she got up and followed without a bit of trouble.

Outside in the hall I asked her, "Do you have any luggage?" Sister Margaret hadn't told me what clothes to put her in, so when she didn't answer I figured I should just give her a set of my own.

After that we made our way down the hall, to the back of the convent where my cell is. And all along the way I just asking her questions. Technically we're a silent order, but I couldn't help wanting the girl to feel welcome, so I kept at it, asking questions as we went.

"What's your name?"

"Where are you from?"

"What do you like to eat?"

I bet I asked her a dozen questions as we walked those silent corridors to my cell. The other nuns had finished their evening prayers and were, for the most part, in their cells for prayer and reflection. So it was just the two of us creeping down the hall like a couple of church mice. I told her so, but still she didn't make a peep.

"This is me," I said motioning to the door to my room. But she didn't budge, she just stopped walking when I stopped, and started when I started. So, I went in and she followed.

"I don't have any sort of selection. It's all the same, but it's clean," I told her.

"The nuns have brown veils, this white one marks me out as a nun in training. Right now I'm the only one at the convent," I told her.

"We're the Discalced Carmelite Nuns. Do you know what that means?" I asked her, but she didn't respond. Her eyes just stared off into the far wall, but I don't think she was seeing anything at all, cuz they sort of dead-ended in their sockets, if you know what I mean. As if they were turned inwards to something she was remembering, some nightmare perhaps.

"It means we don't wear shoes," I told her. We do it in order to walk in union with the founders of our order, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, who themselves shunned all personal wealth, and chose to live simply instead, so that they could better understand God, and his divinity. It's also a way for us to constantly be reminded of the differences between wants and needs." I smiled at Cassandra then, thinking of St. Teresa and her infinite compassion, and all I could see was this child someone had taken and turned into an object of sin.

And I that's when realized something, looking at her then, up close. She weren't nearly as old as I'd originally assumed. When I first saw her I imagined she were almost as old as me, but there in the light of my cell, seeing her up close, I could see she were really closer to twelve.

Oh Lord in Heaven! I thought.

Who would do that to a child?

And here I'd been worried about bugs. Bugs! I knew the Lord was working through me then, to see this girl, not for what they made her into, but for what she was, a child of the Lord, an innocent soul that had been beaten and broken, and I think it was then that I decided I would be the one to help her. The one to save her.

"I'm sorry I haven't any shoes for you," I continued on speaking to her, not knowing if she understood, not knowing if I were getting through, because I had faith, faith that the Lord would see a way to help me break through.

"I do have these socks," I told her. "They're warm, but you don't have to wear them if you're like me and have hot feet." I showed her my blackened feet. "They're still getting broken in," I told her.

I've calluses two-inches thick now, but back then they were still getting broken in, and I had scrapes, and scabs all over them. And I must admit, I'd hoped to make my new zombie-friend laugh. But there was nothing behind her eyes, nothing at all.

"I guess we should see about getting you cleaned up," I reminded her.

She followed me into the large bathroom I share with three of the other Sisters. "Do you want some privacy?" I asked, setting the change of clothes on the wicker hamper in the corner. But she didn't respond so after a minute of just standing there, watching, I just set me head to the task. You see, I had to nurse me ma back home in Ireland, before I came to the US, so I wasn't a stranger to taking care of somebody, it wasn't that hard really.

She even helped too, by pulling her legs free and pulling her shirt over her head. And so we just worked together, her and me. And as we worked I started counting her scars, but I had to stop... when I couldn't see through me tears. I can't tell you the state of her, not so you'd understand just what she must have suffered to look like that.

Most of them were paper-thin white marks that looked fairly old, but a few were large- fat, raised lumps of pink and white flesh that looked to be new. Looked like they shoulda been stitched-over but never were.

"How do you like the water?" I asked, keeping up with the questions. "Do you want to shampoo your own hair? Doesn't that smell wonderful?" I asked, partly because I didn't know what else to do, and I must admit... partly because I had to keep myself from crying. But I knew that night, once I was tucked into bed, away from her hollow gaze, I would cry me eyes dry, cuz I'd never seen anything so horrible.

Afterwards we made our way to the kitchen, and I fixed us a plate of leftovers. I didn't think she'd have an appetite, but she ate it all, everything in sight; her plate, the plate I dished for meself, and some left-over pie.

"We don't normally get pie with dinner," I told her. "But one of our neighbors likes to trade them on occasion for some of our jam."

You know... I never thought I'd grow so weary of talking, especially not after having been so silent for so long, but by-golly I was sure weary of it then.

Afterwards we went in search of her room, but it turned out to be just a cupboard with a dirty floor and some old shelves.

“Why don’t you bunk with me tonight?” I asked her, knowing she wouldn’t answer. But she did. She gave the tiniest of nods. And by-golly... it was enough.

5 Mason

Mason looked at the doctor and then at the one-way mirror. "I could really use that smoke."

"This is a non-smoking facility," Dr. Veda replied dryly.

"Then how about a tin of Copenhagen?" It wasn't his first choice, but he'd picked up the habit a couple of years before while filming a movie in Iceland, and it served in a pinch.

"I'll have some brought in," the psychiatrist said, though she just sat there. And yet miraculously a tin of chewing tabaco appeared, along with the same small middle-aged woman as before. Had Mason needed or wanted further proof that there was at least one silent witness behind the one-way mirror, this was surely it.

With a simulated-air of nonchalance, he picked up the tin that was set before him and stared at it. It was a tin of Copenhagen Long Cut Mint, the seal still in place.

"It's not my cut," he told the psychiatrist.

"But it'll do," he said a bit more mockingly than he'd intended to.

Then, with a sudden flirtatiousness Mason turned to the silent witness and said, "Thanks love," as she slipped soundlessly through the door.

"So, how would you describe your feelings for Cassandra? By all accounts you were smitten with her from the get-go, would you say it was love at first sight?" The doctor sounded patronizing, and judgmental. In fact she sounded down-right bitchy, and it made Mason wonder once again, where the warm-hearted woman he'd first met had gone.

"You can't make such sweeping statements and have them mean anything," he told her. "Terms like love and beauty are generic, and don't mean the same thing to everyone. What is love? I certainly didn't know until I met Cassandra."

That took the doctor by surprise. Mason could see by the look on her face that she must be flashing back to all of the magazine covers that had speculated Mason's every romantic endeavor. His last being a two-year relationship with Nicci Tucci, one of Australia's biggest pop icons. Six years older than him, she had been very vocal in the press about wanting to settle down and 'do the family thing'.

Mason, on the other hand, had been pretty tight-lipped through the whole affair. But that hadn't stopped the speculators from mapping out their entire future in the tabloids and entertainment rags. According to them, the two would eventually get married and have a truck-load of kids. But truth be told, in private Nicci had been very adamant about not wanting to have children. She swore it would wreck her body. And, as her body was her real meal ticket, and not her voice, the last thing she wanted was a kid to ruin it.

Mason himself had been more than happy to let the world go on thinking the two were destined for marriage and family, so long as that had never really been an option. He'd only hooked up with the less-than-brilliant pop singer because his career had been flagging, and he needed the boost her notoriety would provide. If he couldn't get into the tabloids all by himself he'd been more than willing to sleep his way there.

It wasn't one of the prettier sides to his personality, but hell... there weren't many 'pretty' things about Mason Harlow. And for him – it had been a practical decision. A decision his manager, and he, had both agreed upon.

Mason, after all, was all about his career and making money. And his long term plans never included children, or even a woman for that matter. All he really wanted was to be able to retire in comfort so that he could pursue his other dreams, like surfing and maybe getting a band together.

Nicci Tucci had been a vehicle for his career and that was about it. And even as gorgeous as she was, she'd hardly been anything to write home about. Even in the sack the woman had failed to impress. Hell, a dead fish had more to offer between the sheets than Nicci Tucci had. But he didn't very-well think he could explain that to the woman sitting opposite from him. No, she probably even bought into the whole tabloid-created 'love triangle' that had supposedly broken up the two-year relationship.

The fact that Mason had been more than happy to see Nicci stepping out on him, with the boy-wonder from the US no less, well that probably wouldn't make him too sympathetic in her eyes either. So, in typical Mason fashion, he just blew over the topic by saying, "I cared about her, but no, I didn't love her." And that was that.

"But you loved... love Cassandra?"

Mason tucked a pinch of chew into his lower lip and sucked for a second, then spat the dark juice into his empty Coke can. Then, in a half-smiling, half-irritated gesture, he lifted the can and shook it at the mirror, indicating that a replacement was needed. There had to be some perks to the silent witness in the other room.

"Before Cassandra I was asleep, living my entire life in a half-dream. Every moment was spent regretting the past or anticipating the future. But from the moment I saw her it was like I was present for the very first time in my life. I could feel the ground beneath my feet, and the air between the hairs on my head. Why, with Cassandra every breath was experienced fully. How many people can say that?"

"You say she tortured me, that she brutalized me and held me captive. But what if I was to tell you that she saved me instead? That she pulled me back from the brink of extinction, from oblivion, and that she gave me the keys to my own life and then taught me how to drive it." Mason sat up a bit more in his seat, but his face was an empty.

"More than that... she showed me life's not some goddamn dress-rehearsal where there's always time for more; more takes, more tries, more time to get it right. Why, every moment is slipping away, dying, disappearing to never be seen again. And Cassandra? Well, she taught me that in order to live life you have to be fearless, utterly and truly fearless; you have to drive it like it's stolen, full-throttle, foot to the floor, hand off the brake."

"So tell me then, how did she do this? How did Cassandra wake up Mason Harlow up?"



“After seeing her that day, I made a point of finding my way back to Mac’s every chance I got. Unfortunately I wasn’t able to slip away again until the following Sunday. But she wasn’t there. I waited though, hoping to catch her arriving for her shift, but after almost four hours, and five twenty-ounce beers, I gave up and stumbled home. Determined though to see her, I faked being sick the next day, just so I could go back to Mac’s, just so I could see if she was there.

Luckily, she was already working when I arrived. Unfortunately for me though her section was full-up, so took a seat in the corner, where I could put my back up against a wall. And from there I watched and studied.

My waitress though eyed me suspiciously.

“What will it be love?” she asked in a thick Irish accent.

“A Guinness,” I said smiling a bit uncomfortably. The truth is the little redhead intimidated me, and right away I thought it was probably best to get on her good side. Of course her old-man being the giant pullin beers behind the bar might have had something to do with that.

Six-feet-six at least, bald and covered in tattoos, that fella can scare a bit of sense into you right quick. But for all of that, he seemed like a jolly bugger – most of the time; always smiling, always barking out his unusual laugh. Once, in all-friendliness, he patted a fella on the back so hard the bloke nearly choked to death on his beer.

Watching them though, I knew the redheaded Irish woman and the giant were a couple, and based on the claddagh ring on her finger, I assumed were actually husband and wife. Cassandra, on the other hand, well she looked nothing like either of them, and from the coolness of their conversations, she seemed to be a new addition to the bar, but at one point I did hear the Irish woman say something about Cassandra living upstairs.

So, I spent the first hour trying to work that out. Was she the man’s sister? The woman’s? I just couldn’t put it together.

“When ya gonna work up the nerve to go and speak to her?” the woman asked, as she was dropping off my third pint. I was working through them faster than I’d planned, and having not eaten much that day, was already getting my head up a bit.

“What’s that?”

“When ya gonna work up the nerve to speak to our little Cassy? I’ve seen ya watching her.” She bent in close and looked me dead-in-the-eyes. “It’s like this, we don’ like stalkers around here, so your either gonna go and speak to her, or else me husband over there,” she waved at the giant, who smiled and waved back in a rather less-than-friendly manner. “Or else me husband over there is going to ask ya to leave. Ya got that?”

“So those are my only two options?”

“Yup,” she said setting the drink down so hard it sloshed over the rim and soaked the napkin.

“And what do you suggest I open with?”

“Well you’re the actor you figure it out.” She smiled broadly.

“You don’t have any suggestions at all?” I asked, making my voice sound as pathetic as I felt.

“Nah, but she don’t know who ya are, I asked her the last time you was in, so I wouldn’t try to impress her by bragging about being in the movies. You see, Cassy’s a different kinda lass, she’s been living up at the monastery for the better part of thirteen years, and dating’s a new one on her. So if you’re serious, and you decide to ask her out, ya better be on your best behavior, cuz Conor over there, well this is his bar, and he won’t take too kindly to ya hurting our little Cassy. Ya hear?”

“I hear.” I said, nodding towards the man eyeing me from behind the bar. He smiled slowly and then turned his attention back to the beer he was pouring.

The waitress sauntered away then, and left me to my thoughts, which I’ll admit were totally blown to bits, as I tried to chew through the part about the convent. But when I thought about it it did seem to explain some of Cassandra’s rather unusual traits, like her childlike dress and her ability to stay still for so long. *It might even explain her constant state of irritation*, I thought.

When I looked up from my silent contemplation I saw the tiny Irish woman gesturing to me from across the room. Then she nodded towards Cassandra with her head, so I took a big swig of my beer and got to my feet. But before I could make my way over to her, you see, the room was thick with late afternoon revelers... I saw something I’ll never forget.

A bloke in a red-plaid shirt grabbed hold of Cassandra’s backside. She’d been taking his order when out of nowhere he’d taken it upon himself to get frisky. He was sitting with a bunch of his friends, and they all laughed when she squeaked and backed away. But by the look on her face, which had gone the ghastliest shade of white, and by the look in her eyes, you could see Cassandra was terrified.

And when I saw that frozen look on her face, the one mixed with shock and outright terror, something in my head snapped, like a switch had been flipped, and suddenly I was murderously mad. And it was all I could do not to jump on top of the nearest table and make my way over to her that way instead.

But trying to contain myself, I pushed my slow way through the crowded room, knocking into people, making them spill their beers, putting one bugger onto the floor by accident.

But it was all for nothing as the giant, who had apparently witnessed the whole damn thing himself, had beaten me to the punch. And even as I hustled to get to the offender, I watched as the big man cleared the bar in one swift motion, and in two more bounding steps was suddenly standing behind the man-in-plaid.

“You will not lay your filthy hands on the ladies, you hear me?” he bellowed as his big hands closed around the man’s neck, lifting him clear of his chair.

“You will not disrespect women in me bar!”

His booming voice nearly shattered my eardrums, as I had finally made my way over to them and was now standing just behind Conor. Just then the giant gave the wanker a good shake,

and then another, for good measure. And I could tell he wanted to do more, but was instead thinking it through, in a slow and methodical fashion.

After a short pause he dumped the man onto the floor, where he fell into a heap, gasping for breath. The man-in-plaid rubbed at his neck but showed a bit of prudence when he chose to remain where he was, instead of trying to get to his feet. I thought that was the smartest thing he could have done really, given that the giant was still fuming above him; plumes of steam practically rising from the man's ears.

“Now clear your tab and get the fuck outta me bar! And anyone else that's thinking about layin' hands on the girls - clear your tab and get the fuck out! We don't serve perverts here!”

If I hadn't been intimidated of the big man before, I can honestly say I was then. As big as a house, and meaner than a stuck pig, he was clearly someone to be reckoned with. Clearly the man-in-plaid must have thought so too, since rather than standing up where he was, he crawled his way to the door. Then, lickety split, him and his mates, who had tossed a heap of cash onto the table, were suddenly sprinting out the door.

“You okay there love? You need to go upstairs and have a lay down for a bit?” Conor asked Cassandra, who was standing motionless nearby. She shook her head and smiled weakly at the man. And that's where I was, just a few feet away, looking into her eyes, when I saw it. A glint, a shimmer, of silent satisfaction, and something else, something I couldn't quite put my finger on, but it gave rise to the hairs on my arms, and sent a shiver coursing up my spine. And it left me with the very real impression that Cassandra had taken a great deal of pleasure in the scene that had just played out in front of her, that she had enjoyed it in a visceral, almost carnal way.

But the thought was quickly forgotten, as I saw the little redheaded waitress looking at me, with a satisfied smile of her own. Then, she nodded once approvingly, then jerked her head back towards the table I had just left; as if to say, ‘now's probably not the right time’.

I did as she suggested, and made my way back to my table, even stopping to assist the bloke I'd knocked on his ass. I even offered him and his mates a drink. But he just told me to ‘never mind’ and ‘he'd have done the same thing, if he'd have seen it’.

As the night wore on a few others patted me on the back, as if to say, ‘good on ya’ as they passed by on their way to the toilet.

“This one's on the house,” the little redhead said as she dropped a thirty-six-ounce Guinness off at my table. “My name's Shay, and me husband over there is Conor. And a'course you already know our Cassy, though, truth is, she hates the name Cassy. Her real name is Cassandra and she works again tomorrow from six till closing.

6 Cassandra

“I can’t really say when it was that I decided to take him, whether it was during those early morning hours spent pouring over his movies, or if it was just something that would have happened regardless. Though, I’d like to think he... inspired me.

In the convent we’re taught to destroy the love of self, and in its place learn the power of penance and humility. For it’s only through the sacrament of penance that we can truly atone for our earthly sins and attain Heaven. I believe for some, they do this instinctively.

Mason was like this in the movies he chose; all of them poignant tales, all of them full of agony and despair. He was punishing himself. Doing penance for sins he probably couldn’t even admit to himself.

Despite this, there was also a playfulness about him that was very alien to me, in all my seriousness. I see it now. Hindsight being what it is. I see now, how it fascinated me, Mason’s childlike deviance that delighted in everything wicked.

But perhaps even more fascinating was the painful shyness that seemed to leech into every part he played. It was always there, his obligatory reticence. But it wasn’t the shyness born of social awkwardness, the kind that makes you appear weak and inept. Rather, it was a diffidence born of anger or shame. A diffidence that seemed nearly rapturous in its suffering.

You see shame can do a lot to a person; it can weaken them, and it can make them stronger, and it can do both: reinforce and undermine. But the one thing it always does is ask for penance and recompense. Mason wanted someone to hurt him. He wanted to make amends, and to pay for his sins, but he also wanted to know if he could still bleed.

You see, he’d grown cynical and angrier than he cared to admit, but more than that, he’d grown numb. Little touched him anymore, and even less inspired him.

No, Mason Harlow wanted to be taken, to be consumed, to lose himself in someone else’s story. Maybe that’s a common ailment among actors; the need to experience life through someone else; perhaps it dilutes their own agonies, or perhaps it enhances them. I don’t know.

But there was something familiar about him as well... his need to cherish something. To exhilarate in *it*. To feel fully alive because of *it*. But the day I first met him, he was as far from *it* as he had ever come. And his life, well... that was just a lot of empty space, with nothing to fill it.

But I’d be lying if I said my reasons were wholly philosophical, because in choosing him I was also choosing the only man I ever truly wanted. Maybe that’s not so shocking... when you look at the life I’ve lived.

More sexual encounters by the age of thirteen than most women have their entire lives, and all I got from it was technical expertise.

...though there was a boy... once.

I knew him briefly during my stay at the convent.

But he was a boy and not yet a man.

He was sunshine and summer days, honey kissed, and wide-eyed, with the dewy skin of a child; hairless, and smelling as sweet as a newborn calf.

Mason on the other hand... well, he was all man. Nothing at all like my boy of summer. And the way he made me feel, both terrified and pissed me off. I guess, in the end... he wasn't all that different from the rest.

And that night... when he was on his knees, giving himself to me, submitting completely, so that I could feel at ease, all I could see were those same malignant eyes staring back at me.

They call it misandry. I looked it up on the internet. I guess it pretty well describes me. After all, what's not to hate? Especially considering their transgressions against me.

But their passions are a weakness easy to exploit, and... well, even easier to predict. And in the end I knew, that if I was smart enough, and duplicitous enough, I could use that weakness to my own end.

So there I was, staring madness in the face... that beautiful, handsome face, and suddenly I knew... I had a choice. So I chose to act like a man.”



“My first night in the convent was but a happy lie and it was possibly the worst thing that could have happened to me. Had I started off my life there, as it was that second day, and every day thereafter, I might have had a chance. But as it was, Cara's kindness that first night only lulled me into a false sense of security and hopefulness that would eventually become just another agonizing reminder of just how awful life truly is.

She'd taken me to her room, cleaned me up, given me a clean set of her clothes and even fed me. And then, when she could find no other place for me to stay, she had insisted that I sleep in her bed, with her next to me on the floor.

And as I lay there, the drugs slowly fading from my system, I began to work out how the rest of my life would go, and for the first time those plans didn't include some horrific nightmare. Instead I would become a Sister, like Cara, and we would grow old together, there in the peaceful stillness of the convent.

That night I laid awake for hours listening to her crying, and then to her gentle snores, and I contemplated a life that seemed, if not entirely hopeful, not terrifying either. And when sleep finally overtook me I slept as soundly as I ever had.

But life is suffering, and there ain't any getting around that, or so I was reminded that very next day.

The knock came before the sun had arrived, and loud and harsh, it brought me awake instantly. Afraid and unsure, I jumped to my feet and grabbed the long shaft of the brass

candlestick that had been sitting on Cara's bedside table. I held it there, at the ready, like a baseball bat, poised to strike at anyone who charged through the door.

Cara, still with sleep crusting her eyes, woke a bit slower. But after hearing the knock and then seeing me standing upright in the middle of her bed, still dressed in her spare robes, and ready for action, she came awake quick enough. "It's okay, it's okay," she reassured me in a gentle tone, "It's probably just one of the sisters needing something."

The loud rap sounded again, and obediently Cara pulled open the door.

"Novice Cara." Sister Margaret's voice was near screeching. "What is she doing in your room?"

You'd have thought I was an alley cat snuck inside in the middle of the night.

"There weren't a room next to the kitchen, and you were busy..." Cara's words trailed off as the stern look on the woman's face turned into an outright scowl.

"Wasn't a room, novice Cara, it's there wasn't a room," Sister Margaret said through her teeth.

"We have a cell for the young girl now... did you clean her up?" From the way the woman's nose wrinkled and her lips curled back over her teeth, I could tell she didn't think I wasn't cleaned up very well. To be fair, my hair was out of control, down past the small of my back, it hadn't been cut in years, and as I'd gone to bed with a wet head, it was now in a huge tangle. I guess that, combined with the fact I was still brandishing a candlestick like some medieval weapon, the woman probably honestly believed I was some sort of demon.

"I told you to clean her up," the fierce nun said scathingly, as she stepped into the tiny room and took hold of me. Unaccustomed to women, especially women dressed head to toe in the stark brown and white habits of the nuns; I was too shocked to put up a fight. And when she grabbed my arm, my hand released the candlestick, and it fell to the tile floor with a loud Clank.

"Go and get Sister Mary Ita and have her bring the sheep shears," she bellowed. And with that I was being drug down the hall towards the bathroom I'd showered in the night before.

As you can imagine, Sister Margaret was nowhere near as careful, or as patient, as Cara had been. Instead, she jerked the smock over my head, tearing out some of my hair in the process. And then the tunic quickly followed suit. Even the undergarments didn't prove much of a challenge for her as she ripped them from me, without so much as an afterthought.

The bath, it turned out, was already filled with scalding water and what smelled like rubbing alcohol, and when Sister Margaret pushed me under, well... it was all I could do not to scream.

But in that moment, that's exactly what I decided not to do. This woman, bride to some God I did not know nor trust, thought she controlled me. And control was the one game I did know how to play.

Though she had control over my body, I vowed then and there she would never have control over my will. So, as much as I wanted to cry and scream in pain, as the scalding hot water, mixed with the stinging alcohol, burned my flesh and made it feel as if it was being peeled from my body, I held my tongue.

Of course, before it was over I was forced to bite that tongue in order to keep her from the satisfaction she craved. As the hot, salty blood pooled in my mouth, as I let it slide down my throat, I contemplated people like her.

Though they'd always been men before, I could still recognize a sadist when I saw one.

But I couldn't keep my promise. And when the wire bristles of her brush scraped across my skin, giving-way for the alcohol to penetrate beneath the surface, I couldn't help my open-mouth scream of rage-tinged pain. Mouth open, she pushed me head first beneath the blistering water. Instantly my eyes and nose were set alight as the chemicals set them on fire.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, she pulled me from the tub; nearly blind, and panting hard, and after a minute I wretched up all the water and blood I'd swallowed, all over the floor.

When I could finally see again I realized there was a crowd of maybe a half-dozen nuns standing around, staring at me.

Sister Margaret Mary didn't seem to notice, or care, as she took up the shears and began removing my hair. After several swipes Cara, finally finding her voice, and her courage, as meek as it was, took a step towards the determined woman.

"Sister Margaret Mary, I washed her hair last night and checked it too. She didn't have any lice or bugs of any kind. I don't think it's necessary to shave her head." I was so proud of the little Irish girl, who probably had never stood up to anyone in her entire life.

But I would have told her not to bother. From the looks of the hair spreading out over the bathroom floor it was already too late. There was no saving my hair, or my dignity. So I held my tongue and said nothing.

"There is no telling what is hiding in this mess, and there is no way to know for sure until it is all gone. There. That ought to do it. Now, Novice Cara, if you could please bring us a clean set of your robes, we can get her set to right and be off to breakfast." The sadist's voice had taken on a sing-songy tone that I knew right away was for the benefit of the gathered nuns. Had it just been the two of us, I was certain the evil screeching tone would have remained.

Just then a bell began to ring out through the church. "The Angelus bell is calling sisters, it's time for Lauds."

The women, at first reluctant to leave the commotion of the bathroom, began to slip away slowly, all of them headed to the chapel for morning prayers.

"Not you Cara. You'll finish getting the girl cleaned up and then take her to her room – down by the kitchen, you'll see it there. We've fixed it up for her. I believe Father Cormac will be along shortly to give the girl some instructions on her time here."

After the women had all gone, including Sister Margaret Mary, and it was just Cara and I in the small bathroom (my hair spread out all around our bare feet), all I could do was weep, and as I wept she cleaned the mess Sister Margaret Mary had left behind.

"It'll be okay. You'll see. Sister Margaret Mary can be very harsh I know, oh Lord do I know, but she means well, and she was right, with all that hair it would have been hard to tell if you had bugs. I should have combed through it last night. Here, don't cry." She said as she patted at my eyes with the sleeves of her habit and when I looked up into her eyes and I saw tears there too. "It'll be okay. You'll see."

The room Sister Margaret Mary had made up for me was down a hall, just off the kitchen. It was a room nestled between the back-garden exit and the old chapel, which was now being used for storage. You see the convent... well, it had seen so many renovations over the years it had become a veritable labyrinth of hallways and rooms, some of them dead-ending into small cubby spaces filled with the bric-a-brac of a convent full of pack rats. Old paintings, decorated glass vases, porcelain statues, most of them broken, even old rocking chairs with missing rungs, and a broken grill polluted the area.

Why, a large stack of winter kindling sat by the garden door, for what could have been the better part of a dozen years, so covered in dust and cobwebs it was. Why it amazed me, how there seemed to be no end to the bits and pieces that had been stacked up and stored over the years, all of it serving a purpose that only God could understand.

My room, or cell as the nuns liked to call them, was but an old hallway that at one time must have led to the old chapel. Once used to store old pews and broken statues it had been made up like all of the other cells I'd seen with just a small bed, a table and a single chair.

But it was different in an important way... you see, that part of the convent had been built well over a hundred years ago, when it was just a mission on the frontier, and the walls weren't made of drywall and two-by-fours like the rest. No... this part of the convent was made of stone and timber, brought up from the Rio Grande River, or so I was told.

To be fair, it did appear to be a cozy enough room, which instantly made me worry.

Of course, some part of that worry might have had to do with the fact that Father Cormac was sitting on my bed, waiting for me. And he too looked cozy and very serene. But for the gleam in his eyes, I just might have believed the lie. But, like I've said before, you can't lie to a liar.

"Thank you, Novice Cara. I'm sure our young friend here is very grateful for all you've done in welcoming her to our convent. You should run along now though, I don't want to keep you from holy mass and communion." To the inexperienced eye his smile was stately and reserved. To one such as myself, well let's not pretend a predator isn't a predator, shall we?

Cara smiled herself, a bit nervously, then waved once and was gone, and I was left alone with the priest.

"Hello young one," he said patting the bed next to him. I sat in the upright wooden chair, just like the one in Cara's room.

His smile tightened on his face but he continued speaking as if he wasn't the slightest bit annoyed. "We've had a bit of a tough time discussing your situation. Not the least of which is the trouble in knowing what to call you. I understand that you don't really have a name, not a proper name at any rate. I'd hardly call a nickname given to you by your pimp a name. Would you?" He looked at me as if I would answer. I didn't.

"Well, since you don't have a proper Christian name I think it's best if we start there. Many of our young sisters decide on a new name in Christ when they enter the convent. Though you aren't really entering as a candidate... but that might change..." While he talked he played with the rosary he had wrapped around his wrist.

But I watched his eyes, because they felt slippery and cold on my skin, and made me want to shrivel up beneath them, but I didn't want to seem weak in front of this man so I forced my back into an even straighter position, and regarded him with a cool look of my own.

"You can think about it during our time together these next few weeks, while I go over the rules of the convent, and begin teaching you the contemplative nature of the Carmelites and what it means to be sharing their monastery, and their lives."

My skin burned, and my head itched, and I was dying for a pee but I sat, solemn faced, listening to the man describe for me what life within the monastery would be like. How the nuns would go about their daily lives, in silence for the most part, as if I wasn't even there. They would pray and eat and work as if my arrival had never even happened, and it would be up to me to watch and listen, to do as they did, in finding Christ there in the silence of the community.

"You can speak to them of course, but you must remember that these women are not here for you, they are here because they wish to commune deeply with their Lord, they wish to live as Mary lived, to love and be loved by Christ above all else, and through that love pray for the salvation of the world. If you are a constant bother to them how can they achieve these noble goals?"

I'd meant it when I had vowed to keep my tongue in my head, so I knew the silence part wasn't going to be a problem.

And though Father Cormac had done nothing to me, and he certainly hadn't displayed the sadistic tendencies Sister Margaret Mary had, I knew he was not all what he seemed to be, and until I knew exactly what it was he wanted from me, I thought it was probably best to keep silent.

"I asked you a question young lady, I intend for you to answer me."

Silence permeated the small cell as he waited for my answer. And the whole time I had to struggle not to fidget; not because of any weight I felt under his intense scrutiny, but because I desperately needed to relieve my bladder. So, I focused on the floor, waiting for him to either hit me or get on with it. He did neither for a very long time.

It wasn't until I was just about to break, and tell him I needed to use the toilet, that he stood up quickly, staring down on me with all of the authority he could muster.

"I understand that you have not been taught any manners, and that you've led a... difficult life, but that does not excuse you from behaving like a civilized person. We are offering you our home, our food, and more importantly our love and devotion, and in exchange you show us only contempt."

He took a step forward, and in the small room that's all it took before he was inches away from me, his waist level with my face, his eyes baring down on top of my nicked and stubbled head. Then, with a soothing voice, meant to illicit trust and engender affection he added, "If you let me, I can show you what it means to walk in love, to experience the rapture that is His essential nature. Your life here can be full and rewarding."

His hands had come to the sides of my head, and he held me there, mere inches away from his now trembling body.

And so I held perfectly still, a statue, a doll, waiting for his next move. This was, after all, exactly what I was used to.

Then, after a moment or so, he let his hands fall to my shoulders, and then fall away completely. Then he took a step back and regarded me. My bladder forgotten, I looked up from his waist to meet his eyes. There was something new there, something I recognized immediately; that hunger I loathed and feared, that hunger that provoked in me a silent, but deadly rage. But who was I? I was the outsider, the nobody. I didn't even have the other children to take my venomous rage out on, so instead I turned it all inside and let it eat me from within.

He left that day and didn't return again until later in the week, when Sister Margaret Mary called him, asking him to settle some trouble I had caused. Apparently, the beatings she had met out with her belt, along my knees and elbows, was not sufficient enough to cure me of my deviant nature, so the priest was brought in to see if he could salvage her grace and my future. He was waiting for me in my cell when I arrived there after scrubbing the kitchen top to bottom.

"Sister Margaret Mary says that you refuse to say prayers with them, is that true?" His eyes were a muddy gray, rimmed in red-puffy circles of fat. And when my answer never came they went wide as he slapped me hard across the face. "I asked you if you refused to say prayers with your hosts." The corner of his upper lip trembled as anger rose up inside of him, and even his hands felt the heat of his passions and they trembled slightly in his lap; as he fidgeted with the rosary he wore around his left wrist.

"She also says that you've been masturbating, which she has expressly forbidden." And there it was, the gleam in his eyes, and the real reason he'd rushed here from his church in Ben. And though I might have been young in years, I was not so naive as to miss that. He was a man after all, and all men have their appetites. And it was true; I did have a habit of touching myself as I drifted off to sleep, though I don't think it was really as they thought, for the sake of sexual gratification. Instead it was soothing, calming to my over-stressed nerves.

The fact that Sister Margaret Mary had taken it upon herself to come into my room as I lay sleeping, to check on such activities, was absurd to say the least. And yet if I wasn't lying on my back with my hands folded across my chest she would strip back my bedding, to expose whatever position I happened to be in. Which typically was me laying on my stomach, with the fingers of my right hand pressed up against my seam.

Sykes used to tease me about it too, but at least he had the decency to enjoy it for what it was. Sister Margaret Mary though was appalled, and disgusted, and she would drag me from my sleep, pulling me out into the hallway, where she would beat me, and force me to scrub the sandals of the other nuns.

At first it was the sandals, but by the third night she had me scrubbing the floors, and then the walls. I'd barely get five minutes back in bed before the Angelus bell would toll out, bringing everyone to their morning prayers.

"I guess I should have seen this, knew it was coming. Perhaps it was just hopeful ignorance that blinded me. But there is a demon in you child; a demon that must be exorcised before any of God's light can shine in."

He'd begun to pull a length of rope from a big black bag that sat at his feet. I'd missed it when I first came into my small cell, but now it was the only thing I could see, as it looked to be filled with many things, and none of them looked particularly pleasant. My bottom lip trembled, and I had to fight with myself then, not to speak out on my behalf, not to defend myself, to beg off whatever punishment this man had in mind.

But just in time I flashed back to my time with the Welshman and remembered - that begging was what these men seemed to like most. And the more I beg, the more they hurt, that was the rule of the game. So I bit my lip, hard, and when it still refused to stop trembling, I bit it harder still, until the taste of blood once again filled my mouth.

As he fitted one end of the rope through a metal ring stuck in a timber in the low hanging ceiling, he began to pray. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Ghost, amen." He snatched up my wrists and fastened a leather cuff around each of them, then running the rope through the metal rings on the outside of the cuffs, he yanked my arms up over my head until I was forced up onto my tiptoes. "Most glorious Prince of the Heavenly Armies, Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in our battle against principalities and power, against the rulers of this world of darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places."

From his bag he took a pair of scissors and began to cut away my smock and tunic. "By the power of God His armies arise, His enemies are scattered, and those who hate Him flee before me. The smoke is driven away, and so must the evil flee, as the wax melts within His flame, so the wicked will perish in the presence of God."

I hung there by my wrists, naked and exposed, totally at his mercy, listening to his words, letting them wash over me like the oils used to paint the portrait of Mary that hung in the hall. Was I evil? Was he cleansing me in some truly holy way? But for the lecherous look in his eyes, and the spittle that flew from his swollen red lips, I might have thought so.

But when he brought forth the flat wooden paddle, and began to strike me with it, I had my answer. "I drive you from us, whoever you might be, unclean spirits, satanic powers, infernal invaders, the wicked legions that corrupt this child."

Slap. Slap. Slap. I cried out with each strike of his paddle, and with every stinging blow my voice rang louder and clearer, like a clarion call. And I prayed, prayed that someone would hear; someone would come and rescue me. But each cry only brought this wild, ferocious man, drenched in sweat, that much closer to the exaltation he sought. His ruddy face grew redder and redder as he whipped himself into a religious frenzy with every word, and with every crack of the paddle.

But it was his demon, not mine, that was a palpable presence within the room.

Wide-eyed, I stared into the creature's eyes for I could not look away, because there was nothing I could do, to save myself, to escape this mad man, and his wicked compulsions.

Once, when a blow came unexpectedly to the back of my thighs, I opened my mouth to cry out yet again, but before I could make a sound, he jammed his fingers inside, cutting off my air, cutting off my only chance of salvation. Drool dripped from his lips as he pressed his fat fingers painfully into the moist crevices of my mouth, while his demon eyes scanned the swollen welts his belt had left upon my flesh. And all the while his feverish words continued.

"Begone, Satan, inventor and master of all deceit, enemy of this child's salvation," his words flew before him, and with every one his punishment grew in strength and vigor. "O Lord, hear my cry and come unto thee, I beseech Thee come through Jesus Christ Our Lord!"

When he was done, when he had finished his exorcism, the only evidence I had that I was still alive was the air that slowly filled my enflamed lungs. And the pain of it told me I had not yet passed on, though as the air slowly filled my lungs, only to bleed out once again through my

burning throat, I suspected that hell had indeed claimed me. And when my breath bubbled up through my snot-filled nose, the priest laughed and wiped it all away.

“There, there,” he said, “It’s over.”

I had cried and screamed with each swipe of his paddle, yet no one had come, the Lord had not saved me, and the demon was still there in his eyes. And I knew. I was bereft, left adrift, to suffer alone, just as I had been with the Welshman. It was that same old evil come again, only this time I knew, deep down in my bones I knew, this time it had come to stay.

7 Veda

Ashlyn took meticulous notes as Sister Cara spoke, even though the interview was being recorded, because she dreaded the idea of having to go back and sift through hours of tape just to get the answers to a couple of lingering questions. Also, by focusing on writing she was too busy to focus on the priest, which was a good thing, because every time she did focus on the priest he seemed to eat up all of her attention. Several times already she had been forced to ask Sister Cara to repeat herself because she'd been completely distracted by his nearly-incandescent eyes.

Unfortunately though, Ashlyn suspected the priest not only realized her odd fascination with him, but also that he found it rather amusing. And the thought of amusing him any further absolutely horrified her. Therefore, as the nun spoke, Ashlyn was careful to keep her eyes on the yellow tablet in front of her, and off of the sleek-dark cassock and the strong, sleek man inside of it.

“You said that Sister Margaret Mary had told you to put Cassandra in the room by the kitchen, but that was just a cupboard. Do you think she actually meant the cupboard?”

“Oh no,” the pale nun replied with a gasp. “No, she meant the room down the hall just off the kitchen. She told me so the next day, when they cut Cassandra’s hair.”

“They cut her hair?”

“Oh yes, Sister Margaret used Sister Ita’s sheep shears and took off every bit of it, right down to her scalp.” As she spoke, the wide-eyed nun looked positively remorseful, but Ashlyn was just confused.

“Why would Sister Margaret Mary do that?”

“She said we couldn’t be sure if Cassandra had any bugs, being as her hair hung all the way down her back and all. But I’d washed it the night before, and I told her there weren’t no bugs in her hair. But... Sister Margaret Mary has her way of looking at things, and when she makes up her mind...” The woman’s voice trailed off as she examined the stubby, chewed-on ends of her nails.



“Sister Margaret Mary was pounding on the door before I was even awake for the day. And it must have scared Cassandra something fierce, because I found her standing on my bed with a candlestick in her hand. But it was what happened next that probably scared Cassandra the most, because Sister Margaret Mary barged in and grabbed her by the hair, and then drug her down the hall to the bathroom, where she made her bathe in hot water, alcohol, and Epsom salt.

Sister Ita told me later that it was an old-folks recipe for getting rid of crabs and lice, but she figured a good warm shower and some proper shampoo probably woulda worked just as well. And wouldn't have been nearly as painful.

Sister Ita's normally out in the barn with the animals, cuz she says she prefers them to most people. She's also tends to the gate on the rare occasion we get a visitor. They just pull up and honk and she goes running on her fat feet. They're even blacker than mine. Anyway, Sister Margaret had asked Sister Ita to bring the sheep shears from the barn, and after her bath, she sheared off all of Cassandra's pretty brown hair.

I don't think Cassandra wanted me to see her cry then, but after the other sisters left us to clean up the mess, she broke down and cried for all that hair she'd have to regrow and probably because her skin was hurting something fierce. She did look a lot like a boiled lobster. Which only made the million scars she had look that much more horrific.

After that we got her cleaned up and in another set of my clothes, I was sure running pretty-thin on them by then, but seeing as there weren't no other options... Well, after that I took her to her room, which was down a hall just off the kitchen, which led to an unused part of the old convent. There weren't nothing back there really, but the old chapel, which we used to store the odd bits the sisters didn't wanna throw out, and of course the door to the back garden is there.

Father Cormac was already waiting on us when we got to her room and he told me I should head to morning prayers, so I skedaddled, as Sister Ita likes to say, knowing it wasn't my place to get between the two of them. Cuz I figured... if anyone in the convent was going to help Cassandra it would be Father Cormac. He'd been so kind to me when I first came to the convent, so I knew he was gonna make her feel right at home.

I guess that's the thing about evil. It doesn't stride right up to you and announce its intentions, and it doesn't come upon you all at once either. It just sorta creeps in; little by little, getting you used to its presence. Like Sister Ita's frog.

You see, Sister Ita told me once... that if you put a frog in a pot of cool water on the stove, and slowly bring it up to boiling the frog will just sit there, merry as can be, cuz it doesn't notice the slowly rising temperature, and even though it could hop out at any time, it doesn't, cuz by the time it realizes what's going on it's... well, it's just too late.

Father Cormac was like that, though he wasn't the frog. I guess that makes all of us Sisters the frog, and Father Cormac was the boiling water. Cuz his evil was just sorta leeches into us and we didn't even notice it, until it was too late. But it wasn't us that got cooked. It was Cassandra that paid that price, and we just stood back and let it happen. I guess that makes it as much our fault as it were his. Cuz if we'd have stopped him sooner, well... she could've had a real nice life with us sisters at the convent.

Most of the Sisters liked her well enough, and we're a great bunch of ladies, I mean Sisters, once you get to know us. There are just a couple bad apples in the bunch... like with anything I suppose.

And Sister Margaret Mary is definitely a bad apple. And sure she proved that more than once in the days after Cassandra first came ta us.

Only, we didn't call her Cassandra back then... cuz she didn't have a name yet. In fact, we just sort of avoided her name altogether. Which isn't really as hard as it seems. I mean... It's

not like you go around calling people by their names a whole lot, not when you're speaking to them, maybe about them, but not to them, so at the time it didn't really stick out in my head that she didn't have a name.

Sister Delphine in the office said that the social workers were calling her Toni Doe, kinda like Jane Doe only the Toni part was the name her pimp had given her, and Doe was something the hospital had tacked on. So, when she came to us, it wasn't with a proper Christian name, and that seemed to rankle Sister Margaret Mary something fierce; that among other things Cassandra did or didn't do.

Looking back on it now, I don't think it mattered much what Cassandra did, cuz no matter what Sister Margaret had it in for her, and there just no avoiding that.

Like, when Cassandra didn't say her prayers out loud, Sister Margaret would grab her by the arm and shake her and say, "You girl, are not above showing your love and respect for the creator of all things. How dare you?" and things like that. She'd also take a sandal to her, whacking her on the knees and elbows, and forcing her to stay kneeling longer than anyone else. Sometimes at dinner I'd go looking for her, and she'd still be in the chapel on her knees and Sister Margaret would tell me to 'leave her be' because she was doing penance.

After that I'd stuff my pockets full of food whenever I noticed Cassandra wasn't at a meal, and I'd sneak it to her later. Of course Cassandra never complained about the way Sister Margaret treated her; in fact she never spoke at all. But when I brought her the food I smuggled out of the kitchen, she always had a 'thank you' in her eyes, and a couple of times she hugged me so tight I thought I just might burst. There were also tears in her eyes a lot, and more than once a bruise or two around the edges.

Sister Ita told me that Sister Margaret liked to beat Cassandra on the elbows and knees cuz it didn't leave marks there. That way, if the social workers ever came to check up on her they wouldn't see any bruises. Not that they did, check up on her. I suppose with over a hundred kids to watch out for the one they worried about the least about the one being taken care of by a bunch of nuns.

It's sad knowin that's exactly the one they shoulda been worried about the most.

But Cassandra didn't say nothing, and after a week, I guess we just sort of assumed it wasn't that bad, and that she was getting on okay. I mean we all knew she could talk. Sister Margaret called the social workers to ask, and they all said she could. Of course that just made Sister Margaret Mary that much angrier with her. Personally, I just figured Cassandra didn't have anything to say, and it didn't bother me one bit that she didn't want to talk.

Though, when she did, I didn't even recognize her voice. I thought maybe some stranger had gotten into the mill and was hiding there for some awful reason. But, when I got closer, trying to see without being seen, just in case it was a burglar or something, I was shocked to find Cassandra talking and laughing with a boy about her own age.

She'd been living at the convent for about a year, and she still hadn't said a word, so when I heard her talking, and laughing, I was a wee bit hurt. I guess that's why I didn't say anything when I found them.

"You know Anson; they'll probably have you arrested if you get caught in here with me."

I had never seen the boy before, and I was really shocked to see him within the monastery walls.

“I don’t care, so long as I get to kiss you first.” He laughed when he said this, making the dimple in his right cheek stand out. He had a lopsided smile that gave him a sorta lazy grin.

“Don’t say that,” she told him.

“What? It’s true. I don’t care what any of them do, so long as I get to be here with you.”

His brilliant blue eyes, his wavy brown hair, his velvet voice... I couldn’t help falling in love with him. That’s why I snuck back to the old mill every Tuesday afternoon to watch them. And I guess that’s why I never told anyone neither. You see... I loved him, even though he was nearly six years younger than me; and still a boy really. I never wanted anything so much as I wanted him to talk to me, like he talked to her.

“I brought you something,” he said into her hair, as she lay there nestled in his arms.

“I want you to have it, so it can watch over you while you sleep.”

I never saw what he gave her because she held it in-between the two of them, but when he spoke again he sounded sad and worried. “You look more tired every time I see you. Are you still having nightmares?”

She shook her head, but even I didn’t believe her. She’d never told me she had nightmares... then again, she never told me anything.

He brushed some stray hairs from her face and said, “His name is Leo. My father gave him to me when I was a little boy. He told me that Leo is special because he’s a dream walker and it’s his job to protect people when they sleep. Now it’s his job to protect you. No more bad dreams. Leo will scare them all away.”

His words were like poetry. And at night, as I drifted off to sleep, I used to play them back in my head, over and over, all along wishing he’d said them to me.

“You’re so beautiful,” Cassandra told him once. And I remember how angry that made me feel... as if a boy could be beautiful. But thinking on it now, it was the truth. Even with his slightly crooked nose and his lopsided grin, there was something beautiful about him.

Then, she said, “take off your shirt,” and he obeyed. No matter what she asked of him, he would simply laugh, and do exactly as she said.

“Why don’t you take yours off?” he asked, but she just laughed. She was always refusing him, always teasing him. And that was something I knew I would never do. But I was too afraid to speak up.

You see, I wasn’t a nun yet. And I think God was testing me. Seeing him there, his shirt off, his pale skin glowing in the light that poured in through the slatted roof... I know now, it was God showing me what it truly means to live a life of chastity, and I very nearly failed.

Cassandra and Anson never actually had sex, that I saw at least. It was only kissing and such. But they were getting as close to it as they’d ever come, the day that Father Cormac found them in the loft. Sister Margaret had called me into her office and demanded to know where it was that Cassandra slipped off to every Tuesday during her recreation time. I told her I didn’t

know. But, I might have suggested she might be exploring the old buildings. So it was my fault Father Cormac found them there.

Of course, I was in the mill too, spying on them, when Father Cormac came creeping in. Luckily, I managed to duck into a pile of hay before he could see me. But I could see him, lying there watching them, just like I'd been doing. He watched them for a long time too, as they rolled around in the hay.

I was shocked when he didn't interrupt, and even more surprised Cassandra wasn't punished for it later. But then, the following Tuesday, as Anson came slipping under the south wall, sneaking up to the old mill, I saw why Father Cormac had kept his silence.

Cassandra missed the beating. She'd been detained inside and didn't see when Father Cormac took the boy by the arm and led him through the old chicken coop, into the side barn.

"You have no business here!" Father Cormac screamed.

Anson put his hands up, trying to protect his face as Father Cormac rained punches down on him. Again and again until his knuckles were all cut and bloody.

He was like some horrible nightmare as spit flew from his mouth and curses flew from his lips. Again and again he beat him, until Anson finally fell to the ground. Then Father Cormac started kicking him.

I crept underneath the long mill table, closer and closer, until I could see Anson lying on the ground, his hands and arms wrapped tightly around his head. It was terrifying to see, and not do anything, but I didn't know what someone like me could do.

Lord forgive me, I should have tried to stop him. Even though he was an enormous man, I think he would have stopped, if only he'd have known someone was watching.

As it was, he didn't stop until Sister Ita came in, screaming that the police would come and take him away.

They had to bundle the boy in a blanket and drive him to his parent's home in the back of the old Chevy Malibu that the Sister's use to move heavy things around yard. And later it was Sister Ita who had to clean up the blood stains out of the back. And when I asked her if I could help she just hissed at me and told me to 'let it be'.

Later Sister Ita told me the church had been forced to pay for Anson's medical bills, in exchange for the family's silence. Father Cormac in turn had demanded that the boy be restrained, and never again allowed anywhere near the convent.

After that I was so angry, so... jealous of Cassandra, I never told her why the boy had disappeared, and never again met her in the loft above the mill. I wish I could tell her now. I wish I could tell her how sorry I am. God knows I don't deserve her forgiveness, but I would ask for it just the same.

Unfortunately that wasn't the last time I let Cassandra down.

It was almost a year later, just before I took my vows and was officially invited to join the convent as a full-fledged Sister, that I began to suspect that Father Cormac's visits were something more than the bible lessons he'd said they were.

It was the middle of the night, and I'd come awake after a really bad dream, where I was being chased by a broken and bloody boy. He'd been screaming at me to 'See'. Over and over in my dream he'd said the word 'See'. I think now it was really God speaking to me because it was meant to be, that I would see what Father Cormac was doing.

I guess we all should have seen it sooner. Especially after he'd given her that strange name. Cassandra Lethe. It's not a Christian name mind you, which makes it odd to say the least. But because she refused to speak, Father Cormac had been given the task of choosing Cassandra's name in Christ. But it wasn't until Father Mahoney came that we learned what her name truly means.

You see the name Cassandra comes from Greek Mythology, and the story goes, that a beautiful young girl, who was especially devout, had prayed to the god Apollo. And one day, after seeing her praying, he fell in love with her. And as a gift, he decided to give her the power of prophecy.

But Cassandra refused to lay with him. Which made him very angry. So, as punishment, Apollo made it so that no one would ever believe her prophecies. So that's what Cassandra means – literally – unbelievable.

Even her last name, Father Mahoney told me, was another way for Father Cormac to hurt and torment her, because it literally means 'forgetfulness' or 'oblivion'.

Father Mahoney explained it to me last night, and I think he's right. By naming her Cassandra Lethe, Father Cormac was saying no one would ever believe her, even if she did talk. And if she did talk... why, she would be cast into oblivion and forgotten.

I'd like to think that he was wrong, that if Cassandra had told us what he was doing, we would have believed her, and that we would have cast him out instead.

Still, the truth came upon us all slowly, and none of us was very willing to accept it, especially as we're taught to love the person, and not their deeds. And since we already loved Father Cormac, it was sorta easy to overlook his harsh punishments of a willful girl that nobody really understood.

But that night, when I woke up to the screams of the bloody boy yelling, "See! See! See!" I couldn't get back to sleep. So I went for a walk instead. Sometimes I do that, to calm my nerves, and sometimes I wander into the kitchen, to see if there's anything to eat. Though technically, that's not something I'm supposed to do.

But instead of turning into the kitchen, I crept down the hallway, to Cassandra's room. I don't know why I did it, other than to say that God was guiding me there. Though I daresay, I let him down that night, and every night thereafter. But it must have been him who wanted me to hear what was going on inside that room. I can tell you it upset me so much I couldn't sleep the rest of that night, or the next.

It was Father Cormac's voice I heard coming through the thick wooden door, quickly followed by the sharp sound of pain-filled cries.

"You've been delivered unto me, not by accident, but by the divine hand of God Himself, who wishes that I cleanse you of the demons that have taken root in your soul. It is divine providence that you have come to us. Though you refuse it now, some day you will understand God's great mercy."

I heard another gasp of pain, louder than the first, and it fell upon me like some sort of ghost crying out from the past. But I knew it wasn't a ghost. I knew it was Cassandra and she was in pain. And I knew it was Father Cormac that was causing it. I should have knocked. I should have done something brave, but instead I just stood there. I didn't even run away to find someone braver than me. I just sorta stood there listening.

"God does not give us all of the answers Cassandra. It is our job to seek them out, to meet Him halfway. And it is through His example we discover what it is He truly wants for us."

There was another gasp of pain, then another, quickly followed by another, and then another.

"After all of this time... I thought you would be further along. It just proves that you have given in to your wicked tendencies, your sexual perversions. You're unclean Cassandra, how can you expect to let God in when you are filthy, inside and out?" He said all this through grunts and moans. And it was clear enough, even a nun could understand, what was happening in that room.

Even an idiot like me could understand. But I still didn't do anything. I just ran back to my cell and sobbed into my pillow, until my eyes ran dry.

And I prayed. I did do that much at least. I prayed for guidance, for wisdom, and for strength, and by the time the Angelus bell rang out the next morning, I had decided how I was going to save her. I was going to go tell Mother Mary Teresa what I had heard.

Sister Margaret Mary caught me though, before I could get through the door.

"Where are you going in such a rush?" she demanded as she grabbed me by my arm as I tried to run past.

"I'm going to go speak with our Mother Superior," I told her without any confidence at all. I'm not proud of it, but that woman terrifies me, and all I could do was shrink in front of her like some wee mouse.

"You will do no such thing. Mother Superior is not well and is not up for visitors. You will march back to your cell right this instant."

"But, but..." I stammered as I faced the fierce woman, her narrow gaze fixed onto the middle of my forehead. I imagined she was trying to bore a hole there, so she could see what was going on inside my head. But I was reluctant to turn back, I'd spent the night gathering all of my courage, and I still had a wee bit of it left. So I told Sister Margaret Mary what I'd heard at Cassandra's door the night before.

"I'm sure you're misinterpreting what you think you heard. Father Cormac has certainly been spending more time with the troubled girl, but I do think that his ministrations are helping. She's more compliant and she hasn't had any of her violent outbursts lately."

The violent outburst she was referring to happened the previous fall, when Cassandra threw a potted plant against the wall, after Sister Cecilia had refused to allow her any supper. She'd only missed it due to the fact that Sister Margaret had made her muck out the chicken coop at the last minute. But Cassandra was late, so she'd been turned away.

And she couldn't really afford to miss any meals; she looked so much like an old scarecrow. So I could hardly blame her for throwing the plant. But Sister Margaret sent her to her room for three days and the whole time Father Cormac had preached to her.

And on the fourth day he emerged saying that Cassandra was much improved, and that she was truly repentant for her actions. He'd been so happy with the outcome, he was literally bouncing down the hall as he left. But I didn't see Cassandra for a week after that, and when I did see her, she looked even frailer, and sicklier than when she'd gone in. But she did seem to bounce back, and even Sister Cecilia seemed to think she'd improved, because I noticed she was giving her double the rations.

Still, my stomach boiled when Sister Margaret blew off my worries that something bad was happening between Father Cormac and Cassandra. But when she patted me on the shoulder and told me she would look into it, I figured that was the best she could do.

What more could I have asked? It's just... I was asking the wrong person. But back then, despite her outward cruelty, I didn't believe Sister Margaret wanted anything bad to happen to Cassandra. Her methods were often harsh and maybe a bit cruel, but I always assumed her intentions were good. She was a nun of God after all. She wasn't some school marm or hall monitor who could just look the other way. She was commanded by God to stand up for the weak and to go humbly before Him.

But as it turns out though, I put my faith in the wrong person.



Ashlyn looked up as the nun went silent, and then looked at the clock on the wall behind her. It was already twenty minutes past the time she had allotted for the interview, and there was clearly still much more to cover.

"I know you have more to tell, but I think a break would be best. And, as I have another interview in just a bit, I was hoping you could come back later today or tomorrow?" She addressed the priest instead of the woman, who seemed overwhelmed by her detailed testimony.

"We can come back tomorrow morning. The same time?" the priest asked, looking weary, as Cara's words hung heavily upon him.

And there's something else, Ashlyn thought. There was more pain in the priest's eyes than she would ever have expected, and it made Ashlyn once again wonder about the connection between the priest and Cassandra.

"That would be most helpful. If you stop at Beverly's desk she'll get you some cash to cover your travel expenses, and money for your food and lodging as well. What you're doing is a huge service, not only to Cassandra, but to the State as well. We'd be lost for answers if we didn't have people willing to fill in the holes." Ashlyn smiled as best she could, and then stood to see them out.

As the priest was following Sister Cara out of her office, Ashlyn put her hand on his arm, "If we could have a moment, alone?" she asked. "Certainly," came his cool reply, although the nun looked terrified at the prospect. Whether it was terror from being left alone in the unfamiliar

place, or terror at the thought they might be discussing her, Ashlyn didn't know. But as weary as she was, she wasn't entirely too concerned by it either way. Though, she did experience a small pang of guilt as the door slid shut on the wide-eyed woman's face.

"How long have you known about the physical and sexual abuse that transpired at the monastery?" Ashlyn didn't see any point in sugar-coating the question. Had he known or been complicit in any way she would have to consider whether or not to report him to the authorities of Ben, Texas.

But his smile was so pained it brought her up short.

"I had reasons to suspect some of it when I first arrived at the convent. Though, as you can imagine, none of the Sisters were forthcoming in what they knew or suspected themselves. Most of them truly loved Father Cormac, and most of them have suffered abuses at the hands of Sister Margaret Mary. Though, I daresay none so bad as what I'm beginning to understand Cassandra has suffered.

"Father Cormac was clearly a sociopath, he hid his intentions and actions well, and I believe only Sister Margaret Mary understood the depths of his depravity. Why she went along with it I can only guess. But to answer your question, I learned most of it from Cara shortly after Cassandra was taken into custody, when her actions were publicized. It was then that the distraught girl confessed it all to me, in the privacy of the confessional. It took me another week before I could bring her to the decision to come forth to the authorities. It would have been impossible for me to contact you directly, as everything said within the confines of the confessional is protected by canon law."

His smile was one born of pain, and Ashlyn believed he was being truthful. Had he not been able to talk the nun into coming forward, he would not have divulged anything he'd heard in the confessional.

Hearing the truth of it though made Ashlyn angrier than she cared to admit.

And when Ashlyn spoke again there was a bit of venom in her voice. "Does Cara realize that charges will most likely be brought against Sister Margaret Mary?" The priest nodded gravely, and then said, "That is why I wanted to do this here, so that Sister Margaret's substantial influence could not interfere in any way. It's no less than what she deserves, and Sister Cara Charity understands that. She'll come to terms with what she has to do."

"And what about you? What is your relationship with Cassandra?" She hated to ask so bluntly, but looking at the time, she had few other options. He gave a breathy chortle, and then said in a calm, almost bored way, "I met her just before the funeral, and then two days later I drove her to the bus station. I guess you could say we're mild acquaintances."

"Thank you," was all Ashlyn said before she opened the door.

Pausing only long enough to smile, the Priest slipped silently out into the hallway.

Ashlyn stood there for a moment and watched as the priest took Sister Cara Charity by the arm, and slowly led her away. He was hiding something. Ashlyn didn't know what, or why, but she was sure as hell he had more to tell.

However there wasn't time for speculating just then, as Ashlyn was already late for her next meeting with Mason. But first... a half-recalled memory, triggered by something Cara had said, made her reach for her phone instead.

8 Cassandra

Cassandra eyed the crippled woman as she entered the room on her crutches. To her, it seemed like a cruel twist of fate, that someone with such a beautiful face would have such bent and twisted legs. Brilliant, driven, and gorgeous; the woman almost had it all. But for the deformed legs she probably would have risen to the top of her field. Cassandra wondered how far a cripple could go. *Probably farther than a broken whore*, she thought cruelly.

“Do you need help?” Cassandra asked the woman, though she made no attempt to rise.

“No, I’ve got it,” Dr. Veda said with a smile.

It took a bit, but eventually the doctor settled herself at the table and began divesting her rather large bag of its contents; a notepad, a digital recorder, and one thing else that Cassandra hadn’t expected, a tiny figurine in the shape of a lion.

“What’s that?” Cassandra asked, eyeing the small figurine which was no larger than a few inches tall.

“This?” the doctor asked, as she picked it up and spun it around in her fingers. She examined it closely for a moment, and then set it down on the table between them.

“It’s just something I found lying around,” the doctor said smiling as she clicked the switch on the recording device. Turning her attention back to Cassandra, the doctor asked, “Why don’t you pick up where you left off?”

They’d left off with Cassandra hanging from the ceiling of her cell, and Father Cormac administering his cruel lessons, and Cassandra didn’t particularly want to go back to those memories just then. Instead she wanted to discuss the lion; why the doctor had brought it, and who had told her about it. But, in the asking of those questions, she knew she would reveal too much, expose too much.

So she let it drop, for now, but her eyes kept wandering back to it as she continued her tale. And maybe, the presence of the little lion made her a little edgy, and maybe it tainted her recollections, with something darker... something more malevolent than she had intended.



“Father Cormac had much to teach me those first few years, and he was nothing if not diligent in his work. To him, I was a cursed soul that Satan himself had possessed. But I could have told him; it wasn’t Satan, it was Sykes, and I wasn’t cursed, I was just broken. I could have told him there was no fixing me, that it was just too late, the damage was already done. I should

have told him that he might as well just go ahead and kill me, for all the good his lessons would do.

But that would have been a lie. Oddly enough, I did learn things from him, things that to this day I'm thankful for. Though... I dare say, I don't believe anything he actually taught me came from his mouth.

Instead, it's what he taught me about myself that's mattered, that's truly changed me. You see, it was because of him, and his cruelty, that over the course of those first few years I was able to knit together a sort of iron shirt, that was very nearly impenetrable. I guess it's a bit ironic that by his cruel hand, he delivered me my salvation, and he never even knew it.

Before Father Cormac I was just an open, bleeding wound, plagued by wants and wishes, and hopes and desires; all of them as out of reach as the others, all of them just pits of emptiness trying to swallow the entire world, just to satiate their aching need. But, wrapped in steel; the miseries that had plagued me since childhood no longer had any effect on me. I was immune to the loneliness, immune to desire, devoid of all of the sentiment that before had left me crying into my pillow, when no one else could see.

Finally I no longer dreamt of having a family, a home; and those dreams, those wishes and wants, those desires and needs, well they no longer festered in me like an open wound. And because of that I became impervious. Under his tutelage I grew numb and distant, and for that, only for that, I would thank him.

But of course I learned this long before his cruel ministrations would come to an end. And, truth be told, much of what transpired between the two of us was just further demonstration of his own wretched sickness.

I wonder what you would classify him as; a pedophile to be sure, and a misogynist, you only had to listen to his sermons to figure that much out. For certain a sexual deviant, and a sadist through and through. Though... a part of me thinks he would have greatly enjoyed the other role.

But all in all, I think you'd have to deem him a sociopath, for there was never an ounce of compassion within that man, nor a single shred of dignity, and even Sykes had had that much.

Father Cormac though, was just an empty casing for something darker that lived within him. Though I know not what it is. But I do wonder about it sometimes, how he came to be like he was. Was he born or made this way? I have a theory, though I'm not a professional, so what do I know? But if you did ask, I'd have to say that something along the way changed his DNA, and it was overwritten by some invading force, a virus perhaps, that corrupts the host.

Whatever it was, it was plain to see... it wasn't through with him... or me. It was still festering in his soul. So, as the thrill of discovery disappeared, and as the magic of his dominion faded, he grew irritable and worse yet... he grew bored.

He had possessed me, beaten me, and exalted in my agony, but that was no longer enough. His appetite had grown, and he knew, in order to appease it, he would have to travel darker roads still. And every step he took down that darker path amplified his thrill. So paddling quickly became whipping, and whipping quickly became cutting, and before I knew what was happening, cutting became his favorite sport.

And all the while, he was no different than any of the stupid johns who came to Cockaigne to satiate their needs; ignorant of everything except the vague twitching of an atrophied organ.

Though Father Cormac was unique in one regard; he was the only one to claim His was the ecstasy of the Divine, ordained by God Himself, and was committed within His Holy Service.

And unlike the johns, and their single serving appetites, Father Cormac had all the time in the world, and the scope of power with which to fill it. And his patience was prodigious.

Three years after arriving at the convent my day of Vesture had finally arrived, and I was to receive the habit of a novice. Just like the Sister's habit, the habit of a novice included the brown tunic and scapular of the Carmelite order. But unlike theirs, the novice's habit included a white veil, instead of a brown one. For the past three years I'd been a simple postulant and wore the white scapular and veil of the uninitiated.

And for three years Sister Margaret Mary had worked diligently, trying her best to keep me from becoming a novitiate. Had I not hated her severely, I might have thanked her for her efforts. Though, in the end, Father Cormac ultimately had his way. So, at the age of sixteen, I become an official candidate of the Sacred Heart Community.

Still, I had not uttered a single word. But apparently that didn't matter, as Father Cormac's influence over the Carmelite convent was nothing short of miraculous.

"You may be a novitiate, but you will never be a nun. I will see to that personally. Do you understand me?" Sister Margaret Mary hissed at me as I passed by her on my way to the altar. Father Cormac stood nearby at the podium, his words ringing hollow in my ears.

"Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, He only gives. And now, especially, we give thanks for sending a new laborer into the vineyard – For in Luke ten 'the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.'"

I knelt when I was supposed to kneel, and turned when I was told to turn, and I took the holy robes and kissed them too. I crossed myself, though I never once spoke a word of intention, nor a word of prayer. That they took upon themselves, and soon it was over.

"As St. Teresa of Avila once said, 'Those who are received should be persons of prayer, sincerely aspiring to perfection.' Go now Novice Cassandra Lethe; aspire to that perfection as you seek to pay homage to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen."

Father Cormac found me aspiring later that evening, out by the rose garden.

"I have two gifts for you," he told me.

Two gifts I could neither accept nor refuse.

"This one," he said, handing me a rather flat box. "I can give you now. The other one I will have to give you later, in private."

It had been three years and still he had not taken me. He'd come close, and done just about every other unimaginable thing, but that he had not done. But looking into his watery eyes just then, I knew... that was going to change. Thankfully I had my iron shirt, and I was impervious.

"You don't have to talk, but you could still say thank you!" he hissed between his teeth when all I did was stand there, holding the box in my hand, as if it were a bomb ready to go off. I stared at it a moment longer, and then I pulled off the lid. Inside was a six-inch wooden cross on a bit of leather. I picked it up and looked at it closer.

“It’s yours now; now that you’ve been cleansed of the wickedness that once held sway over you.” He licked his lips and bent in even closer.

“I can’t wait to see you wearing this.” He draped the leather cord from my neck and let the heavy weight of the wooden cross fall upon my chest.

“And only this.”

He was being bold, reckless even. I looked around the back garden, half-expecting to see another nun strolling past. But we were alone.

“I’ll see you later tonight... with your other gift.”

He came in the night, when I was reading in bed. When I first arrived at the convent I would often pretend to be reading the bible, so as to ignore someone’s attention, or else to make them think the better of me. But I had long since stopped pretending, and now I often read the bible, though I no more understood its meaning. And sometimes it was some other book pressed discretely between its pages.

Cara was responsible for that of course. She’d been the only one who had worked out that I couldn’t read. But instead of telling anyone or making a fuss about it, she just started leaving books in my room. There’s not a lot to do in a convent, and after a bit I found myself staring at these books. Easy-Reader books at first; and that frustrated me, the childish drawings and themes. But it helped, and soon I was graduating to young adult, and then within that second year, I was reading books by Jane Austen and poems by Coleridge.

My education therefore was a smattering of whatever Cara could salvage out of the donation box. I guess that makes my learning rather eclectic.

But that evening I was reading the bible, and silently dreading the arrival of everything I hated, everything I loathed.

“You’re a woman now, a true woman of God, and I couldn’t be more proud of you,” he said as he sat down next to me on the bed. The way his chest was puffed with pride, I knew he meant every word he said. Would you understand how much worse that made it?

The way he looked at me, with a glow in his beady blue eyes, I knew what it was he was preparing to do. But knowing and stopping are two very different things.

Slowly I set the bible aside.

“You’ve come so far Cassandra, so far indeed.”

My eyes were transfixed on the small silver package he held in his hands.

“I think you are finally ready to understand what it is to suffer, as God has suffered - in order to save our souls.”

I took the package with trembling hands.

He was terrifying me. Never before had I seen this feverishness so early in a session. My fingers shook as I worked at the ribbon on the package.

“It’s special, only for you Cassandra, only for you.”

He stood then, as he spoke, and just sort of hovered over me, as my trembling fingers worked to free the package from its wrappings.

When it was finally done, I slid the top from the box, and peered inside. But I had no idea what I was looking at. I looked to him for some sort of explanation.

“It’s a cilice,” he told me with barely restrained excitement lighting his creamy eyes.

What it was was a small metal belt, made up of three rows of small metal rings, and from each ring three metal barbs protruded. Six silk ribbons; three red and three black, were tied to each end. Too afraid to hold his expectant gaze, I kept my eyes focused on the confusing contents of the box.

“Worn by the most devout, it allows us to experience, and therefore understand the pain and suffering that God has endured for the sake of us all. In experiencing his pain, so too can we experience the ecstasy that comes from knowing his heart.”

He knelt before me, taking the cilice from my shaking hands, he held it reverently before him.

“In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.”

Then, as if an urgent need propelled him to roughness, he took hold of my legs and yanked them apart. His hands, trembling with an excitement of their own, slid up my legs as he slowly revealed the flesh of my thighs beneath.

It was terrible, and so unlike our other encounters; encounters I had grown almost immune to.

I was panic stricken, shocked into a near catatonic stupor. My armor of indifference had been undone by the unexpectedness of what was happening. And even though I had grown nearly immune to a certain type of horror, this... this was different... this was unbridled lust, combined with a new and unexpected physical torment, and I had not had time to adjust.

When he wrapped the belt around the upper part of my right thigh, as its angry little teeth bit into my flesh, I was set on fire. My whole world ignited, and suddenly I was engulfed in an inferno that was sure to consume me.

There was a fire consuming Father Cormac as well. By the wild unrestrained madness that burned within his eyes, I knew. He was positively enraptured by my agony. And I wanted nothing less than to kill him for it.

“Tonight you will feel the ecstasy of the Devine.”

With a fierce jerk, he yanked the belt tighter, digging the small barbs deeper into my flesh; bringing forth dozens of tiny beads of blood, that bubbled up where each of the vicious metal teeth penetrated my skin. Before I could stop myself, an anguished cry escaped my lips. So I bit down hard trying to hold the others in. I couldn’t stand the thought of giving in, of giving him the satisfaction of hearing my cries. Not now, not ever again.

But as he cinched the belt tighter still, driving the spines deeper into the meat of my leg, I couldn’t stop another unsanctioned cry from cleaving the silence in two.

With a deep-wet sigh of satisfaction, Father Cormac collapsed into my lap. His face buried between my thighs; he lay there heaving on top of me, as if he was spent.

“Tonight you will know what it means to be the bride of God,” he said, as he picked his head up from my lap. “This is going to be so special my little Cassy, so special.”

He stood then, and slowly began the ritual he'd preformed a hundred times or more, of stripping off his clothes, folding them neatly, and placing them one-by-one onto the chair. Then at last, he turned to me...

Before I knew what was happening his full weight came down on top of me. The pressure on my thigh, where the cilice dug its fierce claws into me, made it feel like my whole leg was on fire. But that was only a minor distraction from the real torment I knew lay just ahead.

His fat face hovered just inches over mine. "I adore You oh Lord Creator, though You are hidden from me, let me immerse myself in the flesh of Your divinity, let me bathe in the blood of Christ as it works its way through this woman of God, as You worked Your way through Your Holy Mother Mary."

Our union that night was just the first of many such 'spiritual workings' as he called them. For me it was worse than anything I'd endured with Sykes, and even rivaled the affections of the Welshman. For me it was hell, my own silent hell, and there was no escape. And that is how my life remained until the day Father Cormac died and I was finally set free.



Cassandra had watched the doctor's eyes as she had related her story, as if she'd been searching for something, pity perhaps or maybe empathy. But what she'd seen was a woman numb to it all, and not for the first time did Cassandra wonder what it would be like to be a psychiatrist, to plumb the depths of twisted and disturbed minds.

"Does my story make you sick?" she asked.

The shrink looked at her with unmasked irritation. "Is that what you wanted, to make me sick?"

"Why would I want to do that?" Cassandra didn't know why the woman was provoking her, but she assumed it was some sort of psychological test.

"Maybe you like how shocking your story is; maybe it gives you a feeling of control. Do you like to manipulate other people's emotions?" The woman's dark almond eyes were locked on hers and Cassandra didn't want to be the first to look away.

This wasn't the reaction Cassandra had expected. Surely Sister Margaret Mary's treatment of her was nothing new, and there have been predatory priests for as long as there have been priests, but Cassandra felt her story was unique in the extreme. Surely this doctor woman would recognize that. Surely, she would have some empathy for what she had just shared.

But instead of empathy, all the doctor seemed to have for Cassandra was a mild case of pity, and more questions. Cassandra could see them all percolating at the back of the woman's head, as clearly as if they'd been printed on her face.

"Did Mason remind you of the priest?"

“What? No. Why would you ask that?”

“Did he remind you of Anson, the boy you seduced in the mill?”

“I didn’t seduce him. He saw me. He snuck into the convent to be with me. I didn’t make him do anything.”

“And what about Father Mahoney? Did you seduce him too?”

“Are you out of your mind? Father Mahoney? Father Mahoney didn’t come to the convent until two days before I left. I hardly know the m... man.”

Cassandra wasn’t aware of climbing to her feet, only that she was suddenly bearing down upon the doctor from above.

“I was wrong to ask you if my story made you sick, obviously you’re the sick one. You’re sick in the head to think such a thing. Why would you even ask that?”

In a minute she’d be over that table and on top of the woman. What would it matter anyway? Her sentence was all but certain, with a woman like this working on her side.

“Calm down Cassandra,” the woman said with only the slightest quiver to her voice. The door opened then and two large orderlies came in before Cassandra had made up her mind whether or not she was going to throttle the good doctor. With them breathing down her neck, her choice was an easy one. But she was through talking to the woman, through trying to explain.

“One more thing before we end our session for today.” The woman regarded Cassandra without any sort of expression on her face, and it was hard for Cassandra to know where she was headed. With a great deal of trepidation she nodded at the doctor.

“We are going to be charging Mason Harlow with second degree murder this afternoon. Is there anything you want to say in that regard?”

Cassandra fell back in her seat with a thump. *What can I say? I did it. It was me, not him. No one would believe me.* A hundred and one thoughts were spinning in her head, and none of them wanted to hold still long enough for Cassandra to grasp onto them. Finally, after ten minutes of sitting in silence, the doctor collected her things and got to her feet. At the door she turned back to Cassandra.

“I’ll leave that for you, as a memento.”

Cassandra’s eyes turned in the direction that the doctor was indicating, and there on the table sat the small lion figurine. Seeing it, Cassandra bit the inside of her cheek, until it bled.

9 Veda

Halfway through her day Ashlyn began to feel ill. With a sore throat, and a steady stream of snot leaking from her nose, she was also feeling quite pathetic. Not to mention anxious, as she waited for her next interview to arrive. Because the last thing she needed was to get sick.

Sadly, she knew that worry would get pushed to the back of what was quickly becoming a very long queue of things to worry about.

Which was ironic in the sense that Ashlyn had arrogantly assumed, when she first caught the Cassandra case, that she would have it all sorted in not time. But nothing was what it seemed with this stupid case, and in many ways, it was beginning to feel as though someone was intentionally fucking with her.

The Catholic Church included. Oh, she'd been right in her criticisms that the church, or least its practitioners had tormented and tortured the young girl. And nothing anyone could ever say would ever obliterate that fact. Nor could it obliterate what it had done to Cassandra's recovery.

But what Ashlyn couldn't reconcile was Father Mahoney, his emotional entanglement with Cassandra.

There was just something funny about the young priest, and that frustrated Ashlyn to no end. Which oddly enough invigorated her an equal corresponding amount. However that was an issue she wasn't prepared to deal with just yet.

But if she had the inclination, Ashlyn would have to admit she was looking forward to seeing the priest again, despite whatever horrors the nun would no-doubt impart. For Ashlyn, it would all be worth it, if it meant she would get to see the man's warm smile and bright eyes once more.

Even now, when she closed her eyes, she could almost feel his vice-like grip around her waist. And she knew a part of her would give anything to be able to feel it once again. Of course she knew that would never happen. Still, a part of her couldn't help playing back the memory of it, in great detail, time and again.

In fact, it was on a constant loop when a knock sounded at her door.

Rather than getting to her feet and making her slow way over to her office door, Ashlyn called out loudly, "Come in" and the door swung open.

It was her boss Dr. Sullivan and not the person she had been expecting to see.

"Can I help you?" Ashlyn asked a bit flustered, as her mind was forced to swiftly change gears.

"I heard about the photos," Sullivan said, as he sauntered into her office munching on a handful of peanuts.

"What of it?" Ashlyn asked, a bit of steel returning to her voice.

With nearly prehensile lips, Sullivan snatched up another peanut from his hand and held it there between his lips for a moment, before he sucked it in and started to chew. It was a languorous thing, as if he were chewing over his words before he would say them.

After a long moment he swallowed and then said, "There's talk that you aren't going to charge either of them."

"Not right now I'm not," Ashlyn said, not wanting to feed into his obvious power trip. She also didn't want to give him any more information about her case than he already had. Yet, technically he was still her boss, so she knew she would have to handle him with great care.

"You get proof hand-delivered to you that a man in your custody has committed murder and you just sit on it?"

"I'm not sitting on it. I'm fact-checking. Remember what that is?" Ashlyn asked, suddenly no longer feeling the need to restrain her indignation.

Changing tact, Sullivan said, "The DA wants to bring Cassandra to arraignment as quickly as possible; this being such a high-profile case."

Which is exactly why they gave it to me and not you, Ashlyn thought acerbically as she gazed at the man standing before her. It was hard work keeping the image of her pounding an ice pick through his skull from clouding her vision. Still, it did make her smile.

"She's on an extended psych-hold. We have until Monday to charge her, and as long as Mason is talking I'm not going to do anything to jeopardize that. If you have an issue, take it up with Dt. Pfluger."

"Oh come on," he said before he dumped the last of his peanuts into his mouth. Then with a full mouth he said, "We both know this is him getting his rocks off in the confessional. We both saw the pictures. It was intentional. And as soon as those pictures get leaked to the press he'll be off and running. For fuck's sake, he's not even a citizen. You have to charge him or he's in the wind."

Ashlyn groaned. Clearly she didn't need this, nor did she need to waste time explaining to the witless man that the US had extradition rights with Australia, and that if Mason did indeed do a runner back home, he would definitely not find a safe-haven there.

However, in Ashlyn's estimation, Sullivan's opinions were based more on the movies he'd seen than any facts he'd ever learned. And it was her well-educated opinion that Sullivan knew less about criminal psychology than most of the detectives she worked with. And he certainly didn't know much about the law. How he'd managed this long in the field she clearly had no idea.

Just then, as if to prove the very point she'd been thinking he asked, "Have you administered the PCL-R?"

"Yes," Ashlyn responded rather irritably.

The Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised, was a tool that was somewhat standard in their field of work, however the results could vary greatly depending upon the administrator, and other determining factors, and Ashlyn did not consider it to be that reliable of a tool in determining criminal behavior.

"And..." Sullivan said, dragging out the word, as if to prompt her.

“And she scored a seven,” she said, closely examining his face for the disappointment she knew he would feel. And as usual, he did not disappoint. Then, possibly because of her own child-like need to gossip, she couldn’t help but add, “However Mason scored a thirty-two.”

At that Sullivan’s eyes went wide with unrestrained shock. “Holy shit,” he said, whistling between his teeth. Then, as if to point out his own prognostic powers he said with a weaselly snarl, “I told you so.”

Sitting back in her seat, Ashlyn took a deep, steadying breath. And then with a bit less animosity, she said, “I know.”

“It’s only been three business days and I’ve got my calendar booked out till Friday. The soonest I can be ready is next Monday.”

“Next Monday?!” he screeched, as if she’d told him sometime next year.

“Yes, next Monday. Unless of course you don’t want me to do a proper job, then you can have it at any time. But, like you said, this is a high-profile case. And unless you want to see this get pulled back into court on appeals, you should let me do it right the first time.”

Ashlyn stared the man down, knowing full-well that she held the upper hand. Still, she was a bit shocked when, for once, her petulant boss seemed to back down.

However, before either of them could get in another word, a tiny redhead appeared in the doorway, just behind Sullivan.

“Hello, Mrs. MacKenna, so wonderful of you to make time for me. Thank you.” Ashlyn greeted the woman, and then looked meaningfully at her boss. Taking the hint, he excused himself.

“Don’t mind him. He was born like that,” Ashlyn said by way of releasing the tension that had built up in her office. God forbid any of the leftover negativity affect the woman’s willingness to cooperate.

“Please have a seat. Thank you so much for coming in to speak with me today, I’m sorry it couldn’t be under better circumstances.”

“It’s no problem. Tuesdays are slow this time of day,” the woman said as she took a seat opposite from Ashlyn. There was a tight, but genuine smile on her face, and Ashlyn couldn’t help thinking it made the woman look nervous. But perhaps that was to be expected, considering...

“I was hoping you could help shed some light on what happened between Cassandra and Mason.”

“I’ve been trying to work that one out on me own, and all I can say is I never woulda thought the girl had it in her. Is what they’re saying on TV for real? Did she really torture him?” The woman came forward in her seat until she was just barely resting on the edge, as if at any moment she might spring forth like some possessed Jack-in-the-box.

“It looks that way, but we’re still trying to get to the bottom of it all.” Ashlyn didn’t see the point in denying it, but she wasn’t about to divulge any new information either. Ashlyn could just tell the woman lived to gossip, she could just see it in her meddling eyes.

“I was hoping you could tell me, how is it you came to know Cassandra. And anything else you can think of, that might help us get to the bottom of all this.”

“I spose I can help with that. Especially if anything I have to say might help get her off. Or, you know, a lighter sentence. What’s she up for do ya know?”

“No, we haven’t charged her yet, as Mason hasn’t been exactly forthcoming in the details. But from his injuries, and the statement we got from Byron Edleston, it seems there is quite a lot of evidence against her.” Ashlyn didn’t bother to mention all of the evidence found in Cassandra’s apartment; the taser wands, the restraints, and all that blood... It had all been collected and put into evidence, and now it was Ashlyn’s job to piece it all together.

“But, I understand she’s had quite the troubled life, and maybe there are some... psychological explanations for what has happened,” Ashlyn said, leaving the door wide-open for Mrs. MacKenna to assume whatever she liked, hoping it would be enough to get the woman’s mouth moving.

“Aye, well then, if it’s that kind of thing you’re wantin to know, I’d be happy to oblige, seeing as how that lass is crazier than a fruit cake. What do ya want to know first?”

“To be honest I was hoping you could just tell me about how she came to work for you and what you thought of her, you know... your general impressions and anything that you might have witnessed between her and Mr. Harlow.”

“Oh is that all? Well, let me tink.”



“We got a letter from Cara a week before Cassandra arrived. Which was a wee bit odd, as Cara had never once before written ta us. What, with her being so busy up at the convent and all. So right away we knew something was up.

In her letter, Cara’s explained that there was some kind of trouble up at the convent, and she was wondering if a young lady named Cassandra could come and stay with us for a wee bit.

I wasn’t too keen on the idea meself, but Conor said that since Cara had never once asked for nothing before we had to do it. And he had planned to call up there the next day and tell her so himself. But we got busy at the bar and he forgot for a bit. So, it was a real surprise when about a week later the lass just and turned up on our doorstep, another letter from our Cara in tow.

Being that Conor and his sister were never what you call close, we were a bit surprised she’d gone ahead and sent the lass, but her letter explained that she had nowhere else ta go. It also said the girl had been living up at the nunnary since she’d been rescued from a pimp when she was just wee lass. And I guess that cinched it for Conor. Cuz he took one look at the skinny girl and told her that she could stay.

And at first, I don’t mind telling you, I wasn’t so sure if she was going to work out. Hell, at first I didn’t know if she could even talk. She was so quiet. But after Conor got done giving her one of his big bear-hugs, she said all quiet like, “Thank you” and well, that was that.

So we showed her the spare room above the bar, and told her she could stay with us, while she saved up to get a place of her own. Then I set about teaching her the finer points of waitressing a pub. It's not as easy as ya might think, and it took her a spell to get it right. But she worked it out in the end. Though, we did have a higher-than-normal turnover in glassware that first week, but hell, tha's nothing.

But the thing that got me most about Cassandra wasn't the broken glasses, or even how shy she was. What really got me was how sad she was all the time. Normally I'd tell a waitress to perk up or hit the road, but ya just can't tell that to a girl who's had that kinda life, now can ya? And besides, the customers seemed to take to her melancholy ways oddly enough. She was sorta like a stray dog that everyone kinda felt sorry for.

I know that's why she got bigger tips than any of the other girls, meself included. Cuz people felt sorry for her. And they didn't even know her history. No... Conor and I were real mum about that.

I guess that's the thing in the bar business. It doesn't matter what kind of personality ya have so long as ya got the looks. Men just like to look at a pretty thing when they're tossing one back. And, for as sad as she was, Cassandra sure had the looks; with those big brown eyes, and that baby-doll face of hers. I guess that's why she had more than her fair share of gropers too.

Anyway, she'd only been with us a couple of weeks before Mason Harlow came into the pub. Jaysus, he sure didn't look anything like he does in the movies, and it took me a couple of minutes to put together who he was. But Cassandra, hell she didn't know even after I tried to explain it to her, on account of there not being any TVs up at the nunnery.

But for all her peculiarities, she sure was a hard worker. And she didn't even kick up a fuss when she was asked to mop out the jacks or wipe down the bins. Not that she's the only one doing those things, mind you. She's just the only one who don' complain. And jaysus, even I complain about mopping out the men's room; them tossers are nasty shites, believe you me. You'd think, for as old as some of them wankers are they'd finally sort out how ta hit the damn target.

But Cassandra did have some issues. For one thing, hardly nothing ever came out of her gob. It was like pulling teeth getting her to say much of anything. Even after Mason Harlow came into the bar, and I'd seen the way she was staring at him. I tried to talk to her about it, but she just shrugged it off, almost like she was mad.

And then... she had troubles sleeping from day one. Which I don't mind telling ya kinda creeped me out. Sometimes she would let out this blood curdling scream in the middle of the night, waking me up and scaring me half ta death, all at the same time. Conor though, he'd always try to be the hero; he'd go running in, just to find the lass wrestling her bed sheets. Once he tried to wake her up, which was a fucking... sorry for the language, real mistake cuz she punched him square in the face.

Of course she didn't know what she was doing at the time, but he still had ta go to work the next day with a big ol' black eye that no one could believe. But ol' Conor, he just made up some story and soon he had everyone believing he'd caught an intruder, and given him the what-for.

"You should see the other fella," he kept telling everyone. And, being the size he is, no one questioned if it were true. But after a while though, his story had been repeated so many times,

and changed so much, I was starting ta worry they'd be calling in the dogs, to sniff out a body or such.

But even after all that, Conor still had a tender spot in his heart for Cassy. And well, I guess I was warming up ta her meself.

I'm not exactly what you'd call the warmest person. Aye, it takes a bit for me to get ta like some folks. Most of 'em really. And at first, I was a bit put-out that someone was sleeping in our spare room. You see, I'd had me eye on making it a nursery, and now Conor seemed to have the excuse to put it off he'd been wanting for.

Anyway, when I realized that Mason Harlow was sniffing around Cassandra, I did me best to try to keep them apart. I even told him to bugger off, that she didn't need nobody famous, dragging her into the spotlight. She'd had a hard-enough life and was such a wall-flower to boot; I couldn't imagine her being drug through the tabloids.

"You can just forget about the lass, you hear me?" I told him. "She's been drug through the ringer that one, hasn't had a lick a luck since the day she was born. And in fact she's just left the convent. So she don't need the likes of you sniffing around, trying to get some," I told him.

"Our Cassy is as sweet as can be, and the last thing she needs is some hoity-toity, do-as-I-please Don Juan getting her to fall in love with him. Especially when you're just gonna run off, leaving me to deal with the fall out." Cassandra didn't need that, and by the Lord, neither did me and Conor.

"It's not like that," he told me. Aye, and by the look in his eyes I knew he believed it too.

Jaysus that man is a looker, and I could hardly believe he had a thing for such a simple girl like Cassandra, what with no flash, or style to her what-so-ever. Every day she wore the same tired ol' thing; a flower dress, a pair of white trainers, and an old knit sweater that Conor said used to belong to Cara.

Finally one day I had to ask her about it. "Don't you have anything else to wear besides them flower dresses?" I asked her.

Staring down at her feet, Cassandra just said, "It's all they had in the donation box that fit me."

Shite. I nearly choked when she said that, I felt so bad then for asking. Not that it would have stopped me mind you. I just might have tried for some more tact is all.

"Hasn't anyone ever taken you shopping?" I asked her, even though Conor was eyeing me like mad. I guess I can be like that at times, a bit in-your-face, not that I mean to. Conor always said it was just my nature, and that people would either get used to it or not. Either way, it was they're problem not mine. Conor's always had a way with words like that.

Anyway, Cassandra just shook her head 'no'. So right then and there I realized I'd have to be the one to show her how it's done. Fortunately she had a stack a cash on her when she turned up, so I knew we wouldn't have ta be divin' into the bargain bins. Not that there's anything wrong with that. But since Cassy had enough of that type thing, I knew something different was in order. And since we pay her well enough, and Conor refused to take any rent, I figured she could spare a bit of all that cash.

“You keep your money dear,” he’d told her when she’d offered to pay for the room. “Aye, you’ll be needing it for when you settle in your own place, rents not cheap and of course you’ll be needing a bed and all that.”

“I’ll take you before your Sunday shift,” I told her that Friday night as we were mopping up.

“Well then, you’ll be needing this,” Conor said picking up the whole damn register.

“Funny,” I said, cuz I’ll be damned if that man don’ know me, through and through. But, I just waved him off, and then snapped him on the arse with me bar rag. To which Conor just laughed, setting the register back down, as if it didn’t weigh a hundred pounds. Then he scooped me up into his arms and spun me till I was dizzy.

For as long as we’ve been together, I tell ya, there’s been no loss of fire between us, me and my Conor. It was like we were meant to be. And that night, as he was tossing me in the air, I could see Cassandra saw that about us, cuz that’s the first time I ever saw her smile.

It was just a small thing mind you, but it was the first, and there weren’t too many after that. Aye, I guess that’s another reason I wound up liking her so much, socially speaking of course. Is because she saw me and Conor for what we really are, just two silly romantics, with one giant heart. And I guess that made her happy, in her own sort of way.

Shopping with Cassandra, well, that was a whole other thing. I swear, you’d have thought she’d never been to a department store before. But it sure didn’t take her long to fill up her first bag. And she certainly had an eye for fashion.

It was funny though, watching her try stuff on; how she could sort of change so drastically, from one outfit to the next, kind of morphing into someone new. Me, I’m exactly the same no matter what. What you see is what you get. You could dress me up in any type thing and I’ll still be just the same; a short, spunky redhead with an attitude. There’s just no getting around that.

But Cassandra, she’s something different, and with every new outfit she seemed to become *someone* different. Even her face seemed to change, growing older perhaps, and more serious too.

In the end though, we figured she’d spent just over eight hundred dollars, and that’s on account of her needing everything. Aye, and when we strolled into the pub, all fancy-as-you-please, with her hundred or so bags tucked under our arms, we got a round of applause from all the regulars already tossin’ ‘em back at the bar. Already they’d gotten to know our sullen girl, and had taken to her, like family. I mean, none of us knew her or talked to her that much, but we all sort of looked after her like kin.

Anyway, that day when we walked in and everyone was clapping real loud... well, that was as close to happy as I ever saw her get. Though she still did have that haunted look in her eyes. But I figured, on account of her life, that was probably never gonna go away. It’s sad and all, but that’s just the truth of it.

Besides, ya didn’t have to know the details, what with seeing all them scars.

“Jaysus woman, did ya leave anything behind?” Conor asked when he looked up and saw us coming through the door. Of course he was only pretending to be mad. But Cassandra, she must not have known, cuz she looked absolutely petrified. She even took a few steps back, until her back was pressed up against the wall, like she needed the support of knowing it was there.

Seeing her face, all terrified, Conor smiled and laughed, trying to show her he was not being serious. But still, she eyed him like she was sure he was going to snap. So I walked over to the bar and slapped Conor upside his big bald head and said, "Don't be an arse."

But it wasn't until Conor went over to Cassy and pulled her into one of his big bear-hugs that she finally started to breathe.

She'd had to get used to that in her short time at the bar, Conor being such an affectionate man, always slapping people on the back, and giving 'em a hug.

"Do you think I bought too much?" she asked me later on upstairs.

To which I couldn't help but laugh and then say, "Darling". "There's no such thing as too much when it comes to clothes, shoes, and men."

Of course, I regretted my words, just as quickly as they'd tumbled from my mouth.

10 Mason

“I finally asked Cassandra out the next day, though I had to fake another sickie to do it. Which I’ll admit is a pretty big no-no in the movie business. It’s not cheap rescheduling everything. But I had to go. It was a compulsion. And before you say it... I know what you’re thinking... but it wasn’t some carnal desire to... you know... to fuck her or anything. Rather... it felt almost spiritual. Like somehow, through her, I could finally define my entire existence. I know that sounds crazy... but it’s true. And maybe it is crazy, or maybe she bewitched me somehow. But whatever it was... I had to go. I just had to.

Even now I feel it. That same compulsion. Though the memory of her lessons it a bit.

But Byron, he just couldn’t let me go, not without some answers first.

“Where are you going? What are you going to do? Who are you going with?”

But I didn’t have any answers for him, which only made him all the more insistent.

When I’d gone home sick the day before, he had gone to my hotel room looking for me. For over an hour, he had knocked, then pounded on my door, until someone had finally called security. Of course they fucking let him in. And ever since there’d been no-end to his interrogations.

“Look, I’m sorry about yesterday,” I told him.

But his only reply was a stern look, that I swear he must have borrowed from Jack.

I knew he had a right to be pissed, and maybe a little worried too, because I never once missed a day of work on account of being sick, not once in all my life. Half-dead with the flu I’d still turn-up. I guess that’s just my dad in me. Jack never could abide anyone lying around if there was work to do, death’s door present or not. Except for Juliee. Her, he wouldn’t let do anything.

But even if Byron did have his reasons to worry, that still didn’t make him the police of me.

“You know what Byron?” I asked him as he slipped into the SUV behind me. “You’re the reason I went to the pub yesterday, I just needed some time alone. I can’t take you hovering over me mate. You’ve gotta give me some space.”

Hard working, loyal like you wouldn’t believe, and willing to work for peanuts... I didn’t always understand why Byron put up with me.

“I’m just trying to make sure you get better Mason,” he said. And with a deft flick he had set the hook. A goddamn clever devise, he’d used a bit too often if you asked me.

But all I could think about was Cassandra. So instead of making me feel guilty, it only served to make me mad.

“God damnit Byron. I pay you, and if I tell you I want to be alone, then that’s what you’re going to do, you’re going to leave me the fuck alone!” I screamed at him from the back of the black SUV. Even my driver, who was watching us in his rear-view mirror, looked as if I’d kicked a puppy.

But I could tell Byron was angrier than he was hurt, and when he opened his mouth to speak I cut him off.

“Just get out Byron!” I yelled. And when he still refused to move, I said in a menacing voice, one I’d never used with him before, “Get out. And I don’t want to see you again until it’s time to leave tomorrow, or I swear-to-god Byron, yours will be a one-way ticket.”

I regretted my words just as soon as he stepped from the SUV. But all I could think of was how devious the bastard could be, so I slammed the door in his face, and told the driver to “drive”.

This time I had him drop me a good five blocks from the pub. And I bribed him to boot, promising him a grand to keep his mouth shut. Of course with that much money on the line he enthusiastically agreed.

But then I realized I would have to ask Byron to get the money from the bank, and for a moment I felt a pang of remorse for how poorly I’d treated him. But a moment later, when it occurred to me all of the questions my asking would no-doubt provoke... well, let’s just say, I regretted those words a whole lot less.

It’s funny now... thinking about how long I stood there on the sidewalk just outside the pub, playing out a hundred different scenarios of how the next few hours with Cassandra would go; how I would walk in, take a seat, and quickly say something funny, something that would make her laugh, something that would make her smile.

But all of my plans evaporated the moment I walked into the quiet pub. Because Cassandra had changed. Literally and overnight, she was different; dressed different, looked different, hell she even acted different. And just like that, everything I thought I knew about her went winging out the window.

No longer wearing her floral dress, knit sweater, and white runners; Cassandra was no longer the awkward and innocent girl I’d seen before. Instead... instead she seemed incredibly mature; in her slim fitting dark jeans and tight red blouse. Even her shoes, a pair of black leather sandals, spoke of a quiet confidence that hadn’t been there before. Do you know what I mean?

But what was most transformative, was her hair, how it now hung in long, lazy curls that ended mid-way down her back, and her half-smudged make-up, how it accentuated her full and gorgeous lips.

And when she looked at me, with her liquid-brown eyes... I knew then, that I didn’t stand a chance, not against this new and potent persuasion.

But then something happened that I did not expect, when she turned and looked at me... she flinched, almost imperceptibly. And yet... to me, it was everything. Because I knew then, that that scared little girl was still there, hiding there beneath all of that commercial confidence.

Had I known then... that it would be that scared little girl that would be the sure and certain death of me; I might have gone running from the pub right then and there. But truly, ignorance is bliss, and the bliss I was feeling just then would ultimately be the death of me. The death of who I was.

But there was something else there in her eyes, something I can’t deny, because it was simply being reflected back at me. And even now, I can recall what it feels like, that unrestrained lust that slides over you, leaving you chilled and yet... pleasantly unnerved. Cold and slippery;

it's a mercurial thing, a menace that's hard to nail down, and still, it sends shivers coursing over your skin.

And I couldn't help wondering if the damage had been done. If had already played my hand, and come up short.

And I feared the worst when her eyes danced over me, and then flicked away just as quickly.

Anxious and unsure, I took a seat in what was quickly becoming my regular spot, the one across from where the red-plaid gent had been sitting the night before. I liked it there best because it allowed me to keep my back to the wall, an eye towards the door, and the other one aimed at the bar.

Though I was pretty sure the bartender, the hulking Conor, had deemed me a 'good guy', the man still gave me pause, and with good reason. I'd seen him nearly crush the plaid man's neck with no more provocation than a grab to Cassandra's backside, and here I was about to ask her out. Part of me thought I should be a bit more worried about that. And another part told me to 'grow a pair'.

"What will it be?" Cassandra asked gliding up to my table.

"You look beautiful today," I told her honestly, if somewhat shakily.

To which, she smiled sardonically and then rapped her pen, rather aggressively, on her tiny notepad.

"Do you really need to write down a single drink order?" I asked dismally, forgetting all of the one-liners I had concocted not five minutes ago out on the street outside.

"What makes you think I'm writing drink orders?" she asked, smiling then at her cleverness, and I almost fell out of my chair.

"Then I'm curious, what do you write in your little notebook?"

Cassandra just shrugged, but her eyes still held onto her smug smile, making them glow a fiery crimson instead of their normal brown.

"What can I get ya?"

"What do you recommend?"

"Oh I don't know... you're in a pub, how about a beer?"

"I am. So, I guess I'll have a twenty-ounce Guinness. Please," I said, having recently developed a taste for the thick, dark beer that tastes of iron and coffee.

"Original," Cassandra commented dryly. But her mouth pulled up on the left side, and I was sure it was another smile.

And I would have retorted but she skipped off to the bar before I could think of anything clever to say.

I'll admit, I never wanted a script writer more in my life. Then again, I'd never wanted to impress anyone more in my life. Normally if I wanted someone, I'd throw them a smile and that was that. If not, then I knew they weren't interested, and I moved on.

But this... this cat and mouse game was intoxicating. And the thrill of wanting her, of chasing her, of coming away disappointed... only heightened everything I felt about her. And soon wanting her became the addiction.

Sadly, I didn't get my nerve up enough to ask Cassandra out until I'd had another 2 beers. Courage, it seems, comes in all shapes and sizes, and that night it was dark and frothy.

"What are you doing on St. Patrick's Day? You want to go out?" I asked slowly, praying I wasn't slurring my words.

"You're asking a waitress, in an Irish pub, to go out with you on St. Patrick's Day?" she asked just as slowly in reply.

I hadn't thought about it like that.

Of course it was their busiest night of the year. What was I thinking? And immediately I felt stupid and wanted to kick myself.

"I guess so."

My reply sounded pathetic, even to me, so I forced myself to sit up straighter, and look her dead in the eyes, while I waited stoically for her answer.

"Okay."

I sat there, stunned by her easy acceptance, for more than a long second before she asked a bit shakily, "You want another beer?"

I shook my head and she walked away, and it was another fifteen minutes or so before she returned to ask if I needed that refill yet. This time I was ready for her.

"How about I meet you here at seven, and we'll go and see what Sixth Street is all about? I here St. Patrick's Day gets kinda nuts."

She shrugged and said, "Sure."

And that was that. I put my money on the table, smiled up at her, and then got up and headed for the door.

Luckily for me, just outside the door the little redhead appeared out of nowhere and grabbed me by the arm. "Come with me," she hissed as she pulled me into a nearby alley.

"I here you're going out with Cassandra on Saturday night," she said, looking none-too-happy about it. Despite the fact she'd been pushingd for it in the first place.

"I am."

"Well, there's some things ya oughta know then. First off, Cassandra was traumatized as a wee lass. And I don't mean she was smacked around a few times, or she was teased at school. She's never had a home and was raised by some horrible beast of a man that did unspeakable things to her. That's why she spent the last thirteen years up at that convent in Ben."

With her hand on my shoulder, she stood on her tiptoes so that her mouth was close to my ear. "She ain't never had a relationship with a man. I asked her, and she admitted as much. Ya understand what I'm saying here laddy?" Dropping back down to the flats of her feet she regarded me coolly.

I nodded.

“You better be on your best behavior with her, and watch out for her, or else it’ll be Conor you’ll be dealing with. Got it?” She made a point to look me dead in the eyes.

“I got it,” I said solemnly.

I had assumed that living in the convent Cassandra probably hadn’t had many opportunities to date much, but I did find the news about her childhood traumas a bit unsettling. Not because it somehow made her less appealing, only... I’d dated broken girls before, girls that had so much baggage you felt like you needed a manual just to have a conversation with them. And the idea of it, just then, made me more than apprehensive.

But then, when I considered how she made me feel... I knew it wouldn’t matter. I knew it would be worth any amount of baggage; even if it meant I’d need a set of encyclopedias to work her out.

“I won’t hurt her, I promise. And I won’t take her anywhere she doesn’t want to go,” I said quickly and earnestly. “And I promise not to, you know... until she’s ready.”

The redhead’s eyes narrowed sharply so I added, “and not on the first date.” They narrowed a little bit more, and I swear to god, that even if her hulking husband wasn’t inside, I would have been scared stiff by that tiny woman.

So I added, “And not until she tells me she loves me. Okay?”

“Ya aren’t gonna love her and then leave her, like you big Hollywood hunks always do either. This is for real or nothing. Ya can’t drag this one along.”

I hadn’t thought about it, but when she said it like that, I realized that even with my sick days dragging out the shoot, my stay in Austin was limited.

But I must have paused too long thinking about it, because after a minute the vicious redhead gave my arm a good, hard pinch.

“Ouch! I swear. I don’t know how I’ll do it, but I swear I’ll stay in her life just as long as she wants me. Honestly I can’t imagine ever losing her.”

I had shocked myself, as much as I had shocked her, with my sudden heartfelt confession. But it was true. I didn’t know how I would make it work, but if Cassandra wanted me in her life, I would make it possible no matter what. The fact that I felt all of this even before our first date, well...I know that makes me seem all the more insane.

Three days later, at exactly seven, I met Cassandra outside of Mac’s.

“How’d they feel about you leaving tonight?” I asked as I came to stand beside her. A pathetic first line, I know. But clearly this woman did something to me that wasn’t entirely good.

“I worked the day shift. And besides, Shay didn’t want me working tonight anyway. She said it gets too crazy in there. And since I’m new...” she let her words trail off, and I think we were both thinking of the man in plaid.

“Well I’m glad you’re new. I’ve always wanted to see Sixth Street on St. Patrick’s Day. The entire crew kept going on about it.”

I took her hand then and looped it through the crook of my arm.

“But I wouldn’t want to do it without you. Come on. We can see it for the first time together.”

She stopped us then, pulling me up short. Turning to look at her, she scrutinized my face for a moment, then gave me an odd look. As if to say she knew.

I had said something that implied I knew more than I should. Which of course I did and didn’t. I smiled stupidly, hoping she’d let it slide. And after a second, she shrugged and looked away.

But I knew the redhead would talk, so I said, “Shay told me you were raised in a convent.” I punctuated the naivety of my statement by flashing my best boyish grin.

The truth was; I didn’t know what happened to her, not really, and I really didn’t want to know.

“Yes,” she said lightly, letting her hand slip slowly from my arm. And I watched silently, as it dropped lifelessly to her side, and fretted internally that our date was already on a steep downward slide.

“Where would you like to go first?” I asked cheerfully, turning the full-weight of my most mischievous grin on her. I had hoped it would prove my indifference towards the previous subject, and at the same time start an entirely new one. Thankfully she smiled a small, crooked smile in reply, and then shrugged again. But still, she didn’t utter a word.

The night had barely started and already it was fixing to be the worst first-date I ever had.

But the street was alive, and already crowded with drunken revelers, dressed in every shade of green. Even Cassandra had prepared for the occasion as she was wearing a low-cut green dress that hung on her shoulders, and cinched at the waist, coming ever-so-flirtatiously to just above her knees.

“Sensible shoes,” I told her, nodding to her feet.

She looked down and then back up to my eyes. I think now she was searching for sincerity.

“Shay laughed when I came downstairs in heels,” she admitted sheepishly. “She made me go back upstairs and change into these.”

They were an elegant pair of white strappy sandals that laced up her ankles; a Roman design I think. Whatever they were, they had the desired effect, and for a few minutes all I could imagine was unlacing them.

“They’re perfect,” I said, which seemed to please her.

“I see you managed to find some green too,” she said very generously.

Truly it’s the kindest thing she could have said as my fashion sense is a handicap. But I manage somehow; which is to say that Byron manages it, most of the time.

That night however, I was all on my own, as Byron was still not speaking to me. So for better or for worse I’d picked a light-blue denim shirt, and an old pair of jeans. Not because they looked good, but because it was comfortable. The only green I wore was a tie I had nicked from the set. But even that I couldn’t get right.

Her eyes danced coyishly over my face as she adjusted it; snuggling it up so that it no longer hung loose around my neck.

“I’ve always wanted to do that,” her breathy voice said into my chest, as her hand slid under my tie, where it came to rest just above my heart. No-doubt, she could feel it racing beneath. I ducked my head, so she couldn’t see just how much she was affecting me. But when I looked back to her portentous eyes, with all that mystery staring back at me...I floundered and found no words would come.

“You certainly wear yours better than that guy,” she said nodding to a very intoxicated man in green overalls and a flashing green tie.

“It’s more that the tie is wearing him,” I said, with a bit of my old-self coming back.

With a breathy laugh, she tweaked my old-battered Budweiser hat and said, “And this... this looks... nice.”

But by the way she said ‘nice’, I was pretty sure she meant the opposite. *God what she does to me*, I thought as my eyes took in her silky curves, and her questioning brow.

Never before, not even with my first, had it ever felt like this... with this energy.

“Thanks,” I managed in a rough whisper. But floundering, I had to abandon all hope of trying to explain. Apparently, Cassandra enjoyed my discomfort, because it drew her crooked smile... and my heart skipped another beat.

“I saw one of your movies,” she told me in a small voice, her eyes suddenly submissive.

The next step I took, I stumbled over my feet which had suddenly grown two sizes too large. And every step after that felt like clown-feet slapping down the pavement.

“I really wish you hadn’t,” I told her, through the thick saliva that was puddling in my mouth.

She pulled on my arm, bringing me to a stop again. This time I looked at her pensively.

“Why not?” she asked sharply.

And suddenly I had to cleave my parched tongue from the roof of my mouth. Sucking the last bit of saliva from my tongue and swallowing it, I tried to explain. “I liked that you didn’t know that part of me. I liked thinking I didn’t have to live up to any expectations.” I put air quotes around the word ‘expectations’, and then regretted it immediately.

“I liked thinking that I could just be me,” I finished stupidly.

“I didn’t... I don’t...” she stammered.

I smiled at her, and squeezed her hand, and after a second she smiled too. And then once again, I put her hand through the crook of my arm, and we continued to walk.

“It’s not a big deal. Really. What one did you see? What did you think?” Our pace, slower than before, did not match that of the growing crowd.

“Division. It was good,” she told me without looking at my face.

“No, it wasn’t. But thank you.”

“Well, you were good in it. You were so... sad.”

The movie was about a young man who had lost his brother, and then his father, and was himself lost in a world of drugs and alcohol before a car crash left him the bearer of someone else's heart. It had been a huge disappointment at the box office.

But I had done some of my best work bringing out the darkest parts of the character's persona, humanizing without demonizing the man, and for that at least I felt I could be proud. Still, when the writing falls short there's only so much you can do. Of course I didn't explain all of this to her, in fact, just then, I was hoping to drop the subject all together. So far, our conversations had been two wrong turns and a dead-end, and we'd only just begun.

"Where do you want to go first?" I asked, as we were now far enough away from Mac's I thought we could both relax. Cassandra looked around with wide eyes and shrugged. So I lead her towards the nearest bar, which was overflowing with people dressed in green.

Inside there wasn't a place to sit, so we just stood off to the side, as I flagged down the nearest waitress.

"Two Mojitos please." It's not really an Irish drink but from the look of the green beer they were pulling at the tap, it seemed a healthier option to me.

"I hope that's okay?" I asked turning to Cassandra. But she was enthralled with everyone at the bar, her gaze quickly darting from one mad reveler to the next. And had it not been for the mild look of terror on her face, I might have thought she was in heaven.

"What?" she asked turning to me. It was loud, and we had to shout over the crowd to hear each other.

"Is a Mojito okay?"

She shrugged and said, "I've never had one. We didn't really drink too much at the convent." Her smile was forced, and I felt a bit guilty.

"If you don't like it we can try something else. Tonight's for exploring all of your... options."

I winked, and then felt instantly ashamed. Why I couldn't act rationally around this woman I just didn't know.

As our drinks arrived, a couple of spots opened up at the bar, so we slipped into them before someone else could.

"So Shay told you that I used to live in a convent." Eyes cast down; Cassandra took a slow sip of her drink, leaving the statement to just hang there uncomfortably between us.

"She mentioned a little something about it. What was it like?"

"Boring mostly, and a bit lonely." When she looked up I could see a sadness haunting her eyes, and it pulled on every string in my heart.

Even by then I was her marionette, and all she had to do was pull the strings, and I would dance. Even then.

"How long did you live there?" I asked, trying to keep the conversation going. But I was also afraid I was inadvertently forcing it down a path neither of us wanted it to go.

“Thirteen years. Form the time I was thirteen until I turned twenty-six. ...” She took another sip of her drink, and then another. Then, with a sad smile, and water in her eyes, she tipped the glass and drained the last of it. Turning to me she said, “Surely there’s something more interesting that we could talk about.” And as quickly as that, all talk of the past was done and over with. And we spent the rest of our time sipping martinis and discussing the James Bond movie she’d recently seen.

“Does it really make a difference if it’s shaken instead of stirred?” she had asked at some point, and since I didn’t know the answer we ordered ourselves one of each. It being Austin, the birthplace of the ‘Keep it Weird’ slogan, the bartender didn’t even look at us sideways as we sipped from our four glasses and compared notes. In the end she was flushed, and giggly, and truly gorgeous in a new and unexpected light.

We eventually decided it didn’t make a damn bit of difference, whether it’s shaken or stirred.

After a while our drinks were gone and as we contemplated another round, just to be sure of our conclusion, looked around and noticed people were starting to whisper and stare. And so I knew it wouldn’t be long before the camera phones started clicking away. Clearly, it was time to change bars.

So a minute later we were strolling out the door. Regrettably, the smooth escape went directly to my head; and I started feeling cocky about my ability to outsmart and outmaneuver the crowd.

But it was crazy out on the street, and it didn’t really matter what skills I had, as bodies were milling past us too quickly to be identified. And if anyone’s eyes fell on me with any degree of recognition, they were swept away too quickly to be of any kind of threat. This of course lulled me even further into that very false sense of security.

Of course three rounds of liquid courage goes a long way in making one feel safe, and secure. So, for a time being I was happy, blissfully, ignorantly happy.

I even laughed out loud when a guy in a bright green top-hat bent over and spewed green vomit all over the gutter we had just crossed.

“Oh gross!” Cassandra squealed pulling herself closer to me. I laughed again, totally lost in a somewhat disgusting technicolor dream.

After a while though, I realized I was inadvertently dodging curious faces. Faces that seemed to materialize out of the crowd, just long enough flash a look of recognition, before once again dissolving back into the masses.

That’s when instinct took over, and I pulled Cassandra towards a loud and dark dance club that I thought looked like the perfect place to hide.

“Let me pay this one,” Cassandra offered, but I don’t do that. Another thing Jack beat into me I suppose. But still, there was no way I was going to have it.

“Hey, aren’t you Mason Harlow?” the bouncer asked as he took my cash.

The big bald man smiled real wide and went on before I could answer. “Man, I loved you in Cannon. Here, it’s my treat tonight.” He pushed the cash I had just given him back into my hand.

“No, seriously I can’t...” I started, but before I could finish, he was saying, “No I insist. It’s the least I can do.” I gave a resigned smile, and then looked around at the people who were starting to stare. And the whole time... in the back of my head... I was hoping against hope, that this wasn’t a completely terrible idea.

With a sigh I said, “Thanks” and we went inside.

I know now I should have just walked away then, taken her to a different bar, maybe even gotten off Sixth Street altogether. But the revelers seemed to be working up to a feverish pitch outside, and though it didn’t really seem much better inside, I didn’t want to be rude and offend the man who had just offered to pay our cover-charge.

I was also desperate to get out of sight of anyone who might have recognized me on the street. Though I wasn’t sure of it, I thought I had spotted Oscar Perez, a paparazzo I had run-ins with in the past, lurking around outside, and if that was the case – then outside was the last place I wanted to be. You see, Oscar what veritable pit-bull when he latches onto a story, and I just knew he wouldn’t rest until he figured out who I was with. And that was something I promised Shay wouldn’t happen. God knows I didn’t need the press digging into her past, especially when she hadn’t told me any of it herself.

So ignoring the nagging feeling that I was making an enormous mistake, I took Cassandra inside, where the music was louder, and the crowd was more intense.

“What do you want to drink?” I shouted directly into her ear.

“Anything,” she shouted back. I ordered a couple screwdrivers and found a quietish corner to stand in. Miserable that someone had recognized me, and worried he wouldn’t be the last, I didn’t immediately realize there was a smile plastered on Cassandra’s face. It hit me all of a sudden, like one of those panic attacks that sneak up on you, gripping your heart, and bowels in equal measure.

Her immense smile... full of brilliant-white teeth, nearly crushed my heart.

Bewildered I asked, “Why are you so happy?”

“I don’t know,” she replied lazily. Then, as demurely as you please, she asked, “Do you want to dance with me?”

She was good, real-good, because somehow, instinctively maybe, she had asked in the only manner that would ever prevent me from refusing. Because more than anything... I hate to dance in public. In fact, I hate it more than going to openings. And for the life of me, I would not have done it, had she not have asked in that... way of hers... with her batting eyelashes and the pouting lips.

Even with three women near the dance floor staring at me, I could not refuse.

“Sure,” I managed to say before I felt a lump rise up in my throat. I was already imagining my arms wrapped her, my face buried in her hair, breathing in her scent, breathing in her skin...

Suddenly sure of herself, Cassandra took my hand and led me out onto the dance floor. It was a fast-paced pop song that everyone knew, except for Cassandra, apparently, because she asked me all about it as we danced; the smile never once leaving her face.

It was heroine, her smile. And her gentle, unguarded laugh. And I was mainlining it right then and there, for all the world to see. That's the only excuse I have, for not seeing what came next, for not heading it off, for not doing something, anything, to stop it.

There were three of them at first; one that was bolder, who came right up to us, and two that hung back behind Cassandra. "Oh my god you're Mason Harlow!" the first girl screamed loudly, causing others on the dance floor to turn and look. "Oh my god it is you!" she shouted again, before she put her hands to her face and screamed in a mad, hysterical way. Stunned, I flinched back, accidentally pulling my hand free of Cassandra's grasp.

That's when the wild girl pushed her way between us, and screamed again, "Oh my god! I'm your biggest fan! I swear. I've watched all of your movies. I own all of them too. I can tell you all of your character's names by heart. Oh my god what are you doing here?"

She just wouldn't let up, and as she continued to harass me her other two friends grew steadily bolder.

"Excuse me," I said as I tried to maneuver around her, attempting to get back to Cassandra's side. She'd been pushed further back by the wild girl's approaching friends. And after a minute, all I could see was a ring of people starting to form around us on the dance floor. All of them just standing there, staring at me, and the hysterical fan.

"I heard you were in town filming, I just never imagined I'd see you. Here, can you sign my shirt?" She thrust her hand into her purse to search for a pen, and while as she was momentarily distracted I pushed her aside and made another attempt to get to Cassandra.

But before I could get around the woman's two friends, a drunk guy, drenched in beer and way too much cologne, moved in front of me.

"Hey I know you." He punctuated each word by jamming the tip of his index finger into my chest. He was about my height, and weight, and I took a second to weigh the odds and consequences of knocking him out right then and there. But looking past the gathering crowd, I could see a look of panic growing in Cassandra's eyes, and suddenly she was all I could think about... *how am I going to get her out of here... before things get really out of control?*

"Please, if you could excuse me... my date..." I started to say, but before I could finish a hundred things happened all at once. As the music played on, the first girl, the overly confident one with the hooked nose and garlic breath, finally noticed I was no longer standing in front of her, and she moved next to my right shoulder, and started to jab me in the arm with her pen. "I thought you were going to sign an autograph for me?"

Another person in the crowd yelled, "That's Mason Harlow! Mason Harlow is here!" and suddenly there was pandemonium on the dance floor.

Two more girls rushed past Cassandra, knocking her down in their attempt to get at me, and then suddenly she was being trampled by a dozen feet, rushing to see *the famous actor*.

Though I couldn't hear her over the noise of the crowd, and the blaring music, I imagined I could. I imagined I heard her cry out, and suddenly it was all red mist again, and I was shoving people aside to get at her. I think I even decked a guy, god I hope it was a guy, who got in the way before I was able to scoop Cassandra into my arms.

She was bleeding from her forehead and a cut on her arm. And she was bleeding from her leg, where I saw a metal band was wrapped tightly around her upper thigh. Her dress, pulled up almost to her crotch, was tangled up, and I couldn't get it pulled back down without setting her back on her feet. And from the way her eyes were ping-ponging inside her head, I didn't think that was such a hot idea. So instead, I tucked her further into my arms and made for the door. That's when all of the phones came out.

Everyone has a camera on them now, and there's just no escaping them. And suddenly I knew how this would all play out in the tabloids, with me carrying a wounded girl, whose clothes were half ripped off. It was all I could do to keep my head, as I tried desperately to maneuver through the crowd. How we had gone from blissful happiness just moments ago, to full-on fight or flight, I couldn't work out. Instead my head was spinning with the strobe lights and the loud rock music.

I had broken almost all of my promises to Shay. I was supposed to keep her safe, unhurt, and out of the tabloids. And I had failed. Looking down at her exposed legs, her bleeding head and her bloodied dress, I knew I had failed miserably. And I knew the only way I could salvage any of it was if I could get her out of the club, before any more damage could be done. Had there been an Empire State Building to climb, I would have.

That's when the bouncer from the door came to our rescue. With a jerk, he yanked Cassandra's dress back down so that it covered up more of her legs.

"Here, follow me. Quickly," he said in a deep baritone that I found instantly comforting. And as there were no other options available, I followed him; weaving through the confusion, barely keeping his brightly colored shirt, with the word 'Bouncer' written on the back, in sight as he bobbed through the crowd. And when we got cut off, he doubled back to find me swallowed once again by the marauding throng.

"Stay tight," he growled before taking off again, this time roughly pushing aside the people who didn't move fast enough. I tucked in behind him and followed closely in his wake.

"There's an exit out this way," he said as we cleared a roped-off area. I looked back then, and noticed four more bouncers, all dressed in brightly colored shirts, were holding back the surging crowd.

When the metal door that took us out into a darkened alley clicked shut behind us, and the blaring sounds from inside was cut off, I was finally able to assess the situation. Cassandra was hurt but her eyes, wide and locked on my face, were clear again, and the bleeding from the cut on her forehead seemed to be slowing somewhat.

"Hold this on it," the bouncer said, holding out a towel he produced from his back pocket. I gave it a skeptical look. But he just chuckled and said, "It's clean." So I nodded for Cassandra to take it. She winced when she pressed it to her head.

"Is there a way we can get back to my hotel without being seen?" I asked.

"Where are you staying?"

"The Four Seasons," I answered. His raised eyebrow told me what he thought about that.

"Just a sec," he said, before disappearing back into the building, releasing a torrent of sound as he went.

“I’m so sorry,” I told Cassandra. It was all I could think to say. Because it was my fault. Because of me she was not only hurt, and bleeding, but no doubt morbidly embarrassed as well.

“Believe me, I’ve had worse,” she said with a bitter smile that left me thinking it was true.

“It’s my fault,” I went on. “I knew I’d be recognized, I should have had us leave. I should have stopped those girls before it got out of hand.” I probably would have gone on, but there was another burst of music as the back door to the nightclub opened again, as the bouncer returned.

“There’s a pedicab on the way. He’ll take you wherever you need to go, on the house. I’m really sorry about this.” He said the last directly to Cassandra, who gave him one of her dazzling smiles in reply. His own answering smile was so complete it nearly ate his face.

And even though she wasn’t mine... not really... I remember feeling a profound sense of pride that he would think she was. Even for just that moment.

“Thanks man, I’d shake your hand...” I said nodding down to my occupied arms, and then smiled. “I owe you big time,” I told him honestly.

“Nah man, it’s what I’m here for. It’s my job,” he said patting me hard on the back. And before I could say or do anything else he disappeared back inside the nightclub. Luckily, we didn’t have to wait long before a two-seated pedicab came whipping round the corner. Its driver was a crazy-eyed kid with long blond hair, wearing cut-off jeans, and a ‘*Fuck Me I’m Irish*’ T-shirt.

“Oh man, I thought he was kidding when he said Mason Harlow needed a ride. Sweeeet,” he said bobbing his head as he came to a stop, just inches away.

I looked down at Cassandra, still cradled in my arms, and I realized I was reluctant to let her go.

“Do you think you can climb in, or do you need me to help?” I asked, drawing a look that told me I was being ridiculous. So I set her on her feet, where she wobbled at first, so I steadied her with a hand on the small of her back, which of course sent my adolescent heart to racing; paranoid she would somehow hear it and know, I quickly pushed her into the cab and then followed behind her. And before I knew it, we were flying down the darkened alley, heading towards a busy street at the end.

Still reeling a bit from our encounter at the club; I was a bit nervous about emerging out onto such a busy street, but at the last minute, the cab veered left, and we were racing along an adjoining alley. A few minutes later we emerged out onto a dimly lit street, with hardly a car in sight.

In my haste to get away, I had just assumed my hotel was the best option, but looking at Cassandra just then, as she quietly bled into the bouncer’s rag, I suddenly felt horribly ashamed.

“I’m so sorry. How is your head? If you want, I can take you to the hospital. My assistant Byron can drive us.”

She looked up at me and smiled tenderly, but it did nothing for my aching heart, or for the shame that twisted inside of it like a butcher’s knife.

“No. I’ll be okay. Head wounds just tend to bleed a lot. Look, it’s stopping now. I just need to wash it out.”

To be honest, I didn't want to look as I've always sorta had a thing about blood. I can look at my own blood, no problem; it could be draining from me by the bucket-load, and nothing. But a single drop of someone else's blood and I panic. In fact, I'd been mouth-breathing since coming out the nightclub, so looking at it just then was about the last thing I wanted to do. But I did it anyway. And just as I feared it would, it made my head spin and my stomach heave.

"Are you okay?" she asked, pressing the rag to the cut on her forehead once again. By the look on her face I suspected I looked about as green as my tie.

"Yes!" I sniped back rather harshly; my embarrassment bringing out the ass in me, again. But when she flinched away in fear, I was suddenly reminded of myself, and I continued on softly, with a guilty smile tucked intentionally into the corners of my mouth.

"I just have a thing about blood," I admitted, clearly ashamed of my behavior.

At my discomfort, Cassandra's cheeks rose into two tiny-red apples, and her eyes glistened with the reflected street lights as they zoomed by overhead.

And suddenly I was restraining myself; from touching her face, her neck, stroking her long, dark hair. My lips trembled, as they strained to refrain from pulling her lower lip into my mouth. It was agonizing, even then, having her so near; her neck, her arms, her beautiful hands, all within reach, all made for kissing. But I could have none of it.

Because she was also so very far away; a lifeboat unto herself, and I was the pounding surf. And I knew... if I got any closer... she would capsize.

All I needed was to look at her, to see the proof of that. Even then I knew... the closer I got, the more dark, and dangerous our journey would become.

But it didn't matter. Because I knew, even then, that I would claim her.

If I didn't someone else eventually would. She was a lamb, lost in a city of wolves, and she needed me, to protect her.

As our pedicab sped across busy streets and screamed along darkened alleys, I knew it was all a perfect metaphor for what was to come. And I awaited it with deep anticipation.

And still... we hadn't had a single moment alone together.

After a short stop and then a swift jerk, the pedicab sped across another busy street, and then down another blackened alley. It was then my insecurities got the better of me. So, instead of taking her hand, instead of brushing my lips against hers, all I could manage was, "I'm sorry for the bumpy ride."

I felt impotent. As if I'd stepped up to bat, only to find I held a flaccid stick in my hands.

"I figured you guys would want to stay off the busy streets, so... my apologies for the bumpy ride. It can't really be helped," the pedicab driver's voice trailed back to us, along with the exhaust fumes of a dozen cars.

"Thanks mate. That's smart," I shouted back, hoping he'd hear.

A moment later we were pulling into the sally-port of the Four Seasons hotel. Barely ten pm, it was early enough to still be busy outside, and more than a few onlookers eyed me suspiciously as I helped the young, and bloody, woman from the back of the pedicab.

“Here’s one on me mate. You’ve earned it,” I said handing the driver a folded one-hundred-dollar bill. When he saw it, he gave me a huge two-arm hug, causing the busybodies to glare even more.

“Hey man thanks! Anytime! The name’s Tyler. Just call this number and ask for Tyler. You hear? Anytime you need a ride, call Tyler.”

We stood there for a moment and watched as Tyler drove off; back down the busy street we’d just crossed.

“Should I carry you?” I asked.

To which Cassandra replied, in a very non-verbal sort of way, an unequivocal ‘No’. Clearly I was being ridiculous, or at least she thought I was. But I knew, even then, that everything had changed. I was bound to her now, in a very alien and unfamiliar way. Yet, even then, I knew I never wanted it to end.

11 Cassandra

The last thing Cassandra wanted was talk to that maddening woman again. She'd only just left, and already she was back for more.

Only now the doctor was in control. *And all because of that stupid lion*, Cassandra thought caustically, as she entered the sterile room.

"Can you tell me about the day Father Cormac died?" the doctor asked from where she sat, already divesting her bag of the usual contents.

The two guards, who'd been Cassandra's escort, nodded politely to the doctor and then backed silently from the room as Cassandra slipped soundlessly into her seat.

And for a long moment the two sat regarding each other in silence, as if from their stoic expressions some crucial detail would be revealed.

It was obvious to Cassandra that the doctor believed she was on to something. Perhaps she thought she grasped the tail-end of a thread, and that if she pulled on it hard enough, everything might magically fall into place. And though the thought made Cassandra want to laugh, the confidence in the good-doctor's eyes made her think the better of it.

She's one tenacious bitch, I'll give her that, Cassandra thought rather wryly.

But the smile quickly faded from Cassandra's face as she contemplated her answer. It was a well-rehearsed one, one she'd known she'd eventually have to tell. But it wasn't one of her making, and Cassandra had no real way to be sure Sister Margaret Mary would even keep to her end of the deal.

"You look tired," Cassandra said, examining the doctor's face.

"I am tired," Dr. Veda replied.

"Can I ask you something first?" Cassandra asked in such a peculiar voice, the doctor returned the scrutiny.

"Sure," the doctor replied, slowly dragging out the syllable as if to punctuate her wariness.

"Why must I declare my sexual status on your health forms?"

"I'm sorry?"

"When I was filling out the forms the nurses gave me, I was asked to select either: Miss., Mrs., or Ms."

"And..."

"And why is my sexual status important to anyone? If I was a man I would not have to indicate my sexual activities," Cassandra said, holding the woman's gaze, knowing full-well the doctor would try her best not to answer the question.

"It's not an indication of your sexual status, only of your marital status," the doctor told her banally.

“I rather think it’s the same thing. But whatever. Even if it’s as you say, why is a woman’s marital status pertinent enough to be included in her title, but a man’s is not?” Cassandra eyed the doctor much like a rapacious housecat would eye a nesting bird.

“I don’t know why it’s relevant to the health forms, but in many cases it is helpful to know if a person has a spouse, and a family.”

“Surely by amending a woman’s name with a title that indicates her availability for intercourse, while at the same time omitting that information from a man’s name, says something about a culture. Does it not?”

“And what do you think it says about our culture?”

“More than you would think it does... that’s for sure.”

“To that end I suppose you could question why we must signify a gender at all,” the doctor said smiling coyly, and by the glimmer in her eye, Cassandra could see the woman was clearly enjoying their brisk little banter.

“I’d like to think it doesn’t matter if one is female or male,” Cassandra replied a bit wistfully, yet not allowing herself to even imagine such a state. But she did notice the flash of pain, or was it anger, that criss-crossed the doctor’s eyes, and then was gone. But when she spoke again, Cassandra could plainly hear pain tinging the doctor’s voice a violent red.

“Nor should it matter if one is both, or neither, but sadly it still does.” The doctor looked into Cassandra’s eyes, not bothering to hide the shadow of some ill-fated memory that still lingered just beneath the surface of her rather stoic façade. Though, in all honesty Cassandra couldn’t admit she understood.



“I’d been working in the gardens with Sister Ita Mary when Father Cormac came for a visit. He hadn’t been by in a long time; as his church in Ben was eating up more and more of his time. He said he was stopping by, just to check on things, and to give me another lesson in ‘Latin’. That was his most recent code-word for our time together. He always did think he was such a clever man.

“Come along Novice Cassandra,” he called to me as he brushed past us on his way into the convent.

“Yes Father,” I said softly, and then quickly fell into step behind him, leaving Sister Ita to haul in the big bags of weeds by herself. I felt bad for it, leaving her there with all that work to do, but Sister Ita’s a stout woman, so I knew she could manage it. Still, I couldn’t help looking back with regret. Sister Ita must have mistaken my look for something else, a silent plea perhaps, because just then, she opened her mouth as if she might finally speak.

Which of course she didn’t. None of them ever did.

Once in my cell, Father didn't waste any time before stripping off his clothes, and as he did so he spoke in a rushed whisper. "It's time Cassandra, enough of this nonsense of you remaining a novice. The bishop is coming, and I can hardly explain why you've remained a novice for so long. You'll have to take your vows and become a sister."

He'd mentioned it before, telling me I had no choice. But something had always happened to stop it. Sister Margaret Mary normally being the cause. On numerous occasions she had intervened, and so once again, I had assumed she would somehow thwart his plans. But just as I'd thought it, just as his hands were freeing my hair of the white veil that denoted my station, he said, "Sister Margaret Mary agrees, we will do it next week, before the Bishop arrives."

He turned back to his cassock and pulled from it a small wooden box, before neatly folding it and placing it on the only chair.

As you might imagine, I never became fond of receiving Father Cormac's gifts, and so I was more than reluctant to take the small wooden box from him when he offered it to me. But I knew, a life-time had shown me... in all things unpleasant... quick is usually best. And so I took the small box before sitting down on my cot. And with trembling fingers I lifted the lid and peered inside.

"I've already discussed it at length with Sister Margaret Mary and it's settled. You will take your vows next Friday," Father Cormac said in the soft monotone he used during his sermons, or when he was trying to ply food or information from the nuns.

"The Bishop will be arriving in the middle of the month, and it will be done and over with before he gets here." His left hand slid up my tunic and in between my thighs.

I went cold from the inside out. I didn't want to take my vows. I wanted to run and hide.

"Yes Father," I said instead.

Inside the box was the devotional scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmela. Consisting of two small woolen squares, connected by two long woolen cords, it is worn draped over the shoulders so that one square rests against the breast, and the other against the back. Sewn onto one side are the words: *Whosoever dies wearing this scapular shall not suffer eternal fire.* And on the other side: *Behold the Sign of Salvation. Mt. Carmel.*

"Receive this blessed scapular and beseech the Blessed Virgin that through Her merits, you may wear it without stain. May it defend you against all adversity and accompany you to eternal life. Amen."

With his words, Father Cormac took up the scapular and sprinkled holy water over it, and then me. Then when he was finished, he poured the remaining holy water over his naked chest, letting the water run through his course-white chest hair, down his stomach, to finally drip from his full erection.

The only thing missing now was the brown veil that would forever mark me as a bride of god.

Later that night, after everyone else was in bed, I lay awake for hours thinking of how I might escape this new and horrible destiny that lie before me. And though I'd been scared before, of the priest and his brutal predilections, this was different because it was no longer my flesh I was worried about.

You see... it was the words that I feared the most. Saying words I didn't really mean, making a promise I knew I couldn't keep... well, it terrified me beyond anything that had come before. Cuz it wasn't just my body he wanted now. And it wasn't just the pain and suffering of my flesh that would appease this new hunger... No... now he wanted my soul.

And suddenly I had no choice. I had to escape.

In the past I'd thought of every imaginable plan, the most recent one being to steal the money Sister Margaret kept in the top-left drawer of her desk and hitching a ride out on the nearest road. But always my plans had fallen apart because I had nowhere to go. I knew no one outside of our monastery walls. And I had no way to make a living, except for whoring, and even though I was technically gifted at that, I knew I would die before I would let that happen again.

I had spent my life opening my legs for creatures that didn't deserve the same air I breathed, and I wasn't about to spend the rest of my life defending myself from even worse atrocities.

But things had changed. And I knew that no matter what, I could not take those vows. I could not lie to God. That was something even I could not do. And though I'd been a novice, it hadn't been a promise; it had only been a desire to get to know God. But now, to say the vows, that would bind me to him for the rest of my life, and not really mean them... I could think of no greater sacrilege than that. Surely that would earn me a one-way ticket to hell.

My life, already damned in so many ways, was of little consequence to me. But this, this would damage my eternal soul, and that was a risk I could not take.

So in the wee hours of the following morning I crept into Sister Cara's room.

Cara had taken the vows, a year or so after I arrived, so she of all people knew the severity of the choice, and the finality of the mistake, if I didn't feel the conviction in my heart.

"I can't do it. I just can't," I sobbed into her shoulder, as she held me there on her bed. "I know. I know," was all she said, as she patted me on the head, and rocked me back and forth. I fell asleep there in her arms, and when I awoke she was sitting at her desk, composing a letter.

"I can't guarantee he'll agree, but I've written to my brother in Austin, asking him if you can work in his bar. They have a small apartment upstairs with a guest room, where you could stay. You'll have to take a bus, but I think we can get you there by next Friday," she said, and I couldn't believe my ears. Finally a ray of sunlight had come into my dark and gloomy world. I hugged her then, until we were called away by the Angelus Bell.

Little could I have guessed that in a few days' time I'd need that life-line more than ever.

The following Wednesday, as we sat eating our supper, Sister Margaret called me into the hall. "Novice Cassandra, could you please come here and speak with me?" she asked in her sing-song voice that we all dreaded as surely as one dreads the plague. Reluctantly I did as she bade.

Out in the hall, the tall, narrow woman with the hawk-like face, took up my hand and looped it through the crook of her arm. "Here, walk with me," she said, and we walked the length of that hall and then the next, until we were near the old chapel and my cell. That's when she turned to me, a dead-flat look in her eyes. "I won't have you as a nun in this convent. I simply will not have it." Her voice wasn't sing-songy anymore. In fact her tone was full of menace and her eyes were the flat black orbs of someone without a soul.

"What can I do about that?" I asked her.

“You can leave and never come back. He won’t chase you. If you leave, if you just go away, he will have no choice but to let you go.”

I didn’t believe her. She would have done or said anything to be rid of me, consequences be damned. And seeing as how my death would be an acceptable outcome for her, I was reluctant to agree.

Still, that had been my only plan, to run away and never come back. Only, I needed a place to go and money to get there, and so far I was zero for two, as Cara’s brother had still not replied.

“And how do you suppose I get to wherever it is I’m supposed to go? Walk? It would take him mere hours to find me, wherever I’d go.” The scathing tone of my voice was unmistakable, and for once Sister Margaret flinched back.

“He has to let you go!” she demanded ferociously, as if stating it would make it so.

I laughed at her then, right in her face.

“Give me a way out of this place and I’ll go. But I won’t just walk out without money or a place to land.” I stepped back and regarded her for a long moment before I turned and walked away. Her and I had been through too much, shared too many secrets, for her to try and stop me now. So she could only watch me go.

Later that night Cara came rushing into my cell. “I heard them fighting,” she said breathlessly, as she closed the door behind her. “Sister Margaret Mary and Father Cormac, on the phone,” she clarified when I looked confused. “They were fighting about you. Sister Margaret Mary was trying to talk him out of making you a nun. She told him she talked to her friend at the Convent of the Blessed Mary, over in Wichita, and they’re willing to take you. She told him she’d go to the Bishop if he didn’t let you go.”

I never thought Sister Margaret would go so far as to try to send me to another convent, certainly not when I could talk. And I knew then that the woman must truly be desperate, if she was willing to take that risk.

The very next day Father Cormac came storming into the convent. In his haste, he rushed passed Sister Cara in the front gardens, and Sister Delphine, who was dusting the vacant chapel.

“Where is Sister Margaret Mary?” he demanded loudly, of no one in particular as he sped down the hall. Mother Mary Teresa was the only one to answer, as he passed her wheelchair that was parked just outside the kitchen.

“She’s in the back-chapel sorting donations,” the woman’s tiny voice said.

Without a word of thanks, Father Cormac took a right down the very next hall.

I was coming out of my room when I saw the two of them arguing. But when they saw me, he turned to leave. That’s when he slipped on a brown liquid that had puddled on the floor in the hall. Sister Delphine had over-watered the plants again, and the excess had leaked all over the floor.

With a loud CRACK, his head bounced off the cobblestone floor.

Both Sister Delphine and Mother Mary Teresa heard the sound, as they sat chatting in the front parlor.

The paramedics told us he died instantly, and I believe it too, because he never once even tried to move. However Sister Margaret Mary needed some convincing.

“Father! Father! Father!” she screamed as she shook him, but he did not respond. A short time after that the paramedics were called.

Two days later, the day after I was supposed to take my vows, the day of Father Cormac’s funeral, Sister Margaret Mary approached me.

“I want you gone. Today.”

She told me then, in no uncertain terms, I was to get out of *her* convent and never come back. Then she handed me a thick brown envelope full of cash.

“I don’t ever want to see you, or hear your name, ever again. Is that clear?” The woman moved so she was standing an inch in front of me, and I had to look up to see into her beady little eyes.

“My pleasure,” I said, as it was all I could think to say, before I turned and walked away.

Stunned by everything that happened, I went back to my room to pack. But after a few minutes I decided there wasn’t anything I wanted. So I went to Cara’s room. She’d been in there for the better part of the day and had only come out for the funeral service.

I knocked once. “Cara, are you in there?” I called.

She answered the door with red and swollen eyes and I could hardly believe it, because she knew. Better than anyone else, she knew what Father Cormac was like, how sick he’d been. And here she was crying for him. I just couldn’t put it together.

“I... I...” she stammered before breaking down into hysterical sobs.

Still angry, but also concerned, I led her to her bed, and sat with her while she cried.

After a while, when it looked like she could be reasonable again, I said, “I just thought because you knew...” but I couldn’t go on.

Eyes widened into full round orbs, she looked at me in stunned disbelief. Then all at once, in a rush of words, she cried “Oh dear Lord no! I wasn’t crying for him! I was crying because I heard Sister Margaret Mary tell Mother Mary Teresa she was sending you away.”

I guess it makes me selfish, and maybe not so Christ like, to admit I was more than a little relieved that she wasn’t crying for him, she was crying for me.

“I’m going to miss you too. I’ll make sure to write, just as soon as I know where I am going.”

“You have to go to Austin, go and see Conor. It’s only been a week, I’m sure his letter is just lost in the mail. I’m positive of it. He’ll take you in. At least go and talk to him and see for yourself. Promise me. You have to promise me!” She was so adamant, so certain I would be accepted by her older brother, whom she described as a giant teddy bear with tattoos, I couldn’t break her heart. So when Father Mahoney asked where it was I intended to go, I said with a melancholy smile, “Austin, all ports unknown.”

12 Veda

Ashlyn was wondering when the tiny redhead would finally get to the point. Shopping trips and wardrobe choices didn't really cover what she needed to know. Still... listening to the woman tell her story, Ashlyn had gotten a whole new sense of the 'girl with too many faces'. So, rather than missing something important, Ashlyn decided to let the woman continue, at her own pace.



"I guess all-in-all it went pretty well having Cassandra stay with us. She was quiet as a church mouse, and worked harder than any of our other waitresses that's for darn sure. But, there were some... difficulties... Her nightmares for one. More than once Conor had to go in there and stop her from ripping her hair out.

And then there was the one night... after closing... Conor and I were getting ready for bed. I'd come out of the shower in not but a towel. And Conor... well, he was in his whites, rubbing lotion on his big bald head.

"Where's Cassandra?" I asked him.

"In her room," he said, and that's when I came round to his side of the bed.

He looked weary that night, with bags under his eyes, and a frown-line running across his forehead.

"Jaysus old man, you look wrecked. Maybe we should just go ta bed."

He laughed at me then, like he always does, but he leaned forward till his forehead was resting on me belly. I ran my fingers over the silky skin of his head. Stoking his fire... as it were.

"We could start trying for that baby," he said, following a rather sinister moan.

"We cannot. Not with her staying in its room," I reminded him.

"It'll be months before it'll be born love, and it won't need its own room till it can talk, and tell us to bugger off when we're gettin' rowdy in the sack."

He'd slid his hands up me towel then, until he had them on me diddies. And then he smiled up at me so wickedly, I might have thought to agree.

But I just said, "How 'bout we do a practice run instead?"

He let me know how he felt about that when his big hands circled me waist, and before I knew it he had pulled me on top o' him.

I guess we were so used to living on our own, I never thought to check... if Cassandra had really gone to bed. But with Conor's hands all over me, and his mouth working its way down my throat, and over my chest, well... before I knew what was happening he'd already slipped up inside of me.

"Conor my love, you are the dearest of men..." I said taking his face in my hands. "But right now I need you to be very, very bad," I told him. And well... he's been more than happy enough to oblige.

And he was fierce that night, fiercer than he'd ever been. With his steely eyes, and villainous grin. In one hand he took my hair, and jerked it hard, pulling my head to the side, so that he could sink his teeth into the flesh of my neck, as his thick fingers dug painfully into my sides. Harder and harder, he pulled me down onto him, over and over, with an angry, menacing growl that was both exciting, and scary to see. And all the while he just stared off into the hall, never once looking at me.

Harder and harder, he drove his flesh into me. Pulling at my hips, biting at my neck, until he was howling his excitement into my ear. And that's when I turned to see... Cassandra... she was standing in the hall.

He'd been watching her you see, watch her watching us, the entire time.

"You sick bastard!" I yelled as I pushed him away.

"You fucking sick bastard!" I screamed again as I slapped him, hard across the face.

"I couldn't stop," he said defensively.

Climbing off of him, I turned and slammed the door. Yet she just stood there, just stood there watching me.

That night I told Conor she had to go. I wanted the nursery back and I wanted her out, for the sake of my nerves. I didn't mind her working in the bar but having another woman that close to your man ain't right. It just ain't right.

The next day Conor came to me and said that Brandon, his contractor friend, had bought up some old shops along the east end of Fifth Street, only a dozen blocks from the bar. Apparently, they'd all been renovated as cheap apartments, and would serve as such until they got round to knocking 'em down and putting up some giant hotel. But Brandon didn't think that'd be for at least a year or two. And the rent was perfect, something Cassandra could afford. And it was close enough she could walk to work as well.

I told Conor to get the keys and we'd take her for a look.

I guess she was expecting it, because she didn't seem too shocked when I told her we'd found her a place. In fact, I think she seemed relieved. Maybe what she'd seen the night before had traumatized her. She probably hadn't seen a man and a woman since... well, since when she was a child... I imagine it probably brought back some horrible memories for her. So, maybe she wanted the privacy as much as we did.

We told Cassandra about our idea on St. Patrick's Day, just before her date. And neither Conor nor I saw her again until the next day when we finally stumbled down the stairs.

Cassandra was already up, mopping floors. So we left just as soon as we finished our breakfast.

Conor, in his infinite wisdom, had us walk there, so he could see for himself just how far Cassandra would have to go.

“We’ll get you some pepper spray,” he told Cassandra, as we strolled past a couple of homeless men that eyed her a bit too closely. “And a stun gun,” he added, because he was always one to be a wee bit over-protective.

“Now it’s nothing special. Brandon said this one used to be a butcher’s shop. But it’s been cleaned, and painted, and such, but it’s still pretty basic. Here this is it.”

We’d come on it sooner than I’d expected, which made me happy knowing it’d be a short walk for her. And I knew it was the right one because of the old ‘*Sutter & Sons*’ butcher’s sign out front.

“We’ll get you some curtains,” I told her, all cheerful like.

Inside, the walls and even the tile floor was a stark white, which gleamed in the sunlight that spilled in through the large front windows.

“Oh look, a brand-new stove and refrigerator,” I said, quite honestly envious of both. Because my own set are as old as dirt and look every bit of it too.

“Everything in the kitchen and bathroom is new.”

Conor was playing the realtor and the inspector all-in-one, as he went around and checked every door for creaking hinges, and every lock to make sure they were all sound. He even checked to make sure there was an ice tray and a broiling pan.

But, by the look of it, Cassandra didn’t seem too impressed. So I kept at it, telling her all the ways we could make it fit. “We can paint the walls whatever color you like,” I told her. “Home depot has a machine that’ll match whatever color you want.”

“Where does this door go?” Cassandra asked opening a door that was just off the kitchen and tucked in behind the bathroom. “Oh that,” Conor said kind of nervously. “That’s where they did the butchering, but we can padlock that, and you’ll forget it’s even there. It’ll be good for storage. Not that you have stuff to store mind you,” he said sorta back peddling, and we both knew it.

But Cassandra wasn’t listening. She seemed more concerned with the strange doorway that led to a rickety set of old wooden stairs.

Without a word to us, she flicked on the light, and disappeared down into the dimly lit basement. So Conor and I followed. And to be honest, it was a rather gruesome looking room, with hooks hanging all around. And a giant one that hung in the middle, just above a big iron drain.

“That’s where they’d hang the side of beef, and slice it into steaks,” Conor said stupidly, and I popped him hard in the ribs for it too. If it’d been me, I would have kept that part to meself. But Cassandra didn’t seem to hear him, and if anything, she seemed oddly fascinated by the huge drain in the middle of the floor.

There was even a hoist to haul the carcasses up and down. I guess that was so the butcher didn't have to break his back. But there were some other useful things too; like a washer and dryer and a utility sink along the far wall.

"You won't have to use the laundry mat," I told her. That would have made me real happy. Though I would have to make Conor do laundry, cuz I wouldn't have stepped a foot inside that basement, unless I was forced.

Cassandra seemed not to care though. And just kept walking around, letting her fingers run over everything, along the sink, then along the winch, that fastened the enormous pulley to the wall.

"It's a bit grim, maybe some paint and a good cleaning, and maybe take those down," I pointed to the hooks hanging from the ceiling.

"I'll take it," Cassandra said out of nowhere, shocking the shite right outa of me, that's for sure. But looking at her then, I swear, there was a bit of jolly in her eyes, and that definitely was weird. Conor though, he didn't look near as happy as I felt, but I was sure he was just worried about such a naive girl moving out on her own. But I figured it was about time she spread her wings and all.

But moving her in turned out to be a bit tougher than I thought. We took her to Ikea and since they don't deliver, and none of their stuff's put together, it took Conor the better part of a Monday and Tuesday to get her set up. And, while he built furniture, Cassandra and I painted the upstairs a lovely shade of green. Conor even put a huge lock on the door to the basement, not that anyone could get in from down there, she just said it made her feel better, and I totally agreed, cuz I for one would have done the same thing.

In the end, she went through nearly all the money the Sisters had sent with her. Though I told her not to feel bad about that, as it was helping her get set-up, and that's exactly what it was meant to do.

She even had enough to buy herself a TV and a laptop, and boy did that make her happier than a two peckered puppy.

But that quickly changed... when Conor finally asked about her date, and the cut on her forehead.

"Cassy if he hurt you... you have to tell me, and by God I'll make damn sure it never happens again."

I think it was the menace in Conor's voice that finally made her speak.

"He should have known better," Conor fumed, storming about her tiny place. "Those dosers would never behave like that in my pub!" He hollered and fumed. And to be honest, I was upset too, but not because it was Mason's fault. Getting mobbed is kinda a package deal when you're dating a celebrity, but because it was hard to see Cassandra so hurt.

But when she seemed madder at Mason, than at the silly girls that deserved it, I asked, "Does it bother you, all that attention he gets?"

"No," she said, real annoyed, and then she would say no more. So I let it go. Because I knew, some hurts can't be explained with such simple things as words.



Ashlyn hated to interrupt the woman but looking at the time, she realized she had to get moving in order to make her next appointment. “I’m sorry Mrs. MacKenna. It seems I’ve run out of time for our interview. Is there any way you can come back tomorrow?”

“Sure,” the red-head said, all too eager to help.

“How about the same time then?”

“Sounds just fine by me.”

As the two emerged from her office, Ashlyn had to fight to suppress a loud groan of annoyance when she spotted Dr. Sullivan hovering in the hall.

“The lab report on our murder victim is in,” he said with a confidence Ashlyn was sure she didn’t like. Thankfully he had waited until Mrs. MacKenna had rounded the corner and was out of ear-shot.

“We’re still not sure those pictures are real,” Ashlyn pointed out rather testily, to which Sullivan just shook his head in that knowing manner that suggested he alone could foretell the outcome of the investigation.

“And?” Ashlyn asked, her irritation growing remarkably, as she really didn’t have the time or patience for his usual antics.

“And...” Sullivan said, letting his voice trail off, as if to build up the suspense, thereby assuming more control of the situation. However Ashlyn was never one to give in to his childish whims, so without another word, she reached out and snatched the report from him.

“It’s like I’ve been saying. They’re all a bunch of deranged perverts,” Sullivan snapped as he watched her snatch away his moment. But Ashlyn was too engrossed in the contents of the rather shocking report to pay any attention to his words. Yet shocked was exactly what she was, because inside she was cursing up a storm.

Faggot munching ass cake dick slouching monkey nut jobs, she swore silently.

The random strings of profanity rarely made sense, even to her, and even though no one else could hear them... it still caused Ashlyn to blush. Of course Dr. Sullivan, who believed himself *Primas Inter Pares*, or rather *First Among Equals*, would no doubt assume her blush was caused by her delicate sensibilities reacting to the rather scandalous news. And for once Ashlyn was inclined to let his false assumption stand.

Pressing the issue, Sullivan was quick to point out, “They found semen in both his stomach and his rectum. You do know what that means?” He looked pointedly at Ashlyn, searching her face for further reactions to the shocking news.

In reply to his quizzical look, Ashlyn flashed a defiant one of her own. “I do know what it means,” she said forcefully. “It means he had sex less than a day before he died, otherwise the semen found in his stomach would not have been detectable.”

“The evidence suggests it was consensual,” Sullivan stated, quite obviously, as the report had been quite clear on that point.

“So I see,” Ashlyn said, accepting that she had misjudged many things about this troublesome case. But rather than let Sullivan see her obvious distress, she thanked him for the report and asked, “Is that all?”

Sullivan, having gotten what he’d come for, tossed a shrug over his shoulder as he sauntered away.

Then, with her skin itching, and a burning taste of bile simmering in the back of her throat, Ashlyn entered the small-gray box that was the largest of their interrogation rooms.

13 Mason

“We rode the elevator in silence; with her bleeding quietly into the bouncer’s rag, and me kicking at the floor with my worn-out shoes. And so it was, we came to the ninth floor; with me silently dreading everything I had yet to say; and her... as distant, and as cold, as a midnight sun.

“This is us,” I said leading her off the elevator.

Cassandra followed slowly, hesitating somewhat; her shuffling her feet and downcast eyes pulling at my insides.

I didn’t know then... that it was fear making her hesitate.

“Are you ok?” I asked as she looked up with a half-smile and a broken sandal dangling from her right hand.

“The strap broke,” she told me with a shy little shrug and down-turned eyes.

“Now may I carry you?” I offered gesturing with a sweep of my hand, and then bending into a deferential bow.

Which made her smile, and not just with her mouth, but with every-last-thing she had. Do you know what I mean? As if all that tension and fear had finally snapped, finally letting her go. And her whole body just sort of relaxed into one breathy sigh.

“No. But you could help with this...”

His breath caught... Mason could not continue, and instead looked down at the trembling hands in his lap.



There was a long moment of silence as Mason’s soundless struggle filled the room; as his chest fought to pull in air through the swelling in his throat.

He had stirred something within the hollows of his heart, and it was threatening self-emulation right there, right in front of the angry doctor’s puzzled glare.

“Are you alright?” she finally asked after a long moment of watching him squirm.

Mason, oblivious of everything except for his own misery, looked up from his wringing hands. A twinge of shock, or maybe horror, swept over the doctor’s pretty face when she saw the unmasked pain twisting inside the man.

For his part... Mason figured he could manage a nod of his head. But when he glanced at his reflection in the two-way mirror, he flinched instead.

His eyes, rimmed in red, held enough pain for an army of ghosts. Yet he knew there was just one who resided there.

“Jullee...” he said coarsely, around the knot in his throat.

“She reminded me of my sister Jullee just then,” he said before his rough whisper broke off into a long series of dry and racking coughs.

When he could finally speak again, he continued somewhat slowly, “She just stood there, looking at me... and then at the floor. Like she knew.”

“Knew what Mason?” the doctor asked, leaning in across the table.

Mason chewed his lower lip, his face twisting in pain.

“I knew...that she knew, and she knew that I knew she knew,” Mason sing-songed in a cracked and broken voice that made his Aussie accent thick and nearly intelligible.

“What did she know?”

By this point the doctor wasn’t even sure what she was asking.

Mason however didn’t notice, or care, as he was deep in the throes of some memory he was struggling with; trying yet again to make it turn out right. *But it never will.*

“There was nothing I could do to save her,” he said, the last coming out as a vicious hiss.

Yet, at the same time, his left arm was swiping away the tears, and snot, a vicious man could never have shed in earnest.

Life is cruel, Mason thought, as he looked off to the east; back to a childhood of innocence and pain. Then he looked to the west; as if he were looking towards a future he knew must lie somewhere ahead.

“To my ruin...” he mumbled softly, so the doctor wouldn’t hear.

“There was nothing you could do to save her,” the doctor said quietly, and for the first time since the interview began, he could see the compassion Mason had almost forgotten the doctor possessed.

“What does it say about a man who cannot protect the people he loves?”

With a shaky hand, Mason took up the tin of Copenhagen and began shaking it, packing the moist contents into a corner. But it was a complete waste of time, the tin was already full and packed, and the contents did not move. But it served its purpose, as habitual gestures always do, to sooth the nerves that had come suddenly, and unexpectedly, into view.

Clearing his throat, Mason leaned forward, as if to curl in around an aching gut. Then, with a wince, he lay in a pinch of chew between his teeth and lower lip.

“The hotel room had been booked for Mr. Stone,” he said; the last of it slipping between his teeth in an angry hiss.



“It’s a goddamn mansion. And quite honestly the most opulent place I’ve ever stayed. By comparison, the last movie I shot was in Iceland and I had to share a bathroom with three members of the crew. And I for-one can tell you, none of us were too happy about that.

So it was quite a leap to go from that to a suite of rooms that includes a small personal gym, and a well-stocked bar. It even had a fireplace that I had Byron lay-in and light before he left. And like a good boy, he was nowhere in sight. Though I half-expected it from him. But I am thankful that, at the very least, he was never privy to the terrors of that first fateful night.

I bet you’re wondering how it is a half-talented actor like myself could ever hope to afford a full-time assistant like Byron. Well the truth is I can’t. But thankfully that never seemed to bother him. Though... he did often say he was working his way up to bigger and better things, and eventually an A-lister would snatch him away.

“I should have a first-aid kit here somewhere,” I told Cassandra as we entered the suite.

“I’m always nicking myself on the set,” I told her, as I started rummaging around for the first-aid kit Byron had insisted we buy.

“Can I use your bathroom?” she asked, still holding a sandal in one hand and a blood-soaked rag in the other. Biting my lip, I pointed her to the double doors at the far end of the room.

“Wow!” I heard her say breathlessly, as she shut the doors behind her.

While she was inside the bathroom, I ran around looking in all of my bags, and even under the bed, for the first-aid kit that Byron had stashed somewhere. I found it, finally, under a stack of towels in the mini-gym, just as she was coming out of the bathroom.

With her face washed and the bloody rag discarded, Cassandra looked a whole lot better. Still, she did have a wad of toilet paper pressed to her forehead, so I wasn’t completely in the clear. Luckily though, it didn’t seem to be bleeding anymore, so I offered to take a look.

“I thought blood makes you queasy,” she said, sitting down next to me on the sofa, closest to the fire.

“Huh? I guess I forgot,” I said looking into her brown eyes, and for a second I couldn’t see any of the hurt that usually lingers there. It was curious, and for a moment I was tempted to ask, but instead I apologized again.

“I’m so sorry this happened to you.”

“Will you please stop apologizing?”

“Sorry. How is your head? Do you want some Advil or Tylenol or something?”

She looked at me strangely then, like I’d just offered to amputate her leg. And then, with a snort of derision she said, “It’s just a scratch.”

“How about a whiskey or rum instead?” I asked smiling over to the bar.

“Maybe later?” she asked in a way that didn’t seem at all certain. So, worried I was pressuring her, I looked away, down at the first-aid kit, for a bandage that was the right size for the cut on her head. And then I remembered her arm, and her leg.

“Where are you from?” she asked while my mind was somewhere else, so when I didn’t answer she went on timidly instead, “You just sound different now, then you do in your movies. And I was wondering what kind of accent you have.” She looked as though she felt guilty for asking, and it was extremely cute. So I answered in all seriousness, instead of teasing her, as I was first inclined to do.

“I’m Australian.”

“Really? How come you didn’t have an accent earlier tonight? I know I would have heard it.” She examined me closely, and I couldn’t help but laugh at her then. But when she looked offended I added, “I try to use an American accent when I’m out in public. It’s good to practice, and well... people don’t recognize me as much,” I told her honestly.

Satisfied with my answer, she nodded seriously, as I smeared the antibacterial ointment on the smaller of the gauze pads, and then placed it to the cut on her head.

“You’re good at this,” she said, in a voice that slid over my skin like honey warmed in the sun.

“At what? Getting you pummeled?” I asked pulling away.

“Or do you mean wrecking a first date, because apparently I’m pretty good at that as well. Does this hurt?” I pressed the tape to her head but looked away, not able to bear her mockery.

But there was none. Instead, with a finger, she tilted my chin until I was looking at her again. Then, with her eyes searching mine, she gave the slightest shake of her head, and then smiled such a Helenistic grin...

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“I used to,” I told her somewhat painfully, my hand lingering on the side of her face a second longer than it should. Embarrassed, and hurt by the ghosts of memories long dead, I looked down at the first-aid kit sitting in my lap and said, “She died when she was ten.”

“I’m sorry.”

I gave a nod and then smiled, thinking that surely there were happier topics we could find. “Do you miss your sisters at the convent?” I asked, then instantly regretted it. From the look on her face, the convent wasn’t such a happy topic either.

Cassandra looked away to the window then, and then over to the fireplace. And for a long moment she contemplated her answer. “No, not really.”

“So how is it you’re so good at this doctoring stuff?” she asked after another long moment; the sadness nearly entirely gone from her voice.

“I was a wild-child growing up; always in the bush, hunting and fishing, and getting into all sorts of trouble. Hell, I doubt there was a day I didn’t get cut or bruised, or worse. So my mum used to call me her little *Enkidu*,” I said laughing at the memory, never guessing Cassandra would get the obscure reference.

“Ah, the wild-child of Aruru, made to rid Gilgamesh of his pride and arrogance?” she asked laughing. “And did you ever find your Shamat?”

I looked at her then, at her wide and bewildered eyes, and saw a smile I’d never seen before.

“I don’t know what that is,” I admitted truthfully. To which she laughed again, wholeheartedly this time, and in my face no-less.

“Why she is the one who seduces the wild-man Enkidu, out from the wilderness, and into civilization,” she exclaimed, her bright eyes shining in delight.

My god who is this woman? I thought. *This primordial goddess, who all but wrote the notes of life upon my heart, and soul. And now I’m a goddamn poet.* I laughed at my own stupidity, my own insanity, as my heart and mind spiraled out of control, as I fell madly in love with this difficult woman.

“Maybe that’s what you’re here to do,” I said before I thought, and maybe I would have said it anyway, the night being what it was, with her closeness, and her scent radiating off of her the way that it was.

But she sat back, pulling away from me then, as a sudden coldness hardened her eyes, and covered over the warmth that had been there, just a second before.

After a long moment, of not knowing what to say, she finally said, “What part of Australia are you from?”

“A little place called Glen Locke. My father’s a cattleman there. We raise Wagyu cattle. Do you know what that is?” I felt myself wink a bit, a habit of Jack’s, and I had to chuckle as I realized just how proud of him I was, and how much I wanted Cassandra to meet him. Though... I think now, that’s the worst idea I’ve ever had.

“No... we were vegetarians at the convent. I hadn’t even tried a burger until last week. I liked it though,” she said smiling guiltily, making me want to kiss her.

Instead, I leaned back, like a startled rabbit, wide-eyed and watchful, and just stared at her from afar.

“It’s a very expensive kind of cattle. In the market it goes for around three hundred a kilo... or I guess here that’d be about one hundred and sixty a pound.”

“Is that expensive?”

I laughed at her then. How could I not? I swear, it was so cute; her perfect innocence, displayed so perfectly... and in all the world – I was the only one to see. It made my head swell, and my heart ache, and for everything, and anything, I wanted to be with her, every second of the day, every day of the week, and should I not be with her... I knew my thoughts would be consumed by nothing else, save her.

However my laughter had hurt her, as insensitive as I can be sometimes, I had forgotten how my reaction would seem. So, thinking to set her right I said, “Oh don’t feel bad, I doubt many people here know about Wagyu cattle. It’s kind of an Asian thing. And yes, it is expensive. That’s why my father won’t raise anything else, not so long as there’s a market for his beloved beef. You should see him with them too. He walks around singing to them, and scratching behind their ears. By the way he treats them you’d never guess they were destined for someone’s dinner table.”

“That’s so sad,” Cassandra said, suddenly horror stricken.

Here, she'd just told me she'd been a vegetarian, nearly her entire life, and I'd just said the rudest thing possible in reply. I swear I can be so stupid sometimes. I think that's why I became an actor, so I could go around saying what other people were thinking, instead of coming up with shit on my own.

"They live a long and happy life on the ranch before they wind up there. I swear," I said quickly, hating to lie, but at the same time desperate to get the look of torment off her face.

"Oh. Okay," she said distractedly, as she gazed at something on the coffee table. And when I looked I realized it was an old photo that my mother had recently sent me. It was of the two of us, when I was just twenty-three.

"She's so pretty," she said.

"Yes, she is."

"Who is she?" she asked with a smile.

"My mother," I told her, to her surprise.

"Are you close?"

"Sometimes," I said, not wanting to explain.

"She must be so proud of you," she said, her brown eyes searching my face, as if I were a bug under a microscope, curious in alien ways. Suddenly nervous and very conscious of myself, I snatched the picture back from her, and tucked it under a roll of gauze in the first-aid kit. As if I was attempting to hide it, as if I was ashamed.

I turned on her then, biting my lip, fighting myself for the right words to express how she made me feel, both excited and tremendously...afraid.

But Cassandra was even more nervous than me, and at seeing my face, the pain and frustration that no-doubt lined every-inch of it, she flinched back and away, like a startled fawn.

Gently, as if she were a scared and wounded animal, I picked up her arm and cradled it gingerly as I began to treat another of her wounds.

"I hope so," I said as I squeezed the antibiotic ointment onto the small, shallow cut; noticing as I did so all of the tiny white scars that lined so much of her skin. There were so many of them... all with varying lengths and widths. It was enough to snag the breath in my throat and cause me to cough.

With a nervous smile, I looked up to find she was watching me, as if studying my obvious reaction. And that's when I was overcome by her scent. Mild, yet unmistakably her; it was spice and lemon, mint and tea, and I swear I could smell the ocean in her hair and honey on her breath.

And how could I possibly resist? Compelling beyond reason, bewitched and enthralled, my brain begged for action and I... I could find no reason not to agree.

You see... desire begets desire, and hunger begets hunger; and so-too my need, feeding upon itself, quickly became the demise of an entire evening.

Because I simply could not resist...

So, leaning in closer, breathing deeply her sweet and savory scent, I inadvertently pressed down on her injured leg. With our lips, just inches apart, she gasped in pain, and pulled away.

Sitting back quickly, her eyes told the story. I'd hurt her, a coy and wounded animal, skittish and unsure; I'd barely won an ounce of trust, and already I'd gone and thrown it under the bus.

Ashamed, I looked down at Cassandra's leg and saw several small streaks of blood, just peeking out from under the hemline of her kelly-green dress.

"Let me," I said reaching out to take a look.

"No!" she shouted, and she grabbed my hand.

"No, please don't," she said somewhat calmer, as she tossed it away. "I can get it. It's fine."

She said the last with a flushed look on her face, as if she were struggling with herself, struggling with what not to say.

But I've never been much for rules, or people telling me what to do. Another handicap I suppose. So I reached again for the hem of her dress, as if to pull it back and reveal the secret she was hiding beneath. And then... just to throw some petrol on everything, I said, "I saw it, that thing around your leg."

Cassandra stood so fast then she knocked the first-aid kit to the floor, its contents going everywhere.

"What is it?" I asked stupidly, still too hungry for answers to care.

Cassandra looked at the scattered bandages for a second, and then she looked at me; her eyes empty of everything except the tears that belayed the fury on her face.

Then, with a surprisingly cool and steady voice, she said to me, "I have to go." And before I knew it she was at the door.

"I didn't mean to...I'm sorry. You don't have to tell me. Please. Don't go."

A second later the door was opening, and she was stepping through.

"I won't hurt you," I promised to the empty space, knowing full-well it was a truth I'd already displaced.

14 Cassandra

“Words are funny, hateful, spiteful, angry-little things; that twist in upon themselves; bending and writhing in your head and in your heart until they become something else. And lost and lonely, I spent too many nights with nothing but words on pages, written by strangers long-dead, as my only company. Their words tormenting me. Piercing, slicing, gouging out bits of me, to leave wide-gaping holes that nothing seemed to fill.

And words like ‘home’ and ‘family’, words like ‘love’ and ‘passion’, words like ‘touch’ and ‘feel’, well... they became the deepest and darkest pits of all.

In the convent I found these words in the books Cara smuggled out of the donation box for me. And stories, like Dumas’ “Count of Monte Cristo”, and McCarthy’s “Blood Meridian”, became the dry tinder at the very center of my emaciated heart.

For weeks and months on-end their words, like worms, bore into too-rotten flesh, that had never really lived. And over time, became the open wounds I would pick at, as I hung suspended from the rafters, as my cruel father punished me, for crimes I would never commit, and for a few I already had. And yet, in time, these words... also became the only life-line I could cling to.

And even though my shame was acute beyond any point of usefulness, because of these words... my shame was tempered too. Because in knowing others had suffered; others had endured, others had walked a long and lonely path, and survived to tell their tale, I knew I could somehow survive this too.

‘To what end?’ a cynical person might ask. But that... as in all things, depends entirely upon the creator.

But it wasn’t until after leaving the monastery that I discovered words could also set me, and an entire world, on fire. And it wasn’t until I found music, a world full of music that had been previously denied to me, that I finally found meaning... in all of that suffering.

Because there... deep within the heady sounds of the blues, and hidden within the lilting breath of folk, and even within the twisted torments of heavy metal; there was lightening in sound.

And it was the perfect elixir too, unique unto its own, as it both compounded and alleviated the malady within; though... it seems its power is vastly unknown.

So as Springsteen sang ‘sometimes it’s like someone took a knife baby edge and dull and cut a six-inch valley through the middle of my soul...’ something inside of me caught flame. And, when he sang, ‘Only you, can cool my desire, ooh ooh ooh, I’m on fire’ I literally burned from within. And it was just me and a blinding inferno, that no one else could see.

Even when I looked in the mirror it was there, behind dead eyes that had seen too much, a voice screaming for me to wake up! *Though I never seem to listen.*

And I wondered if Eminem knew the power of his words when he sang ‘His gift is a curse, forget the Earth, he’s got the urge to pull his dick from the dirt, and fuck the whole universe’. Because I knew that song was for me, about me. I wanted to fuck the whole universe for what had been done. I wanted to fuck it till it bled, and leave it heaving on the floor. I wanted to gouge out its eyes and leave it there to hear only its own endless screaming.

...I tell you I am broken, but how can you believe when you can't see inside my head?

By the end, I was bleeding from my ears, all of the emotions I never knew I had. And songs like James' *Benediction* and Daughter's *Touch* became the tempest that blew me over the edge. And the only thing that pulled me back was Mason, with his smooth laugh, and easy eyes.

Because from the first moment I first saw him, Mason had become the only thing that could blind me to the inferno that raged where my heart should have been. And later... as I grew to know him... well, let's just say, I found it was in his stillness, in his timeless sang-froid, that I found I could finally breathe.

Even watching his movies, though all the time he was something different and strange, some shade of his steady self-possession would shine through; remedying my ailing mind and appeasing the poison that coursed through these cursed veins.

In an effort to harness this strange healing power, I bought all of his movies, and played them again and again. Watching every move he made, with his hands, his face; gestures he would make that were all his own.

And I watched for the way he kissed. Imagining always that it was me.

But all things devolve into chaos, and everything manifest surely recedes back into nothing... and so too Mason's cool presence soon became just another prickling reminder of all that was broken inside of me.

And when he discovered my cilice, when he tried to kiss me, and I flinched away, scared and unsure, when he laid bare his emotions, so that I would feel safe in his presence, I was reminded again, by sharp contrast, just how incredibly damaged I am.

Everything, you see... turns to ash at my touch.

And even though I know... that the past lay somewhere behind me, I know too now, that I will never truly be free of it. It's molded me, just like Enkidu, who was molded from clay and the saliva of Aruru, the ancient goddess of creation; I was formed out of something not of this world. Yet unlike Enkidu – I was not fashioned for some noble purpose. Instead, my creation was of a purely lascivious intent. And I know now, I'm wicked through and through.



“The night I moved into my apartment can only be described as a blissful torment. As I shut the door behind Conor and Shay, saying goodbye to that part of my life, and hello to my new-found freedom, I was struck by an overwhelming sadness. It must seem odd to you, that after so many years in the company of others, constantly suffering their watchful appraisals, that I wouldn't relish finally being alone. You know... I think I thought that too.

But instead of feeling relief, I wandered the nearly empty space lost for purpose. You see, I was empty, if you can understand, devoid of natural feelings, and normal thoughts. Because

they'd been beaten and loved out of me in turns. And that night, alone in my darkened living room, all the things I never had come to sit with me; a mother, a father, sisters and brothers, and all the hopes and dreams that had never manifested in my traumatized mind, or my missing heart.

It was an incredible loneliness, like nothing I'd ever felt before.

You wouldn't understand the suffering of a kiss long-awaited-for, or how with it comes poison from a wound that had been left too-long to rot and fester, and how only the saline tears of loneliness and longing can staunch its flow.

But I had no tears to shed. They had all been cried out of me so very long ago.

I think that's why I ended up in the basement, my fingers trailing over the cold crook of the metal hooks, across the rough splinters of the workshop table, and along the rusty handles of the utility sink. There was nothing familiar anywhere in my life, and every time I tried to think of something else, something other than the crushing darkness that was sinking in on me, my mind would flow like a river, back to Mason.

And I would think of the almost kiss, and his easy laugh, and I would think of his touch, how it burned in the most delightful way. And I would think of his face when he saw the cilice, and I imagined it... disgusted...and worse... disappointed.

A normal woman might have cried then I suppose. A normal woman would probably have curled up into the fetal position on the floor and bawled her eyes out. Instead, I found a length of rope under the workbench and bound my own wrists. Instead, I stretched up on my tiptoes, hands above my head, until I could just barely fit the rope over the hook. And instead, I let go, hanging myself there in the damp concrete basement – and for a moment I forgot it all, and came home.

These are the words that have been lost to me; 'home', 'family', 'love', 'kindness', 'generosity', and most importantly, 'forgiveness'. For their meanings are not something you find in a dictionary but are rather something lived, something experienced, something shared. And these words are tethered to us like an umbilical cord, sustaining us in times of darkness, in times of struggle, and in times of pain. But for those bereft few who know not these words, the boundless, the untethered, there is only emptiness where such words should reside.

What then do we fill ourselves up with? How then do we define everything from who we are, to what we will become? I can no more tell you I want a 'home' and a 'family', if these things are as fictitious to me as 'Neverland', and as out of reach as 'Ithaca' itself. For I am not Odysseus, and for me there is no journey home, and no Penelope when I get there. I am alone, solitary, broken, and denied. And my story has no happy endings because in my reality they simply do not exist.

15 Veda

Ashlyn had never felt so spent. Had she been awake for a month? A year? Her mind and her body would have let her believe so, if only the calendar would agree. And yet there still was no end in sight to the misery of this strange and depressing case. And even more distressing was the fact that every time Ashlyn thought it couldn't get any worse, it did; much, much worse.

And yet what was probably the most frustrating thing for the criminal psychiatrist, who was a perfectionist in every thing she did, was trying to navigate through the stories, and lies, and somehow manage to find the truth buried inside.

Climbing into a hot bath with a glass of wine and a new novel, Ashlyn had hoped to dispel the phantoms that had plagued her thoughts, both waking and not. But lying there in the steam-filled room, all of her thoughts seemed to coalesce around a worrisome event that had happened earlier in the day.

"How's our little Marla Singer?" Sullivan had asked, coming up to her in the hallway just outside of Cassandra's hospital room.

"What are you doing here?" Ashlyn had asked, making no attempt to hide her shock at seeing him there. This wasn't his case after-all, and he had no business butting in.

"Oh I just wanted to see her for myself," he said with what Ashlyn could only describe as unmasked lechery, so much so it made her skin crawl.

"I've got this handled, if you want any information you can get it from my notes," Ashlyn told him before turning and storming off. Well... storming off as best as she could, with her twisted legs and aluminum crutches.

"That man does not get access to Ms. Lethe again. In fact No One is to have access to her unless I approve it first. Is that understood?" Ashlyn asked pointedly of the man standing guard outside of Cassandra's room.

"Does that mean video as well?" he asked.

Ashlyn, for all of her abilities, had not even seen that one coming.

"What do you mean?" she asked somewhat shakily as her thoughts had already begun to spiral out of control, as she considered all of the implications a question such as that would bestow.

"Dr. Sullivan had Sam make copies of all of the video feeds for this patient," he said nervously, as sweat broke out across his balding head.

"Including the feed from her room?" Ashlyn was literally shaking now. So much so her metal crutches were making a metal tinging sound as they struck the door handle again and again.

His response was a slight nod as the man seemed suddenly too scared for words.

"Never again. Is that understood?"

"Yes ma'am."

Ashlyn turned and left the hospital that minute, and a very short time later was barging into Police Chief Emile Asencio's office.

"I want him banned from the case!" Ashlyn demanded, not bothering to wait for the man to hang up the phone, or for that matter to acknowledge her presence at all.

"Pardon me. I have something I need to deal with. I'll call you right back," he said into the receiver before hanging up the phone.

"Excuse me?" he asked Ashlyn, as if he wished for clarification.

"Dr. Sullivan. I found him lurking around the hospital. I want him banned from the case, and from Cassandra. This instant." Ashlyn was practically foaming at the mouth and she knew it. And this was exactly what she didn't want. To seem like an emotional female – to give 'them' any reason to think less of her abilities. But she was just so irate at Sullivan's obvious objectification of Cassandra, she was literally beside herself.

"Please have a seat, take a breath, and explain," Asencio said calmly, motioning to the chair that sat just in front of his large oak desk.

Ashlyn took a deep breath and took a seat, and for the next twenty minutes they discussed very openly why she thought her boss was way out of line when he had asked for the video feeds.

"You're absolutely correct," Asencio said, easily enough, almost too easily. But non-the-less he had reassured Ashlyn that he would take care of it, and that there would be no further incidents as far as Sullivan was concerned. Still though, it worried her. And it bothered her immensely at just how comfortable Sullivan had been in assuming a right to the video from the woman's private hospital room.

How often does this kind of thing happen? How often are the rights of women, criminal or not, appropriated for the sake of male curiosity, all because of this masculine appetite that seems to lay claim to everything?

That thought alone turned Ashlyn's stomach as she lay restless in the steaming water.

Closing her eyes, she pulled her feverish face beneath the surface, hoping its stinging bite would cleanse the turbulent thoughts from her mind. But still they sat there on her chest, threatening to drown her, there in her very own home. And again and again Sullivan's licentious voice echoed in her ears, "How's our little Marla Singer?"

The comparison, she thought, had been meant as a thoughtless quip, made for no reason other than to get under her skin, or perhaps provoke some illicit response. But it had done so much more than that, oh so much more, as it had driven home for Ashlyn, like nothing else had, just how much Cassandra had been denied.

Because who was Marla Singer? Just some crazy girl from the shadows of a masturbatory-fetishment about male supremacy. Just some self-loathing outsider who's not even allowed entry into the world of the men she's forced to endure, and why? Why? Because she was simply... a woman. And even though somewhat-central to the story, Marla Singer alone was given no voice and no purpose of identity – other than that of villain.

"She's a predator posing as a house pet."

The water sluicing from her face, Ashlyn quoted allowed what had once been a favorite line from favorite film. And in fact, she knew much of it by heart. But like so many others, she'd been blinded by its poetry, and had forgotten to pay attention to its oh-so salient message.

Sullivan, and people like Sullivan, who found femininity a flaw and a reason for violence and anger, of course would hear it loud and clear. But for Ashlyn, it had been a simmering thought, percolating at the back of her mind. *Toxic femininity would ultimately be the ruin of man, and therefore must be fought by any means necessary.*

It was a message she'd heard every day on the radio and saw plastered across the news every night; spread over airwaves, burned into disks like a contagion – it was spread by casual contact as much as by any thought-out means.

And the message... *that equality is a myth*, was one that was growing harder by the day to deny, especially when one stopped to do the math: one-in-four... that was the number... and now suddenly... denying it and what it meant seemed nearly impossible.

16 Mason

“All I could do after she left was sit there on the sofa and watch as the fire slowly died down to nothing. Then, when even the twinkling light of the coals was almost gone, something out of the corner of my eye caught my attention. It was the photo of my mum and me

Bending forward, I picked it up off of the floor where it had been spilt along all the other various contents of the first-aid kit.

Why had I gotten so upset? I wondered, knowing all along it was guilt; guilt over conversations that had turned into the truncated sound-bites of strangers trying to communicate in an unfamiliar language.

Closing my eyes, I tried to remember back before everything turned to shit, back to a childhood that was both mediocre and... sensational. And for the first time in a long time, I remembered my mother as she used to be. Before our tragedy claimed its second, silent victim. And I missed her... the old her... who loved the old me. And then I wondered if she felt that way too when she called, hoping it was *him* who answered, instead of me.

Instinctive in a physical way, mum always had these *foretellings*... or so she liked to call them. Anyway, once just recently, she called to tell me to skip a flight, and I did, on account of what she'd said. And it was a good thing too because it was eventually grounded. And while everyone else had to scramble at the last minute for flights, I was already en route.

Sadly the only thing mum ever missed was Jullee's death. For thirty-four days she had sat vigil, and on the thirty-fifth day – she'd gone for bread... by the time she returned her only daughter was... well... Jullee was dead.

To this day she hasn't forgiven herself. Nor me... as I had slipped off to the pub. Nor Jack, as he was wherever the fuck he went, whenever his family needed him.

And here I was judging Cassandra, and my own family was hardly any better. So once again I was left feeling ashamed. Ashamed that from the first moment I had seen her, I had made quite a few assumptions; shy... awkward... and incredibly beautiful... but also someone with no real-world experience.

How much of that was really Cassandra, and how much of it was just me, projecting what I wanted to see?

I didn't really know a thing about Cassandra, not really. And this crumb, disturbing as it was... well... that was just another example of how much I really didn't know. Still... no matter what I did, I couldn't get her out of my head.

So, over the next week I stayed away; thinking she needed time, but really, I was just trying to sort out why I was so addicted to her.

You see, before I'd met her, Byron had been teaching me about Buddhism and mindfulness and I guess in a way I was trying to be mindful of my intentions regarding Cassandra, because quite honestly... I wasn't sure how messy I was willing to get.

By the time I finally did make my way back to Mac's I was immediately met by a very irritable red-head.

With tiny hands and sharp claws, the small woman latched onto my arm and drug me out into the street, and then down a somewhat deserted alley.

"What did you do to that girl?" she hissed at me from her tip-toes, so that she could get in my face as much as possible.

"I didn't do anything. We were mugged. I can hardly help that!" I didn't mean to shout at the tiny woman, but I didn't like being attacked, especially when my own guilt was hurting me more than anything she could do.

"That's not what I'm talking about ya tosser," she spat at me as she jammed her finger into my chest. "She told us about that. But she also said you don't want to see her no more."

I was so taken aback; I just stood there gaping at the woman like a damn fool.

"I told ya not to break her heart. And ya could have at least waited until she got home safely. She had to walk back from your hotel, and she didn't know where she was going! Joe had to go out and fetch her after a couple of guys cornered her down on Red River!"

Now she was the one yelling, and stamping, and waving her finger in my face.

"I... I..." I stammered stupidly.

"I don't want to hear it!" she screamed in my face one last time, and then just sorta ran out of steam... letting out a huge breathy sigh, like the wind coming off a bellows, she deflated right there in front of me.

"Well I never thought I'd be standing in a dark alley screaming me head off at Mason Harlow – that's for damn sure," she said coming back down to the flats of her feet.

And we both chuckled at that, and then looked around when a homeless man shuffled around a bit in his spot further down the alley.

"I never said I didn't want to see her again," I told her in all seriousness.

"Then why haven't we seen hide nor hair of ya?" A bit of her biting tone was back, but at least she wasn't yelling at me anymore. I've said it before, and I'll say it again, that little redhead could scare the hair off a wookiee, and I was more than a little intimidated of her just then.

"And don't say you've been working cuz you were happy enough to skip out on your work before your date."

Goddamn that woman can be perceptive.

"I just wanted to make sure I was in it for the long-haul. Like you said. I just needed to make sure I had it in me to stick around when... when shit gets... weird," I told her, though I don't know what made me pick those words. And for a second I thought she was gonna backhand me, or kick me in the nads. But instead, she just took a step back and nodded, seemingly satisfied with my answer.

Then, as if to confirm my suspicions, she nodded again and said, "At least you got some sense in you." And then she was patting me on the arm and leading me back inside.

As it turns out Cassandra wasn't even there. It was her first night in her new apartment.

When did that happen? I wondered.

But in a way I was relieved. Because after the encounter with the redhead I wasn't sure I'd worked up the required level of courage to have that conversation. Would we discuss what happened? Or would she just tell me to bugger off? I honestly didn't know because as far as women go... Cassandra's about as enigmatic as it gets.

Like a sad little puzzle, wrapped up in a way-too alluring package.

God, and how I wanted nothing more than to crack open her head and see what made her tick.

Which is funny now,...when I think of it... funny that I should admit such a thing, because that's exactly what I ended up with; a wild and dangerous tour of Cassandra's tormented mind.



The very next day I had to fly out to LA for a promotion the producers were forcing me to do. Fed up with my excuses, I knew it was the least of what they had planned to do as a sort of pay-back for my recent indiscretions. Byron was ecstatic however, as he wanted nothing more than to be back in LA, back among friends, even if it was only for a day.

“You’ve got to focus or you’re going to drag yourself and this production down with you. Everyone’s noticing that you’re not really here. Even when you show up you’re not here...” With the last word Byron rapped a finger on the middle of my forehead.

“You’ve got pussy warping that head of yours, and if you’re not careful it’s going to drag you down. Send you packing... back to that ranch you just love!”

Byron of course, was always good at turning words into weapons. But he was right, and I knew it. My attentions had been everywhere but on the set. I'd forgotten my lines, forgotten the name of my character, and the character's brother. Hell I even forgot the name of my love-interest and instead kept referring to her by her real name, Vivian Schoken; an incredibly attractive and somewhat talented actress, who has almost zero patience with me.

I felt bad about all of it. But even with Byron's chastisements, my thoughts were still revolving around the sad girl with the self-flagellation fetish.

And by the time I got back to Austin... Well, I had worked her up to near rock-star status. For days I had fantasized about her, in so many different scenarios, and in all of them I was of course, the conquering hero riding in to her rescue. So, by the time I walked into Mac's on Sunday night, I was convinced she would fall into my arms and beg me to take care of her, forever, which of course I was convinced I was more than prepared to do.

Sadly that's nowhere near what really happened. No... instead of riding in to her rescue I spent the entire evening nursing drink after drink at the bar.

I'd originally thought to sit in her section, but after she growled at me I took a seat at the bar instead. And that's where I remained, nursing my drinks and pride, in turns, until a few hours later when she finally came up to me and said, "Your friend here said he knows all about us."

I looked back over her shoulder to see Oscar Perez sitting at a table in her section. He was clearly watching me... watching us. Instantly angry, I eyed the man as he witnessed Cassandra lean in to whisper in my ear.

"He said he knows about me too," she whispered in her honey-breath that washed over me, taking me instantly to a very inappropriate place. But Perez's beady little eyes staring back at me was like a bucket of ice-water poured over my head. In reply I gave Cassandra a slow nod and a smile, because I couldn't think of anything to say, and without another word she drifted away.

And for the next hour I sat there brooding over what the paparazzo could possibly know. And then, I realized it didn't matter. He was here and that meant he would eventually get his photos. That was his job after all, and Oscar Perez was very good at his job. I knew this because he had been my miniature shadow for the past fifteen years. And our history was not a very pleasant one. That alone made me worry how it would all affect Cassandra and our already half-crippled... relationship.

The last thing it needed was his deleterious attentions.

"Did Cassandra leave?" I asked Conor as he absentmindedly poured out a whiskey and Coke. I'd been so preoccupied with Perez I didn't notice her leave. But after searching for some time I finally assumed she must have.

"Ya, she left for the night mate, gone back to her flat. I let her go early, now that she's gotta walk. I don't want her out there on the streets after the pubs close."

By this time it was one in the morning, and Mac's was showing no signs of slowing down. So I knew Conor had been thinking more about her safety than his bottom line when he told her she could go.

"Listen here Mate. I'm from Dublin, ya? And I'm as straight a shooter as anyone. You can just ask. But that fella over there, he's been in a couple of times, asking about you. Always sitting in Cass' section too. And I'm not too sure how I'm feeling about him. But I can tell you it's nothing good. So I was thinking of asking him not to come back no more, unless you were wanting to vouch for him," Conor's low grumble seemed more like a menacing threat than a question. Especially given the way he leaned-in across the bar. But it wasn't me he was leveling with a lethal look. It was the tiny Mexican who squirmed beneath that nightmarish glare.

"Why don't you let me handle this?" I asked, to which Conor whistled between his teeth and said, "Just keep it reasonable, I don't need them rangers in tonight."

I nodded once, and then picked up my beer.

When I sat at his table, the short Mexican with the thick accent and no neck, just stared back at me, his eyes never leaving the knuckles of my right hand. They were bruised and bloody from an argument I'd had earlier with an unresponsive wall. I'd lost the argument of course, but by the look on Perez's face I'd won some sort of respect.

"Do I want to know what the other guy looks like?" he finally asked, to which I only smiled in reply. This made his thick black eyebrows screw together in the middle of the forehead, making

him look even more like a troll. Though not attractive, not by any sense of the word, I'd heard on the street that Perez was a bit of a ladies' man. So I couldn't help wondering, just then, as I sat there smiling into his vacant eyes, if he had tried his luck with Cassandra.

But that just made me laugh, especially when I imagined all the ways she can put a man in his place. It seemed a natural talent of hers, and I wondered was Perez the kind of man who liked spurs.

Besides...Cassandra's ineffable femininity can be very disarming at times, and more than a little intimidating, and just the thought of anyone so ordinary as Perez lasting more than a minute in the full-beam of her spotlight was simply ludicrous.

"So, how are you?" he asked politely after a bit.

"That depends on what brings you here Oscar." I was less than polite, and intentionally made my words into a growl. I was in no mood to play games with him, and was more than a little put-out that he was even here, in Austin. Had he tracked me down?

"Surely there can't be much work for you here."

"You'd be surprised at the odd bits and pieces one picks up." He smiled and took a slow drink from his half-empty beer. I thought about tipping the last of it over his head, and then decided against it. I wouldn't have had a problem knocking him on his ass either, if he'd gotten feisty with me, but for Conor's sake I wasn't going to pick a fight.

"Cassandra's my friend, nothing more; you don't need to be bothering her," I told him in a stern voice that left no room for argument, or so I thought.

"She's led an interesting life, that's for sure," he said none too cryptically. So he'd done his homework. He probably knew more about her than I did, I realized, and in my half-drunk state it was almost all the motivation I needed to push his face down his throat.

But then I thought of Conor. "You see that big fella over there." I jerked my head backwards, back towards the bar.

"Yeah, so?" he asked defensively.

"That's her cousin," I said stretching the truth.

"And he wants me to tell you to fuck off now, and never come back. Here, I'll even pay your tab." I took the bill that was lying face-up on the table.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, that's so."

"And if I do come back?" From the slight tremble in his voice I knew he was calculating in his head the height difference between the two very different men.

"Well... seeing as Conor owns this establishment," I began, rocking my chair back on its two hind legs.

"...and he's from Ireland, where, as you might have heard, they literally grow up rowing in pubs," I said popping the last of his peanuts into my mouth.

When I was done chewing I went on, "...so I figure he'll mop the floor with your face, and then call the cops to report your drunk and disorderly ass." When I had finished my threat I smiled ruefully, mainly because I was too drunk to think of anything else to say.

"Well... I'm gonna finish my beer at least," he told me testily, as he quickly drained the last of his drink. Then, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth he said, "Just because she's a civilian don't mean she's off limits. You chose this life, you know how it works. And she chose you. No innocents here. Everyone knows. Everyone made a choice."

I'd had it with that defense. As if it would work in any other profession. Could you imagine Senators and Congressmen being followed daily by paparazzi just because they chose public service as their career? Wouldn't fucking float. But actors are somehow immune from the laws that govern basic human decency. It was enough to make me puke.

"And you're the one who chose a very dangerous profession."

"Oh yeah and why's that?"

"Because one of these days Oscar someone is gonna get fed up with you."

"I'd like to see you try," Perez said slipping his Nikon over his head.



"I finally caught up with Cassandra late the next day. It'd been a long day and I was knackered, so instead of the usual cloak and dagger I had my driver drop me right at Mac's. I mean, what did it matter anyway? There was little point in hiding when Perez already seemed to know more than I did.

"Cassandra," I called over the heads of half-dozen men. There were a few open tables in her section, but I didn't want to assume.

"Can we talk please?" I asked coming to stand beside her.

"Meet me outside," she said without turning to look at me.

A minute later I was once again standing in the alley. "I'm sorry I was so rude. I shouldn't have put you on the spot like that," I began before she even had time to turn. But when she did... seeing the pain in her eyes was like taking a physical blow. Once only the phantoms of half-remembered nightmares, the pain that now haunted Cassandra's eyes seemed visceral.

"It's okay. I know I'm...different," she said consolingly, the last word coming with all the solemnness of a nun. And suddenly I was ashamed – all over again.

"No, you're not..." I started to lie, and if it hadn't been for her slight wince, I probably would have gone on too. But instead, I took her hand; content just being next to her.

"I want to be friends, at least. Can we do that?" I asked after a bit, my woeful eyes imploring her.

And surprisingly she relented without struggle. “Sure.”

It’s funny how an unexpected thing, like her easy forgiveness, can take the weight of a thousand mistakes off your shoulders. Or at least one very big one.

Standing there in the dark, no words passed between us for a very long time, as we listened to the hum of the street, and the din of the crickets that had just begun to sing. But when her thumb began caressing mine, as it stroked the strings of my heart, I worried I was no match for this incredible woman.

How could I ever explain the ease of ecstasy with this elemental eidolon?

“Can I take you out on Friday?” I asked after awhile, wagering against my luck. Because soon the shoot would be over, and life would call me back to LA, back to a life I’d nearly forgotten. So I was very aware that time was...as ever – of the essence, and in such pathetically short supply.

She nodded shyly in reply, then quickly brushed her lips against my cheek.

“Yes,” she said softly, and as she pulled away a slight blush stained the roses of her cheeks red. And it was like that. Whitman’s *Body Electric* finally made sense.

“Okay then... I’ll be here at seven...” she was shaking her head ‘no’ before I could finish.

“Pick me up at my place. Here...” she took a pen out of her waist apron and then grabbed my hand. “I live here; it’s not far, maybe ten blocks.” She scribbled the address on my hand, just like the girls back at school used to do.

“Okay, at seven,” I confirmed before she turned and walked away.

Then, just as I was turning to leave, something flashed in the darkness. Looking back, I realized it was just the homeless man. He’d returned sometime during our conversation and I hadn’t notice. But now that I had, I realized he looked terrified. Frozen where he stood, he eyed me as if at any moment I might have a go. But then after a moment he seemed to settle down.

Our date turned into tolerated amusement; ice cream and a stroll around the lake, me in a hat and sunglasses, and her in a short dress and white sandals, though she went about barefoot most of the time. And all-in-all it went better than I had expected. So, when I dropped her at her door I chanced my fortune once more.

“Can I take you out again, on Sunday?” I asked as we stood on her front porch. Unfortunately she just shook her head and said, “I work Sunday.”

I knew that... I’d just forgotten. “Oh yeah, of course. How about Monday then?” I asked knowing I would most likely be shooting all day Monday and would have to once again sneak out early if I wanted to take her out at a decent time. She nodded, smiled and planted another kiss on my cheek. I wanted to turn my head at the last second and catch her lips on mine, god I wanted it so badly, to feel them pressed to my burning hot flesh. I imagined it would be like dousing a fire with ice, all steam and... sizzle.

I could tell you it was a madness from the beginning, but how can you understand when you can’t see inside my head? I wanted her so badly. All I could think about was undressing her, touching every inch of her, making love to her in every possible way... but knowing I couldn’t... god that was some heady stuff, better than the best coke, better than the highest high. She was my Everest and I was going to - very much - enjoy every inch of my journey to the summit.

“Okay, seven on Monday,” I said just to make sure I hadn’t heard her wrong or hadn’t missed something during my little mental freak-out.

“Yes, Monday at seven,” she repeated back slowly with a gleam in her eyes, a hint of something hiding there, as if she could read my mind. Which of course made me shudder as I knew she’d hate me forever if she knew what I was thinking... dreaming... wishing...

After our dinner on Monday we went back to her apartment and we watched one of my movies. Normally a painful experience, this time I found it rather enjoyable. Mostly because she talked all the way through, asking me questions, telling me what she thought would happen. It was a thriller about a man whose father was murdered so he goes out seeking revenge on those that done it.

One scene in particular however seemed to fascinate her; the one where I had one of the men responsible for my father’s death on his knees and was about to kill him. It was a pivotal moment for my character, where he had to decide if he was going to break his promise to his father, to not fall into the same violent tendencies that had led to his father’s own demise, or if he was gonna walk the high-road. In the end, my character falls victim to his own emotions and kills the man with a saws-all.

It’s a rather gruesome movie and not hardly what you’d call a chick flick, and in the past it had been difficult to get any of my girlfriends to watch it. Most just said it was too violent, or too bloody. But not Cassandra. No... she... she couldn’t get enough of it. She even played back a few of the more intense scenes so that she could watch them again.

“How can you get so angry when it’s not really your father?” she asked in all sincerity.

“I don’t know, it’s acting.” I cocked an eyebrow at her hoping that sufficed. It seemed to because she shrugged and then went off to get us another bowl of popcorn.

But it wasn’t the popcorn I wanted. With her there, sitting so close to me. The warmth of her thigh pressed against mine. The intoxicating smell of vanilla and jasmine radiating off of her skin... well it was enough to make me think I was drunk on her. And as a drunk is often bold and reckless, I pressed in closer, then closer, and then inching my way forward I finally went in for the kiss.

Her long, dark-brown hair was hanging around her face, and as I brushed a piece back over her ear she shivered, but she didn’t pull away. Instead she held perfectly still, her face at an angle away from mine. “You are so incredibly beautiful,” I said, making my voice a soft whisper at her ear.

“If anything I do makes you uncomfortable, please tell me, just punch me, or you can kick me, just don’t get mad. I promise I’ll stop,” I said before I pressed my lips to her cheek just in front of her left ear. But her tiny shivers gave me goose bumps and that only encouraged me all the more.

Tearing my lips away, I moved them an inch closer to her mouth, her full and tender mouth, and kissed her again. Slowly she turned then, to face me; and unable to resist this last temptation – I pressed my mouth to hers, at first gingerly, but then in a moment of full arousal, I pressed harder, using my tongue to gently pry her lips apart.

She gasped softly then, and I devoured that as well, as my mouth worked at consuming hers.

And it was sublime... it was heaven incarnate, it was Xanadu and all of its pleasures. I was in heaven and so I kissed her as if heaven had no shame. And after only a slight hesitation she kissed me back, at first equally as tender, and then with a passion I could never have anticipated.

Her mouth, a glowing ember of heat, felt like it had been born only to consume. And consumed I was, as our kisses grew deeper. Slowly I let my hand wander down her neck, to the back of her head, and I pulled her hard, into me.

She kissed me then like someone who had never been kissed before, with all the enthusiasm of a teenager. So unfathomable I can't even begin to explain. It was maddening, and exhilarating, and before I knew what was happening my hands were on her breasts.

And suddenly it was just like we were two teenagers in the back of the family minivan. With her firm breasts filling up my hands so perfectly, it was suddenly all I could do to keep my mouth from them... from her... in her thin-blue blouse and white shorts, and nothing on beneath.

My hands, hot and quivering, were nearly as ineffectual as a virgin's, and yet... I had at least aroused her nipples, and now they pressed angrily against the palms of my hands, and my erection matched them perfectly.

It was agony I tell you. The likes of which you can hardly fathom unless you've been there; the wanting of her, the needing of her... it was pain and pleasure all rolled into one blazing fire that was consuming me from within. And when her mouth pulled away from mine, gasping for air, and her chest heaved into my hands, and when my cock strained to be set free, pressing itself painfully against those vile buttons... it was utter bliss and complete torment, and it was perfection in the simplest of terms.

But I guess every man has a snapping point, and I'm not proud to say that mine was such a feeble thing that I could not withstand even a mild groping session, before my hedonistic side took over, yet it would be the truth.

Using my body weight I forced her down onto her back. And her legs, once curled beneath her, were now tangled beneath me. And in what I can only describe as pure blissful stupidity, I ground my hips into her, letting my angry cock feel the warmth of her through my jeans. And my hands, each of them with a mind of their own, were roaming now, unrestrained across her body; up into her hair, and down along her slender neck, only to slide down her side and around to her back.

And it was only then that I slowly came to realize she was no longer responding to my touch. In fact, she wasn't moving at all.

And there was a terror in her eyes I had never seen before.

You see, in my blind rush to get at the prize I had pushed too far too fast, and instead of telling me so, instead of punching me like I'd told her to do, she had just clammed up and gone completely rigid, all the color draining from her face; even her lips were the palest shade of white.

"I'm so sorry!" I said scrambling up and off of her as quickly as I could. "I don't know what happened, I thought you were enjoying it. I'm so, so sorry."

She kept her eyes on me as she sat up, once again pulling her legs up and under her. Then she grabbed a couch pillow and hugged it to her like a shield.

“It’s... it’s okay.” Her voice was shaky, and it made me want to punch myself. Hard.

“No, no it’s not. I lost myself there for a second, but I swear it won’t happen again.” I smiled at her as I got up and moved a little ways away. “I promise. I won’t do that again. But, you did like some of it? The kissing?” I think it was my ego and not anything chivalrous that made me ask. But she nodded, and my heart skipped a beat.

I’m telling you, those cliché’s from the movies and pop songs, they’re all true, and I was absolutely stunned to finally figure that out.

“Can I take you out again? Friday? I promise to be on my best behavior.” I was aware that I sounded like I was begging; and even to my own ears the desperation was anything but sexy. But I had to ask. I had to know. And when she said ‘yes’, well... I was as stunned as I’d ever been.

“Friday works.” Her smile was a small, sad one, but I didn’t pay much attention to it at the time because I was too excited about the possibility of a repeat performance, and maybe the possibility of getting a bit further the next time.

The whole way home though my cock kept reminding me that it had been months since it had seen any action, and it was overdue to say the least. But for once in my life, I found I could ignore it because the arousal I felt for Cassandra was such a cerebral thing, and the aching in my loins was only a slight fraction of that intensity.

But later, back at the hotel, I took out my guitar and for the first time in months I found I had a reason to sing.

17 Cassandra

“We’re not so different, you and I,” Cassandra said smugly as she sat picking at her hair; sectioning off bits to twist around her long, thin finger. It was a self-soothing ritual of sorts, one of many that Cassandra was rarely aware of. But when she did notice, the way she chewed her bottom lip, or curled and un-curved her toes, she would instantly and silently berate herself, as if she had just committed some God-forsaken atrocity.

Then, as if that wasn’t enough, as if the guilt of every slight infraction of decorum wasn’t enough, she would suddenly grow acutely aware of her own egotism, and at that she would make the sign of the cross.

Dr. Veda would never know all of this of course, but Cassandra thought by the assuming look on the doctor’s face she most likely guessed most of it.

“And how are we the same?” the good-doctor asked.

“For one, we’ve both studied beneath the same cruel tutor,” Cassandra replied dryly as she tossed away a half-twisted, half-forgotten strand of chestnut hair.

“Oh yeah? And what tutor is that?” the doctor asked slightly amused. Yet the doctor’s amusement faltered when Cassandra looked up from beneath her heavy, down-turned brow, and stared vacantly back at her.

No... not vacantly, rather it was as if a great tidal force had opened up somewhere behind Cassandra’s eyes, and suddenly the good-doctor was in thrall.

“Pain Dr. Veda. Pain compounded by time,” Cassandra said softly, as she let her bare feet drop to the floor.

“I see...” Dr. Veda’s voice trailed off when she couldn’t think of anything else to add.

Cassandra’s head twitched first to one side, and then to the other, in an alien, disjointed movement that sent the doctor retreating into the back of her seat. “No doctor, it’s I who can see,” Cassandra said nodding her head to the doctor’s bent and twisted legs. “That you’ve spent many long nights alone with nothing but your pain to keep you company. And still it has not crushed you.”

“Not yet...” the doctor said chuckling but wound up choking on the word ‘anyway’, and it came out as a dry cough.

“Yet...” Cassandra said contemplatively, as she eyed the doctor from across the table. But it wasn’t idle curiosity that made the doctor shrink beneath her glare; rather it was the way Cassandra looked at her, as a lynx might examine its prey.

“Oh don’t hold back now,” Dr Veda said hiding her nervousness well.

“Yet...,” Cassandra continued, her unyielding eyes never once wavering from the good-doctor’s face. “You’ve only come half-way. For you the coin still has two sides. You see it’s wrong to think that pain and pleasure exist only in opposition of one another, that they are mutually exclusive, two ends of a vast spectrum. Yet... that is possibly the greatest falsehood of all time. A white lie compounded by fear, stretched out over time, and it has birthed its own reality. Still, the truth is there for those willing to seek it.”

“And what truth is that?” Dr. Veda asked somewhat shakily.

At that Cassandra smiled so devilishly for a moment the atheist doctor imagined it must be a sin.

“Sometimes pleasure and pain are one and the same.”



“Mason was beginning to understand this as he slowly discovered the brief moments between the pain; the chinks in the armor if you will.

And just as he was spinning into the depths of his very own private hell, I helped him discover another one of life’s best kept secrets; tenderness shown at a time of great and terrible pain will forever bind someone to you, like nothing else can. And these, tethers made of immortal steel, will hold Mason tight to me, now and forever, no matter what space or time separates us.

Because I was there for him, when he needed me. When he was on his knees, out of breath, bleeding from every orifice. It was me. I sustained him when he thought nothing possibly could. I bound him to this life, to his breath, to the very beat of his heart, and now he owes me. He owes me a debt he doesn’t even begin to understand.

You see he was a weak man. Weak of mind, and weak of soul.

Though, to his credit, he was not shy of self-control. That was plainly evident in the well-defined muscles of his back, and the way his abdomen curved up and over his hip, to create the most amazing shape. But his physical strength could not protect or save him from the pain I would inflict, and for him that made every injury so much worse. You could say his mental suffering was quite... intense.

And that worried me, as the actual physical pain of what I was doing was quite minor... compared to where we still needed to go.

Yet, he took to it so poorly at first it was hard not to feel sorry for him, he was so childlike, so innocent in so many ways. And naïve. No...ignorant is probably a better word. He was ignorant as to the nature of suffering and pain.

He had lived so much of his life in one long hedonistic rush trying to satiate this desire, then that, always chasing some assumed high, whether it be work or women. It’s no wonder he was half-crazed when he found me. And it’s no wonder he was teetering on the brink of a total nervous breakdown when I took him. Why... I doubt he would have lived long with his life so out of balance, his longings so out of control.

Because he was his desirous mind and little else.

But there was a mental fortitude within him, shinning out from that darkness like the rays of some forgotten sun, which provided him an innate power he was not yet cognizant of. And I

knew that if he could be taught...if he could be trained...then one day he would be unstoppable; a force no one could refuse or deny.

He was already powerful; there was no doubt about that. And the power radiated off of him like a sword being pulled from a forge. But just like forging a sword; too much heat and your blade will become brittle, causing it to break beneath even the slightest of blows. Yet too little heat will leave it soft and unable to stand.

Why... Mason was like this... in some places too soft, too weak, too timid to wield, and at other times, and in other areas, he was too hard, too proud, too rigid, brittle and easily chipped.

Did you know... the best swords are bi-metal blades, blades that are composites of both iron and carbon? This allows them to be both flexible *and* supremely hard. A blacksmith accomplishes this feat by tempering the blade at different rates. The faster an area cools the harder it becomes, allowing it to take and hold a razor-sharp edge. And the slower it cools, why... the more carbon it retains, thus the more flexible it remains, so that it is able absorb even the most tremendous of blows.

A katana is a good example of this; a blade that is both infinitely sharp and ultimately flexible.

By first coating the spine of the blade with clay and ash, the blacksmith wields its destiny... Red-hot, the blade is removed from the tempering fire and immediately is thrust into the quenching bath. And as its cutting edge is exposed to the hissing kiss of the cool water it solidifies on contact, instantly forming a supremely hardened blade, that once sharpened will retain its cutting edge for the remainder of its days.

Yet the spine, still covered in clay and ash, cools much slower, and because of this it retains more of its carbon, thus allowing it the flexibility it needs to withstand any amount of pressure.

Two sides, two destinies, fused into a single sword. That is where true power lies. Because strength without flexibility can only leave one brittle, and easily chipped. And so too, flexibility without strength leaves one too malleable and easily bent beneath another's will. Therefore both strength and flexibility are required in both swords... and men.

You see... forging a man is no different; you must always fortify your blade; therefore lessons of pain must always be soothed by pleasure, and all pleasures must be tempered by pain. So as not to make them too brittle. So as not to make them too soft.



“And that’s what you were doing? When you took Mason into your basement, hung him from the ceiling and tortured him for days?” Dr. Veda asked angrily. Her eyes, cold and hard, looked only at Cassandra.

“Yes. Ask him yourself. Ask him if he thinks I have helped him.” Cassandra’s voice was not harsh, not demanding, not even arrogant or defensive. It was just the calm languorous expression of one stating a fact, nothing more.

“I have asked him.”

“And what did he tell you?”

“He told me that you woke him up, that before you he was asleep and that ever since the day you first took him he has felt more alive, more awake than ever before.”

Cassandra nodded in understanding, but didn’t say anything to the doctor who glared openly back at her.

“But that’s not so unusual. Often one feels a new zest for life after having gone through something so horrible, something so terrifying and devastating as that. It’s actually not an accomplishment of yours so much as a bi-product of him having survived something so wicked.”

Cassandra allowed herself a small thin-lipped smile.

“In fact, it’s not at all unlike someone being cleared of cancer after having faced certain death. Their appetite for life comes back and they suddenly appreciate of all the things they had previously taken for granted. This is not some magical response one gets from being tortured. It’s a natural response to surviving the unthinkable.”

Dr. Veda had a glare in her eyes as if she was trying to challenge Cassandra, and it was hard for her not to laugh, but Cassandra remained still, content for now to just watch the woman rant.

Beneath the table however, Cassandra spun the little lion figurine around and around in slightly numb fingers.

“You tortured this man for no reason, you enjoyed it too, therefore there’s no excuse you can give that would validate your actions.”

“So if one becomes ill and in the process of all that pain and fear they find a strength they never knew they had, a zest for life, as you called it, a renewed passion for all they took for granted, then that is a good thing?” Cassandra asked the woman across from her, the little lion going around and around.

“It’s a natural process,” the doctor said dryly.

“So, unless Mason was diagnosed with an illness or unless some other tragic, unforeseeable event happened to him, he should be condemned to go through life half-asleep, unaware of all the magic, all the power, all the richness that lies just beneath the surface, unaware of the zest – that makes life worth living?” Cassandra wasn’t challenging the doctor’s thinking; she honestly just wanted to know.

“That is not up to you to decide.”

Cassandra was disappointed that the good-doctor hadn’t answered her question at all, and had instead just cast judgment, and then moved on. Much in the same way she understood the American government worked.

“Mason recalls waking up in your basement, but not how he got down there. How did you manage that?”

Cassandra's nimble fingers stopped their incessant movement and for a small second the little lion froze in her tight grip. Then, as if it had never happened, it began to move once more, over and over, over and over, as she began to speak.



"We had gone on a couple of dates before I realized that Mason was only half-formed; and was in fact half-asleep and half-dead as well. And I thought about that for a very long time afterwards; what it would mean to be with someone who didn't understand themselves, who didn't have the first clue about their own reality. For him the world was two inches long and everything he had experienced could easily fit into that space.

And he thought I was the innocent one, the naïve one, the one who had no clue about the 'real world', but in fact it was he who was ignorant.

And his ignorance disgusted me. It was almost as if he was being willfully stupid, and I just couldn't respect him because of it. Then, when his animal exposed itself, I knew he and I could never be...

At least not as he was... so, I guess it was as much for me, as it was for him, that I took him. I wanted a man, a whole man, awake and powerful. I didn't want some mewling child who would make excuses when he should take action, who would run when he should fight, and who would fight when he should think, one who would turn away – unable to face his own pain.

They'd all been like that, the men at the pub, the priest, Sykes and all of his merry men... stupid, mewling children whose lives revolved around their most primitive organ. And I wanted Mason to be different. So, I gave him the opportunity, nothing more, just the chance to change.

"I'll pick you up Friday at seven," he told me on the Monday before I took him. And at first I was going to say 'no' because who was I to change a man? I was going to say 'no' because surely he was too old, too stubborn, too male to change. But I was desperate and I wanted him, and so I said 'yes'.

After he left that night I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to accomplish in days what had taken Father Cormac years. Of course the Internet helped. There were things there that I had never expected, things for controlling people, things for fetishes, things for delving into the darker side of everything. Most of them though were just toys for the animal; objects to be wielded by stupid, ignorant people, stumbling around in the dark, unaware of their true potential.

But some of these things I knew could be put to a better use.

So, when we returned after our date I invited him in... knowing he would expect something in return for the meal he'd just purchased, and no-doubt for the attention he was paying me. So getting him inside was easy. And, as we were both drenched from rain, and our clothes were soaked through, it wasn't hard to get him undressed either.

“Take those off, and I’ll throw them in the dryer,” I told him, throwing him a blanket from the back of the sofa. He looked at me funny then, surprised I think, and a bit more than wistful I suppose.

“Are you sure?” he asked rather stupidly.

“You’ll get sick,” I told him, as I went into my bedroom to strip off my own wet clothes. And when I came back out I was wearing only a robe.

From the look on your face I can tell you think I was being too bold, too forward, especially considering my previous hesitations. No doubt you think I was tipping my hand. And you would be right to think that, if only he were awake. Certainly he would have been suspicious at least. But you forget men are animals and are very easily distracted by their own... impulses.

And from the moment that Mason saw me, in nothing but a silky, black robe, all his impulses revolved around two questions: what was I wearing beneath that robe? And how was he gonna find out?

“Do you want to watch a movie?” he asked in a rough voice as he sifted through the small box that contained the sum-total of all the movies I owned.

“Just, not one of mine,” he clarified somewhat ashamedly.

“Anything,” I said scooping up his wet clothes that lay in a heap upon the floor. “How about *Oppression*? I’d like to watch that again.”

With the blanket cinched tightly around his waist, Mason made his way over to my small TV.

“That seems oddly self-conscious of you,” I told him, as he struggled with the blanket and the DVD case he fought to open. And suddenly he changed; suddenly he was a tiger at the zoo, preening for his audience. Smiling and stretching wide, he let go of the blanket and cast both of his devilish eyes upon me.

“It was wasn’t it?” he asked in a growl, to which I could only laugh.

When he was done, he came to sit beside me on the sofa, where he let the blanket fall to one side, leaving his thigh closest to me exposed to the cool night air. I think that was the first time that I balked.

Actually seeing him there, sitting next to me on the sofa, my woefully inadequate robe doing too little to contain my own growing...curiosity; it was more than even I could take. So when I closed my eyes and imagined my fingers trailing through his lightly colored chest hair, or winding around his waist, I very nearly took him, right then and there.

How can I explain this, so that you could possibly imagine... what it was like, for twenty-six years of nothing, no feeling at all, and then to suddenly have a rush of hormones and adrenaline, the likes of which you couldn’t begin to believe... If I’d purred or growled just then I would not have been surprised. Though I dare say, it would most likely have been a surprise for him.

But in my lust-filled stupor I did move closer, pressing my leg up alongside his, until I could feel the very heat of him.

Had I read a million books I never could have known what it was to feel such... electricity. Words written on pages are poor substitutes for things that ought to be lived.

But how?

In an attempt to get better control over myself, I picked up the brush that was sitting on the table next to the sofa and began to slowly work it through the mess of my hair. It was nearly an impossible task as my hair had been tangled into a bird's nest by the wind and rain.

"Let me," Mason offered, startling me somewhat. But he didn't wait for me to reply. Instead he slipped the brush from my hand and began working it through the lowest strands of my hair.

"The trick is to start at the bottom and work your way up," he told me, as the cool water from my hair soaked through the flimsy fabric of my robe. I shivered once, then twice as trickles escaped the brush and fabric to run down my back, only to disappear somewhere between the crack of my ass.

His thigh; too-warm, too-close, too-tempting, pressed into my back as he spun me around so that he could get at my hair from a different angle. He was so gentle that at first I thought he couldn't be making any progress at all. But slowly I began to feel the brush make its way from the top of my head to the small of my back; his left hand always smoothing and gathering the wayward strands as he went.

And suddenly I was in danger – of sinking. Inch-by-inch he was devouring my will. But how could I stop him?

All the while, as he combed through my hair, he spoke in his unhurried way, and his words – plump and fat, filled the room with inconsequential stories of his youth.

"How come you are so good at this?" I finally asked, when I could bear the curiosity no longer.

"I had a younger sister once, who had long curly hair, and it used to get tangled like this when we played outside after school. She was sick and wasn't supposed to be outside, running wild with me. So we'd have to get her cleaned up before my parents got home." Mason's voice was a rough echo of what it had been just a moment before. And I found his sadness a potent philter.

However, I was also acutely aware that I was quickly losing my nerve. So, with a new resolve, reinforced by his sudden sadness, I turned and took the brush from him.

"I'm not done," he said in protest, before I could get my mouth onto his.

Like wax, he melted beneath me, as I explored the contours of his lips, the texture of his tongue, and the warmth of his breath. Wintergreen, tobacco, and some things unrecognizable...perhaps leather and wood, metal and fire, or earth and blood...something intimately known to the subconscious alone, something hard and dark and foreboding, lingered there on my tongue when I pulled away.

"Are you thirsty?" I asked meekly, as the rest of me fought a sudden and desperate urge to taste him again.

"No," he lied, pulling me back into him for more; his fingers digging roughly into my freshly brushed hair. This time though it was me who melted, and I was desperately close to losing control. So I pulled back a second time, but this time he was even more reluctant to let me go, and his hands tightened their grip even more so.

Once more I relented; falling back into his arms, where his famished mouth quickly began the steady work of ravaging me. Feebly I struggled again to free myself from his affections, but my hands, without any thought to my gathering will, rebelled against all better judgment, and were soon clawing their way up his chest, and over his broad and expansive shoulders.

That's when I realized how close I was to the edge. And it would have been so easy...to live there in that moment forever, consuming nothing but each of his exhaled breaths. To become whatever, whomever he wanted me to be. I knew there in that moment there was little stopping me from falling into those easy and comfortable routines.

And when a sad guttural-groan escaped me, I realized there was only one thing I could do.

"No," I lied horribly, as I finally pulled myself free of his embrace.

"Don't go," he pleaded; his strong hands, with their long-lean fingers, reached out for me. So I took a wary step backward.

And the fear he saw then on my face then was real, so very, very real. Because this man was more dangerous than I had thought. And I had only just realized it in the nick of time

"I'm thirsty. Can I get you some tea or a beer?"

"Beer please," he said smiling his cocky, self-assured grin; finally feeding my resolve.

I went to the kitchen and got us both something to drink, tea for me and a cold Hieneken for him. And when I returned from the kitchen, though he looked and seemed the same in every way, I saw him in a new and different light. Free from the tethers of my own desirous mind, I could see the hunger, plain as day upon his face. Then I worried what difference he could see in me.

Not that he was aware enough see.

"What's wrong?" he asked when I set the beer down in front of him.

"Nothing," I told him, allowing too much sadness to thicken my voice.

"No, Cassandra, don't be like that. Tell me, what's wrong, what did I do?" he asked anxiously before taking a small drink of his beer. Then, as if being eaten alive by guilt, he watched me intently as I seemed to fight for an answer.

"It's just, I get..." A slight tremble colored my voice.

"...I just get scared," I finished lamely. But at least, for all of that – it was the truth. Mason terrified me.

He smiled and reached for my hand and I let him pull me to the sofa, where I sat once again, my thigh pressed against the furnace of his own.

He brushed the hair back away from my face and tucked a piece behind my ear. Then he looked into my eyes and said, "You don't have to be scared, I won't hurt you."

"I know," I said, certain he didn't mean it.

"Then relax. I promise not to do anything you don't want me to do."

"But... I can't. Relax," I said. The tension in my shoulders, the tightness in my stomach, even the look in my eyes, both terrified and excited, were all very real. So at least there was that,

at least I didn't have to work to convince him of my feelings. He just simply believed, and not just because he wanted to, but also because who would ever lie about such a thing?

"Then you take charge," Mason said getting to his feet. The blanket, forgotten, was left to drop mindlessly to the floor. "Tell me what to do, and I'll do it. You can have complete control..."



A loud knock sounded at the door and for a moment Cassandra was a deer caught in the headlights; with her mind lost somewhere in the past and her body frozen there in the present.

"Come in," the doctor said loudly.

At that, a lanky orderly came in and placed a small square sheet of paper on the table in front of the psychiatrist, and then just as quickly retreated out the door.

For a small space of time the doctor examined the square of paper, and then with a worn look on her face, she looked up to the shock-still woman on the other side of the table and said, "I'm sorry. Please, go on."

"Women have sorried themselves into second-class servitude. Don't you think?" Cassandra asked, when her eyes finally met the doctor's.

"For a man, saying sorry is like admitting defeat. But you..." Cassandra said accusatorially, as she leaned in across the table. "...you say it as a way to excuse your own existence; your own desires, your own wishes and wants, and needs. And when does it stop? When you're finally sorry for everything? And then what? Innocuous sounding words... 'I'm sorry', and yet they seem to say everything."



"You can have complete control..." Mason said, his oh-so salient words falling easily from his mouth, I very nearly didn't believe him. But then his smile, both dangerously wicked and deviously disturbed, drew a line straight towards what I was meant to do.

"What?" I asked, as pieces clicked into place.

"Take me Cassandra. I'm your slave. Do with me what you will. I'll do anything you tell me to do." He was standing there, staring down on me, his breath a fast and heavy pant that made his chest rise and fall dramatically.

For some unknown reason I reached out as if to touch him then, but instead, he took my hand and brought me to my feet.

“You see what you do to me? I’ll do anything for you Cassandra, anything.”

I stood there, my hands clasped tightly in his larger, stronger ones, and silently pondered the implications of his words.

Finally after a long moment I said, “Finish your drink.”

His blue-green eyes crinkled with amusement, as his lips curled around the mouth of his beer. Then, smiling broadly, he flicked his tongue inside the rim, before tipping the rest down his throat. It was fascinating, the way his Adam’s apple slid up and down as he took it all in, his eyes never once leaving my face.

And when he was done, he let out a loud groan of contentment, and then placed the empty bottle back onto the table.

He’d been standing there, in all of his obscene nakedness, and I had somehow managed not to look. It’s a point of pride really, that for once I let my will get the better of me. That so rarely happens in a trial by fire. But somehow I managed, and now it was becoming an issue, as his eyes taunted me, playfully gesturing for me to take a look, daring me; he wanted so much for me to see him – in all of his glorious masculinity.

But it wasn’t his flesh I was concerned with.

“I’ll do anything Cassandra, all you have to do is ask.”

Mason’s smooth delivery could rival that of a modern-day encyclopedia salesman. And yet it had all the grace of a bull in heat...and still...had I not been so consumed by my own motives, had I the even the slightest of doubts... I would have wavered, and surely, I would have faltered.

“Anything?” I ask moving slowly backwards, until I was within arm’s length of my kitchen table. Mindlessly he moved forward.

“Anything,” he pleaded, and a cool-rush of adrenaline sped through my veins.

“Kneel then,” I said with a copy of his self-satisfied grin.

He came then, all-too-willingly to his knees.

“What do you want Cassandra? I’ll do anything. I’d even lick your feet if you asked,” he said, a little less than begging, and a bit more akin to demanding.

“I’ll suck your toes... whatever you want...Cassandra,” he said the last with so much menace I had no choice but to do two things at once. First, I looked into his eyes, to see if the menace I’d heard was mirrored there. Had it been...I honestly cannot say what I might have done. But thankfully there was only a reckless mischievousness lingering there.

And the second thing I did, and infinitely more worrisome too, was to check to make sure I hadn’t fallen into a quivering puddle of orgasmic jelly the moment he’d said my name. So instantaneous had my physical reaction been... I was suddenly less-than-certain the skin I was in could be trusted. Drenched in sweat, shaking with thirst, and practically doubled over from the sudden hollowness quickly filling my gut, I was out of my mind; a ship tossed and lost at sea.

God, what this madman does to me.

I swallowed hard then, as I watched a dark and disquieting look slowly fill his eyes.

And when I spoke again it was with every ounce of courage I could muster.

“And if I want to tie you up?” I asked sweetly, recovering somewhat from my initial lapse of control. Sensing the change, the smugness all but fled Mason’s face; though it still danced mischievously around his eyes, crinkling them in the corners. And once again my knees threatened to dump me there beside him on the floor.

“I’d let you.” His muscular shoulders flexed, and suddenly his arms were reaching out to me, his hands motioning for me to come into them. I braced myself this time, against the indomitable force of his will. Like a collapsing sun, the gravity of such men, is an incredible force, radiating out from them in all directions. So it took nearly everything I had not to fall into those arms, not to lose myself in his desires, and his needs, while knowing all along I could.

I could very easily have been the one on the floor begging for his cruel intentions.

But instead I took a deep, shuddering breath, and held my ground.

Shuffling uncomfortably, Mason’s bare knees pressed painfully into the hard tile floor. My window was closing and I knew it. And it was only a matter of time before it would be gone for good. But it wasn’t gone yet, there was still time. To make up my mind. And to take up the control he’d so foolishly offered.

“This is starting to hurt,” Mason chuckled dryly, as he attempted to cover over a groan of agony as he shuffled again painfully on his knees.

And that’s when I decided, right then and there, in that moment of time. More so I believe than at any other point. When I looked into his face and saw, in the sepulchral glow of the street lamp outside, all of the pain and desire he felt; painted there in the sinister shadows that lined his face. And I knew. He had the hunger.

Like all of them; untrained, unrestrained, unable to satiate their own... They become the takers, the plunderers, and the purveyors of other people’s goods. It was a hunger that would know no bounds and honor no borders. And it was this hunger that finally drew me out. That gave rise to the monster beneath. And like some great leviathan, it rose in me then, spreading out its icy tendrils into every corner of my mind. Making me numb.

I won’t lie to you... like I said, but I ain’t gonna sugar coat this either. I ain’t gonna spare you the truth because your delicate sensibilities can’t take it. You owe me that much. Don’t you think?

So when I tell you, about the feeling that possessed me just then, as I looked down at his body, bent and stooped before me, you must believe me. In that moment, when I knew there was nothing stopping me from taking... control, that there was nothing stopping me from taking... him, there was what I can only describe as a single, solitary moment of utter perfection.

And I exalted in it.

Why, it was as if every atom, everywhere, was suddenly set on fire. And the universe itself was ablaze. And suddenly I was the universe, and the universe was me, and we were aflame. And for that split second, for that briefest of moments, I was utterly and truly ecstatic, and very nearly consumed.

But then the feeling passed, and I could see from the look on his face, I had made a mistake. He was growing nervous, suspicious even. He had seen the madness burn through my eyes and he had balked, hand-to-face, shuddering against my suddenly uncomfortable presence.

In a sad, untrained attempt to cover my lie, I forced a blushing smile; and in case any of the madness lingered upon my face, I followed it up with a quick, rough cough, and then silently begged forgiveness with my eyes.

It seemed enough, as he gave a small uneasy chuckle of his own.

But my smile had betrayed me. Drawn from a well of numbness, lacking any warmth of its own, it had cast its own sinister glow, that gave rise to the hair on the back of his neck, and brought goose bumps to his flesh.

His body knew what his mind had not yet processed.

I held his gaze a moment longer, a moment too long perhaps. His clever mind was catching up. Yet a man's mind always finds stiff competition when it's fighting its own desires, and its own expectations. And so it came to him slowly as all of his fantasies were slowly being overwritten by something new... something cold... something disorienting.

Fear.

I saw it in his eyes, and it thrilled me like nothing else in this world ever has. Suddenly nervous, his eyes searched desperately for some recognition in mine, for some hint of the warmth that had been there before, for the façade he'd come to believe. I suspect they came away wanting, as the look of fear deepened upon his face, and a row of sweat blossomed across his forehead.

Yet, the man's ego is a blunt and stupid weapon, and can easily be turned in upon itself. His own, was brazen enough to allow me the seconds I needed. And then it was too late.

The force of the blow knocked him backwards onto the floor, where he sat down with a thump. It had been unfathomable to him, that a powerful man, such as he, could be so easily overcome, that someone like *me* could, without hesitation, pick up that control and use it against him.

The shock on his face then was a delicacy too rich to pass up. So I lingered a moment, sucking it all in, before I once again laid the bare metal tip of the taser against his skin. Reflexively his left hand closed around it, but before he had a chance to pull it free, I pulled the trigger sending nine hundred thousand volts coursing into him.

There was a loud SNAP as Mason's neck whipped backwards. And a loud grunt of agony as his body flopped onto its side. With small, jerking movements he convulsed into one spasm after another, the current rippling through all of the lines of his deeply chiseled chest.

And it was spectacular, to see him buck and arch, to see his strong and capable body writhe beneath my touch. Why... it was pure, unadulterated reality, and it made every hair stand on end and dance with excitement.

Suddenly reckless with desire, wanting to hear his glorious agony, again and again, I pressed the baton to him over and over.

Every muscle twitched, contracted, and danced in a spasmodic rhythm as he inched across the floor. His naked body, now glistening with sweat, had become this blank canvas and I... I finally understood exactly what I had to do.

One more time, as the sedative I'd given him slowly kicked in, I pressed the taser to his chest and watched as a slow trickle of blood escaped his tight lips, though the immense pressure held them locked together.

“Yes. Yes,” I said. “This is exactly how I imagined it would be.”

18 Mason

“She never once swore,” Mason said somewhat pensively as he worked to loosen the metal tab on the now empty can of Coke; causing a dark pool of spit and macerated chew to slosh around on top.

“Not a ‘shit’ or a ‘fuck’. Not even a ‘goddamn it’ when the whip cracked back onto her knuckles, splitting two of them open,” he said dryly.

Mason looked up at the psychiatrist. “I guess she never got into the habit.”

The doctor didn’t smile at Mason’s clever play on words. The gravity of his voice rebuked even the slightest hint of humor, so rather than bring a sense of comic relief, his words instead cracked and snapped liked tinder threatening to catch.

“She just picked up a different toy from her bench of horrors.”

“And what did you do?” the doctor asked after a long pain-filled pause.

“What could I do?” Mason asked, suddenly hostile as a terror-filled memory flashed across his sapphire eyes.

Leaning forward in her seat, the doctor examined his agony openly; which only served to further remind Mason of his cruel captivity.

“I was bound, and gagged, and totally powerless to even speak,” Mason said spitting his words across the table at her.

“So I did the only thing I could do...” he said slinking back into his chair, his animal-eyes constantly moving, from one thing to the next, ever alert now... ever on guard.

“...I bled.”



“She circled me, sometimes smiling a small, sad smile, but most often not. Mostly though I remember how her eyes never seemed to tire of watching every move I made, voluntarily or not. Especially not.

I had come-to in a dark concrete room. Only I don’t know how I got there. And at the time, I couldn’t even recall what I’d been doing just before...just before everything went black.

“I’m doing this to help you,” her voice came softly from somewhere behind me.

I tried to wake up my lifeless brain, to make it function so that I could work out how I ended up...there. But before I could form any type of thought there was a flash of pain across my

left shoulder. My body and mind jerked together as one, as a loud CRACK sounded, and my wrists dug painfully into the tethers that held them over my head.

“This is good for you,” she said, her voice so pleasant you’d think she was putting a child to bed. But before my mind could fathom what she meant, her arm shot out, and the riding crop she held cracked against the tops of my thighs. I screamed then, into a gag stuffed inside my mouth; really giving it the best I had. But it was for nothing.

I would have begged, ‘Please, please you don’t want to do this,’ had I been able to. If it wasn’t for the wad in my mouth, I would have told her I’d do anything, if she’d just FUCKING STOP!

But all I could manage was to scream ineffectually into my gag.

Still, I tried to tell her with my eyes. I tried begging and pleading, but she looked everywhere else but there. Her own eyes, once velvet-soft, now crawled creepily over the goose-fleshed corpse that hung in front of her.

How did I get here? I wondered to myself as the leather cracked against the small of my back, causing pain to blossom like an electrical storm, radiating out from contact.

What is going on? I wish I could scream. My thoughts were benign, at first. Then after a moment, as the cloud of confusion I had been swimming in seemed to dissipate, my anger began to set in. I’d been in her apartment... we’d kissed. CRACK went the whip. I cried out, but it was eaten by the rag in my mouth, making me gag, then choke, then the vomit came to the back of my throat. *This is it. I’m going to die, going down in my own vomit.*

“There it is,” she said as she circled around me to get a better look at my face. *Get me the fuck down now!* I told her with my eyes.

“I knew it was in there somewhere,” her cool voice cooed into my ear. She came close to me then and I knew I couldn’t let the chance slip away. So I kicked up with my feet, my bare legs swinging out to the sides, then snapping together. It was a clumsy, desperate attempt to trap her, but there seemed no other option.

But she was too fast and flitted away like a spooked starling before my legs had made half the journey to her.

Her laugh then came from somewhere behind me, and it came with another SMACK, and then a blossom of pain that spread across my shoulders. Instantly it was followed by another, this CRACK higher and louder, as it came across the top of my ass. Clearly, she was holding nothing back.

And then there was only pain and my silent plea for death.

Then suddenly there was a pause in the pain, and for a moment all I could hear was my own ragged breathing. It bubbled and wheezed its way up through my constricted throat, past the snot and mucus that had accumulated there, to be expelled out into the hot humid air of my concrete cell. And again I wondered where I was, and how I’d gotten there. But before my thoughts had time to coalesce into anything more concrete, the pain would begin again.

SNAP went a wooden ruler as it came across the flat of my stomach, which caused me to jerk, and snap, and tear at my shoulders, as I struggled to remain on the tips of my toes. My wrists,

so agonizingly sore, couldn't bear any more weight, or else surely they would be torn from the bloody stumps of my arms.

"It's the tendons in the wrist that go first," she told me then. "Most people think it's the shoulders, but it's not. The smaller, weaker joints give first; first the nerves, then the tendons. I bet you're already feeling it in your elbows. And that's with your toes on the ground."

She circled around me. Her eyes ever-taunting. "I guess now we'll see what kind of upbringing you had. Were you the kind of kid who sat around all day, letting your muscles and sinew grow flaccid and weak? Or, were you the kid who was always on the go; hurtling fences, jumping from trees, strengthening your muscles and tendons, giving them the resiliency they'll need? I guess if we hear a snap we'll know."

Though my eyes were clouded with unshed tears, I could see Cassandra plain enough. How she moved, in the slow-elongated movements of a predatory cat, all leonine and feral. And her hair was braided now, and she had on an outfit I'd never seen before; dark-blue jeans and a black t-shirt. *Be Brave* it said; which was just fucking perfect.

"You probably can't feel it now, because your ulnar nerve has gone numb, but you've no doubt already done some damage to your wrists. Humans just weren't meant to be hung like this. It's just too weak of a joint to take all that weight," she said coming to stand directly in front of me once more.

"Unless of course you've had time to adjust to it as a child, when your bones are still forming, when the ligaments and tendons are still developing." She circled me again as she spoke now, making me dizzier and dizzier.

"The doctors were amazed at the bone remodeling that took place," she said gazing down at her own forearms. "But you were born on a farm." She said the last as if she were mocking me. But instead of feeling any source of injury at the mention of my father's home I somehow instead felt a strengthening resolve.

"Hold still," she said coming closer this time; well within my reach. "This is gonna hurt a great deal." The flash of metal made me doubt her words not even a little bit. And when it bit into my flesh, when it tore its hot-jagged line from my navel to my sternum, I could do nothing more than scream.

Ice cold, my sweat ran down my feverish skin, down my chest, where it mingled with the blood that now flowed freely from the tear in my flesh; to form what looked like Kool-Aid trails that ran down the rest of me, only to drip off the ends of my toes.

I hung there for a moment, detached – just watching it go.

Then the pain stopped, and I had time to swallow the snot that had been clogging the back of my throat, and time enough to clear my head, which only allowed the fear to sink in.

I'm going to die. This fucking bitch is crazy, and I'm going to die.

Then suddenly it was her cool fingers that traced over my skin; first a line over my ribs, starting at my spine. Then she circled around in front of me, her fingers leaving their bloody ley-lines across my feverish flesh.

Watching... always watching, how everything she did elicited some sort of reply from my ever-too-willing body. And had I the ability to, I would have made it stop. I would have stopped feeding her what she was so clearly feasting upon.

But all I could do was hang there. Her very own life-size marionette. And all I could think was... of Amsterdam... and all the pretty little whores, lined up in a row... tucked into windows lit in every hue. They had reminded me so much of the lifeless papier-mâché dolls my sister used to have; only with bare breasts and damaged eyes, that ransacked my soul as I moved along their sin-filled streets.

“Come to us,” their robotic lips had beckoned.

And not once did I stop and wonder who it was that manipulated their strings.

So great a sin... this lack of sight; and my only defense proves a much more heinous crime.

You see, I realized then, as I hung there, that I truly deserved this... this death... that was stalking me.

O’ course... as it turns out, That glorious palace of equanimity lay much farther beyond the mere pale of pain she was demonstrating for me just then.

Yet as they say, ignorance is bliss, and thinking death’s sure salvation was moments away, I let my head fall forward so that my chin rest upon my chest, and I slowly tried to catch another breath.

With the tenderest of touch, Cassandra put her palm on my chest and rested it there, as if she wanted to feel my heart beat beneath. And as crazy as it sounds; as improbable or as unthinkable as it sounds, the warmth of her touch, the connection of it – just then, no matter how sadistic and cruel it had been before, was nearly as rejuvenating as a long and peaceful night’s rest. Though I dare say, the effects weren’t nearly as sustaining.

But in that moment, in her calmness, and the silence of that connection, I was restored. At least in part.

I looked up at her then, from under my heavy brow, and met her pity-filled eyes. Not that pity offers any real support. Rather, it seems to me an elixir made only of judgment and condemnation. Do you know what I mean?

But it doesn’t matter, because pity couldn’t help me, not then, nor since. And as quickly as it came, it was gone. Silent, and ever-watching, Cassandra let her hand slide off of my chest, and then moving as silently as the grave, she moved off somewhere behind me, where I could no longer see her face. A terror-filled moment later there was the sharp sound of metal on metal and old gears. And then suddenly I was being lowered in place, and for the first time since waking up I could finally get my heels on the ground. A great sigh burst involuntarily from my lips.

Soft, lilting laughter sounded from somewhere behind me, so I twisted in place until I could see Cassandra standing at a pulley that hung on the far wall. Her hand hovered just over the lever. Again, I implored her with my eyes, and yet again it had no effect. No, instead she walked back around until we were once again face-to-face. Only now she stayed further back, well out of my reach.

“I’m going now, but I’ll be back to start your lessons,” she said looking me dead in the eye. “I’m sorry it has to be like this, really I am, but there’s simply no other way. You’ll understand

later, I promise,” she said smiling her sad thin-lipped smile. “There just isn’t any other way.” She shook her head slowly, as if she really wished there was another way. And suddenly I knew... Cassandra was crazy, crazy enough to believe it too.

But for all of that... it was the remorse I could see plaguing her eyes that worried me the most. Because I knew it meant something was compelling Cassandra to do this, it wasn’t just some flight of fancy, this was a well thought-out, well-executed plan that some sad and desperate part of her was furiously trying to play out. And the implications of that alone was enough to leave me paralyzed with fear.

I wonder now though, had I been able to, would I have begged her not to go? I thought about it then, and I was indecisive, as she retreated silently up the steps; my thoughts still ping-ponging between ‘yes’ and ‘no’. But in another half-a-second it didn’t matter because the solitary light flicked off, and the door shut, and I was left alone in the total darkness of my despair.

“Don’t go,” I mumbled into the rag.

All I knew of pain before coming to such a day was the half-felt, half-remembered, phantom of pain. Nothing more than the faded memory of Jack’s belt being laid-out across my back, or the gravel being plucked from my back after laying my motorcycle down on our gravel drive.

No... certainly anything I had felt of pain before coming to such a day would have been nothing more than that common ache of a normal life.

But now... to truly convey the pain Cassandra could inflict... with mere words? Why, it’s an impossible task. Really. Pain being as subjective as it is.

But truly... if you’ve ever broken a leg or split your skull you’d still only know a small fraction of the pain Cassandra inflicted upon me in the hours and days that followed. And any pain I had felt prior to that – well, it would be lost to a sea of nothingness, having been so far surpassed by every new object of comparison. Truly, I too was lost to a sea of nothingness, as the waves of pain she delivered washed over me.

And yet none of that compares to the anguish of losing control over my own life, my own destiny. And had I the chance I would have ended my life right then and there, just so I could control one last thing. But even that was stripped from me.

Still... there were times, long stretches of time, when I dreamt of little else. The only thing that varied was the manner by which I succeeded. First, I’d concoct one wild idea, then the next; each of them more gruesome than the last, each of them still preferable then, to what I was forced to endure.

Hanging there, my dead legs supporting all the weight they could, my wrists taking the rest, was nothing short of agony, and I would not wish it upon even my worst enemy. Yet, looking back on it from this side, I don’t think I would change a moment of it. I know now I could never forego what I have learned, for the sake of a few days worth of comfort. That agony, the sheer torture of it, was worth it to finally have ownership of my own mind, and by extension my entire life.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Back then I would have done anything, anything at all to make it stop. Had she asked me to, I would have cut off my right hand, just to have it over-with. But Cassandra was gone, and I was alone with my agony, and my thoughts. And at first all of them centered on Cassandra; on killing her, on taking revenge, and on what must have happened to make her such an evil cunt. Then however, I began to plot, to think of what I would do when she came back.

But my plotting did me no good because by the time Cassandra returned, after I'd spent hours standing in place, hands bound over head, I could no longer control my own body, and was little more than a cadaver being held in place. Only my eyes remained functioning, everything else had long since passed from pins-and-needles, to shaking-and-burning, to finally land in the numb-and-dead stage.

I couldn't even lift a foot, had I so desired. And believe me... I *so* desired. Because my rage, in direct opposition to my numbness, had grown exponentially, as I had waited on her return, and all I could think of was taking off her head. A swift kick, maybe a leg-lock, somehow, I was going to break her scrawny, fucking neck.

Yet for all my anger there was nothing in her that was afraid. Instead she just looked at me and smiled. She was wearing black leather leggings, a pair of riding boots, and a tight fitting black tank-top. And her long brown hair was pulled into a high severe-looking bun, and there was something black and bulky in her left hand, which swung at her side. But it was the object in her right hand that really forced my mind to work. And when I finally placed it, my body grew instantly cold and clammy, and a cold sheen of sweat broke out across my skin. It was an object my body remembered all-too-well.

"It's time for your lessons to begin," Cassandra said plainly, which further frightened me.

And I have to say, that though she never included it formally, it was what she taught me about fear that was probably the most illuminating of all of her instructions.

Always before, fear had been something experienced quickly, and then just as quickly, forgotten. With one notable exception that is; that ever-pervasive fear you have when you love a terminal person. But that's an entirely different kind of fear. That's the fear of knowing, of seeing the end before it comes, and though that fear is no less intense, it is not the same as the fear of the unknown.

And pain, in all of its infinite variations, is the epitome of the unknown. Utterly unknowable, it is perhaps the last eerie ghostly-lurk of immortal mystery that is still available to us all. Yet, it is the one instructor we run from, time and again. And all-too-often we go into that dark-night completely ignorant of the person we could have been; had we been brave enough to venture into that mysterious unknown.

But that night... as I hung there, I had a good long chat with my friend fear, and I came to know it as I had never done before, and the two of us...we came to an agreement.

"There were four incredibly important lessons my father taught me," Cassandra said as she walked over to the hoist and started to crank the lever. Down I came, another few inches, then a few more, until I was standing, knees slightly bent, with my arms dangling dead in front of me. They felt like two anchors, and the weight of them alone threatened to pull me forward.

And with my legs totally numb beneath me, feeling like two wooden stilts, I knew if I tried to move them, to catch myself should I start to fall, they would snap like two dead snow-gum limbs.

Actually the fear of that happening was so intense I put more of my weight onto the torn flesh of my wrists, causing the stiff leather cuffs to bite deeper into my skin; drawing blood and bringing with it another sad muffled-cry of pain.

“Temperance, prudence, fortitude and justice... those are the four cardinal virtues,” she said moving up behind me, where she began loosening the knot holding my gag in place.

“And without them a man can’t hope to live an illuminated life. And you... you Mason have been bereft. Asleep, wandering in a dark and desperate place,” Cassandra purred as she once again came to stand in front of me. But all I could think of was how desperately I wanted to find some secret reserve of strength, so that I could lash-out at her, and wipe that smug smile from her face. But I was utterly empty.

“When I first arrived at the convent I was nothing more than an animal. A vile, dirty creature that was happy enough to wallow in its own filth. And it took many years of father’s ministrations before I finally began to understand.”

As she plucked the wad of cloth from my mouth an ungodly cry escaped me. It was a horrible, guttural thing, which sounded more like a dying storm than any noise a man ought to make.

“Only by incorporating the four cardinal virtues can a man truly be free...”

I swallowed hard, and then again, trying to draw moisture into my parched mouth. Incredibly desiccated, my tongue (sandpaper against the roof of my mouth) made a scraping sound when I tried to lick my lips.

So when I saw the water bottle come to my mouth... man... never before has there been anything so satisfying as that. You know?

Greedily I sucked at it; coughing and sputtering when it came too fast for my bone-dry throat to take it in. Disgusted, Cassandra pulled it away. Desperate, I implored her with my eyes, to which she relented, seemingly amused.

“First my love, I will teach you temperance,” she told me with a sly smile as she pulled the bottle away again, this time after I had drained nearly all of it. Though I was amazed at how restorative it was. How with just that little bit, I was suddenly able to muster a mental strength that moments before had been impossible.

“Cassandra why are you doing this?” I asked in a hoarse voice that I hardly recognized.

I had wanted to start screaming at her, to demand she cut me loose, that she end the insanity, right this instant. But I didn’t. Instead, for once, I thought before I spoke.

“I told you why,” was all she said as she took a step back and regarded me carefully.

I was standing on my own two feet, and I figured I had about a good foot-and-a-half of slack in my arms, but for all of that, I wasn’t sure I could do anything to stop whatever machinations she had yet to come. So rather than lashing-out in an ill-conceived attack, I talked to her instead.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” I told her honestly enough. “I thought we were having fun,” I said, and it seems to me now, looking back on it, ‘fun’ might not have been the right choice of words; her definition of ‘fun’ being so fucked up and all. Because when I opened my mouth to speak again Cassandra laid the bare metal of that taser-wand against my chest. With wide-eyes I had watched its two-second decent, and then everything within me shattered.

Eyes wide, mouth open but silent, I took the nine hundred thousand volts. Ears ringing, body flopping in an impossible array of movements... each of them pulling at the skin on my wrists, sawing it back and forth through the stiff leather of the cuffs.

And when it became too much I dropped to the ground, my bare knees crashing hard into the cement floor.

Then, after a long moment, the pain subsided, and after another long moment, I climbed slowly back to my feet. Panting and sweating, I had to swallow hard to get past the blood in my mouth.

Then, before I had time to think, she pressed the wand to me again; only this time to my lower abdomen, just above the elastic on my boxer-briefs. And at once my bowels seized and every muscle in my ass clenched so tight there was a loud snap as my spine was jerked out of alignment.

This time though the pain passed a little quicker and when I had my breath back I screamed, “You fucking bitch!” Blood and spit flew from my mouth. And once more I had to climb to my feet. Though this time I was much slower at it. And this time I had a great deal less hope than before.

“Didn’t they teach you anything in that convent of yours?” I asked her viciously.

This time it was her hand that lashed out. And it caught me across the face, snapping my neck to the side.

“They taught me much. So much,” she hissed with a degree of anger. Then, with a degree of disgust she said, “And now I’m going to teach you.”

I wondered then if I could get one of my legs between hers, maybe I could trap her there. But there was the taser wand to worry about. And that’s when I saw it... the water bottle. It had been dropped in her anger, and now it was lying on the floor. And so it was like that that I finally came to tears. Which only made me laugh. Though, given my bodies reluctance to obey, it probably sounded more like a sob.

Cassandra followed my gaze, and then laughed openly when she saw what had upset me so. And of course it made her chuckle. And then with a coy flip to her head, she bent and picked up the water bottle. Then... as if to compound all previous cruelty; she gave a little twist to her wrist and dumped what little water that remained out onto the floor.

And had the old cliché been true, if looks really could kill, I would have provided her just then with a million horrible deaths.

“You won’t get away with this,” I told her menacingly. “But if you let me go now. I swear I’ll forget all about it. I swear we can just go our separate ways. You’ll never have to see me again.”

But my words were nothing more than white-noise to her. And I think she only let me speak because it entertained her, or perhaps because she knew that if I believed I had a chance, the suffering would only be that much greater. That's just the kind of woman she is; thorough, thoughtful... exacting in every detail, and also unrelentingly cruel.

"Just let me go."

Her voice came as a soft caress, her touch, a gentle presence as her fingers traced over my sides, then up to my chest. "For as brilliant a teacher as he was, father really did lack imagination. Always the same thing: the cutting, the beatings, always the same thing over and over."

I started to move back, merely contemplating another sad attempt at escape, but before I could get past the thickening-cloud in my head, Cassandra laid her taser to me once more. But this time she put it to my neck.

"I would never have guessed that there were so many devices to control people."

Jaw locked... head snapping back with a sickening sound, I once again found myself on my knees, this time with the bulk of my weight resting on my wrists out in front of me.

Then all of a sudden, I heard a loud Click, as something thick and heavy snapped around my neck.

"Amazing what you can find on the Internet. Amazing thing the Internet. Sister Margaret had a computer of course, but I was never actually allowed to use it. I didn't know you could order anything, positively *anything*, and have it delivered. Express, overnight, second-day air; why... it's like magic." Her voice was childlike, wistful even, and it brought with it a crushing sense of dread; as my mind began to twist itself around every nightmare device I could think of.

And had I known... had I truly known what it was she had snapped around my neck I would not have bothered. For the worst had already been done.

The shock came almost as quickly as she finished speaking. Lightning fast, it was like the taser only worse, much, much, worse.

It was a small metal box that sat over my Adam's apple that delivered the most barbaric of all of her punishments.

"It's a bark collar," she said sounding rather indignant. "But they have them for people too, but those are just... toys. This one is for a big dog who barks too much, with a modified amperage filter of course," Cassandra said earnestly as she examined the small remote she held in her hands.

"Crazy what you can learn when you live in a hundred-year-old monastery. Myself... I used to love fiddling with all the old wiring, and sometimes Sister Ita would help me. Once we even fixed up an old television set." As she spoke she circled around me, making me twist on my knees so that I could follow her."

But after a moment of great trepidation, I got defiantly to my feet.

The shock took away all thought, and all ability to scream, or stand. And once again I crashed down to the floor, onto my broken and bloody knees.

“All we could get was the Spanish novella channel. I think Sister Ita learned to speak Spanish just by listening to that old thing.” Cassandra carried on as if nothing had happened, as if I wasn’t nearly retching from the pain, as if I wasn’t quickly coming unhinged.

Finally when I found my voice I asked, “Why me?”

“Because there’s something in you Mason. A force of nature maybe, that you keep locked up, hidden away. And I’m going to help you find it. I’m going to wake you up Mason.” She said this with such conviction I knew she believed it to be true. *She’s insane, she’s totally fucking insane*, I thought, repeatedly, as if it were some kind of warding spell, which of course it wasn’t.

Of course her being crazy just made everything that much more unknowable, therefore that much more terrifying.

“Please let me go. I can’t take any more. I’m done. Let me go Cassandra. Let me go home.”

“What home Mason? You haven’t got one. You have a hotel room. Even back in LA what do you have? A house with some furniture some girl picked out, I bet you can’t even remember her name. I bet you don’t even have any pictures on the walls.”

“This is sick. You’re sick. You need help Cassandra.”

She smiled at me then, and took a step back, regarding me coolly.

“I thought you cared about me,” I accused carelessly. And I knew instantly it had been the wrong thing to say because all of the color drained from her face, and her eyes narrowed in anger.

“Cared about you? Why should I care about you? You only wanted one thing!” Instead of sending another wave of electricity through the bark collar, Cassandra walked calmly over to the pulley at the back of the room and began to slowly turn the lever, raising me up. Slowly the rope tightened, and I was lifted up onto my feet and then my tiptoes once again. And as I rose, every muscle screamed in utter recognition; my calves burned, my shoulders threatened to come from their sockets, and the skin of my wrists...well, it felt as though I had none. There was even a loud CRACK that sounded as a tendon in my shoulder protested the vicious treatment.

“It’s not the pain or suffering that’s important Mason. It’s what you do with it. If you face it unafraid it can wake you up, make you strong, invincible even. But should you run away, should you cower in fear, should you try hiding from it, then your suffering, and your pain will only grow, and you’ll never know... the pleasure conquering it can bring.” Her words would seem enticing, had I not already experienced more pain than one person should.

“No Cassandra, don’t. I’m begging you. Please don’t do this.” I swung limply trying to twist around to see her, trying desperately to keep some kind of control. It was an illusion I was hard-pressed to let go of; the illusion that I ever had control, then or at any other time in my life before that.

I never once did. Not really. And it was Cassandra who finally proved it to me.

She came around to stand in front of me again, this time holding a thin knife, the blade about four-inches long.

“If pain is your master then you are a slave, and it doesn’t matter who holds the chains.” She laid the flat of the cold blade against my chest, just above my right nipple, which was as hard as a rock and stood out angrily, despite the warmth of the room.

“Pain brings the gift of allowing us to be present, in the here and now. If the pain is severe enough...” She drug the blade, tip-down, pressed tight against my flesh, across my peck and down to my sternum, where slowly, very slowly, a single drop at a time, blood rose to the surface, leaving a beaded trail in its wake.

Then she pressed harder, till metal hit bone.

I closed my eyes trying futilely to block out the pain.

“...there’s no escaping into the dream world. That’s your problem Mason,” she said, hissing my name as she pressed the tip of the knife deeper into my sternum.

My screams, with nothing to absorb them, crashed against the concrete walls and came echoing back at me.

“...always living in a dream world. But thankfully,” Cassandra said twisting the knife until the drops of blood became a trickle. I heaved and panted and spit in equal parts.

“...pain, pain brings you home again.”

Cassandra drug the knife, bone-deep, along my right ribs until she’d sliced a line clear to my side. Nausea won then, the battle over screaming or hurling, and for a moment a hot-flush washed over me, but I swallowed back the bile, because I was reluctant to let any liquid go.

“There’s so much I have to teach you Mason,” she said now with a wistful look as she stood back to review her work. “And lucky for you, you can scream all you want. No one will ever hear you.”

She took a finger and pressed it into the hole that she’d just created, making me scream. Making it peel from my lips like some god-awful curse. “See? Doesn’t that feel better?” she asked sweetly.

I growled my answer back at her, words I can’t even recall.

“My father never used to let me scream, not really, not the throat scraping, ear splitting, body draining kind of scream. The only kind that helps in my opinion. So believe me when I tell you, I do this as a kindness. But please, don’t take it for granted.”

And I did scream, many, many times after that.

Especially when she stitched two of the gashes she had rent in my flesh. But she was meticulous in her efforts. And when she stopped to appraise her work, I could see in her face an odd sort of pride. And she deserved it too, for how expertly she handled her various tools. And how the things she could do with them were just as varied, and just as unrelenting as the ocean tides... and yet... somehow... infinitely more overwhelming.

But it was in those first few hours that I found the saving grace that would sustain me in all the days, minutes, and seconds that would follow. And it was simply this... pleasure after pain is an absinthian-mix that transcends ALL mortal aspirations. No doubt. It is such an intoxicating illixir I would have sold my soul for just a second of her tender touch.

And just the mere thought of it, after such prolonged agony, was enough to make me quiver with expectation... to make me shake in exaltation... the likes of which you could never begin to imagine.

And there... in the dark confines of my basement prison, where everything was painted in the deep tones of Rembrandt, Cassandra opened up a world of intoxicating experiences that have forever changed me.



Mason rubbed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. “Is there any chance I can get a piss-break?” he asked.

The doctor eyed him curiously and then nodded. She had needed one herself for quite awhile but had been reluctant to stop his morose monologue.

“Sure,” she said, and a second later a large deputy was walking through the door.

“Please escort him back here when he’s done. I think there’s still more we can get through today.”

Mason, for his part, kept his tongue, though he rolled his eyes in open contempt.

“This is good. We’re making progress,” the psychiatrist told him, which did nothing to appease his irritation; rather it seemed only to foster more.

“Good then, five minutes.”

Twenty minutes later they were back at the table, and Mason was sporting a rather damaged looking eye.

“You shouldn’t have pushed him,” the doctor said from her side of the table.

“I only wanted some fresh air,” Mason replied testily.

“Well, if you don’t mind, we should continue. I have other appointments today.”

Mason huffed and then said, “I need some water and something to eat.”

“Very well,” was all the doctor said before she lapsed back into her watchful silence. And after a long moment Mason sighed deeply, then rubbed at the whiskers on his face.

“Yes...very well then,” Mason said rubbing his neck.



“I need you to remember what this feels like. It’s very important,” she told me as she fastened something to the back of the collar around my neck.

“I thought it would be more fun if your hands weren’t tethered the whole time...” she said sweetly as she sent another wave of electricity into the collar, making me jerk hard against my restraints.

“And this is my insurance policy.”

I was back on my knees, staring up at her, and all I could think of was how I was going to kill her.

“That was one milliamp,” she told me. “And this is three.”

There are no words to describe what it feels like, so I won’t even try. But know that I couldn’t even scream. Even that was beyond me now.

“I’ve modified it so that it goes up to six now, which shouldn’t kill you. Unless, for example, it doesn’t shut off – well, then even three potentially could.”

I was going to die there in that basement. I was going to die, and she was going to have to bury my corpse somewhere.

She walked over to the workbench and picked up a black bag I hadn’t noticed was sitting on the floor beneath it. Bringing it back over to me, she moved to stand directly behind me.

Instinctively now, I flinched when she touched me, expecting pain would follow. But instead of pain, I felt the sudden chill of a soft caress, as her cool fingers slid softly up the inside of my left thigh, then back down again.

Behind me I heard a deep open sigh.

“Spread your legs,” she said equally as soft, before she yanked my legs violently apart; a hand on each thigh. My knees scraped angrily over the rough concrete, causing them to burn and sting all over again.

“Now hold still.”

Before I knew what was happening she shoved a metal rod between my legs, half-way up my thighs. On either end of the narrow bar was a leather cuff that she fastened tightly to each of my legs. With a ratcheting motion she cinched the two cuffs as tight as they would go, nearly cutting off the circulation to the lower half of my legs.

It was excruciating, the wide-leg kneel she had forced me into, and worse still was that my hands (still suspended high above my head) couldn’t take any more weight. So I wobbled off balance.

“Easy now,” she said, her voice a low rumble in my ear.

But before I could get my balance again, I felt a tug between my legs and I looked down just in time to see her click a metal loop around the bar. Then before I could fear any new and terrible predicament, she forced my head backwards, until I was staring straight up to the ceiling.

I gasped as the collar bit deep into my throat. With a yank, she drew another gasp and then a choking cough. And when I coughed my head and neck came forward, jerking the rod between my legs.

Had I coughed any harder, I realized, I might have snapped my own neck.

“Be still,” her low, sultry voice came in a whisper; her lips just brushing the back of my ear. “I’m going to release your hands now, but that’s not going to feel very good, not at first. So don’t try to move your shoulders, let me do it for you, or you might dislocate them.”

It was clear she had first-hand experience with this, but somehow that didn’t comfort me.

But when I saw her hands pull the cuffs free of my wrists, and when I felt the tension in my arms slacken for the first time in what felt like weeks... well, let’s just say I was more than a little thankful she’d warned me.

Even my dead legs, after standing for nearly as long, had not felt anywhere as bad as this. And all I could do was cry out as she cradled my arms to her chest... as she wrapped protectively around them. Then, inch by agonizing inch, she lowered them down in front of me. And by the time they were at my side she was kneeling on the ground before me.

“Please Cassandra, please don’t do this.” I begged her again, though due to the unnatural constraints on my neck, I couldn’t look her in the eye, but rather had to view her past the mounds of my cheekbones. Her hand slid up my chest, across the back of my neck, over the collar I wore, and into my hair. The tips of her fingers raking over my scalp, in a rough, but not unpleasant way.

Move your fingers you stupid wanker, I yelled somewhere at the back of my mind. Throttle her bloody neck!

But the nerves in my neck and spine seemed not to function properly. They jumped around like bugs beneath my skin and refused to listen to any of my commands.

Her hand tightened its grip on my short hair. Then she gave it a vicious yank, just as my fingers started to respond, and I could finally produce a twitch in both of my pinkies; causing a completely involuntary grunt to issue from my mouth.

I could see the delight my vocalization gave her. Her eyes, inches away now, scanned my face as she gave another, harder tug on my hair, yanking my neck back even further.

Yet as her lips brushed the line of my jaw, sending shock-wave shivers racing down my spine... I instantly grew hard.

Her body then pressed against mine, in what might have looked like a hug, had there not been so many restraining devices tethering me into unwilful submission.

But before I could respond, before I could get my now mostly responsive hands around her scrawny neck, her free hand came around to the small of my back, and with her other hand still firmly grasping my hair, she unleashed another bolt of electricity into the collar.

Her firm-grip was the only thing that stopped the whiplash that would surely have snapped my neck. And for a long moment I spasmed into her tight embrace.

“There we go. There we go,” she cooed into my ear.

Was I dead? Was this hell? My mind was ringing.

“That was five milliamps, and enough to scar. So you mustn’t ever try to hurt me Mason.” The softness with which she spoke was both eerily haunting but also incredibly sexy, and I imagined that if it weren’t for the psychopathic parts, we could have had fun playing as master and slave. But this though... this was more akin to what a serial killer might do. Which of course was a sobering thought as I regarded her through my lowered lashes; all the while breathing in and out through my nose, trying to lessen the spasms as they slowly began to fade.

When she released me, I barely had time to think before she was shackling my wrists to the metal rod between my legs. And I teetered on my knees when I tried to lift my hands past my waist. But she just tisked, and shook her head, as she came around to stand behind me.

And suddenly every hair on my body stood on end because I knew it would come... though that made it no less startling... and when it did... come... the jerk of it lifted me from my knees, ever so slightly.

She had fastened another clip to the back of my collar you see... and then to the hook above my head, so that now part of my weight rested on my neck, and the rest on my agonizing knees.

I forced then to swallow past the metal box digging into my throat when I tried to speak.

“Ca...” I began, but before I could continue she pressed her lips to mine. Satin soft, thick pillows, moist and warm, they were the antithesis to everything that was happening to me. They were the anti-venom to all the poison coursing through my veins. If only the effect would linger...

Slowly she pulled back, so that her face hung over mine, just inches away.

“Miyamoto Musashi once said that to act in accordance with nature one must learn to activate their mental energy, and be able to remain constantly attentive, while outwardly remaining calm and unruffled. Only then can you achieve harmony with your mind and the world around you. This, my love,” she cooed.

“... this is your first lesson, and the first of the four cardinal virtues. This... is temperance.” She took a step back and reached up to fasten something to the rope above my head.

“You must learn to control yourself my love, for if we cannot control ourselves what hope is there? You must remain kneeling here, unmoving, until I return. You must show me that you have the self-control, and the discipline I require.”

I couldn’t speak. Nor could I assimilate her words.

“Your collar is connected to the hook, just over your head, and I’ve fastened a remote to it. So if you should tug...” She jerked forward ever so slightly on the collar, bringing my head down and forward a bit. “It will go off.”

I gaped up at her, as comprehension was slow to kick in.

“And if you should release the pressure like this...” She yanked backward on the collar now, pulling me up, and back. “It will go off.”

She took another step back and regarded me for a long, quiet minute. I held perfectly still as I waited to hear where all this was heading. *No place good*, I thought.

“I have to go to work. While I’m gone you are to remain kneeling. If you try to stand it will go off, and you will hang. If you fall asleep and fall forward, or backwards, it will go off and you will hang. The only way for you to survive is for you to dig deep... and develop the mental

fortitude required. If you can do that, then we can move on. If you can't..." she turned around and walked slowly to the workbench. "Well then, I guess you weren't worth training after all."

She turned and left then, climbing the wooden stairs two at a time, her riding boots nearly silent as she passed out of sight.

And there I was, kneeling on the floor; legs apart, head back, chin up.

Everything I'd witnessed, and everything I'd endured, left no doubt that she had in-fact fastened the remote to the rope. And later, when a random thought occurred to me, when I realized that somehow she had triggered the collar, while she had one hand flat against the small of my back, and the other tangled in my hair, my worst fear was confirmed.

How she'd done it was beyond me, but the fact that she had only convinced me further, that no matter what, I was gonna remain kneeling there on that floor, shivering and mostly naked, until Cassandra was certain Jack Harlow's son was tougher than most.

19 Veda

“What’s going on in here?” Ashlyn demanded of the crowded room in general; her interview with Mason having been rudely interrupted when a loud crash, followed by the shuffling of numerous bodies, sounded from just beyond the two-way glass wall of the interrogation room.

There were easily two-dozen people packed into the small space; most of them women she’d seen milling about this part of the precinct for the past few days. And there wasn’t a dry eye between them. But that made Ashlyn shake her head, as she caught and then forced the eye of many of the invaders.

“This is not some soap opera people. This is somebody’s life, and quite possibly the worst day of his life. It is not some constructed-reality television series played out for your amusement!” she said, ending much louder than she had intended.

And even before Ashlyn had finished speaking, the room had begun to clear; with many a bent head, and down-cast eye, indicating the shame and dishonor the intruders felt. Not that Ashlyn believed any of it for a second. Even if she hadn’t seen the predatory smiles and delighted twinkles in their eyes, Ashlyn knew, as she knew her own skin, these were guiltless people.

Born and raised in the age of consumerism, these people had been trained to consume the suffering and vexations of others, as though it were meant for the exchange. And even now, as they filed into their self-made clicks, circling water coolers and Xerox machines, they were doing what they had been circus-trained to do; judge and critique, and never once make anything new.

Ashlyn watched them go without a word. Until she realized she was alone with a rather simple looking girl, and her assistant Beverly.

“Can I help you?” Ashlyn asked, as she eyed the young woman openly. But her scrutiny did not have its desired effect. And instead of shrinking from the room, as Ashlyn felt the young woman should have done, she turned to the doctor instead.

“It’s so sad. Isn’t it? I mean he loved her and she did this to him,” she said while dotting her eyes with a crumpled piece of tissue.

Forgetting her anger for a second, Ashlyn turned and followed the woman’s forlorn gaze, back through the one-way mirror, back to the man she’d just left. But he looked different now. And for a moment Ashlyn thought it was possible that it was the way the muted-gray room diminished the golden hues of his tan that made him seem so much weaker now, frailer to be sure. Or maybe it was how his eyes, more swollen now, seemed rimmed in jet-black circles she hadn’t noticed before.

Or maybe it was simply the distance that offered her a moment of clarity, a moment of vision she’d been blinded to, up until now. Whatever it was, it was shocking to her, how someone could miss something so... obvious.

His suffering had seemed of little consequence a moment ago. Just another line-item on a very long list of evidentiary claims. But now... looking into his gray-green eyes, Ashlyn could finally feel the enormity of it all, and finally see for herself, how with each recalled word, Mason had fallen deeper and deeper into an expanse of suffering, unmatched by anything Ashlyn herself

had ever felt. And it was utterly alien to her, this sheer and utter grief, this hopelessness that was pulling him under, syllable-by-syllable.

“Do you want a break?” Ashlyn asked of the crumpled man as she slipped back inside the room.

20 Mason

Mason crushed out his cigarette and then lit another. With short-quick pulls he sucked down the nicotine; desperate for the false equanimity it would sometimes provide. But once again, Mason was denied. That had been the case ever since Cassandra; nothing satisfied, nothing appeased his growing sense of restlessness. It was with him now, like an itch. Like the itch from all of his wounds, only worse because this itch was unreachable, and therefore infinitely more agonizing.

With a great deal of annoyance, Mason worked at keeping his hands steady as he attempted to open the bottle of water he'd gotten from a vending machine. It had been a desk sergeant who had come to the rescue with the smokes; Pall Malls, a horrible brand that tasted like horse shit, but it was still better than nothing.

With stiff fingers, he rubbed at his temples and then, when that didn't work, he tossed his cigarette butt away and dropped his head into his hands.

Back in the room, the god-awful gray-blue room, things had begun to take their toll, which was something, for the life of him, Mason had not expected. It had been one thing to experience it, but recounting it... all of it... somehow made it so much more real; solidifying it in his psyche in such a way, he was sure, he would never be able to scrub it out. It would be with him forever, part of his narrative, the story of his life. It would define him. And... as shaky as he felt, as unstable as he was... that didn't seem like such a good thing.

Thankfully the shrink had given him some much-needed time to think, when she allowed him a smoke-break outside. Sadly though that didn't mean he was alone. Far from it in fact, as there were two armed police officers watching him from not-so far away; just to the side of the back exit, about fifteen feet away from where he sat on an old park bench.

There had been others too, some who had been sitting and enjoying a smoke break before he had scared them off. And now they too watched from a safe distance away; some behind windows, looking through blinds that did little to obscure them from his sight. But Mason was willing to play his part, and pretend they weren't there. He'd sort of grown numb to it anyway, the sensation of being a sensation. It was like an old school uniform that was too-tight, cloying in-fact, but still a necessary evil one must endure. Or so he told himself quite frequently, when he was forced into situations like this.

Looking around, Mason chuckled softly to himself. *Situations like this...* he thought bitterly. "Just as well," he said out loud, as he lit another cig and took a long, hard drag. And when the cig trembled between his lips, he pretended that away as well.

He'd been close to a nervous breakdown when the doctor had asked, "Do you want a break?"

"I want a goddamn cigarette is what I want," he had barked back; a wounded wolf, snapping and biting.

"I told you, there's no smoking in here," the doctor said somewhat sympathetically. "But I'll see what I can do."

Remembering Cassandra was taking its toll on him, inside and out; and not for the first time Mason wondered if keeping silent wouldn't have been better. But he couldn't say one way or the other. And regardless, she was gone from him, and that left only the memories.

And besides, it was up to him to finish what he'd started. After all, he chose this path; the path of honesty, of truth... his truth. And now committed to it, he wouldn't veer left or right, but remain – because it's all he could do.

Back aching, body failing him in every regard, Mason knew he was still only a shadow of the man he used to be. And the wounds inflicted days ago itched, and burned, and many of them felt as fresh and new as the day he'd received them. And more than once he had looked to his chest, to his wrists, to the tops of his thighs, to see if any of them were weeping again.

With a shaking hand he took another long-hard pull; dragging the smoke deep into his lungs, where he willed it to saturate every one of his restless cells.

“Are you ready to come back?” a man's voice came through the thick haze of empty thoughts plaguing Mason's mind. They had been nothing more than smoke and air, but that didn't matter; because they had been drowning Mason, just as surely as if they had been an ocean of waves crashing in over his head.

He looked up to see a silver-haired man in his fifties; fit and trim, a holstered Berretta on his hip.

“I used one of those in Division,” Mason told the man, who shrugged indifferently.

“Fascinating. Are you ready?”

Mason nodded, crushed out his freshly-lit cig, and followed the man back upstairs, back to his tale, where he would once again drown in the haunting memories of Cassandra.



“Tethered as I was, by neck and leg, my hands bound in front of me, my pride somewhere far to the right... I danced a slow dance with madness that night.

And not for a second did I doubt that what Cassandra had said was true. That if I moved too far forward I would set off the shock collar. If I moved too far back I would set off the shock collar. If I stood... if I fell... if my corpse collapsed right then and there, I would set off the shock collar.

And that would be that. I would be dead. I'd convulse, lose my balance, and strangle myself in the process.

But it wasn't just the shock collar I was worried about, because it didn't matter what took me from my knees, be it a sudden jolt of electricity, or simply falling asleep; once down, there would be no getting back up, and without my hands to support me, all of my weight would fall onto the front of my neck.

In every real and conceivable way, I knew I was as good as dead. There was just no way I could last an entire shift on my knees; not with my neck bent back and up in such a way. It was impossible.

But as Jack would say, “There’s no way to it, but through it.”

At first I tried to maneuver into a more comfortable position on the ground; scooching my knees first this way, and then that... trying desperately to get them under my aching back. But a muscle spasm from my head to my ass put a stop to that.

Overwhelmed, I cried out in pain, and then frustration, and finally fear.

After only a few minutes all of my stomach muscles began to quiver; slightly at first and then in great undulating movements that threatened to topple me. Through sheer force of will I fought desperately to stop them. But it was useless. I was useless, and nothing I did had any effect what-so-ever.

So there I was... literally teetering on the brink of life and death, knowing that I was just one fuck-up away from being dead... and I snapped.

So I began to chant. Like some goddamn Hare Krishna.

You look at me like I haven’t experienced different cultures before. Or are you shocked I would seek refuge in a silly religious practice? I guess that would make two of us. But it was the only thing I could think of in my panicked state.

“Peace comes from within,” Byron told me, on many occasions, as he tried to teach me to meditate.

“Don’t seek it without,” he advised solemnly in his buttoned-up Daniel Lewis suit, and his ostrich shoes. Personally I thought it was all bullshit.

“Give me a goddamn Gibson guitar and I’ll show you inner peace,” I told him. But he just scoffed and after a bit I had relented. I counted it as part of the price I paid to retain his services. And if keeping him happy meant I had to sit on the occasional cushion and chant... well... let’s just say, it was the path of least resistance.

Now, it was the only thing I could think to do. “Om mani padme hung. Om mani padme hung. Om mani padme hung.” I chanted the words over and over, in a deep and resonant sound that the cement walls mimicked back at me. And slowly, as my mind fell into that ubiquitous sound, my muscles began to slacken, and the shaking in my gut started to subside. Even my ass unclenched. So I continued to chant...on and on, into the vacuum of that godforsaken space.

So afraid my shaking would resume however, I kept at it long after the dry desperation of my throat demanded I stop, long after my unresponsive tongue could no longer form the words, and my mantra had subsided into a maniacal mumbling of sorts, until eventually I fell asleep.

You’ll have a hard time believing I was relaxed enough to sleep, but being relaxed has nothing to do with it; after all, soldiers on the battlefield sleep amidst gunfire and death, if they have to. It’s just something you can’t understand until your life hangs in the balance. How sleep is as unrelenting as gravity, and that fighting it is like trying to arrest the forward momentum of time.

So it didn't matter that I was balancing on bloody knees, sweat dripping from me, my chanting drifting off into the ether; because suddenly I was sound asleep.

It was the low rumbling I heard, that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once, which first alerted me. And when my sleeping brain finally realized it was coming from me... my eyes flew open and I gulped in huge mouthfuls of air. I had been snoring! Me!

Terrified, sweat beading over every inch of my goose-marked flesh, I started to take stock of my situation. Somehow in my sleep, my weight had come forward, just a bit, and now the collar around my neck was biting into the flesh of my throat. And my knees, wider now, forced the collar higher up under my chin. Do you know what I mean?

It was an impossible position. Beyond anything I could hope to maintain. And that's when I realized... I had it within my power to end it all, right then and there. And there wasn't a goddamn thing she could do to stop me. It would be a nasty, painful way to go, of that I was more than certain, dead certain in fact. But it would be over, and that was *very* tempting.

But it would be Jullee, I realized, that would be waiting for me; her light-blue eyes and honey-colored hair, shining in the light at the end of the tunnel. And I couldn't bear to face her, not like this. Not as I was: drawn down to the darkest depths of my most deplorable self. I was unfit. And therefore unworthy of her love. And I could not meet her like this.

"Not like this," I whispered into the emptiness.

One foot over the brink, as it were, knowing that any further movement in either direction would trigger the collar, I began to chant again.

"Akal, Maha Kal, Akal, Maha Kal,
Akal, Maha Kal, Akal, Maha Kal,
Akal, Maha Kal, Akal, Maha Kal,".

Translated it means "undying, great death..."

Supposedly it is a powerful life-giving chant that is said to remove all fear from one's mind. But it meant something different to me that night. To me it meant "Only a Glorious and Noble Death Awaits Me." Because I knew that's what it would take to earn the love and respect of someone as pure, and as wholesome as Jullee.

But by the time Cassandra returned I had long since lost any ability to vocalize. Eyes closed, legs dead-weights beneath me, I swayed precariously in my restraints; teetering once again on the precipice, knowing that the dark emptiness of death would still be preferable. Yet still, in my head, the words Akal, Maha Kal rang out, reminding me I would not allow my death to have so little meaning; I would instead make it a glorious statement or not have it at all.

Materializing out of nowhere, Cassandra came up behind me and gave a quick, fierce jerk to the rope connected to the back of my collar, causing my head to snap up and back. Terrified of the debilitating shock of the collar, I cried out in fear and sudden rage.

"Shhhh." Cassandra's mouth was at my ear, as her cool hands came to the sides of my face.

"I'm so proud of you," she said in her rough, sultry voice. Provoked, I opened my mouth to speak, but the movement only served to crack my desiccated lips, making them bleed.

“There, there,” she cooed, bringing a bottle of water to my mouth. But the water ran from my numb and frozen lips.

“You did so well,” she said, echoing the statement in her eyes.

Mouth loosening, I sucked greedily at the water, until it was nearly gone. “Not too fast my love, not too fast,” she whispered tenderly.

Then, holding my face in her hands, she looked deep into my eyes. “You did very well. What stamina you have.”

I nodded once. Then saw the narrowing of her eyes, “Thank you.... Ma’am,” I said in a voice that was entirely unknown.

“If you do *anything* you shouldn’t, I will drop you, is that clear?” she asked with such menacing look I nodded as quickly as I could.

“How would you like a reward?” she asked then, as she scrutinized my face.

To which I quickly said, “Yes... yes Ma’am.”

Because, you see... I was finally figuring it out... my pride, along with my dignity, was slowly being murdered by attrition.

Slowly Cassandra’s eyes narrowed. And then she said, “Good,” a little too brightly for it to in-fact be ‘good’.

She stood then and unhooked the rope from the back of my neck. Then, with her foot in the middle of my back, she kicked me forward. Legs still tethered together, hands still fastened to them, I was unable to catch myself and instead fell, face-first onto the cement.

And for a long time I lay there not doing anything, not even all that upset about my ‘reward’. Because it was the sweetest kind of bliss, laying there; better than anything you could hope to imagine. My legs, cramped and aching, protested the blood that was now flowing freely into them, but my knees were instantly grateful for the new position.

“There’s a bucket over there,” she said, to which I could only grunt. If she had expected more she didn’t say. Instead she just unstrapped the cuffs from my thighs and pulled the rod from between my legs. “Arghh!” I cried into the floor, as my hips rotated in their sockets. Had I aged a hundred years I would not have been surprised. Every joint in my body felt as if it were a century old.

“You passed my love. Therefore tomorrow we’ll begin anew,” her voice came, sad and soft, from somewhere behind me. And then, stripping the last embers of light from my sight, she was gone.

21 Cassandra

“I was followed when I left my apartment, by a Mr. Oscar Perez, the paparazzo from LA. that had come here following Mason. He’d been lurking in the bushes outside near the alley, and had come upon me all at once.

“Beautiful evening,” he said, startling me.

“Yes, it is,” I replied stiffly.

“You know what’s curious to me?” he asked, though I hadn’t given him any indication I wanted to speak. Picking up the pace, he had to hustle to keep up with me.

“Why you left the convent so suddenly, and after all those years.”

Had I turned, had I glared at him stupidly, in shocked anger and surprise, I would only have given him exactly what he wanted. So instead I carried on, thankful at least that he had chosen to follow me instead of poking around my apartment, undisturbed.

But his boldness turned into recklessness when he actually followed me inside Mac’s Pub. Which was either amazingly brave or infinitely stupid; as Conor could clearly be seen through the window tending bar, and as he had told the repugnant journalist that he was, under no circumstances allowed inside, I was more than a little surprised then when he slipped in behind me.

Catching Conor’s eye when I walked through the door, I gave a backwards jerk of my head, letting him know that someone *special* was following me in.

Conor, seeing the look on my face, cleared the bar; bat in hand, in half a heartbeat.

“I thought I made it perfectly clear to ya. You. Ain’t. Welcome. Here.” Conor punctuated each of the words with a tap of his bat to the man’s chest, a good foot-and-a-half lower than his own.

“Hey, it’s a free country,” the smallish man said holding up his hands, palms facing out, to show he had nothing in them.

“Ya, but it ain’t free in here, and I say you’re not welcome.” Conor’s Irish accent was as thick as I’d ever heard it.

I do have to give the little man some credit though. He must have had a backbone made of steel to face a mountain like Conor, and an angry mountain at that.

“Alright, alright. I’ll leave. But if you see Mason, tell him I’m looking for him. I’ve got something he might be interested in.” And with that, the little Mexican man was gone, and I was left to wonder the rest of the evening if he was making his way back to my apartment, to lay in wait, or worse.

Sadly the evening only went downhill from there, as Byron came in shortly after my shift began. He walked straight up to the bar and started talking to Conor and Shay, who had both been standing there chatting when he’d walked in. After a moment though Conor waved me over to join them.

I'd never seen Byron before, but Mason had described the unique man perfectly, and I couldn't imagine the chances of anyone else fitting that description coming in with such a panicked look on his face.

"Hey Conor, what do you need?" I asked, not really wanting to know.

"This fella here is Mason's assistant, Byron." He said the name with difficulty, as if he couldn't get his tongue around it. "He says Mason hasn't been back to his hotel since your date last night, and he ain't answering his phone. What do you know about this?"

"Nothing."

"Well, when was it you saw him last?"

"Last night, when he brought me home."

"What time did he bring ya home?"

"Around eleven."

"And you're sure you don't know where he is?"

"Yes."

"Yes you know where he is?"

"Yes I'm sure I don't know where he is."

Listening to our conversation, his head going back and forth like a spectator at a tennis match, Byron soon looked dizzy, and more than a bit annoyed.

"If you see him, can you tell him to please call me? Peter wants his car back and he missed a press call with KANM Wisconsin this morning. I've rescheduled for Monday, but he's got a five am shoot and it's already a tight schedule." The man was clearly flustered. And as he dug into his man-purse, all the while shaking his head, as if it might cause some bit of knowledge to break loose, he spoke in a distracted and worried sort of way.

"I must've tried his cell phone a million times at least, but... I think it's shut off. Here's my card. Call me the minute you hear from him."

I took the card he offered, as did Conor and Shay. Mine I slipped into a pocket in my apron without looking at it; while Shay watched on with narrowed eyes.

I stood there a moment longer, lingering because I didn't know what to do, or say, and when a table called for drinks I took the opportunity to flee. Byron left soon after that; shuffling out distractedly as he studied his phone intently. I imagine he was trying to will Mason to call. And I couldn't help feeling a bit sad for the man. It was obvious he was in love with Mason. No wonder he had taken the role of his assistant; a position that hardly paid and offered little in the form of rewards.

Mason had been the reward; that's why Byron had stayed. And that's why he would never stop looking for the man in my basement.

Worry then, hung over me like a cloud the rest of the evening, as I considered all the possible consequences of taking Mason. I guess, in a way, he'd been right. I was ignorant of the world and its suspicious nature. In the convent no one had batted an eyelash during my thirteen

years of training; no one had suspected a thing. Naively I had assumed that would be the case with Mason. But it was starting to look like I couldn't have been more wrong.

Fortunately I had been smart enough to drive the car, with Mason's cell phone thrown into the trunk, to an out-of-the-way spot in a not-so-wonderful neighborhood. I'd done that much at least, to keep people from snooping around. Surely that would stop people from thinking that I had him stashed somewhere.

But despite my constant self-reassuring talk, I knew that my time with Mason Harlow was supremely limited. He was a famous actor after-all, and people just couldn't let him simply fall off the face of the earth. There would be people looking for him, and I was the last person to see him alive.

That thought ate at me the rest of the evening, and it made me short tempered with everyone. I even barked at Shay when she bumped into me, causing me to spill some of the drinks on my tray. It hadn't been anything really, the drinks were still servable. It hadn't done anything other than soak a few napkins, but I barked at her anyway, telling her to look where she was going.

Then later, when a customer got handsy, instead of letting Conor deal with it, as he preferred we let him do, I bent a man's fingers back on themselves, until I heard an audible Snap. Everyone within earshot groaned in sympathy as the man cried out in pain.

"Cassandra, I know you're worried about Mason, but ya got to let me handle the frisky ones. You can't be breaking their fingers love, I'll get sued."

I nodded in agreement, practically in tears, and then spent the next ten minutes in the bathroom. Shay came in and barked at me then, telling me to 'get it together, and get back to work'.

Finally, Conor asked me to leave an hour early; making some excuse that the weather looked like rain, and I should get going before it started up. He didn't want me catching a cold. To tell the truth, I was only too-happy to leave; though the whole way home I had to keep an eye over my shoulder, as Perez was still out there, and I had no idea where.



"I stood at the top of the stairs, staring down on him, and I couldn't help feeling horribly disappointed, and even ashamed. Had he even tried? I couldn't tell, but from where I stood it didn't look like he had."

"So the remote wasn't rigged to the rope?" the doctor asked somewhat dismayed.

"As if I knew how to do that," Cassandra said dismissively, reaching for the apple sitting on her yellow lunch tray.

"I guess he assumed I was telling the truth," she said blandly before taking a bite of its crisp red flesh.

“And so you just left him there, on his knees for hours?”

“Seven, to be exact,” Cassandra corrected before taking another bite.

Somewhat aghast, the doctor stammered for a question that would make sense. Finally after a long moment she asked, “Doesn’t your conscious bother you?”

At that, Cassandra finally got mad.

Yet it was a quiet fury, that flashed across her face and then was gone.

“What bothers me is that he was weak. Where was his fight? Where was his passion?”

“Beaten out of him is my guess,” the doctor said with a sneer, and Cassandra perked at that. Sitting forward suddenly, she sniffed at the air between them.

“Smells to me like someone’s gone maternal. Have you started lactating yet?”

The doctor, jotting furiously in her notebook, looked up at that.

“It’s hard, isn’t it? Watching them suffer. Our nature, by design, is to run in and help them. To ease their suffering in any way we can. Which so often means taking it on as our own. Did you know that Buddhist have a word for that? Tonglen they call it. But that’s not what you’re doing. No... doctor, transference is a whole other thing.” With a satisfied smile, Cassandra slumped back in her chair, and resumed the slow, thoughtful consumption of her lunch.

Dr. Veda swallowed hard, and then took a small sip of her water.

“What was it you wanted from him?” she asked with narrowed eyes.

Coming forward again, Cassandra leveled her eyes upon the woman, in such a way as to make the doctor feel very uncomfortable.

“I wanted the deepest, darkest, and most desperate part of him,” she said in unison with her dead and decaying eyes. “I wanted the part he shoves into the cold recesses of his hollow heart, where even he dares not look. The part he pretends does not exist, where all of his rage and fury lies, and his righteous indignation too. I wanted it all. And his aggression. And I wanted it hemorrhaging from him in a violent storm of wickedness.”



“When I came to stand behind him, as he bobbed and weaved in a near comatose state, I could clearly see that he was in worse shape than I had intended for him. And I realized then the quiet-strength he must have possessed in order to endure for so long in such a horrible position... well it must have been nothing short of miraculous. I doubt one man in a million could have lasted so long.

And the truth is I had expected him to test his restraints, and to test my authenticity. But instead he showed me his willingness to believe, to accept, and to endure. Truly, he is an amazing

man. But he was also my pupil, and there were still many things I needed to teach him. And we still had a very long way to go.

But seeing him crumble helplessly onto the floor, shivering and shaking the way that he was, had an effect I was not prepared for.

How it made me feel...as if I could consume his suffering, and it would nourish me.

I guess that's the monster revealing itself; the leviathan that sits squat-and-fat in the center of my chest, and feeds upon the emotions of others because I haven't any myself. But seeing him there, helpless and wounded; a fawn in the forest, all vulnerable and in need of saving...it fed that deepest-darkest part of me. And his emotions, as raw as the skin he was in, was an elixir of wormwood, both bitter and sweet.

And I felt powerful. And ashamed. Yet I knew. I was the one who would save him. I would take him, and make him powerful too, and then no one would ever hurt him again. And in return he'd set me free.

Letting him sleep then, that was the slow tempering of steel, so that he wouldn't be too bitter, too brittle, as I had become. I had been damaged beyond repair. Anyone could see that.

So much pain and hate has been poured into my body. My soul, unable to reside somewhere so dark, had no choice but to leave.

But I would not make that mistake with Mason. Mason would be bi-metal material. He would be both strong and flexible. He would be resilient, yet still able to love.

I would tear him down, tear away all of the bullshit-hype that had become his identity, the Hollywood persona that people claimed him to be. Because he wore that person like an impenetrable armor, and as long as he did, he would never be free.

And only pain could set him free. Pain is unique that way, in its ability to strip away any and all things false. You can't dream, you can't regret, you can't pretend when your only thought is present in the pain you are forced to confront. And once that was all he had, once all of the lies and falseness was stripped away, then the real Mason would be revealed.

Therefore I didn't dare be too soft with him, nor too harsh. I had to walk a very fine line so that he could find himself, and yet in the process remain undamaged, and whole.

But things never go as planned, and even the best intentions can sometimes go astray.

22 Mason

“Had I known tenderness it would have been during those idle days spent with Jullee after her fateful diagnosis. Her frailty to me then seemed so much more real, and something about it drove me to a degree of tenderness I don’t think I normally would have had. And loving her was timeless... effortless... why, it was as natural to me as breathing, and yet, had it not been for her illness, I don’t think I should have ever known that. Do you know what I mean?”

But that night, or was it morning? Whichever. As I lay half asleep and mostly dead on the cold concrete floor, soaking in its dampness like a sponge, Cassandra showed me an equal sort of tenderness, that perhaps I will spend the rest of my life searching for.

Committed in the dark like some shameful act, she was careful not to wake me. Not because I needed the sleep, though god knows I desperately did, but rather I think she didn’t want me to know the kindness and compassion she possessed. Sensing this I suppose, I played possum, and the whole time let her believe I was sound asleep.

And if it hadn’t been for her ankles snapping and popping as she came down the stairs, I probably would never have known she was coming. But thankfully I did hear her, and because of this I didn’t startle when her hand was suddenly on my back. And instead, I lay there as still as I could, as she began her slow and steady inspection of me. Her hands, gentle and cool, washed over me then in long-smooth strokes, as if she could somehow wipe away the stain of all the abuse she had inflicted.

“It’ll all be worth it. You’ll see,” she said in a small, hoarse voice as she stroked my hair, sending tiny electrical currents over my skin. Thankfully my body was too exhausted to respond and didn’t rat me out.

With great care, Cassandra rolled me onto my back, and by the light of a solitary candle she began to slowly and methodically clean and tend to my wounds. When she got to my knees I heard a small gasp and then, so softly it could have been the wings of a moth, she whispered, “I’m so sorry.”

Would it be strange to say that it was enough? You know?

Gently, with icy fingers, she applied some sort of ointment to the open sores on my knees, which was so very painful at first; I almost reached out to push her away. But still fearful of her, I resisted and thankfully too, as the ointment soon began to sooth my inflamed nerves. And by the time she had finished both knees, I was worlds better.

But then she did something I will never forget. Hovering just inches above me, I heard her gentle in-take of air, again and again, as she breathed in my scent. Her face, next to my ear, I could feel her hot breath on my cheek as she groaned deep in her chest. Then again, I heard her inhalation, and again her breath came hot and moist, this time upon my chest. And again she moaned; this time so deeply I imagined it emanated from some deep-seated need that was finally being appeased.

All along my stomach, I felt her scorching breath, and with it all unwillingness simply fell away. So too did any thought of resistance as all meaning, and any reason I once possessed, was now drifting away with each fiery breath. And so I lay there, motionless, as her long hair trailed

over my cold and tender flesh; that her breath, in turn, teased and enflamed. And it was the best kind of agony, better than anything I could possibly hope to describe.

“I...never,” she whispered into my Calvin Kleins.

Had I the will to stop her I don't think I would have. For two reasons that I can think of. First because I desperately needed something positive to happen jus then. And second because I was infinitely curious.

With the smallest of movements, I could feel her moving closer to me, until I could feel her body press up alongside mine. Then, lighter than you can believe, I felt her mouth press against me. Her lips, warm soft pillows, trailed a line of feather-light kisses over my shoulder and then down along my collar bone. Then, just as I was beginning to fear her discovery, of my very physical response, there was a horrifying sound from above. As if a giant had been let in.

Loud, heavy footfalls sounded, and then in a booming bass a man's voice called out, “Cassandra, are you here?” The thick Irish accent made the intruder easy to identify.

With a hiss, every muscle in Cassandra's body coiled with a violent tension. Then, before I could open my eyes, she laid a hand over my mouth and said, “If you call out, if you do anything to get his attention, I swear to God Mason, I will kill him.”

I opened my eyes then, to see her own, large brown ones, staring back at me. But there was something more there than open hostility. It was fear. Very real. Very organic. And very frightening, because I recognized the frantic fear of desperation. The fear that will let you do even the most unspeakable things. It was the fear of the cornered, the trapped. A wild animal, ready to take flight, or put up the fight of its life.

I nodded my head, but her eyes only narrowed in reply. I nodded harder.

“Don't think for a second that I won't do it Mason. He wouldn't be my first...”



Mason had been far away and hadn't seen the trap that lay stretched out before him, until it was too late. The good doctor, criticized for her patient pursuit of the truth, had been just patient enough it now seemed. Mason looked up at the woman's eager eyes, the tip of her pen hovering anxiously above her blank notepad.

“I suppose there's no way to take that part back?” Mason asked with no hope, and no idea how he should proceed.

“It's always best to just tell the truth Mr. Harlow,” the doctor replied a bit sinisterly.

“Yes,” the defeated man agreed. “But... best for whom?”



“When she stood, I was finally able to see her, as she looked then, dressed in an over-sized T-shirt and nothing else. I could even see the cilice she wore wrapped around her right thigh. And it wasn’t quite what I had expected. Like everything about Cassandra I guess. But seriously, it was so much more gruesome than I thought it would be.

Three rows of metal rings, all with spikes protruding from them, penetrating deep into her skin... and that’s when I saw her scars for the first time. I mean really saw them and understood.

Lit in the yellow half-light of the candle, they were white phantoms dancing over her richly colored skin, by the hundreds. Maybe thousands. A veritable forest of white lines that covered her, and just by looking at them I knew... deep in my gut, like a punch to the solar plexus, they had been inflicted by some horrible man. In some horrible place. Just another part of her horrible life.

I hadn’t intended the sob that escaped me then, as I saw the thick white bands of scars that traversed the backs of her thighs. It was just the wind deserting my lungs, as I knew...as I had come to know so recently...what it meant, and what it must have felt like for her. And it crushed me.

Turning at the sound, Cassandra took aim and planted a swift kick to my ribs, and I doubled over with a soft grunt of pain.

“Careful my dear. You don’t want his blood on your hands.”

And that’s when I heard the Click, as she fastened a tether from my collar to a steel grate in the floor. Three-feet long, it was nowhere near long enough for me to stand. So I lay there, silently, watching her go. Knowing in my heart of hearts that if I did anything, said anything, to get Conor’s attention, he was as good as dead.

23 Veda

God if Ashlyn didn't need a drink. She'd spent the last two days going from interview to interview; between her office, the interrogation room, and the stark-white cubby at the hospital. And now all she wanted, as she pulled her brilliant-red convertible into the number thirty-seven parking spot in the elevated garage attached to her building, was to consume a very large glass of wine and take a very-long, very-hot bath.

But Ashlyn had work to do, so much so, she didn't even dare contemplate such selfish fantasies. Yet, as it happens so often (with all of us really), the moment her feet hit the familiar ground, as soon as her body registered that she was indeed *home*, all motivation fled from her; as small vermin flee before a flood. And standing there, in the dark shadows cast by the larger and nicer Three-Sixty building, it was suddenly all Ashlyn could do to keep up-right.

And even though the Four-O-Four Rio Grande Apartment complex wasn't where she intended to end up, for now the quaint craftsman-era building in downtown Austin was home. And it was comfortable; so much so Ashlyn decided to forgo the files piled high in her passenger seat, the ones she'd spent an eternity loading into her car, and instead decided to make-do with just her notepad and purse. And so, with an aching back, sore legs, and an abysmal headache, Ashlyn made her ponderous way to her third-floor apartment.

Fortunately for her, the artist next door was having a quiet night in, or was out for the evening, because his loud music was conspicuously absent, which made Ashlyn blow a sigh of relief as her head was already throbbing, and the last thing she needed was someone else's headache pounding in on her, by way of too much bass and too little consideration.

Inside her apartment it was cold and dark because she had accidentally left the air conditioner set too-low again. The night before, in the hopes of freezing herself to sleep, she'd set it near to frigid. But it hadn't worked. And now, with all of the stress from the Cassandra case, things were only getting worse.

Already she'd been hounded by the media, turning down offers for interviews on Dateline and CNBC. Everyone it seemed was just itching to hear all the tawdry details of Mason Harlow's harrowing time with his dominatrix sex-slave.

That's how they were painting it, all over the media; '*Mason Harlow's S&M journey turned tragic*'. But soon, tomorrow maybe, after the DA brought Mason up on murder charges, the headlines would change. '*BDSM love-fest ends in murder*', or '*The deadly triangle of deranged love*'.

Ashlyn of course couldn't help envisioning all of the various headlines to come. And some, for all their abhorrent-morbidity, couldn't help but make her laugh. But her laughter quickly turned sour as she recalled the photos she'd received anonymously.

That alone was enough to take the last breath of wind from her sails.

Because along with the memory came the sharp reminder of her gross naivety. How so foolishly, she had thought it would be enough just to witness the poor man's corpse lying in the

morgue, how she had thought that surely by reviewing his autopsy photos and the coroner's report she was somehow coming to his aide.

It was her duty after all. One she told herself she had performed flawlessly. But it hadn't been the same. Not at all the same. As seeing the look on the man's face, as he realized he was about to die. And to see for herself the look on Mason's face, as his strong hands pushed the man, out in front of the on-coming bus. It was a look of immense satisfaction, and it plagued Ashlyn's mind as she had sat listening to his testimony.

And now, Mason's once-handsome face was blighted by that look of wicked delight, and now only provoked in her a simmering sort of rage.

Because it didn't matter one bit to Ashlyn, the manner or degree of pain and suffering Mason had endured, because nothing... *nothing* she could ever imagine could cause a man to feel such elation in act of committing such an evil act. No, to her, that kind of evil was innate and not something one just spontaneously attains.

Then again, Mason was a man, and it was to be considered, that because of this he would be inclined towards evil and vile things. Not that Ashlyn was a sexist mind you... Then again... how could she not (considering the statistics) think an entire gender was to blame for the systematic victimization of the female population?

Whether it was condoning by silence, or their willful participation in the acts themselves, it didn't matter one iota to Ashlyn, because both were equal in her eyes.

Better a man stand-up and get beat down, then remain silent. Better a man value the differences between the sexes, then slander one in favor of the other.

But that was a problem for another day, because it was Cassandra who was her primary focus now. And Cassandra was a whole other sort of animal. And despite all of Ashlyn's attempts, the woman yet remained a perfect mystery. And even though Ashlyn was sure Cassandra was more than capable of all the horrific things that Mason had described, especially as every mark on his body served to confirm it; Ashlyn was still no closer to understanding *why*.

What were her motives? Sociopaths maneuver around ego and feel little shame or guilt, let alone remorse. And though Cassandra had certainly been cruel, she'd also shown more care and concern than a typical sociopath would. And though her cruelty was markedly inhumane, Cassandra could no more fit the label of psychopath, than Ashlyn could, as psychopaths are narcissistic by nature, and nothing within Cassandra spoke of narcissism.

Certainly Cassandra was sick, that fact wasn't in question. But without knowing her motives, without understanding her thinking, it was impossible to know if she was competent to stand trial. And apparently unraveling the truth of that was going to take more time.

Frustrated, Ashlyn shook her head, as though it might help clear her thoughts. But instead, they just tumbled around uselessly in her head, like so many mismatched screws, tossed inside a mason jar.

"Crap! Fuck! Shit! Whore damn!" she swore aloud as she began stripping off her skirt, then stockings. Then dressed only in her blouse and panties, she drew herself a bath. As she sat on the side of the tub, waiting as it slowly filled, she went over the list of interviews slated for the following day; Shay again, then Cassandra, and Mason; delving back into that whole disgusting

mess. But it was the priest she was really thinking of. And not because he would have anything relevant to add, but rather because he settled her nerves in a way nothing else ever had.

“You sick, sick woman,” Ashlyn reprimanded herself, as she slid out of her remaining clothes and into the steaming bath. “He’s a priest!” she scolded herself again. However, despite the reminder, and his status as a celibate, the priest in all his sleekness, seemed the only thing capable of occupying her very troubled mind.



“Mrs. MacKenna. Thanks for coming in early,” Ashlyn said as she greeted the small woman near the door to her office. The woman had been waiting when Ashlyn had come in, late. “I’m sorry I’m late. Traffic…” Ashlyn said by way of excuse, though in all honesty she only lived a few blocks away.

But the truth, that she had overslept, was one she cared not one bit to admit, so instead she flashed the woman a well-rehearsed smile and then ushered her into her seat; the whole time trying desperately to shake the sleep from her head. But her sleep had been too deep, and much too disturbing; filled with images both horrible and divine, images that in the light of day still made her blush.

“Come in. I’ll be ready in just a sec.”

“No worries. We don’t open ‘till eleven.”

Ashlyn looked at the clock, it was half past eight. She was fifteen minutes late. *Damn*, she swore in her head. *Damn cunt licking ass toad. Shit. Fuck. Damn.*

“Whenever you’re ready, Mrs. MacKenna,” she finally said once the microphone was set up and turned on.

“You can call me Shay, everyone does.”

“Okay, Shay, whenever you’re ready, please continue your story.”



“Cassandra had been in her apartment for a few days before Mason turned up again. And when he came in he was all nervous and stuff. So I thought it was for sure because he was going to break up with the lass. You know how a fella will get… slinking about and such, when he’s feeling guilty about something?

But Cass wasn't at work, so I used the time to have a little chat with 'em.

"She said you didn't call her back," I told him truthful enough.

"She got hurt because of me," he told me, looking like a twice-kicked pup.

"There wasn't anything you could have done," I told him, which according to Cass was the truth.

"I said the wrong things."

"People often do," I said.

"What do I do?" he asked, turning his fine baby blues on me.

"Well..." I said, thinking on it for a bit. Then I said, "Tell her how you feel."

Which must have worked, cuz two days later they were dating again.

Of course that's when it all went bad.



Ashlyn thanked the woman, and then had her assistant Beverly cut her a check for her time and travel expenses, meager as they were. The state appreciated her time and trouble... *blah blah blah*

Ashlyn ran the fingers of both hands through her hair, before she pulled a water bottle and a couple of Advil from her bag. With a quick sip, she downed both in one go.

It was going to be a long day, she realized when she glanced at the clock and saw that it'd only just gone nine.

I wonder if I'll at least get lunch today? she pondered to herself before making a mental note to give Beverly her lunch order before she left. That way, just in case she forgot or got too busy, she could at least eat it on the way home.

Cold food would be better than what she had at home; which amounted to a stash of white beans, some old basmati rice, and a fridge full of condiments. Not that she normally kept such a poorly stocked house, but she had been preparing for a vacation, and had cleaned her cupboards bare.

Out of desperation, Ashlyn had grabbed a couple of breakfast tacos on the way in to work, but like most bad gas-station decisions, they had come to sit like stones in her lower intestines.

Sadly that wasn't the only thing not sitting well with the shrink. No, the Cassandra case had much the same effect, causing Ashlyn's stomach to churn, and worse...

Yet it would all be worth it, if it meant her career would finally get back on track. That is, if she didn't screw it all up, which she was growing more and more certain she would do. But the trap was set, and there was nothing left to do, but wait.

But as fate seems less inclined to sit around than one would like to hope, Ashlyn soon realized a silent witness had come to watch her brood. It was her boss, Dr. Sullivan, who had come to stand in her open doorway.

Ashlyn glanced up to see him, standing like some evil sentinel, come to watch her fail.

"Can I help you?"

"What are you doing Ashlyn?" he asked in a condescending tone.

Ashlyn, for all her strength, resisted the knee-jerk urge to hurl her stapler at him, but just barely.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what are you doing with this case? We've got it all wrapped up. Mason Harlow will be charged with second degree murder tomorrow, and Cassandra will be remanded to the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane."

"Without a trial?"

"Oh there will be a trial, a highly publicized trial, and if you do anything to get in the way of this going forward I will have your job. And my office back." He added the last under his breath, but loud enough that she knew he'd meant for her to hear.

"So the truth be damned. And if all of this blows up on appeals?" Ashlyn raised an eyebrow at him, to which he replied only with a sneer.

"I don't think this is all headed in the direction you think it is, Dr. Sullivan. I think that if you drag Mason into court this whole thing is going to blow up into an enormous mess, and I for one would like to avoid any more courtroom shenanigans."

Ashlyn was referring of course to the former DA, who had her third DWI conviction overturned a year before. Of course it was later discovered that the woman had been 'in bed' with a few notable people, and because of this had gotten off, scott-free. But that was before an Internal Affairs investigation had brought the entire police force under its massive scrutiny. And as a result the APD, and all of its various components, had come to a near stand-still for three months while the investigation had been conducted.

In the end, the DA had lost her job, and two police officers, a judge, and a senator were now all under review. Ashlyn had known all of this, despite most of it being kept under tight wraps, because she had been called in to work with Internal Affairs.

"You're not even questioning them. I hear you're just letting them ramble on about all of their kinky sexcapades. Is that what you like? You want someone to tie you up and spank you? Is that why we're all having to sit through hours of listening to their perversions, because you can't find someone to spank you?"

Hot damn, Ashlyn thought. He didn't just go there.

"You have no right speaking to me..."

Ashlyn didn't get a chance to finish before the man was talking over her.

"You're right. I apologize. I'm sure you can get it just as good as anyone, but this nonsense needs to stop. Either put some questions to the two perverts or I will. I'm not going to let you make a mockery of our precinct. Do you hear me?" Ashlyn didn't answer; she just nodded as the suddenly irate man stormed from the room. A minute later, after she'd settled her thoughts into a nice orderly, task-oriented fashion, she reached over and clicked off the microphone that had been recording the MacKenna interview

"Tit licking ass wanker."



Later that day, as Ashlyn was walking into the hospital, a small middle-aged Hispanic man in hospital scrubs came rushing down the steps at her. Lost in a fog of thought, Ashlyn misjudged the closeness of the stranger, and the steepness of the steps, and somehow lost her footing when she bumped into him.

Landing hard on her left side, with her right wrist and left knee bent out at odd angles, Ashlyn let out a small yip.

"At least it happened in such a convenient location," she quipped to the nurse, who had quickly rushed over to help.

"What happened?" the woman asked, but looking around Ashlyn couldn't find the man who had knocked into her, so instead she said, "My feet got tangled beneath me."

Which was mostly true, and besides, she'd had worse, lots worse. She even told them so, when they offered her a private room to freshen up in.

And at first she was going to refuse, but then, sitting on the bed, when her tears came unimpeded, she was happy she'd finally agreed.

If only her tears were for the pain, she thought she could somehow forget to care. But the cuff on one of her crutches had been snapped off, and as the remaining metal dug painfully into her arm, her only option now was her dreaded wheelchair.

So the tears, born of self-pity, were not so easily washed away. These were the tears that had become her second identity, her second-skin, and when they came they fell as plentiful as the rain.

"Are you worse?" Cassandra asked a short time later, as Ashlyn wheeled herself into the cubby of a room. And as usual, the room was bare of all but a small table, two chairs, and the morose young woman with the sadistic tendencies.

With a bit of effort, Ashlyn managed to pull her lip back down over her teeth, before Cassandra could see the demonstrative sneer.

“I took a spill is all, and I twisted my knee.”

“Even more?” Cassandra asked.

Is she trying to be funny? Ashlyn wondered, but by the dead-pan look on Cassandra’s face, she thought maybe the woman might just be slow. *We should have her tested*, Ashlyn thought as she began to unpack her bag.

“You look upset.”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay.”

“Cassandra, can you tell me why you took Mason? I mean seriously. None of this bullshit about making him into a man. What was the point?”

Ashlyn suspected that Cassandra had a problem expressing her sexuality, and that the only way she could become aroused was if she re-enacted the things she herself had been forced to endure.

Cassandra shrugged then asked, “What is it like to be helpless?”

Ashlyn flinched back reflexively from the question, almost as if it had been a physical blow.

“Excuse me?”

Cassandra pulled her knees up to her chest, and then set the lion figurine on top of the left one. Then she stared at it for a long second before she repeated her question.

“What is it like to be helpless?”

“I’m not helpless.” Ashlyn could hear the defensiveness in her voice but couldn’t care just then.

“Yes you are. You can’t even stand up, let alone make anyone do anything. You just have to take what is offered, because what else can you do?”

“Are you speaking from personal experience?”

“If you could, would you fight back?”

“Fight back against whom? Who would I need to fight against?”

“Your boss. He wants you to fail. That’s what they’re saying, that’s why you got the job that no one else wanted, because you’re a cripple and helpless.”

Ashlyn wondered who would say such a thing, but then realized that they were all probably saying it. The fact that it wasn’t true wouldn’t matter to any of them. And the fact that Cassandra had heard the gossip wasn’t all that shocking either, not really. People talk, always have. The only difference was that Cassandra did it to your face, almost as if she were careless with her words.

“We’re not here to discuss me, Ms. Lethe. We’re here to discuss what happened between you and Mason Harlow.”

“You have to be asking yourself, when do you fight back?”

“Is that what you were doing? Fighting back? Because Mason got too close?”

“Perhaps instead of fighting Mason, you should have been fighting *for* Mason.”

Cassandra looked away then, with a sharp twist to her neck, as if the doctor’s words had stung.

Then, with her eyes turned towards a stark-white wall, Cassandra spoke. “Aye, now there’s the rub,” she said, her voice the perfect imitation of Shay’s.

“We fight. We women... every bit as much as men, only our war is fought over our own goddamn bodies, and the battles are fought behind closed doors, in darkened alleyways, and even plastered all over the TV. But we are destined to lose, each and every one of us – Everything, Always –because we are unable to shed that one pesky constraint that holds us powerless: our morality. And while our captors, our conquerors, our cunning conquistadors fight the dirty fight, full of despicable deeds and psychological warfare, we stand above, easy and willing targets.”

“But not you?”

“Not anymore.”

24 Mason

“Very well done,” Cassandra said coming back down the stairs. I’d heard the door, and considered making an attempt to fight, to struggle. But from where I lay on the floor it all seemed quite silly really. I mean, what was I going to do?

“You showed a great deal of prudence my love,” she said tenderly, as she came to stand behind me.

I tried not to look back at her, but fear compelled me. “I do what I can,” I said twisting on the ground, so that I could see her face.

Her eyes were sad, and there was a solemnness to her that I hadn’t seen before; a reservation that gave me hope. A hope I should never have had.

“You know they say that prudence, or wisdom, is the mother of all virtues.” She smiled, and I twisted back around. “And it is only through our use of prudence, in our thoughts and actions, that we find true perfection in God.” She came around to stand in front of me. Looking down on me. And as she spoke she shook her head. “Your suffering does not make you wise Mason; rather it’s what you learn to do with it that can mark you out as a wise and noble man.”

Looking down on me, a sad smile creeping slowly across her face, she went on, “Whether you use the darkness that has come to sit within your soul, or whether it uses you... That is quite possibly the greatest test of all.”

With a finger, she tilted my chin until I was staring up into her big, brown eyes.

“And by weighing Conor’s suffering against your own... well I for one can think of nothing more prudential than that.”

Her words would have seemed like an elixir of sorts, come to nourish my depleted soul, but her course voice, both soft and sweet, sounded deadly to me. And that alone should have been warning enough, but for my spent and exhausted mind – I couldn’t fathom the depths, such dulcet tones could hold.

“I couldn’t be more proud,” Cassandra cooed sweetly, just as an incredible pain descended upon me; turning my world into a vast sea of torment.



“Mason, tell me who she killed. Who did Cassandra say she killed?”

Mason eyed the doctor from under his heavy lids. He was exhausted, spent, and sick and tired of playing Russian roulette with his words; never knowing which one would cinch the noose around Cassandra’s neck.

“I promise to tell you, but only after I’ve told you everything, only then.”

“Why? Why not confess it now, unburden yourself.”

“Because it’s not my burden, it’s hers. And you have to hear it all to understand. You have to know her to understand, she had no choice. She was only doing what she was made to do.”

The doctor’s pen tapped, tap, tap, tap, relentlessly on the empty notepad. Mason stared at it, his red eyes sore and swollen, wishing he had another cigarette, wishing he could burn with it, down to the filter, to be tossed aside and forgotten; for as useless as he was, once his story was spent, well... there wouldn’t be much point after that.

“Alright Mason, finish your story. Tell me what happened after you woke up; were you still on the floor?”



“I woke to find I was once again strung up by my wrists in her basement prison. And she was there too, sitting on the floor watching me.

“Please Cassandra let me go. I didn’t do anything to deserve this.”

“You’re right. You didn’t. You don’t deserve the gift I’m giving you. You don’t appreciate what it costs me.”

“You’re crazy. You can’t keep me locked up down here forever. They’ll be looking for me, and eventually they will find me.”

“Then that is God’s will.”

I don’t know why, but the strained smile on her face made me think that even she didn’t believe the crap coming out of her mouth.

“Why do you want to hurt me?”

“You think I take pleasure in this? You think it turns me on? That I’m some sick deviant?”

That was exactly what I thought, and to be honest I was beyond caring anymore, and I told her so.

“Yes! I think that whatever happened to you has made you sick and twisted, and this is the only way you know how to be around someone, by taking them hostage and torturing them!”

She rose in a single fluid movement, the very image of deadly grace. And I watched, swallowing my fear in great gulps, as her beautiful mouth twisted into a dark and dangerous smile. Slowly she glided over to where I hung. With a cool hand, she slowly stroked my burning skin, making me shiver, again and again, though I tried not to.

“Do you think these make you strong?” she said outlining the muscles of my chest and stomach.

“What?”

“These pretty muscles that you’ve worked so hard to achieve, do they make you strong?”

“I guess.”

With a burst of rage I never saw coming, Cassandra pulled back her hand, and in a movement too fast to see, reached out and slapped me across the face, rocking my head back violently.

“Wrong. Real strength comes from inside. It comes from pain and suffering. And only by conquering pain can you truly be strong. Do you know how long it took me to conquer my pain?”

“No.”

“No, what?”

“No... Ma’am.”

“It took Father Cormac five years before he instilled in me that most difficult of virtues. Oh... temperance and prudence were easy... as you’ve already figured out. But fortitude... courage... that one took five long years.”

What does rage do? It’s our own worst enemy sometimes. And maybe if I had begged, maybe if I had pleaded, she would have been less cruel, but I don’t think so. I think she had a purpose, and nothing I could have done would have changed any of it...

She went then to the workbench and picked up a leather whip.

“God damnit Cassandra, this isn’t funny! I swear to god, let me down or I’ll see you hang for this!”

She ran a hand along the side of my face, then let it trail down to my chest.

“Courage my love. Remember, courage.”

She took a step back and let the whip crack out from where it had been coiled in her hands. And as it bit deep across the tops of my thighs, laying open the skin, I screamed again, like I have never screamed in my life, so deep and raw, it tore its jagged way out of my chest, tearing up my throat, and setting fire to my lungs in the process.

SNAP! It cracked out again, and again my scream filled the room.

“What I’m offering you is a gift that no one else can give you. You think you’re alive? You think you understand what it means to live in this world? But you’re half-asleep, half-dead, you go through your life like you have all the time in the world, but you don’t. Mason. I’m going to wake you up.”

If there was truly any compassion in her actions, I didn’t see any trace of it on her face. It was rage incarnate, and every word she spoke peeled back her teeth, showing them for the bones they are, protruding from a viscous skull, nothing more. Her humanity had all but disappeared.

She moved around to stand behind me then, and I nearly shattered my jaw clenching it for the blow that I knew would come all too soon. Because just like every muscle in my body, I was in a state of constant alertness now, never knowing where or when the next torment would fall, and so I braced for anything and everything.

Yet it was all for nothing as I heard the crack of the whip and felt the blow across my back, because it was like being lanced with fire itself and nothing I did would ever soften its blows. And so I cried out, in horrible-ragged sobs, that I just wanted it all to end.

“Please Cassandra. Please don’t,” I begged.

CRACK went the whip; quickly followed by another cry, and then another.

I didn’t count, but she must have struck me a hundred times, only she had switched to a cane when she was behind me, so she wasn’t actually breaking the skin, though at the time I was sure I could feel the skin breaking, and the blood running in great rivers down my back, to drip off my ass, or to continue down my legs. I guess that was just the sweat...

But it didn’t matter, in the mist of all that torment and pain it didn’t matter one ounce to me whether my corpse would have skin. And instead I prayed death would find me, fast.

But oddly enough, over time the pain began to lessen, as if it was far away, and I was only witnessing it from some great height, somewhere above my body. And after a while, my cries turned into the guttural grunts only a beast could make.

And by that time, even Cassandra’s voice couldn’t reach me. I was somewhere else, drifting on a sea of sensations that no longer seemed my own.

But she would always have her way... and... pinching my nipple between her thumb and forefinger, she brought me back awake. Like a bubble being burst, she broke the haze of delirium I had been swimming in.

“It’s funny, isn’t it? How we can grow accustomed to one type of pain, or another...”

She moved to the bench and picked up the taser wand. Thinking myself numb, I could hardly bring myself to care.

Touching it to my side, on top of my ribs, the way she did, made me scream again, and again, until panting and heaving I could scream no more.

“Curious how we grow desensitized to pain if it is administered often enough. But change the pain and something magical happens... it makes it hurt so much more.”

“Please don’t. I’m so sorry. I’ll do anything you want. Just please Cassandra, please stop.”

“Oh, I’ve only just begun.”



“I won’t illuminate for you all of the ways she spent the next several hours. I’ll only tell you that I learned many things... so many things, during my time hanging there, suspended half-way between here and hell.

For one thing, I learned there are an infinite number of ways a scream can sound; from the smallest whispered cry of agony, to the fully born wail of frustrated terror, and everything in between.

I know. Because I made every one of them, and when my voice left me, I cried them silently, and after the tears were long gone, a part of me finally died.

But she had been right; in there, in amongst the pain and anguish, amongst the endless suffering and hope, lost then forsaken, I found myself. It was there all along, at the center of me.

Yet, whatever it was I saw, it was what Cassandra didn’t see that truly worried me; and that would eventually be the death of me.

“Where is it?” she screamed, her own cries keening off the walls.

“What?” I asked, unable to lift my head from my chest to ask, so I’m not even sure she heard me?

“Where is your anger? Your rage? Where is it?! You had so much potential!”

In her anger, mad as it was, she began to pummel me with her fists.

“You were supposed to be strong! You were supposed to be strong! How can you do this? You can’t do this!”

Her mad shrieking rose with each blow, and then when that wasn’t enough, she went and got two taser wands, and put them to the tops of my feet. And suddenly screaming was all I could do. Like spikes being driven into my bone, the electricity surged into me, penetrating deep into the marrow. Heaving, I cried, and cried even more when she finally stopped.

“I needed you!” she screamed, as she slammed both wands into my stomach, until I was coughing up blood. Retching and choking, I had to struggle for each breath.

Cassandra stepped back then, and looked at me, as if she could finally see the blood that was running down the drain, as if she could finally see she was killing me.

“It was Kerouac,” I said chuckling hoarsely when I finally caught my breath.

Now it was her turn to ask. “What?” she inquired, as her fury finally seemed to burn itself out.

“Back on the ranch, with the dirt roads, and the cow trucks going by... I imagined myself Jack Kerouac, telling Juliee that someday it’d be me; I’d hitch a ride and get lost in the scenery.”

I laughed then, and then spat the blood that was flooding my mouth. Thankful at least for the moisture it had provided. I swallowed some too, just to wet my throat again. And that felt divine.

“I get it... oh god I get it...” I was delirious, but in my delirium I thought I’d finally found the answer. You know the one, the one that everyone is searching for. I laughed, and choked on the blood, and then laughed some more. But it was more the crackling cackle of insanity, than any declaration of mirth.

“You’re going mad,” she told me to my face.

“Don’t you see? He was right, the bloody wanker was right all along; death will overtake us before heaven.”

I laughed some more. I was already there.

“I thought I was a poet,” I confessed after spitting up more blood.

She felt my forehead then, with the back of her hand, and then with the tips of her fingers. And then she slid her icy palm along my jaw and cradled it there.

“You’re burning up,” she said.

“I’m dying,” I told her, because I thought she ought to know.

I think she panicked then, because she lowered me to the floor in such a haste I dropped like a sack of rotten potatoes.

“I can write a poem for you,” I confessed.

“Shut up, just shut up,” she said coming around to unshackle me. Once I was free, I had enough energy to curl up into the fetal position, but only just barely.

She ran off then, and I thought that was it. She didn’t want to see me die.

I set my lizard free, when it was six. It was molting non-stop, shrinking right in front of me. For months I had tried to get it to eat, I’d done everything I could, but I knew it was going to die. I knew there was no chance. I didn’t have the money it would cost to take it to the vet. It was going to die. So I set it free in the backyard, because I couldn’t watch. It was probably my duty or something, to watch, to witness for it at least. He was my only pet, and I was his everything. But I was also a coward, and I just couldn’t do it. So instead I set it free one night, and never saw it again.

“A bird probably ate it,” I heard Jack tell mom, when no one thought I was listening. *Good, I’d thought. At least it was quick.* Better than wasting away. Better than selling tickets so everyone you love can witnesses... helplessly... the cruelty of time and sickness.

I had watched Jullee die, by inches; a slow procession to the grave, which took everything she had at such a ponderous pace you could almost have marked the seasons by it. And it had nearly killed me too. My mum still hasn’t recovered. And my dad... well, he was lost somewhere along the way. And now a robot named Jack eats his dinner and wears his clothes. Robot Jack would tell me to get up and stop being such a wuss. He’d also tell me to *‘kill that fucking bitch’*. I laughed. Robot Jack was funny.

When Cassandra came back she had a pillow and a blanket. And it confused me at first, because I couldn’t understand what the pillow was for, and then it came to me. I’d seen it in a movie once. I think I was in that movie. She was going to smother me with it, and then just like in the movie – roll me in the blanket and throw me in the Burraga Swamp.

How is she going to get me up those bloody stairs? I wondered idly, as she placed the pillow beneath my head. Then she covered me with the blanket.

“Mason?”

“Yes?” I inquired dutifully, but then when I realized I had forgotten to say ‘Ma’am’ I laughed, a gurgly kind of chuckle, filled with both blood and cynicism.

“Don’t die on me.”

“No.”

“Mason. You have to be strong now.”

“The beatnik with the split lip...”

“What?” she asked, because she couldn’t hear me. “Mason?”

25 Cassandra

“Despite what you think of me, killing Mason was never something I had intended. For sure I was reckless in the pursuit of my goals, and he paid the price, but it was nothing more. Yet still... lying half-dead on the floor, his body broken and barely able to support the spirit which it contained, he was now the essence of pure potential. Because I had taken him into the crucible, because I had laid bare his soul, and made it molten; malleable so the Lord may bend him to His will.”

“And I prayed. *Ecce Ancilla Domini. Fiat mihi secundum Verbum tuum. Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum. Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Iesus. Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in hora mortis nostræ. Amen.*”

The doctor’s blank stare told Cassandra that she hadn’t understood. But of course, the woman was a heathen from India, where they worship insane gods and cows. Cassandra felt the spiders crawling over her again then, the same spiders that she used to feel when Father Cormac would preach to her, would pray over her beaten and broken body. She always took it as a sign that God was working to cleanse her soul, but what did it mean now? Cassandra wasn’t so sure.

“In English it means; Behold the handmaiden of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your Word. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen. And the Word was made flesh. And dwelt among us.”

“And this what? Purified him? Made him clean? Like Father Cormac did to you? Do you think he made you clean?”

“Why else would he have done as he did?” Cassandra twirled the little lion around and around in front of her, hardly paying attention to the doctor or her questions. In her mind she was there again, in the cell, being taught all of the lessons that had seemed so important at the time. Where did they fit into her life now? She hardly knew.

The doctor shook her head. “I think he did those things because he was sick and because he thought he could get away with it.”

Cassandra nodded her head, but didn’t say a word.

“They tell me you keep asking for your cilice. Is that true? Do you want to wear it again?”

Cassandra only nodded, slowly, distractedly.

“And why is that? Do you suppose you are atoning for something when you wear it?”

“Mother Teresa of Calcutta used a cilice,” Cassandra told the ignorant woman, who further proved her ignorance by staring blankly back at her. Cassandra was at a loss to explain something so profound and sacred to someone so devoid of spirit.

“The mortification of the flesh helps us control ourselves. It’s much easier to extinguish a spark than a full-blown fire,” she finally said, slowly and very deliberately. She was speaking to a heathen after all.

The doctor looked shocked. Cassandra didn't know why she should be, certainly just because her legs were bent and twisted, that didn't mean she couldn't experience desires of the flesh. Or maybe it did. Cassandra was beginning to question just how much she really knew about the world, and the people that populated it.

"Are you having trouble controlling yourself?" The doctor eyed Cassandra intently, her top lip curling back in an ugly, judgmental sneer.

"Yes, I find that it is nearly impossible not to indulge in one's basest desires when there is little in the way of distraction. But maybe you don't have those same desires, maybe you can't understand; if you are crippled in that way as well. Who am I to know what you feel? Father Cormac though, he always said that women feel their desires more acutely than men, and therefore we must be constantly vigilant in our devotion to God. Because it is only after we annihilate these desires, annihilate ourselves, that we are able to be filled with the light of the Lord."

"Have you often struggled with your sexual desires?"

Cassandra considered for a moment how to best answer that. Finally she settled on the truth. "Oh yes, since taking Mason it's been a constant battle."

"And is that why you took him, to satisfy those desires?"

Cassandra just stared at the stupid woman. Hadn't she been listening? Didn't she see what was right before her eyes? How plainly did she need to put it, so the woman could understand?



"It would have been an easy thing to use Mason, to take from him my pleasure and then discard him, had that ever been my intention. And I didn't need to tie him up in my basement either. He had been more than willing to provide me with whatever sexual gratification I wanted, there in the comfort of my upstairs apartment. But it was never about that.

Though, I would be lying if I didn't admit that seeing his body, and the way it contorted and writhed about, enflamed those carnal impulses. And I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I loved the way he felt... and tasted. But I can also honestly say that the only time I ever indulged in those inclinations was in the training of him, and solely for that purpose.

Other than that, while he remained under my control, I did nothing to him for the sake of my own pleasure.

Unfortunately though, I had pushed him too far too fast, because I was inexperienced, and I didn't yet know what I was doing. And I didn't know how much a man could take. Having gone through much that is similar, I had assumed certain things. But a man simply can't take as much as a woman.

Perhaps that's because we are vessels, made to take in... to hold... to contain.

But, when I realized I'd pushed him too far, that he was teetering on the precipice, and that any further torment from me would undoubtedly push him over the edge, I pulled back. I brought him down, gave him a pillow and a blanket, and then, when his body didn't warm fast enough; I lay down next to him, curling my own body around his, so that he could take my heat.

I lay there like that, curled around his naked body for hours, long after I had heard his breathing become the deep-slow sounds of sleep. But laying there... the feel of his muscles, hard beneath his skin, the feel of his sweat as it soaked my thin dress... it was too much, too much especially for me.

So I left him there alone on the floor, and I went upstairs to get away from the temptation.

Sitting at the kitchen table, I pulled off the riding boots I had taken to wearing during our training sessions. And from the inside of the left one I pulled out a remote. I had put it there so I could activate it by simply pressing my toe. That way, should he have gotten away from me... well, he would never have seen it coming.

I stripped off my bloody dress then. And then my cilice. I had cinched it as tight as it would go the night I had taken Mason. And since then it had been in place; boring tiny holes into my skin. But it seemed hopelessly inadequate to the task. And, looking at it then, as I pulled the metal belt from my thigh, I could tell it was becoming infected.

So I filled the tub with the hottest water I could get from the tap, and then poured in two cups of Epsom salt, and a container of rubbing alcohol. This was the bath that Sister Margaret Mary had used that first day I spent at the convent. It was also a ritual of father's... to purify my flesh and cleanse my soul. And just then I need all of that. And also, I wanted to punish myself for the aching I felt between my legs.

But it wasn't enough. I couldn't control the way my body reacted to his nearness, his warmth, his smell. And no matter how much I scrubbed, no matter how much the alcohol and salt burned, the pain could not sear away my longings. I had let it get out of control, because in my haste, and reckless pursuit in educating Mason, I had forgotten about myself. And now the fire was raging out of control.

'If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the spirit you mortify the deeds of the flesh, you shall live,' I prayed as a bright bloom of red sprung up beneath the dull gray metal of my blade, until the water turned a vibrant shade of red, and my head grew dim. And then, when even that wasn't enough, I pulled my head under the water and prayed for strength.

But all I could see behind my closed eyes was Mason's face, and his body, and then all I could see was Anson, the boy from the convent, the one who'd left me, and never returned.

I thought about him and his smooth chest, and tender lips, and his bright blue eyes. But that did nothing but further enflame the aching I felt.

And so I fell. There in the privacy of my own hell. And I found that empty ache, and I filled it with thoughts of Mason, and thoughts of Anson; how their mouths had tasted... how their hands had felt...

But God knows our wicked ways and as always is prepared to punish us.

There's a price for wickedness you see? And the price for me was Father Cormac's face floating in front of me, just as I was shaking with release. His hungry, lascivious face with the

too-tight grin, and beady, watery-gray eyes that stared down on me as his saliva dripped into my mouth.

It was the face I saw the day he came to make me a nun...

And the face I saw just before he died...



The shrink sat back and regarded Cassandra for a very long moment. And then she asked a single question.

“How did he die?”

Cassandra set the small lion figurine on the table between them, facing the shrink. Then she looked up to the doctor and said, “I killed him.”

26 Mason

“I dreamt she was in that floral dress again; the one she was wearing the first time I saw her. We were strolling together, her hand in mine, and off in the distance the clouds were gathering. But I was sure there was still time.

The clouds came suddenly upon us then, as if there had been no distance to travel, no time to separate there from here, and all the world, and everything in it, was all happening at once.

The rain was cold and hit us like tiny needles, jabbing into our tender flesh. A sprinkling at first, it quickly turned into a downpour, and suddenly a thousand icy knives were raining down on us from above.

That was how it all began, with the pounding rain, and our mad dash through the streets, and then racing along the roads with our windows down; arms outstretched, catching all the icy daggers we could.

Our dinner had been left on the table at the restaurant, half eaten, mostly forgotten; as we walked out into the warm night air, to stroll along the busy streets, and get lost in one another’s eyes. And when it had started to rain, Cassandra laughed up at the sky, catching the tiny drops one-by-one on her tongue.

“We never get rain, not anymore. It hasn’t rained in ages!”

She was happy for that small moment of time, the happiest I’d ever seen her, almost care free. Wearing the floral dress, the one that I liked so well, she looked so innocent, so fragile, and so perfect. And then, as the drizzle turned to rain, and she began to spin and skip and dance, as if she were ten-years-old again, I couldn’t do anything but watch and laugh, and pretend my heart wasn’t bursting into a million pieces.

Her long dark-brown hair looked black in the street light, and as we ran to the car in the pouring rain, it quickly soaked through. Plastered down her back, pieces stuck to her cheeks; she’d never looked so beautiful. A thick strand stuck in her lashes and I pulled it away, watching the rivulets of rain wash down her face, to drip off her delicate chin. She smiled so seductively then, so meekly; like only a woman can. And it threatened to melt me right there and then, into a puddle of longing I knew could never be put back whole. Not that I wished I ever would.

Inside the car, with the wind and rain beating its relentless rhythm upon the windshield, the sadness started to seep through, and I knew it was only a matter of time before Cassandra would once again become sullen and withdrawn. So I put the radio on, and by chance Vivaldi’s *Winter* was just beginning...

The sharp tangs of the violin, the angry rush of the strings, even the booming of the bass, blared from too-loud speakers, painted the night, and the rain, in perfect harmony.

“What is this?” she asked turning the dial until the speakers began to snap and crackle from the strain. I turned it down a fraction of an inch and watched as she came alive once more.

It was like some wicked ember within her had been struck, making her sad smile turn nearly manic with delight. And then with a sinister laugh, she rolled down her window and stuck her head out into the pouring rain.

Looking back, delirium lighting her eyes, she smiled and blew me a kiss before she slithered from her seat until she was half-way out of the car window.

“Faster!” she screamed into the wild wind. “Faster!”

I pressed the gas pedal to the floor, and the Lincoln bolted out from the pack of cars we’d been traveling in. The rain pelted her, and she laughed with a feverish delight. I turned up the radio a fraction of an inch, and watched her for a moment, before sticking my own arm out again; so that I too could let the tiny, icy drops inject their venom into my skin. And it burned like a thousand piercing needles.

I laughed then, as wildly as I ever have; her mania settling somewhere in the marrow of my bones. Sliding back into her seat, Cassandra looked at me then – looked deep into me, as if she could read not only my mind, but also the most secret desires of my soul, the ones even I do not know. And then, with a knowing smile, she took the wheel, and I slid out the window to my waist.

My shirt snapped in the rain like a wet flag and I pulled the buttons loose, letting it whip out behind me as the rain met my chest and stomach with its painful bite.

And the pain of it... mixed with the hot and cold sounds of Vivaldi coming from the car, and the sight of Cassandra, dripping and wet, her dress sticking to her skin, kissing every curve, it couldn’t have been more perfect. The two of us screaming down the road as fast as the car could carry us, the rain and the wind whipping our outstretched arms, making it hurt, making us feel... alive. The road, the possibilities, suddenly the world lay out before me, and for once... I could see.

I was Sal and she was my Dean; my Roman candle burning like a blazing sun, mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved... ready to lead me out into this world and set me free.

But Dean wasn’t supposed to leave me bleeding on the floor, shivering on the floor, dying on the floor.

And when I woke from my half-dream, my half-remembering, it was only to find I was there... on the concrete floor, dying by degrees...

She’d wrapped me in a blanket, and a pillow had been shoved under my head. And thankfully, finally I could move. I could stretch my arms and legs out straight... there on the cold concrete floor.

But every move I made was accompanied by a symphony of spasms and pain; in my back, my neck, down my ass, running the lengths of my legs. I twitched then, and twitched some more, as every nerve ending in my body began to settle into something other than the tangled web of misery they’d been in.

And I could hear footsteps overhead, and I knew she was there, above me, my tormentor ready to pounce at any moment. I rolled over and heaved, spewing yellow bile out onto the floor. When I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand it came away covered with blood, some of it

dried and crusted, black and flaky. But some of it was bright pink and freshly made. Fear settled over me then, covering me more completely than the woolen blanket.

I swear I'll laugh if anyone ever tries to tell me about fear again. In those Cassandra filled days I tasted fear in every flavor imaginable; from the tartness of the unsuspected, to the astringent yet pungent taste of fear sustained. And just like pain, fear had become my constant companion, and I had come to know it just as well.

I came to learn that fear sustained tightens the chest, constricts the blood vessels, and contracts the muscles. You can always tell the people who live with fear sustained, by the hunch in their backs, and the slump of their shoulders; almost as if they are perpetually being pulled forward into the fetal position, desperate to protect their hearts from the perennial fear that haunts them.

Then there is the fear that pumps adrenaline, in great bursting spurts, that you can actually feel, into the blood, where it can be delivered by artery and capillary to every cell of the body, causing each one to ignite; preparing us for fight or flight, preparing us for the worst, lest we die.

And then there's the fear that twists the bowels, turning the contents to water; fear that strikes hot but fades quickly; and fear that rises slowly and takes forever to abate. And then there's the fear tinged with just enough adrenaline to stand your hairs on end, to tighten your sack, and make your rectum clench reflexively, and then clench again.

I had delved the murky depths of fear, stripped off its mask in every guise, and revealed it for what it is – passion, nothing more and nothing less. It's just the same as love or lust. It's just another point on the triangle; another part of the holy trinity that defines our existence here on Earth.

You see you can't have one without the other. Love, lust, and fear, these things define every moment of our days, and to some degree they are always there, churning away in the background, playing out our personal theme music, painting our lives in richer, deeper tones.

But most of us aren't attuned to listen; not really, we just let it serenade us into a half-sleep, from which we do not wish to wake. But, if you are awoken, if you can hear each note for what it is, then you alone will have mastery over the entire world.

Such were my lessons during those endless hours, where time stood still, and all the world evaporated, and it was just me and those three small inseparable things.

And always at the center of them lay the same thing... pain; for everything devolves into pain; where once again it is reborn in its eternal flames.

Fear then was to be mastered, in every form, if I was to ever going to develop my third cardinal virtue, Courage.

"Fear is such an ugly emotion on a man. It makes him look weak, pathetic, inconsequential. If a man doesn't even have enough strength to hide his fear in public how can he ever be expected to face it alone in the dark? Women live in fear, but you don't see it plastered on our faces, we don't go around showing it to everybody. At least we have the strength... and the decency, to hide it from the rest of the world," Cassandra said as she examined my face for signs of breaking, her hand wrapped tightly around my testicles.

My life had become a Fuseli painting, but I understood. And even then a part of me was truly grateful for the lessons I was learning. You see, I'd known fear, I mean really gotten to know it well. I'd met it the day they told me Jullee was going to die, that she wasn't just sick but was eventually going to die. They'd sat me down in the living room that evening, my mother crying, my father being the stoic bastard he always was.

That was the fear I'd been baptized in, and that was the fear I had carried with me ever since, every day of my life, like some goddamn football injury, making me weak legged, and wobbly kneed. And I knew that fear so well, I imagined it was an indelible part of me, a part of who I was; panic attacks and all. But now that fear had company, and perspective, for what it really is – just blind emotion, knee-jerk stupidity and more than deadly. And its only purpose is to warn and then be overcome. That's it. And here I'd been letting it rule me, letting it define me...

So of all the lessons Cassandra had to teach, this one I was definitely not sorry for.

Because somehow she'd made the fear of Jullee's death, not less significant, but somehow more concrete and less ephemeral; like finally naming it, then putting it in its place. Until you name it it's nothing, but in context, given its rightful place, it can finally have meaning.

Like a half-formed ambition that's been circulating in your brain without end.

Lying there on the cold, damp ground, I found meaning in my fear, and the pain, and by extension – my entire existence. And I found myself, and as crazy as it sounds, I am thankful for it.

Though, I still wanted to kill the fucking bitch.

But not half as much as when she finally came down the rickety flight of stairs and presented me with my last and final lesson.

"You have done well my love," she said cooing in that seductive way.

"You have proven yourself capable of temperance, prudence and fortitude. But you still have one final lesson to learn."

I knew what it was... if I could only find it there... in my slag-filled brain. The wheels spun on rusty hinges as I tried to think of it, before she could say it out loud. I was sure it would somehow soften the blow, like flexing for a hit. If I only knew, I could withstand...

"Justice."

She said the word like it meant something, but to me it was just two hollow syllables strung together that made no sense. I flexed my mind around it again, and again, as she circled me. I also flexed my fingers and toes and prepared myself mentally to leap up and strike her, just as soon as the room stopped spinning. Free of the restraints, this was surely the opportunity I'd been waiting for.

She was dressed once again in her leather leggings, riding boots, and a plain white t-shirt. And for a moment I couldn't stop myself from imagining all of the blood that would soon be splattered all over it, like some morose Jackson Pollock tribute or something. I took a deep breath and sprang into the air.

Up until that point, Cassandra had only used the second-highest setting on the collar just once. And I had nearly bitten my tongue off in the process. This time was worse.

A shockwave of electricity surged through the metal electrodes at my throat, and into the back of my head where, with a bone-crushing jerk, it slammed my jaw shut and then held it there. White-hot, the once bottled lightning coursed down my spine, seized my heart, and twisted my bowels. And when it hit my tailbone I thought my testicles would retract permanently into my abdomen.

Midway through the air, I dropped like a lead weight.

“I told you not to test me,” she said in a tone I had never heard before. It wasn’t loud like the crack of anger, fueled and expressed. No, I had seen that plenty of times before. No, this was different, and infinitely worse, as the menacing calm in her voice spoke of patience times infinity. And perhaps it reminded me of home... of the great expanse of nothing that was anything but empty, and if you let your guard down – was every bit as cruel.

As I spasmed and arched my way across the floor, riding the waves of electricity coursing through my body, she circled around behind me. Then, in one smooth-movement she had my collar hooked to the rope, and before I knew what was happening, I was being hoisted back into the air.

Finally the current ceased. And when it did, I clawed frantically at the collar; panting in desperation, as it was now impeding my ability to breathe. But it was useless, and when I pulled my hands away, my nails were covered in blood. Barely on the tips of my toes, it was a constant struggle just to breathe.

“Justice is your last lesson Mason, and if you pass it you are free to go. And I promise you’ll never have to see me again.” She pulled a small wooden stool out from under the workbench and brought it over so that she could sit facing me, her feet propped up on the bottom rung.

Then out of nowhere, a small current of electricity shot through me, jerking me hard against the front of my collar.

“Oops, sorry about that.” She smiled.

And for the first time I noticed she held a piece of paper in her hand. It was printer paper, with a familiar red and white logo printed on it.

“I saved this lesson for last, because you will need everything I’ve already taught you in order to pass it. It will take everything you have Mason, but I know you can do it. I have faith in you.” The ominous warning in her voice was as dry as the red desert herself, and just as indifferent. And as I stared into her speculative eyes, I tried not to think about where she was heading.

“Justice isn’t always what it seems. For some justice is the domain of God, his judgment, his punishment. Some say that justice is walking the middle road, between what is selfish and what is selfless. Some say it is charity and nothing more. And some people think it is retribution, just desserts, payment for an account due. But I can’t tell you what justice means any more than I can tell you what love feels like. It’s just something you have to experience to understand.”

When she looked down then, at the paper in her hands, her face was a blank slate, where any emotion would have seemed out of place. But when she looked up again, there was a tinge of sadness marring the beautiful façade. But it did nothing to soften the threat in her voice.

“It was so easy to find your parents. I just called the local florists and told them I was filling in for your assistant, since I have your credit cards it was easy enough for them to believe. It’s sweet that you send your mother flowers every year for her birthday. You even have them placed on Jullee’s grave twice a year; on her birthday and on the anniversary of her death. Tell me, when was the last time you put them there yourself?”

Her eyes examined me, looking for the answer she knew I couldn’t give.

“This,” she said waving the piece of paper with the white and red logo on it. “This is a plane ticket to Australia. I’m going to go there while you’re stuck here, and I’m going to kill your parents, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

I flailed on my tether, instantly provoked beyond reason. I didn’t doubt her for a second. I saw the paper. I recognized the Qantas Airline logo. She was crazy, crazy enough to kill, I knew that... or at least I thought I knew that.

“You... bitch,” I managed through my teeth, even though the pressure on the collar held them together.

“Shhhh, don’t.”

“Fuuucking Bitch. I will kill you,” I told her, meaning every syllable.

“It’s justice Mason.”

“Why?”

“Because you left her. You left them. You had a family and you turned your back on them. You left them. And why? So you could satiate your ego? We never truly know what we have until it’s gone Mason. How can I teach you what it means to pay your way if you only take and never give?”

“No... please don’t,” I begged, as I tore at the bloody leather around my neck. “No Cassandra,” I said, as I reached around trying to unhook the rope from the collar. But it was impossible.

“You’ll be stronger for it. You’ll understand what is truly important, once you have lost it, then you’ll never again forgo love, you’ll never again give half-measures, you’ll never again live a half-life, when you know its true worth.”

She didn’t give me time to think, time to figure out what I needed to say to stop her. She just rose from her stool, like some feline goddess, her movements the languorous grace typically only seen in the wild. Tears flooded my eyes, and I had to blink them over and over, so I could focus on her, as she walked away; my only chance at stopping her retreating.

My mud-filled brain chugged slowly through the words I should have been screaming at her.

“Stop,” I manage through my clenched teeth. “Stop.”

She turned there at the bottom of the steps, turned and stared at me for a moment. And all I could do was beg her with my eyes and cry, “No, no... Cassandra.” But after a second she turned back to the stairs, and ever so slowly began to ascend them. At the top, just before the door opened, I heard her whisper, “I’m sorry.” But it came to me as if in a dream, and then she was gone, and there was nothing for me but panic.

I couldn't breathe for the wracking sobs that had suddenly overwhelmed me. Panic, bowel clenching, stomach churning, adrenaline pumping, panic had overwhelmed my broken and fatigued body, and all I could do was sob. Then, like a drunk sobering to the realization that he has a problem, I decided to take stock of the situation.

It took my adrenaline-soaked mind a couple of long agonizing minutes before I saw Cassandra's mistake. She'd gotten up and walked out and forgotten all about the stool she'd been sitting on. It was just a couple feet in front of me; surely my legs could reach out and grab it.

Allowing all of my weight to bear down on the collar in the most excruciating way, I was able to swing my legs up in front of me and snag the stool with the toes of my left foot.

Ever so slowly I drug it back to me, inch-by-inch, the whole time praying that it wouldn't fall out of my reach. This was it. This was my chance to not only get free, but to save my parents. I didn't know when her flight was leaving, I didn't know if she would be down before she left. She'd left me kneeling for hours just for fun, who knew if she would leave me hanging here for days, just because she could.

Finally able to get the stool under me, I climbed up on it, and from there was able to free the collar from the hook above. Exhausted from even that small amount of effort, it took me a few minutes of crouching on the stool before I could trust my legs to hold me. With my feet finally flat on the floor, I quickly took stock of the room that had become my prison.

Over on the workbench I found an old set of tin-snips and slowly, carefully cut the collar from my neck. Then, armed with a hammer and a screwdriver, I climbed the stairs.

I had been positive the door would be locked. I was certain I'd have to jimmy it, and in the process risk drawing her attention. And the whole entire climb up the stairs I had been silently panicking over it, but it was all for nothing, as the door was left not only unlocked but was also standing slightly ajar.

She obviously trusts her cleverness, I thought, which looking back on it now makes me doubly ashamed.

Peeking through the door, I could see Cassandra had her back to me. She was standing in the living room, looking out through a crack in the curtain; the glow from the yellow street lamp outside casting her nakedness in bronze.

But it didn't matter. It didn't matter that my heart still danced at the sight of her, and that my dick still got hard just thinking of how she felt, and how she smelled... of blood oranges and spice...

And it didn't matter why she had done it... taken me prisoner and tortured me. She had threatened to murder my parents, and for that I very much wanted to kill her.

And I knew... if I waited until I could see her face... I would probably lose my nerve. So I sprang on her, before she even had time to turn.

It was as easy as catching a snowflake.

I have never hit a woman in my life; other than in the movies, but that was all pretend. And I knew I wasn't going to start now. Because there's just something incredibly cowardly about striking someone you know is weaker than you are. Just the thought of it brings the taste of bile

and rotten things to my mouth. So instead, I wrestled her to the ground, and pinned her beneath me.

Then, as if by their own accord, my hands slipped smoothly around her throat. And all I could think of was how she had beaten me, humiliated me, and taken away all of my dignity and pride. How she'd mutilated my flesh, and left me a broken, battered shell of a man. But what was worse was that she had threatened to kill my parents. And in my delirious desperation there wasn't a choice to make, just the blind rage that was coursing through me like a white-hot flame.

"I fucking told you I would kill you," I hissed at her, as my hands closed off her windpipe. A little more pressure and I would crush it, a few moments after that she would be dead, suffocated.

She couldn't breathe, so she couldn't talk, but her lips moved then, as if she was saying something to me. Her lips moved again, and then curled up into that satisfied smile I'd come to loath so much. And then a thought began to nag annoyingly at the back of my sluggish brain...

It should have been harder, especially given my weakened state, to wrestle her to the ground, to get on top of her. She had seemed such an awesome force when I was hanging there, with no power over anything in my life, with no control. But now, to crumble so easily beneath me, to succumb so rapidly, to surrender without hope of mercy... it all seemed too easy, and wrong.

Thank you.

That's what she'd whispered, just as my fingers were delivering the crushing blow. Tears streamed out of the corners of her eyes, to roll back into her beautiful chestnut hair. And she looked happy, or as happy as someone who's slowly dying can look. Peaceful even.

My shock overtook my rage then, and reason quickly flooded back into me, as I realized I had a choice, and so did she.

This was the justice she wanted.

This was the point of it all. Everything I'd gone through had led up to this. She'd even said I would need everything she'd taught me to finish this final lesson.

More than anything she had wanted my rage... my fury... my wrath. She'd been so desperate for it, screaming, "Where is it?" over and over again, as she had beat me the night before.

She needed me mad enough, desperate enough, to do this.

I let go of her throat and sat back on my heels.

"I'm not going to kill you," I told her. "I won't."

Beneath me she began to cry; face torn in anguish, tears draining from her eyes, her body convulsing in a fit of despair.

"Please Mason," she begged through snot and phlegm. "Please."

“The first time I ever saw Rembrandt’s *Andromeda Chained to the Rocks*, Mason was the one who showed it to me. And I swear I shall never forget it, so long as I live...



“I won’t kill you,” Mason said in a dead and hollow voice. “I won’t.”

“Please Mason, please,” I begged, terrified of losing my beautiful death.

His eyes fixed on mine as he rose up off of me, slowly... warily... And when he was finally satisfied I was no longer a threat, he moved away.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw him pick up the paper I had pretended was a ticket to Australia. It was just a printing of the Qantas website, just some random page of insignificance.

Looking at it, he shook his head and gave a short, derisive snort. And then without looking at me again, though I remained lying where I was, with the unrelenting tears flowing from my eyes, into my ears, he went over to the table where the contents of his pants were all lined up in a row; his wallet, a silver pocket knife, a lighter, and half-a-pack of Marlboros.

“Oh yeah,” he said in a satisfied groan, as he grabbed a cig from the pack. Then, lighter in hand, he went and sat on the sofa.

“This was all a ploy to get me to kill you,” he said, working his methodical way around what he already knew to be true, as if digesting it.

“You needed me to kill you, just like you killed the priest,” he said, as if he were pleased with his skills of deductive reasoning.

Red and swollen, my eyes never left him, as he sat there naked on my sofa, smoking his cigarette.

“What the fuck did they do to you, to make you this fucking crazy?” he asked as he exhaled a large plume of smoke.

And I shivered at the thought, which his wary eyes caught sight of instantly, as they travelled the length of my body; and for a moment his gaze lingered over some of the larger, more obtrusive scars that mar my unholy flesh.

And apparently he came to the answer all by himself, because he nodded slowly, and took another drag from his cigarette.

“But why me? Why not just kill yourself?”

“Suicide is contrary to the love of God. It’s truly evil,” I whispered into the air, not entirely sure I believed the words I was saying.

“And torturing and nearly killing me isn’t?”

“Hurting someone is forgivable, so long as one is truly repentant. But suicides are forever forbidden from the kingdom of heaven.” A last, final sob came with my words, as if to punctuate my desperation. But it did nothing to soften his tone however, and the look on his face was one of disbelief mixed with disgust. And it seared through me then, like a branding iron. I could barely stand its touch.

“So you wanted me to do it, to kill you...” He crushed the cigarette butt out in the ashtray I had set out for him days ago. Then, getting up, he went into the kitchen and got himself a glass of water, downed it, and then pulled a beer from the fridge. He grabbed another cigarette on his way back to the sofa.

I watched him from the floor, and when he was far enough away, I sat up and scooped over against the far wall, just under the large window that led out into the alley.

Sitting back on the sofa, a lit cigarette in one hand, and an open beer in the other, Mason regarded me like a bug in a box.

“What happened to you?”

I didn’t owe him anything. I had done what I’d done for my own ends, and he had been caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, but I didn’t owe him anything.

“Did you kill your parents? Is that why you were left at a convent?”

He drank the beer and watched me intently.

“Are you possessed by some demon, and the church was trying to exorcise it when you killed the priest and escaped?” It was biting sarcasm, but there was something else in his eyes that I hadn’t recognized then... though now, it seems so plain to see.

When I didn’t answer he got up and went into the kitchen. And then, without my asking, he brought me a glass of water. But he was still staring at me, all wary like. And also like I was not worthy of the skin I was in.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “You’re not thinking anything I haven’t thought for the past twenty-six years.”

He looked truly and utterly shocked at that. “I... I’m not thinking anything,” he lied.

I smiled at that, but it was just the ghost of a smile remembered, and nothing more.

“So, if the priest gave you the name Cassandra, what’s your real name then?” he asked stupidly.

It’s one of my triggers, you know? Something that I can’t really explain, that once said sets me off almost instantly. My name has always been like that... a button, that when pressed sends me like a cannon ball on a collision course, and my only thought is to destroy whatever, whomever, has caused me to remember.

“My name is Nobody,” I said angrily, getting to my feet, not sure if I was going to run or attack. He stood too, his drink shaking in his hand. A cig dangling from his mouth, he said, “Fucking calm down.”

“Fuck you! I fucking don’t have to take this. If you want to call the police, call the fucking police. They’ll do a better job of it anyway!” I screamed.

Angry, unable to process my own emotions, I reached for my strength. I reached for the nine-hundred-thousand-volt taser-wand that was lying on the end-table next to the sofa.

And like a feral beast, I could almost hear my teeth gnashing and my claws clacking as I made my move. But he was faster, and stronger. And he pushed me back onto the ground with one great shove, and before I knew it, he was on top of me, straddling me again. Only this time, he didn’t try to strangle me, this time he slapped me, hard across the face. And I suppose now he was trying to draw the madness from my eyes. But seething at him, at everything, and everyone, I couldn’t be reasoned with. So he slapped me again, only harder.

The blow rocked my head back and left a stinging handprint on my cheek. But it also ignited a fire in my belly that I had never experienced before. Suddenly perplexed, I became desperate to overcome the tidal force of this new, virile attack. So I started clawing and biting him; desperate to fend him, and this new and intoxicating attack, off.

But he contained me easily enough, as he effortlessly tucked both of my arms into his left armpit; leaving his right hand free to slap me, which he did, hard across the face, and then again, as he saw it bring the wild beast out of my eyes.

Then, with a savage madness of his own, burning brightly in his eyes, he took hold of my wrists and held them firmly in his right hand. Terrified by his total control over me, I bucked and tossed my hips, trying desperately to throw him off. But he just laughed and pressed my hands over my head.

“I hate you!” I screamed. “I hate you!” But my body was screaming something entirely different, which we both could clearly see, as I arched my back once again, this time pressing my pelvic bone into him, and raising my hips so high he was lifted into the air; which only made him laugh a breathy, throaty laugh, that was filled with all kinds of frustrated things.

Still, I struggled fiercely with him, trying desperately to free my hands; cursing and yelling at him, so that he would slap me again. And of course he was more than happy to oblige. And the sting of it... well, it made me feel... alive.

So I fought him even harder then.

And just like I knew he would, he stayed with me; as I squirmed beneath him, as his cock rose hard and full against my stomach. We both looked at it then, and I struggled even more.

Letting go of my hands, Mason took up a handful of my hair, and yanked my head backwards until he’d wrung tears from my eyes. Powerless, I cried out in surprise, and then in ecstasy.

I loved the sting, and I lusted after its intensity, and I never wanted it to lighten up, because in that moment, when the adrenaline kicks in, and the whole of your existence becomes about fight or flight, you can’t think about the past, and it can’t rise up like some serpent and drain all of your

happy moments with its venom. And all I wanted just then was to be there... with him riding on top of me.

I opened my mouth, but he crushed my scream with his lips, and I swallowed it with his tongue as his mouth engulfed me. Mad with delight, I squirmed beneath him as he nipped and bit at me. And as the pain swelled my clit, and as the fear turned my nipples into diamonds, he began to laugh, again and again, until he was a quivering mess on top of me. Then, suddenly the shaking subsided, and he looked down into my eyes.

There was a question there, one he could not speak aloud, but I saw it and recognized it for what it was...

And so I nodded once, with my eyes too, as I silently told him 'yes'. This is what I wanted, this is what I needed.

And I did too – want it, want all of it, all he had to offer. The agony, the pain, the feeling of being *alive*.

And when he came in to kiss me, I told him again, as my teeth closed in on the flesh of his cheek. With a “Yelp”, he pulled back and stared at me, looking at first appalled, and then almost merrily, he hauled off and slapped me once again; an open-handed slap, that made such an impressive sound, it drew the fluids from me, sending them gushing out onto the floor. And suddenly there I was... wet and wanting... and yet he still would not take me.

Worry and dread filled me by horrifying degrees as I waited for him. Worry that I should die like this... a quivering mess of need, and dread that I should explode before he could do anything about it.

But it seems I worried for nothing, as he couldn't resist the pressure any more than I could. Succumbing to his own demons, he roared out in furious hunger as he pulled my legs up until my knees met my chin. Then, with one mad thrust, he was inside, pounding me, pulling my hair, and pinching my nipples – all with the same venom as I had leached into him.

And the more he pounded, the harder he pulled, and the more he savaged me, the more I screamed in delight. Again his mouth took mine, and once again I tried to swallow his tongue. You see... it would never, ever be enough... to take him in... until I had all of him...

Then, when he pulled back, I took to raking my nails across his back, tearing at his hair, and savagely licking him, his chest to his chin.

Then without any warning at all, he ruthlessly slammed his body into me once again, and again; with all the ferocity of one who has a score to settle. And it was an agony of the very best kind. Tears streaming from my eyes, I could hardly hold on as he bombarded me with his vicious attack. And when I thought I couldn't stand another blow, he gave it to me harder until I finally exploded into a shivering pool of jelly.

But he was right behind me. His cock pressed as far inside of me as it could go, he grabbed hold of my head and pulled, then pulled again, and then one last time, as I felt the hot injection of his seed, as he shot it deep into my belly.

He collapsed on top of me then, too exhausted to move.

And how could I blame him? Knowing how little reserves he had, after the days of torture and torment, with no food, and barely any water, and yet... he had somehow still found enough

energy to fuck me like I had never even dreamt was possible. Truly, the angels in heaven must have been singing, because in that moment he had found strength enough to liberate my soul.

We lay there for a moment, satiated in each other's arms, before there was a knock at the door. And a heartbeat later the doorbell rang.

It would be the police. I was sure of it, as sure as I'd ever been about anything. But then again, I never claimed to be very bright.

Mason, looking nervous, slid off of me then, and together we both looked at the door. Through the crack in the curtains we could see out onto the porch. Byron was standing there, waiting rather impatiently for someone to answer the door. Then, with all the grace of a lion, Mason stood up, into the yellow glow cast by the solitary street lamp outside.

Too spent to care, I stood as well, and was greeted by Mason's outstretched arm holding an afghan he'd snagged from the back of the sofa. As I wrapped it around myself, Mason slid on his pants and together we went to the door.

"Byron," I said, cracking the door, just enough to peer outside.

"I know he's here," Byron said angrily, as his eyes searched mine for denial. I smiled then, a smile accomplished only after all of your muscles, and most of your bones, have been turned to mush.

"Mason!" he called; his mouth close to the crack in the door. Hearing him, Mason pulled the door open the rest of the way.

"I knew it! I knew you were here!" Byron stormed on the porch; pacing back and forth, looking like an old worried hen.

"You've got a radio interview in the morning at four-thirty, and then a five-thirty shoot, and the producers want to meet with you." Mason gave Byron a smooth smile and then turned his back on him. That's when Byron's eyes finally caught a full view of Mason, as he stood in the swath of yellow light coming in from the street.

There was a loud gasp as he took in the gruesome sight.

"Oh my god! What happened to you?"

Had the man been upset before it was nothing compared to now, as he stood there screeching at the top of his lungs.

"What the fuck did you do?" he screamed, turning on me in a sudden rage I hadn't seen coming.

Mason stepped in front of me, just as Byron took a step in my direction. But Byron just stood there looking shocked, then horrified, and then shaking his head, he regarded Mason once again.

"We've got to go. You've got contracts you have to honor. They're talking about pulling you from the project."

"That's nuts. We're almost half done," Mason said as he slipped on his shirt. Most of the buttons had been ripped off during our mad drive through the rain, but it was freshly laundered, and it didn't look too worse for the wear.

“It’s not nuts if they can’t count on you to show up for the rest of the shoot.” Byron’s scathing comments looked like they stung Mason, every bit as much as my whip ever had.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m coming,” was all Mason said, as he began to fill his pockets with his few meager possessions. On his way out the door he bent and gave me a kiss on the cheek, and then he was gone, and I was left alone to face what I had done.

“I’m not going to kill you,” I told her. “I won’t.”

Cassandra began to cry then, tears draining from her eyes in a steady stream. And then covering her face with her hands, her cries changed into something else, something unearthly, and utterly heartbreaking, and in-between her cries she sobbed, “Please Mason. Please.”

I climbed off of her then; confused, and angry, and hurt. And all I could think to do was seek refuge in the only comfort I knew I could trust... so I grabbed a cig. Which of course turned out to be just another one of my many mindless mistakes.

With my back turned towards her, Cassandra launched herself at me. Leaping onto my back, she beat me with her tiny fists, and in a hoarse voice she screamed, “You can’t do this!”

Wild with rage, she flailed on top of me, clawing and scratching and beating at me in turns. And as I struggled with her, she continued to wail, “You can’t do this to me!”

It took everything I had, just to throw her off, which I ended up doing quite literally.

And when her body hit the far wall, there was a sickening Thud. And then she was still... too still.

“Are you finished?” I asked her, lighting my cig with a shaking hand. And then, taking a much-needed drag, I pulled the smoke deep into my lungs and prayed the nicotine would work its poisonous magic on my frayed and tattered nerves. And for a moment all I could do was close my eyes, as the smoke slowly saturated each of my aching cells.

But paranoia quickly set in and I opened my eyes, after only the briefest of moments; but it might as well have been a hundred years, because in that small space of time everything had changed. It was like a curtain had been pulled back and I could finally see... her... for the very first time.

Like Dorothy pulling the curtain, revealing the great and powerful Oz. Suddenly I too could see, and it wasn’t the woman Cassandra had pretended to be. Nor was it the girl she might once have been. Nor the manifestation I had created of her, in defense of her sadistic treatment of me.

No... now suddenly, crouched before me was nothing more a wildly terrified pit viper, coiled and ready to strike.

“What did they do to you?” I asked her, out of sheer stupidity.

In reply, she heaved out a bellow of such anguish, I could feel it in my chest, and suddenly my lungs had to struggle to release the smoke I had so greedily consumed.

Then, with her lips trembling, with what I can only describe as a rage of despondency, she began to speak; slowly at first, and then in a great gushing torrent of anger and malevolence.

“They emptied me. Gutted, and burned, and stripped everything from me that was once human. Then they filled me with their hate, and their cruelty, and their corruption, until it bled from my eyes, until it leached from my bones. They butchered me, like some animal, and left just

a hollow husk that fed their... appetites. Is that what you want? To know that I am broken? A goddamn effigy of their evil – and I cannot escape it. Not even for a second.”

Her eyes met mine then, and for the first time I could see in them a child born of terror. And though I’m not certain, I think she saw something similar mirrored back in mine, but I do not know. I know only that she nodded then, as if she had seen something akin upon my face.

And then she stood. Slowly. Rising up inch-by-inch, her back pressed up against the wall. And when she opened her mouth, I assumed it was to speak, but instead, the most grief-filled wail I have ever heard escaped her lips. And then, as if she could no longer stand the skin she was in, she raked her nails down her arms, leaving deep and bloody trails.

“I can’t bear it!” she cried. “My bones can’t hold it. My skin can’t contain it!” she screamed, as she tore at the skin on her face, as if she could pull it from her in great swaths.

“There’s no cure. No way to get it out!” Her wild, feral eyes searched mine, for an answer she knew I could never provide.

“There’s no escape,” she said, as if something within her had suddenly been resolved.

Then, as if without thought, she bent and gave her cilice a tightening tug.

“Do you know why you’ve always been alone Mason? Why you’ll always be alone, never to find that perfect wife, that perfect woman?” she asked, her words tongued with ice.

“No,” I answered truthfully.

She moved then, in slow increments as she spoke.

“Because you know the truth. Because you will never again be fooled by that lie that people spread like a contagion. Because you know in your heart, you will forever be alone.” Her voice had turned abusive, and her eyes had become as dark as obsidian, and in them there was only malice.

“People need to believe that there is someone out there for them, someone who will walk that dark and dangerous road of life with them, someone to keep them from the hollow emptiness that stalks them. But you and I know it’s a lie.”

She had inched backwards, towards the kitchen, and I had watched her go, with a sort of detached curiosity.

But when she spoke again however, her words were threadbare and as weak as if she’d just finished running the longest race of her life.

“Because we were there. Lying face down in all of our agony, in all of our despair, and we had called out to the universe, only to find that there’s nobody there.”

I watched, with a trembling sort of trepidation, as she moved towards the taser that was sitting on the counter. I watched knowing that this time I would have to stop her. This time I would be the one to come out on top.

“We are...” she began, as her hand descended upon the object of my doom.

“...alone,” she whispered into my ear, as my arms wrapped around her waist, and I pulled her to the ground.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew what she was doing. I knew that this was only a desperate attempt to finish what she had started. But I didn't care. Because a blind fury had taken control of me. And suddenly screaming out from me was an overwhelming sense of doom, and with it a rage so profound, so wicked and contemptuous, I had no means by which to control it.

"You did this! You did this! You did this!" I screamed at her as my open hand struck her across the face. And when she smiled, a bloody-toothed smile, I struck her again, knowing I was losing, knowing it was still a game and that she still had me, right where she wanted me.

Raging at my own inability, I struck her again, and then... when she went limp beneath me...



It took the doctor a moment to realize that Mason's hoarse voice had trailed off into the shadows. Then, after a long moment of waiting for him to continue, she finally spoke.

"No one condemns you for fighting back Mason," she said with a limp smile that did nothing to reassure his doubts.

Irritated with the woman and the whole process, Mason looked back at her with all the animosity and disgust he could muster.

"Fight back?" he hissed; spit coming to the corners of his mouth. "I didn't just fight back. I fucked her."

Mason's once well-oiled voice was now the strained hiss of a cornered animal, and it raised the tension in the room by an exponential degree. But the tension snapped suddenly, like a desiccated twig, when a loud bang sounded from the observation room. The sound was quickly followed by a shuffling of feet and hushed voices, and then all was silent again.

In a flash of fury, Mason's eyes snapped up to the one-way mirror.

Then, as if resigned to his fate, he shook his head and looked back at the doctor.

"It seems I've finally found a role people are just dying to see."

"It seems so," the doctor said caustically, more than a little upset at the repeated breach of protocol. However, given his current state of willful communication, the doctor was unwilling to stop the session in order to clear the other room. No... he would just have to perform for the wanting crowd.

After all... it's what he'd been born to do.

"Please go on Mason. We're very nearly through."

Mason laughed at that, as if she had just said the most absurd thing. And then, waving his empty glass and lunch plate in the air, he continued.

“It was right, you know...” Mason said before licking and then biting his lower lip. He was performing now, not only for Ashlyn and the crowd behind the mirrored wall, but also for the countless numbers who would bear witness to his suffering as it was slowly digested by the media.

“...being inside her...” he purred like a nursing kitten.

“Like it was meant to be. A perfect fit. Her and I, two damaged and broken souls, trying to come together, trying to at last be whole. You know what I mean?”

Ashlyn couldn't understand anymore than she could fathom the icy depths of the man's crystalline eyes. Both were as alien to her as the heavens, and equally beyond her reach.

30 Mason

“It seems a strange thing to say out loud... but isn’t that what it is... Sex... the climbing inside of someone? Becoming one and all that?”

Because when I pushed her knees up to her chin... and I saw the corners of her mouth match their movement so perfectly...as if they were connected by a string... I knew – she felt it too. And when I pushed inside of her tight, little pussy... there was no doubt.

Together we were one. When she moved I moved, and when she groaned I groaned.

And before I knew it, she was the one on top; somehow having rolled me onto my back, and suddenly she was the one in control.

“Like this...” she whispered, as she ground her pussy into me, almost violently.

“Like this...” she whispered again, as she circled her hips once, and then jerked them back brutally, until she was certain she had taken in every last inch.

Tight, hot, wet, her pussy was like a ravenous mouth; and its muscle... a vicious tongue, was trying desperately to swallow me whole.

Harder and faster, she rode on top of me, her bare breasts swinging in the night air. But when I reached for them... she was there to intercede. And with little effort, she tucked my hands under her knees and leaned forward, as if taking the reins of some demon horse.

Then, in a wild fit of delight, Cassandra bore down on me, with all of the supernatural abilities god has afforded those of your sex, and I was left helpless to do anything about it.

Harder and faster, she drove me into the ground, setting a grueling pace even an immortal would have had trouble attempting to maintain. And still I lay there... totally at her mercy, capable of nothing except receiving whatever punishment she would demand.

And suddenly I was her prisoner again; only now I begged for the corruption which only she could command.

With my hands pinned beneath her knees, and her hands forcing my shoulders onto the floor, she bucked and arched and circled above me, and when I knew I had reached the summit, and that the glory of triumph finally lay spread out before me, she reached around and stroked her long-lean fingers over my tightening sack. Shivers stole over me then, as I anticipated the pain that I knew would surely follow, but instead of pain I felt only her cool fingers as they stroked the space behind my balls, sending me into one body-wracking shock after another, and just as I was about to explode, she shoved a single finger up my ass.

And then it was all too much. I tore my hands free, and grabbed her about the waist, and pulled her down on top of me, as far as she could go, until I was certain I had direct contact with her heart, and then I shot the biggest load of my life. Jerk after jerk, I assaulted her with my hot cum, and jerk after jerk, her throbbing pussy absorbed it. And then, as if she were the mirror to my own darkest desires, she shot her own wet cum all over me.

And that’s when we heard the knock at the door, quickly followed by the bell.

It was Byron, standing on the porch, his nose pressed up against the window. He was standing there watching us.

“I have to go,” I told Cassandra, as I gathered up my clothes.

“I know,” was all she said before I slipped out the door.

Byron and I drove back to the hotel in silence. Not that he didn't have a fair bit to say about me being barefoot, bruised and reeking of sex, blood and cigarettes. But he held his tongue until I had trudged past security and gotten into the elevator.

“What the fuck happened to you?” he demanded as the doors slid shut.

“I'll tell you later,” I promised. But his eyes narrowed, and I knew he suspected the lie.

“I promise,” I said, willing to sell both kidneys if it meant I could just get some much-needed rest.

The doors to the elevator slid open as Byron was wracking his brain trying to think of an argument that would win him his way.

“Go to your room Byron,” I told him before he could open his mouth, the whole time trying my hardest to keep myself from slouching forward into the fetal position. But my voice had been as feeble as a newborn kitten, weaker even, and with a look, Byron let me know there was no way he was going anywhere.

“No,” Byron said folding his arms in front of him with all the stubborn defiance of a woman.

“Fine,” I said handing him my card.

“Start my bath and then get out,” I said, willing to compromise.

“Damn-it Mason!” he snapped, as he grabbed my card and then swiped it across the lock. “You look like fucking hell! What have you been doing? And why do you smell like that?” As the door swung open, Byron turned his penetrating gaze upon me.

But I didn't even have enough energy to look pissed, so instead I tottered inside the room and collapsed in a heap on the sofa. Which was just another in a long line of mistakes I'd made, as I knew that gravity quadruples at sofa-level. But at that point I simply couldn't care. Nor did it matter to me that I was entirely too weak to break its orbit once there. The body needs what it needs after all, and sometimes it simply can't be denied.

Delirious, dehydrated, a desiccated husk of what I used to be; I must have painted a horrible sight for him, because Byron started clucking over me then, like an old mother hen.

“Here. Here's some water, take it. Drink it,” he commanded.

And I obeyed.

When I drank that first glass, and then another, he seemed encouraged.

“I'm starving,” I mumbled somewhat coherently.

“I got it,” was all he said, before hopping off to make me a sandwich.

I ate it while soaking in the tub. I ate it while listening to Byron sniffle at the door.

I had been too tired to think, too excited about eating, and too programmed to behave, to think about the consequences before I allowed Byron to pull the buttonless shirt from me, before I let him see all the awfulness that had been done to me.

Suddenly, in perfect clarity, he saw everything I had been desperate to hide.

“Oh fuck no! Oh fuck no!”

“Byron, calm down,” I said staggering back to my feet. “It’s not as bad as it looks.”

Truth is, I didn’t know how bad it looked. It felt pretty goddamn bad though, so I… well, let’s just say I had no trouble imagining.

His reaction though got even worse when I gave up caring and stripped the rest of the way. A long, four-inch gash on the top of my left thigh was bandaged, but the blackened bruises marking its perimeter hinted at something especially ghastly beneath. And no matter where you looked, I was bruised and cut and welted in just about equal proportions.

“She did this to you,” he said behind me, as I fled into the bathroom. And since it hadn’t been a question, I didn’t bother answering him as I climbed, sandwich-in-hand, into the tub.

And if I can just say… that there has been nothing in my life I could compare to the sheer agony of descending into that steaming pool of water. It is so completely beyond compare. Because as I lowered my body into the tub, as each and every wound kissed the water, it felt as if each and every one of them was being struck anew, right then and there, simultaneously.

I don’t recall if I cried out, but Byron sobbed then, and I had to tell him to get out. And after that he just sniffled at the door. Occasionally asking me questions that I didn’t bother to answer.

It took me forever, and the water was barely tepid by the time I climbed out, hardly fresh and new again. But at least I was clean, and that felt good, at least.

“You’ve got to go to the authorities,” Byron said, starting in on me the second I got out of the bathroom.

“I can’t,” was all I told him.

“Why? Why? Why?” he yelled, as he stormed about the place, waving his hands and demonstrating in a very physical way just how outraged he was.

But I was bleeding again. And from places I could not reach. And after a moment all I could do was ask him, “Please?”

He stopped then, suddenly, and looked at me. As if for the first time he could comprehend just how poorly I was doing. And that’s when he grabbed the first-aid kit and ushered me back to the sofa.

Easing me down onto it, he quickly switched from the irate business partner, back to the more docile and friendlier mother-hen.

“Open your robe,” he told me, as he began sizing up my wounds. Then, with tears in his eyes, he began picking through the stacks of bandages until he found the size he was looking for.

“The one on your leg needs stitching,” he said in an unusually, hoarse voice.

And he was right. It was laid open by at least a half-inch and was beginning to pucker and puss.

“Can you call someone in?” I asked, and when he didn’t respond, I tilted my head to look him in the eye. “Byron?”

He nodded stiffly but didn’t say a word as his gentle fingers spread the antibiotic ointment over several small burns that ran across my stomach. Then, taking a closer look at the gouge on my left thigh, he slid onto the floor.

“Why would you let someone do this to you?” he asked, as his large, warm hands pressed the two pieces of my thigh back together. Then, with small strips of tape, he began the slow work of putting me back to right. With a low moan, I laid my head back on the sofa, and left him to his work.

“I would never have done anything like this,” he said softly, as his hands slowly moved up the sides of my thighs.

In my defense I can only say my exhaustion prevented me from seeing... I had apparently sent him the wrong message... and now he... expected... Perhaps it was my fault... But whatever the case, I knew I couldn’t let it go any further, and so I fled, into my room, shutting the door behind me, and shutting out my best friend.



Pausing for a moment, Mason scrubbed his cheek with an open hand.

“Come now Mason, I thought we’d agreed to the truth,” the doctor said caustically, causing Mason to look up at her in surprise. Slowly, a dark cloud of worry spread across his eyes.

“I’m not...” he began, but his voice trailed off, as if he hadn’t the strength for any more lies.

Dr. Veda shook her head, as if to show him just how disappointed she was. Then, as if she’d been waiting for just the right moment, with two fingers, she pushed a solitary manila folder across the table at him.

“What’s this?” Mason asked, eyeing the folder as if it were a ticking bomb.

“Why don’t you open it, and find out?”

Mason hesitated for a second, chewing mindlessly on his lower lip, and then all-at-once, as if he were ripping off a bandage, he reached out his hand and flipped open the folder.

On one side of the open folder was an eight-by-eleven photo of Byron Edelston, post-autopsy. And though he had been sewn back together with great care, the horrific stitching and the man’s ash-gray pallor made it more than evident he was long-past dead. Mason stared at the photo for a few long seconds before he turned away, as if he could stand the sight of it no more.

But it had been long enough.

With a tap of her finger, the doctor indicated the other side of the manila folder, where a copy of the coroner's report had been pinned.

"There were traces of seamen found..." she said, letting her words trail off, as she watched closely for Mason's telltale reaction. But Mason was not a stupid man, nor was he in any way a gullible man. And after years of training his emotions for the camera, he was not about to let this insignificant woman get under his skin.

With steely eyes, he looked long and hard at the woman, and then down to the report; reading for himself the words he had dreaded to see. 'DNA Match: Mason Harlow'.

"What would you have me say? That I forced him? That I took advantage of him?" he asked.

"I'd have you give Byron the respect he deserves. I'd have you tell the truth. No matter the consequences. That's what an honorable man would do."

Mason seemed to consider her words, and after a moment, he seemed to consider the anonymous people on the other side of the glass partition.

"He told me in this very room how much he loved you, and that he only wanted what was best for you."

Mason's eyes went wide, as the doctor's unexpected words caught, and then held, the breath in his chest.

"So that's it?" he said, rising suddenly to his feet.

"Pardon me?" the doctor asked, as now it was her turn to be surprised.

Mason scrubbed furiously at the stubble on his chin as he paced the tiny room. And then, with his face painted a crimson-red, he turned on the doctor.

"He knew," Mason growled at the woman. "He knew I'm not gay. But still he wouldn't let up. Always there. Always watching me. Waiting... like he was waiting for me to change. As if people just change." Mason's voice seemed to come directly from his chest, and as he spoke his words grew deeper and more resonant, until they were as menacing as a hurricane.

"It's not my fault he loved me. I didn't make him love me. I didn't ask him to love me!"

"You act like it's a crime."

"A crime?" Mason said, twisting the words in his mouth until they came out very near to a threat.

"No, not a crime, but maybe something worse."

The doctor sat back in her chair and stared up at the man, as he paced back and forth.

And then slowing, Mason suddenly seemed to give in. And when he turned back to face the doctor, it was as if a veil had been lifted, and he was revealed, and not as the man beneath (for the doctor could see then that no man lived behind those walls). Instead it was a shade of darkest night, and when he spoke his words were of fire and ice.

“You can’t be loved by someone without them demanding some sort of ownership over you. Because when someone loves you, it’s as if you enter into a sort of servitude with them, that has neither beginning nor end, and manifesting out of nowhere, is completely and oh-so maddeningly beyond your control.”

Dr. Veda considered Mason’s words as she continued to survey the man, watching intently for any indication he was about to snap. And all the while she held her tongue, waiting, watching, for just the right moment.

“I didn’t want his love. I wanted my fucking freedom. I wanted to come and go as I damn-well pleased, and not have to answer to the bloody likes of him!” he shouted, as she didn’t seem to comprehend the magnitude of his subjugation.

“And yet you seemed happy enough to keep him around, so long as he was performing all the various menial and demeaning tasks you put to him.”

“He asked to be my assistant!”

“But not your slave,” the doctor said, leaning in a bit, as if to challenge the man.

“He wasn’t my slave! I never made him do anything!” Mason shouted at her.

“And yet you were happy enough to lead him on, to give him just enough hope to keep him circling back around.” The doctor was baiting him now, and Mason, even as mad as he was, knew it. And yet...

“He knew I’m not a fag! He knew I could never do that!”

Mason turned away from the doctor then, choosing instead to study the plain-gray wall behind him. And as the psychiatrist spoke, her words seemed to fall on him like a lead weight, because in all reality there is nothing so devastating as the truth, nor anything so burdensome.

“*Hope* is a devastating weapon, capable of blinding someone to even the most obvious of truths. And you gave Byron just enough so he would never leave you, because you knew his love for you would bind him to you, like nothing else could.”

Mason said nothing, nor did anything, and for a long moment the two shared an uncomfortable silence.

“Or perhaps you’re just more homosexual than you thought,” the doctor suggested rather cheekily, and when she saw each of her words strike the bull’s-eye with sublime accuracy, she smiled in great satisfaction. Yet her smile was tinged with a shade of fear, as his body seemed to coil in on-itself with a barely-suppressed rage. Still, she went on.

“I wonder what Jack will think of his son now?”

With an ear-splitting roar, Mason turned and lunged at the now-startled woman. His arm out-stretched in front of him, he hurled himself through the air, as if he would grab her about the throat, and throttle her senseless.

Thankfully, half-a-heartbeat later the door to the interrogation room swung open and two large deputies rushed in. And just as Mason’s fingers grazed the sides of her neck, he was pulled back and slammed face-down onto the table. His right cheek pressed painfully into the shining metal surface.

“Ow!” he cried, as the two large men wrenched his shoulders backwards, in an attempt to lock his elbows into place, thereby preventing him from making any sudden movements.

“Hold still and it won’t hurt,” the silver-haired deputy growled in a rich and thick Texas accent.

“Mason,” the doctor said soothingly, as she leaned forward across the table, as if she would whisper a secret in his ear.

But then, loud enough for everyone to hear, she went on. “It’s done. The world will know the truth. Whether it’s your truth or someone else’s – well that’s entirely up to you.”

With a great sigh, all fight fled Mason then; leaving him nothing more than a rag-doll in the arms of the two impassive men.

“I think he’s ready to go on,” the doctor said, smiling at the men, more thankful for their intervention than either of them would ever know.

With a jerk, both men released Mason’s arms, letting them fall with a Thud to the table.

“Do you think you can go on?” she asked the man, as he slowly righted himself.

With a nod, Mason took his seat.

“Good. Then where were we?”

31 Cassandra

“Conor called and woke me late on Monday. And at first, I wasn’t going to answer, I was just going to wait for the police to come and haul me away. But then I realized I couldn’t do that to them, considering everything they’d done for me. I owed them more than that. So I picked up the phone on the fourth ring.

“Hello.”

“Oh dear Lord Cassy, are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“What’s all this nonsense with Mason then?”

Silence was all I could provide.

“Cassy, are you okay? Do you need me an’ Shay to come over there? I swear I’ll kill him Cassy, I’ll kill him for what he’s done.”

I think Conor had sort of replaced Cara with me. That’s the only way I can explain the deep sense of protectiveness he seemed to feel towards me. And it was nice, but it was also a bit overwhelming.

“No Conor. I’m fine, and I haven’t any idea what you’re on about.”

“Cassy, there are photos on the news, photos showing that Mason bloke choking the life out of you... among other tings.” Conor’s Irish was up, and so was his blood.

“Conor, Mason didn’t do any...” I said, but my voice trailed off as I clicked on the TV.

And right away I saw for myself what he’d been talking about. Photos of me and Mason, plastered all over the news.

“Conor, we were just messing around. Just messing... around,” I said, not even believing myself. But thankfully Conor seemed to take the lie easily enough.

“Well then, do you think you can work? Britney’s kid has got the flu, and she’s not coming in. And Lisa just quit as she finally got that record deal. Anyway... we’re shorthanded and we could really use you.”

“Okay Conor. I’ll be in.”

I knew if I had said ‘no’, he would have just come looking for me anyway, and in so many ways that would have been worse. So I got dressed and went in to work; in long jeans, a long-sleeved blouse, and a scarf around my neck.

But it wasn’t enough to hide all of the marks Mason had left behind, and the instant Conor saw me he went through the roof. And it took Shay and two of our regular customers half-an-hour to drag him back inside, after he’d stormed out, saying he was ‘off to kill him’.

“I told you Conor, it was just a silly game, and it didn’t hurt. I don’t know why it left the marks it did. I swear it didn’t hurt,” I told him in the kitchen.

But all I could think was... here's another weak-willed man who can't control himself; forcing everyone else to deal with his emotions instead.

"That Perez guy is outside," Shay informed us, coming into the kitchen behind us.

"I swear to Almighty God!" Conor roared as he grabbed up his bat; clearly excited to finally have a target for his rage. But Shay stood resolutely in his way.

"You've already threatened to kill Mason my love, in front of God knows how many strangers, maybe you should just let this one go," she suggested calmly. And though Shay can be a bit thick at times, and hasn't suffered much in the way of an education, I envied her innate intelligence when it came to dealing with people, especially people like Conor.

Unfortunately Conor couldn't be persuaded to listen just then, and he stormed outside with his bat, cursing the paparazzo as he went.

But he was back, only a few moments later, with his bat unbloodied, and everyone let out a sigh of relief.

And after that, everything seemed to return to normal, for a time at least.

"Look love, I don't think they mentioned your name in the paper, or on TV, but somehow word must've gotten out," Shay told me in a loud whisper over the cacophony of the accumulating crowd. And I knew she was right, because when I looked around the room I could clearly see that all eyes were trained on me, though some a bit more discretely.

"You better high-tale it into the kitchen," she advised with a sharp look, as if to indicate just how much she thought that was a very good idea.

And all I could think to do was nod and flee.

Unfortunately Conor was already in the kitchen, messing with a pot of Joe's chili.

"It's cool out tonight. I'm thinking Joe's meaty-magic will really bring in the crowd," he said, as he looked me up and down.

"It's good chili," I told him, not really knowing, having never had the occasion to try it.

"It is good," he said, as he filled the large bowl he held in his hand.

"I guess I should get it out there to 'em, before it cools," he said, looking from the bowl to me, and then back to the bowl again.

It was a look I knew well. A look I have seen a thousand times, maybe more.

But it always reads the same, each and every time. And suddenly wary, and a bit curious, I looked around the room and found, over by the sink, a mostly empty bottle of Jameson's Irish Whiskey.

And for a second all I could do was stand there, silently panicking, because I didn't have a clue what I should do.

After all, he was my friend, and I couldn't just break a couple of his fingers. Then again... a friendship can only buy you so much.

With a sloppy smile, Conor set down the steaming bowl of chili, and came to stand in front of me. "Let me have a closer look at those bruises," he said, reaching for my face.

And for a moment I couldn't help wondering, yet again, why so many men thought they had some sort of right to lay their hands on me.

Holding my face in his hands, he turned it first one way, and then the other, his blood-shot eyes scrutinizing every little thing.

Then, when he was satisfied with his inspection, he took a step closer to me and smiled. Then he licked his dry lips, and ran a hand over his bald head, and any hope I had for his intentions fled the room like a whisper fleeing before a hurricane.

Because in that moment, as his tongue leapt out of his mouth, and pulled its cracked and broken carcass across his dry and barren lips, I saw it there plain as day upon his face... his hunger. A hunger I had simply seen too many times to ever be surprised by it again.

"They're waiting..." I started to say.

But my words cut off as he came even closer, his body nearly touching mine.

"Shhh," he said, as he laid a finger over my lips.

"I can't bear to see you hurt like this Cass, I just can't. I want to ring his bloody neck. I want to kill him. I swear if I ever see him ever again I'll kill him for what he's done. I know you say it was just a game, but I can see. Damn it Cass! I'm not a bloody idiot. I know he had to choke you pretty damn hard to leave marks like these."

He ripped the scarf from my neck, and then pointed to our reflection in the mirror on the opposite side of the room.

It's funny how a mirror can reveal things that aren't apparent without the reflection. It must be something in the way the it reflects a person's true intentions. Because I could see it then... that which had always eluded me before...

Conor's enormous hands wrapped tightly around a woman's throat. Not Shay's... surely never Shay's. But there had been a day, maybe long gone, maybe in the not-so-distant past, when his thick, meaty fingers had curled around a woman's throat and then slowly, as he watched the life drain from her eyes, he had tightened his grip, until she was gone.

He was imagining it now.

And I could see it as plain as day, painted all over his face, in jet-black ink. What he loathed the most was what he secretly desired the most. And the more he loathed it, the harder his dick became. And right then he was loaded and ready for action. Those photos had seen to that... had sparked off every fantasy he had ever denied himself. And just then... with me an easy target... with his sick passions firing his loins... his intentions were oh-so obvious.

"There was nothing to it. It was just a silly game," I said stiffly, my voice soft and even. And in my head my thoughts were racing, trying desperately to figure a way out of this horrible situation.

I can throw the bowl of chili at him, I thought. It was hot enough to burn him, and it might give me the seconds I needed to get through the door...

Slowly, I moved towards the bowl he had set on the counter.

“You’re the sweetest, most loving man I have ever known,” I cooed at him, mimicking back to him words that weren’t even my own; playing up my strengths, as fighting had never been chief among them.

“Cass... I just can’t see him...” he said, as his hands slid around my waist.

“Shhhh, it’s okay. He’s gone now. He’s never coming back. You don’t have to worry about him,” I said, as I ran a hand over his face and down to his chest, and then I smiled up at him, as sweetly as could be.

But I had overplayed my hand, and he pulled me into him, before I had gotten a weapon to hand.

Pressing his stiffness into my stomach, he said, “I swear to God no one has ever made me feel the way you do. I’d do anything to protect you.”

“Anything to keep you safe.”

“I swear. I will kill him.”

I put my finger to his lips because I couldn’t stand listening to his belligerent reasoning any longer.

But touching him like this became his breaking point, and he could no longer hold back the flood of emotions that were suddenly overwhelming his primitive mind. With an air of desperation, he grabbed up my hand and began to kiss it and my fingers, one-by-one. And then pulling my arm up around his neck, he looped his other arm around my waist, and pulled me up until our mouths were inches apart.

“I will have you...” he growled into my open mouth, a second before his prodigious lips overwhelmed me.

Mind racing, tears streaming down my face, I panicked. Fight or flight had kicked in, and all I could see was the large cast iron skillet hanging from the ceiling, just over the stove. And if I could just inch us sideways, I could just about reach it.

And then...

“Conor?” came a tiny voice that was drenched in both shock and horror.

“Shay. Love. I... It’s not what it looks like,” Conor said, my lipstick smearing his words as much as it had his mouth.

“Yes, it is. It’s exactly what it looks like,” I told her, as I grabbed my coat and fled.

But I didn’t get far, as Byron was outside, waiting for me.

32 Mason

“It’s never going to be enough you know? Not now, not after her. And even then, in those first few agonizing hours without her, I knew. The world would be dead, flat, barren, a veritable void without her; devoid of mystery, devoid of sensation... devoid of... her.

You see... I’d become addicted... to the rush.

I once someone say, “...it’s not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life... not enough kicks... not enough night.” And I guess now I finally understand. Because when Byron’s broad, flat hands slid up the sides of my thighs, and I could feel in them the alien design of the way-too-familiar sex. But I couldn’t help but tremble.

And as he pressed his warm, moist mouth in feather-light kisses to the most insignificant of my injuries, well... I came utterly undone.

Unsprung, my sharp tongue unwrung...

I ask you, what could I have done?

“I would never have hurt you this way...” he said again, this time his hot breath washing over my hardening cock.

So strong, yet so gentle, and in every way the opposite of Cassandra; Byron was weak where she was strong, and strong where she was weak...

It was suddenly as if the great wheel had spun, and now... it was like I was master.

“And what if I wanted to hurt you?” I asked him, as the fingers of my left hand slid into his hair.

“Do you want to hurt me?” he asked in unison with his soft-brown eyes.

With a rough jerk, I squeezed my fingers shut, locking his short, thick curls into place at the base of his skull. And as I did so, Byron let out a small, sharp cry.

“Maybe a little,” I growled, giving it some thought.

I’d learned so much at the hands of my deranged tutor, so much I wanted to share. But I was feeble, and weak, and the only thing I had strength for was a small growl.

“It’s okay if you do,” he cooed, coming forward into me.

“I only want to please you,” he said... before his mouth slowly engulfed me.

And by god, you don’t know... oh... but you don’t know...

But perhaps if you are honest, I suspect you can imagine what a man can do, with an instrument such as that. And had I the ability, I would describe it for you now; the way his tongue moved, as though it had a mind of its own. Or the way his throat seemed to draw me in, and then constrict, like a snake. But I haven’t the words now any more than I had them then, because all I could do was cry, at first in ecstasy, and then in earth-shaking release.

And had it ended there, it would have been enough, to prove to me that sexuality lies not in some meager one-word-description, but lives somewhere upon an inscrutable spectrum instead.

But I couldn't let it end there.

There was still so much I had to know. Like how his mouth would taste, now that my seed swam in his saliva. And so I pulled his mouth into mine, and I took from him every last bit of his will. And with every movement of my lips, searching, biting, sucking, he slipped further and further under my control. And suddenly this big strong man, with his rippling muscles, and sharp-chiseled jaw, was mine to command.

"Take your clothes off," I told him, as I brutally pushed him away.

And he obeyed.

And suddenly I was exploring, tasting, touching, wanting more, more sin, more dark, more ecstasy. I wanted the truth of him, laid out bare and raw, and utterly yielding.

And so with a rough shove, I forced him beneath me, and all the while his muscles, undulating beneath his skin, moved with me. Allowing me in.

"Like this," I whispered, as my hand slid around his throat.

"Like this," I whispered again, once I was fully within.

And then I couldn't speak at all. Because my words had suddenly devolved into the charismatic-tongue of some wicked divinity; until finally I was consumed... and totally subsumed.

And perhaps I would have laid there with him, basking in that glow, that lilac night... But I was not fully actualized, therefore incapable of anything so intimate. And so I did flee, back into my room.

And for the next ten hours I slept like the dead. And the next day, when I awoke I very much wished I was.

Because leaked overnight were those four career-ending photos of Cassandra and me.

"Did you?" I asked Byron, when I saw the cover of *The Rag*.

"No! Of course not," Byron demanded indignantly.

So I patted him on the shoulder and went to the bar.

"Thank you for sending in the physician," I told him, before snagging an OJ from the fridge.

"Did he give you anything?"

"Some antibiotics and these," I said, showing him the jar of pills I held in my hand.

"Is it early or late?" I asked, a bit confused when the gray-tinged sky refused to yield any clues.

"It's late. And these are on every channel. They're calling you every name in the book." By his tone, I would have thought Byron was making light of it all, but when I looked in his eyes, I could tell, it was so much worse than I thought.

"There's more," he said, opening the tabloid to the middle page.

And there she was... Cassandra... naked on the floor, with me on top – choking her.

I set down the half-gone OJ and reached for the scotch instead.

“It’s a little early for that, don’t you think?” Byron asked, obviously before he’d thought it through. Because once he had, and once he’d seen the look on my face, he swallowed back whatever else he was going to say.

And that’s when it all started... the end of my career... and the end of everything.

In all there were four photos, three of me abusing Cassandra, in some form or fashion. And the fourth had been taken as I had shuffled into the hotel lobby, looking particularly messed up; my vapid eyes empty of any higher cognition, any shred of intelligent thought. In fact I looked higher than a kite; a poster child for mescaline abuse.

And I knew... soon I’d be just one of *‘those’* actors.

You know the ones... the ones who fall from grace, never to be heard from again, until the moment of their death when every morbid detail is played out in thirty-second sound bites, every fifteen minutes or so on the so-called news.

They don’t tell you this outright, but once you step into the public eye, for whatever reason, you cease to own your own death. Other things can be hidden, though hiding is never easy. But you simply can’t hide your death. Sooner or later everyone always finds out.

My manager Paz Pennick, the same Paz Pennick who’s no-doubt wishing for my death right now, once said to me, “A famous actor is a star twice in his lifetime, more if he’s lucky, but a star twice for sure; once on the day he’s discovered, and once again on the day he dies. So if you’re going to die, for fuck’s sake make it a good one.”

“God damn this is sick,” Byron said, shaking his head in his hands. “This is God Damn sick. What the fuck happened? How do we spin this?” He looked almost as bad as I felt, and for the first time I realized what he must be going through, how this was all going to affect him.

“It’s not what it looks like,” I told him.

Though it was exactly what it looked like... and more.

“They’re murdering you in the media. I can’t even turn it on, it makes me so sick. All the women’s rights groups are burning your DVDs.”

“That oughta increase sales, at least temporarily.”

“What the fuck happened to you Mason? What have you gotten yourself into? And what kind of drugs were involved?”

I needed another scotch before I could even begin. So I poured it myself, and then took a seat next to him at the bar.

“I’ll tell you, but only if you swear to never tell a soul, even if I die.”

I leveled him then with a look I borrowed from Jack. “Especially when I die.”

Though I could tell he was reluctant, he still nodded for me to go on.

Three scotches later, and just as many ibuprofens, I was finally through most of it.

And all that time... ‘Jesus,’ had been his only response.

Then, there was an hour of him saying the same thing, over and over, in as many ways as he could possibly think.

“Call the police. Turn her in. This is crazy. You’ve got to report this!” He was irate, storming around the room, pounding his fists on the tables, and shoving furniture out of his way when it suited him.

“I can’t,” I said, because I wasn’t going to offer him a bullshit excuse; mostly because I was just too tired to come up with one, but also because the truth was simplest. I couldn’t turn her in. I just couldn’t.

33 Cassandra

“I know what you did,” he told me in a shaky voice, which appeased my sadistic nerve.

“Then that makes three of us,” I said with a cocky smile I knew he would try to make me pay dearly for.

“And now the cops do too,” he said giving his chin a defiant flip.

I stopped then, dead in my tracks, and stared openly at the overly-dressed man. Was he kidding? From the smug look on his face, I instantly guessed not. But before I could ask, before I could make certain, Perez materialized out of nowhere.

Nervous, I looked from the small Hispanic man, back to the statuesque Bryon, and then back again, and even without calculating, I knew my odds weren't good.

“Oh, I get it,” I said finally, as illumination slowly dawned on me.

“You brought him here, to break us up,” I told Byron, who at least had the decency not to lie.

“Yes, that's exactly what I did. And he's learned some pretty interesting things about you...Cassandra,” Byron said before giving a look back over his shoulder, as if to make sure the gathering crowd wasn't paying attention. Which of course they were – all of them riveted to our discourse, like it was news of some pending apocalypse.

But it might as well have been, given how my world was shattering right before my eyes.

“And the photos?” I asked simply to appease my own curiosity.

“I took most of them,” he answered honestly.

“And he sold them to me,” Perez chimed in needlessly.

“I could tell him,” I replied, to which we both smiled. Because we both knew... a liar always tells lies.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Mason demanded loudly of Byron just then as he came rushing across the street at us.

We were all of us grouped together like a murder of crows, just outside of Mac's, caught up in the streetlight, making for what must have been a most comical attraction.

But thanks to Byron's open hostilities and Mason's deranged eyes the bystanders kept a wary distance away.

“I... I...” Byron stammered for a moment, unable to gather his thoughts. He hadn't anticipated Mason's arrival and now he was floundering for a palatable lie, where he knew there was none.

“You went to the police,” Mason growled as he came in close enough to be heard discretely.

“I got your message. What do you mean you went to the police?” Mason had hold of Byron’s sleeve now, and was tugging hard on it, trying to bring the suddenly immobile man ever-closer.

“I...I...” Byron stammered stupidly.

But before Byron could get another word out, Conor descended upon our ‘telling of rooks.

“BY GOD!” he roared, as he caught sight of Mason. And suddenly it was all Mason could do keep the giant man off of him, which of course spurred Bryon into action. Everything he did, of course, was in defense of the man he loved. And this would be no different.

I guess that’s why I couldn’t hate him, not then, and not now. Not even for siccing the paparazzo on me. Because Byron was only doing it out of loyalty to Mason, and for that alone, I could forgive him his blind arrogance.



“Arrogance?” the doctor asked irritably, interrupting Cassandra’s rather banal recitation of the events that led up to the man’s untimely death.

Cassandra in-turn gave the doctor a queer look. As if she assumed the doctor hadn’t understood the word.

“How was Byron being arrogant?” the doctor clarified.

To which Cassandra could only chuckle. Then, when the doctor didn’t seem satisfied, she replied, “Byron assumed that he and Mason were destined to be together... if only it wasn’t for me. But that was never going to happen. And his own arrogance kept him ignorant of that fact.”

The doctor considered Cassandra’s words for a long time, and then she spent another long moment digging paperwork from her bag. Then, in a rather clinical sort of way, she said, “According to the coroner’s report, they found seamen in Byron’s stomach, and rectum.”

Cassandra looked at the doctor as if she had just announced the weather.

“The DNA is a match. To Mason,” the doctor clarified, as there was still no response.

“It seems to me that Mason and Byron were a lot closer than you thought,” the doctor said in a rather pointed attack, hoping again to draw out some sort of calculable response.

But Cassandra didn’t say a word. Instead she just stared at the little lion in her hands and wished silently she could snug up the cilice around her leg.

“Is it arrogance then? If he was certain, that without you in the picture, he would finally have a chance?”

“I suppose not,” Cassandra said distractedly, leaving the doctor’s unasked question unanswered. Years and years, of hours and hours, of Catholic service had given Cassandra a will

that was as strong as any steel. But a lifetime spent as a living doll, vacant of expression, void of personality, alive solely to appease the will of others, gave her the ability to mask each and every emotion, save boredom; which I myself would attest, will be the doom of us all.



“When I first saw Conor I feared instantly for Mason, Conor being so much more imposing of a man. But I underestimated Mason; his intelligence, and his strength.

“Conor,” I said, laying my hand on his heaving chest. But when his seething eyes met my face, I shuddered beneath their glare, and withdrew a couple of steps. And had Mason been any other man he might not have seen the look that exchanged between the two of us just then. And had he been any other man, he certainly would not have understood so quickly. But it was the look on Shay’s face, as she broke through the gathering crowd, that for Mason put everything into place.

Mason looked again from me, to Conor, and then a snarl ripping from his throat, he attacked. But the big man was not an inexperienced fighter, so it took a few long moments before the physical altercation was through. In the end both men were tending to cut lips and bloodied noses.

Of course, had I been the nurturing kind, I suppose it woulda been me tending to Mason’s injuries. But instead, it was Byron who fawned over him as he sat crouched on the sidewalk, his back up against the brick of the bar. Conor, and half of the crowd, having already retreated back inside the pub.

“They make a cute couple,” Oscar Perez announced, as he came to stand next to me.

“Yes. They do,” I admitted honestly.

“So where does that leave you?” he asked me, to which I had no reply. So instead, we stood a ways off, watching Byron and Mason and listening to the things Byron had to say.

“I won’t do this again Mason. She’s poison,” Byron told him.

Mason’s hand swung up and caught Byron’s just as he was about to swab a cut on Mason’s head. Mason looked him dead in the eyes and asked, “Did you really go to the police?”

Byron let his hand fall to his side, and then after a long moment of silence, he nodded once.

“And what did you tell them?” Mason growled in a voice I’d never heard before. Byron apparently hadn’t heard it either, as it clearly startled him.

“Everything,” he said, his voice cracking beneath the strain.

“Mason, be reasonable,” he continued, with a bit more strength. But Mason was already back on his feet, looking down on the forlorn young man.

“You’re dead to me. Do you understand Byron? You’re dead to me.”

So stunned by his words, even Perez could think of nothing to do but stare at the two men, as one crumbled beneath the weight of his grief, and the other simply stormed away.

Mid-way down the block, Byron and I caught up to him. Byron, desperate I suspect, for the answers he just couldn't see, grabbed Mason's sleeve and turned him so that he was looking at me. And for that tiny moment... before everything happened at once, it was as if I could finally see.

"How can you?" Byron was screaming above the noise of the crowd.

"How can you choose her over me?" he shouted even louder, which only further served to incense Mason.

With both hands, Mason grabbed Byron by his lapels, and then he shook him, again and again, until the man finally broke down into tears. Shocked by his actions, Mason dropped Byron back onto his feet. But by now they were both standing on the edge of the sidewalk, with cars zipping by down Congress Avenue.

"Mason," I said grabbing his shoulder, as if to pull him away.

But Byron had already taken a step backwards, straight off the curb, and into oncoming traffic.

"Byron!" Mason yelled as he turned back to his friend.

"No!" I cried, as I too reached for Byron. But we were both too late. And in the next second Byron was hit by the bus, and his body was sent flying fifty feet in the air.

34 Mason

“I just couldn’t,” Mason said again, as if he was trying to provoke some sort of response from the interrogating psychiatrist. But she just sat there with her patient eyes ever-watching, ever-absorbing, every minute muscle that moved, every flutter of his lashes, and every twitch of his hands.

“The prodigal son what?” Mason asked abruptly, seemingly out of nowhere. “Returns? But what of the father? What if he’s not the forgiving kind? And what if the sister has died and the mother has lost her mind? What then of the prodigal son?”

The stoic doctor didn’t say a word. Instead she just sat there in front of the rapidly deteriorating man, a placid smile painted on her face.

“God damnit!” he shouted, banging his fist on the table, causing the water to leap from his glass.

“I’m not a trained dog! I won’t sit here and play tricks for you,” he said as he came forward in his seat.

A slight twitch of her cheek was the psychiatrist’s only response.

“She called me... the next day,” Mason announced suddenly, like a magician setting up his next trick.

“She told me to go to the police and tell them everything.”

And now it was the doctor’s turn to come forward in her seat.

“Why would she do that?” she asked.

Mason smiled a very disconcerting grin that shivered the doctor’s skin.

“Because she knew what the publicity would do to me. That’s why I went to Mac’s that night. To talk her out of going herself, because I had flat-out refused to. But apparently Byron had already beaten her to the punch.”

“Yes, he did, didn’t he?” the doctor asked rhetorically.

Mason knew what the doctor was getting at. He also knew that *everything* had been leading up to these next few sentences... and the anticipation of it... the agitation of it... and especially the fearful unknowing of it... well that was the closest he had come to that wondrous delirium of delight since that last fateful night with Cassandra.

“Have you ever heard the story of Pygmalion?” Mason asked, seemingly changing the subject.

Looking at first perplexed, and then greatly annoyed, the psychiatrist sat back in her seat with a huff. “Yes,” she said. “But I don’t see what that has to do with any of this...” she waved her hand over the table as if to indicate a large pile of shit.

“Why everything, if you ever hope to understand it all,” Mason said, as he lounged back in his chair.

But much to the doctor's chagrin, Mason never got the chance to explain the context of his rather cryptic statement, because just then the door to the interrogation room swung open and two men strode in.

The first was Detective Pfluger, and closely following behind him was a man Mason had never seen before. However, dressed in an outstandingly expensive suit, and carrying an equally expensive satchel, Mason only needed one look to guess who he was.

"What is this?" the doctor demanded loudly of the men before they had both cleared the door.

"That'll be my lawyer," Mason said, sounding less than amused.

"You never requested a lawyer," the doctor said turning on him.

"And I'll bet he doesn't know about the charges you have pending against him?" the ostrich-looking man in the expensive business suit said, just before he slapped a stack of documents onto the table in front of her.

"Here is my motion to suppress any and all evidence collected at the home of Ms. Lethe, as well as anything my client may or may not have said under duress; along with my intent to sue this department for his unlawful detainment."

"And I suppose we're supposed to just forget that Mason killed his assistant?" the doctor asked angrily, as she rose slowly from her chair.

"As to that, an eye-witness has come forward stating unequivocally that it was an accident." The lawyer's impertinent smile served only to provoke the exhausted doctor but being the clear-headed and calculating person that she was, she did nothing to let it show.

"And just who is this eye-witness?"

"His name is Oscar Perez," said the man in the perfectly tailored suit.

And just like that, Mason broke into a wild fit of laughter.



His laughter lasted all the way to his limo. But something about sliding into that cold and empty backseat brought Byron to mind, and all thought of comic relief went out the window. Quite literally.

"Where to Mr. Harlow?" the driver asked, without turning around.

"The Four Seasons please," he told the man in a cracked and broken voice.

"Yes sir."

Back at the hotel he was informed by the concierge that the studio had paid through the middle of the week, which suited Mason just fine. He didn't have much intention of staying that long anyway.

Upstairs though, he had a crisis of faith as he recalled the first day he had stepped through the doors to his presidential suite.

"I've always been a country bumpkin," Mason had told the well-dressed man at his side.

"I know," Byron had said, as sweetly as if it had been a proclamation of endearment.

And so it had been.

"I'm sorry," Mason said to the empty room. And in its answering silence Mason heard a resounding 'so what?' Clearly the room was indifferent. And somehow that made it so much worse. Because not even Byron's ghost lingered here. And for the first time, in a very long time, Mason was good and truly alone.

Yet, had Byron's ghost been there Mason might have said, "I'm sorry I pushed you, when I should have grabbed you instead."

35 Cassandra

“Death stalks us all. It hides behind a new mole, an unfamiliar lump, a bad cough you fear is tuberculosis... or something worse, that’s slowly killing you, where you cannot see. These fears though are irrational, crippling us with insecurities we can do nothing about, when all along it’s the monster lurking within our souls that should frighten us the most.

It’s the monster that deafens us to a child’s cry and blinds us to a mother’s grief. It’s the monster that sits and watches as the world burns in a blaze of our own creation and does nothing to stop it. We watch it... with our own two eyes, but we only have fear enough for ourselves, for that new darkening spot, or that cough that just won’t go away. That demon we hide.

You asked me once why I never left the convent, not until Father Cormac had died, and I’ll tell you now... it’s because of what he did to the only person I ever truly loved.

I found him that Tuesday making love to Cara, sharing with her all the kisses that should have been mine.

“I love you Anson,” she told him, and I watched as he secretly rolled his eyes.

Still, seeing him there, sharing with her all the touches, and tastes that should have been mine, made my heart burn and my mouth fill with the bitter taste of hemlock.

And so my heart is still there, trampled into the floor. And all the hope I ever had, a teaspoon-full at most, evaporated into thin air...

And so it was that I came to leave them there.

“Why are you crying?” Father Cormac asked, as he came into the chicken yard, despite the fact that I had never spoken to him, nor to anyone, save for the sweet boy who was just then betraying me.

“You talk to him. I heard you talking to him!” he screamed.

And maybe if I had opened my mouth just then the boy might have lived. Who knows... maybe he’d be a husband and a father, with his own child to bounce on his knee. But I was too stubborn. Too wicked. Too concerned with myself, and so I snarled and bit my tongue, and then waited silently for him to leave.

And that night, as I collapsed onto my bed, I cried until every last tear had been shed.

And yet... had I known what was waiting for me when I awoke, I swear to you now, it would have been more than water that I had shed that night.

“I have something to show you,” father said, as pleased as punch, with a smirk of villainy on his face the likes of which I had never seen. Still, always dutiful, I followed through the darkest hour of night, to the abandoned farrier’s shed.

“He broke your heart, and so I thought it was fitting that you should get to break his,” Father Cormac told me, as he led me to one of the far buildings that we had sometimes used for ‘training’, especially when things would get loud, or messy.

I shook then without knowing, as I imagined what awaited within.

And when the old wooden doors finally creaked open, I could clearly see my boy of summer, my shining ray of sun, with the brown curls, and pale skin.

He was hanging by his wrists in exactly the same way I had been, so many times before. But there's something infinitely more horrific about seeing someone you love suffering the same fate. Though I can't say that's true for all of the silent witnesses around the world, because so many move for nothing.

But I couldn't stand by, a silent observer, when there was something I could do.

"Please no," I begged.

"Please Father. I'll do anything you ask, just let him go." I dropped to his feet and kissed the hem of his cassock, over and over, all the while begging for him to stop.

He threw back his head and laughed. Then looking down on me, in that pleased-as-punch way he had, he patted the top of my head. "Shhh now child. We will train this one just as we've trained you. You'll see. And who knows, maybe he'll be a better student than you. Lord Jesus knows he can't be much worse."

He brought me to my feet then, and using his fingers under my chin, made me look into his water-gray eyes. "I am pleased that you're finally speaking though. That is an improvement. Now fetch daddy his tools."

From that moment in time, every time I failed to complete a task on-time he hurt the boy. And every time I didn't move fast enough he hurt the boy. He hurt the boy even when I wasn't watching, and especially when I was. And for twelve hours we stayed at it. Until finally he excused himself to go to the rectory to clean up and get something to eat.

And when he was gone the boy called out to me, "Cassandra... Cassandra..." he said weakly.

"Cassandra let me down now, quick before he comes back... let me down."

He was bleeding from his rectum and a million other places too. And his arms were bent and funny looking, as if both of his shoulders had been dislocated. And when he spoke he coughed, and wretched up blood.

"Cassandra..." he begged again, as I stood there looking at him, knowing that it wasn't over, knowing that Father Cormac had never intended to train him. There was no coming back from these wounds, and there would be no salvation for the boy, as there had been for me.

I cut the rope with an old pair of sheep shears. It took a while, and when it was finally done he fell to the ground in a lump, making no more sound than a tiny grunt as the air was forced from his lungs.

I went to his side then, and bent over him, thinking there was something I could do, surely there would be something I could do...

He tried to lift his hand, I could see it in his face, feel the muscles give a feeble twitch. I wanted to scream at him to 'Run!', but I knew he couldn't. I wanted to yell and scream and make him get up, get out, before it was too late.

He was fourteen, just fourteen, but if you had seen him there, as I did, you would've thought he was so much younger.

And I remember thinking that's what we're all like when we're helpless, when there's no hope, when we're retreating into that far-away place. We grow small again, shrinking, as if we could fit into our mother's arms once more. Why... he was like that then... a small fraction of what he'd been; all the light and luster gone from his wavy brown hair, all his tenacity and wildness worn from his very soul.

"I can't feel you."

I took his hand.

"He's gonna come back."

I nodded as the tears and snot drained from me, falling on his face and chest.

"He's gonna kill me."

I sobbed into his sweat and blood-soaked hair.

"Tell my mother... tell her... I'm... sorry."

I wouldn't agree, how could I? Because I knew I'd never leave that cursed convent.

"Please don't let me..." he coughed, and blood splattered my face.

I shook my head, and begged silently for him to just die, for him to just go to sleep, for him to find the ferryman, and pay him his coin to take him quickly to the other side.

"Cassandra don't let him hurt me anymore." His voice was so weak, but his eyes burned with an intensity you cannot ever imagine, not ever. I dare you to disagree.

Why... the vibrant blues of a mid-day sky would never look the same.

"I can't," I lied.

"You must," he begged.

I sobbed until my nose ran dry, and I heard the Angelus bell tolling out, calling the nuns to their mid-day prayer. Surely someone would come looking for me...but what then? They had never saved me, and so I knew... they would turn their blind eyes from his suffering as well, just as people always do.

"He's coming," Anson said, with barely enough voice to whisper, yet the panic was as bright in his blue eyes as it had ever been.

"He's coming."

I looked around for something to smother him with. There was nothing. I got up and searched and searched, and still found nothing I could press over his face, taking his breath from him, as I'd seen the Welshman do so many times before.

I heard him cough, heard his wheezing breath, heard his body trying to do what I could not. And then I heard Father Cormac coming, his booming voice caught up in the glory of song, he belted out a hymn as he walked. Revived by his ablutions and penance, and no doubt a hot meal and some coffee; he was returning to his unfinished work, returning with a renewed vigor.

When I dropped to Anson's side, I could see the tears had mixed with the blood matted in his hair, sticking it to his face. I rubbed and scraped at it with my fingers, to no logical end.

"I can't find anything," I cried.

"It's okay. You couldn't have done it anyway."

Looking back on it, I don't think he was calling me weak... maybe just the opposite, but just then, kneeling there beside him, knowing what was coming, knowing what lay before him, how it must have looked to him, I would have sworn that he was calling me weak.

And I was. For it was all my fault.

"What are you doing?" Father Cormac asked in exasperation, or rather in wonder, but certainly not in anger, as I had expected. No... that came later.

Just then he was simply too stunned for anger, and so he just stood there in the doorway, blocking most of the light that would have streamed into the tiny building.

"What have you done?" he asked again, this time with some force.

"Isn't this what you wanted?" I asked as sweetly as I could.

One hand over his mouth, the other pinching off his nose, I stared long and hard into Anson's brilliant blue eyes, for the very last time.

"I'm breaking his heart."



"You killed him?" the doctor asked so perfectly amazed, Cassandra knew it was a bluff.

The doctor sat across the empty table from Cassandra, regarding her with more empathy than Cassandra thought she had a right to.

"You're not recording this?" Cassandra asked.

The doctor hadn't brought in her typical recording devices and the red light that normally flashes a steadily rhythm on the overhead camera was silent.

"No. I thought it best if some things remained between the two of us." She smiled a truly sad smile, that Cassandra wasn't sure how to take.

"Yes. I killed him." Cassandra didn't see a point in lying about it now. If they wanted it on tape all the better, then she wouldn't have to repeat herself. She'd done it, and now she was going to pay for it.

"To stop the torture?"

Cassandra nodded. Then thinking of something she asked, "How did you know about the lion?"

“When they found the boy’s body, they found it... inside of him,” Dr. Veda told Cassandra, who only nodded in reply.

“Father Cormac did that, to make you pay for loving him?”

“It was suddenly gone from my room... I never knew why.”

“I didn’t know...” Cassandra held the little lion tightly in her grip, clearly unwilling to part with it now.

“And what about Mason? You nearly killed him, doing to him what Father Cormac did to Anson. Does that make you the same as him?”

Cassandra had weighed that question in her mind since the first moment she had laid the taser to Mason’s chest. Would she be the same as he who had come before her? She still didn’t have an answer for that.

“Only God can weigh a soul and determine its worth.”

“And you believe that?”

“I’d already be dead if I didn’t.”

The doctor sighed.

“Mason is being charged with the murder of Byron Edelston. Is there anything you can tell us about that?”

Cassandra couldn’t help the little laugh that escaped her then. “Why?”

“Why? Because you owe him.”

“No, not why should I help him, why is he being charged? The idiot stepped out in front of a bus, there were witnesses.”

“So far no one has come forward, except for a gentleman named Perez, but he is hardly credible.”

“If you say so,” Cassandra replied indifferently.

“So you don’t care what happens to him?”

An empty silence permeated the small room.

“Tell me something then... is there even the smallest part of you that regrets what you’ve done?”

Cassandra regarded the woman for a long time, and all the while the little lion went around and around in her fingers under the table. Then, after having given it a great deal of thought, she simply said, “No.”

For as long as she could recall, Ashlyn had loved the water. Perhaps because it was the only activity her overly-protective parents had allowed her to participate in. Because somehow once in the water they had forgotten about her deficiencies, and for those small spaces of time Ashlyn did too. So she supposed it shouldn't have come as such a surprise to her, just how relaxing a beach-resort vacation could be. And yet Ashlyn was surprised, and remained so, as she sat in the waist-deep water that overlooked the beach; and beyond that the light-blue waters of the Caribbean Sea.

Ashlyn closed her eyes and let the rays of the sun warm her face, and then, with a lazy smile she turned to the bartender and said, "Another, please."

And of course he obeyed, as he cast her a lazy smile of his own.

"I mean to drink until I'm drunk," she informed him, as she twirled a useless two-inch umbrella around and around in her fingers.

"I can help with that," the neatly-bearded bartender said with a wink, as he dumped an additional shot of rum into her Caribbean-blue drink.

Ashlyn smiled more meaningfully up at the well-tanned man, as she sat there at the half-submerged Tiki-Hut Bar.

"Thanks Tyrone," she said. And then she asked, "Where was I?" when she realized her story had faded off.

"The lawyer came for Mason," Tyrone told her, genuinely invested.

"Yes, he did," Ashlyn said, as she swiveled in her seat, until she was once again facing the small crowd that had gathered to listen to her tale.

"It seems there was a witness... no other than the paparazzo Oscar Perez. Apparently after the media began speculating about the 'accidental' death of Mason's assistant," Ashlyn used finger quotes, in order to emphasize just how 'accidental' she'd thought it had been.

"...the man came forward as an eye witness, with photos to boot, proving Mason had in fact tried to save his friend. They were time-stamped by satellite," she said, by way of answering the question the more-sober of them held in their eyes.

"According to Perez's photos Mason got angry with him, and even shoved him. But when it came down to it, when Mason had seen the bus barreling down on his friend, he had tried to do the right thing, and pull him back. Only it was too little, too late, and the man died."

Ashlyn knew now that those ghastly photos of Byron's dead and broken body would be with her, every day, until the day she died. No matter what. But it was okay, because she knew she'd done everything she could to find justice for the man. Only, she knew in her heart-of-hearts justice had still not been done.

"And so Mason was let go and given our thanks for helping with the Cassandra case," Ashlyn finished dryly, as she slid the freshly-made blue devil daiquiri closer to her waiting lips.

“And Cassandra?” the gentleman to her right with the red-tinged curls asked, just as Ashlyn was taking the first sip.

Ashlyn sighed softly into her drink, as she thought about the strange, sad woman at the center of her first case, and then she took another sip before she answered the question; a long, hard sip, that drained nearly half of her drink.

“The evidence was overwhelming in her case. Only... the judge was Catholic,” Ashlyn said aloud for all to hear, but inside, for her alone she thought *and thank god*.

Ashlyn looked from face to face, as she thought about Cassandra. And then, with a sad smile of her own, she said, “Three years. Cassandra must serve out at least three years in a mental institution before she can be released.”

“But that’s not fair,” a slightly inebriated woman said from some ways off. And Ashlyn whole-heartedly agreed, though she kept that opinion to herself.

“Did she kill the priest?” the man to her right asked.

“I don’t think she did,” Ashlyn told him honestly enough. “But so far, Sister Margaret and Cassandra are holding to their stories, both saying that she did. Of course it was in self-defense, and no one would argue that. So, it’s been put to rest. But if you ask me, I’ll tell you ‘No’, she didn’t kill the man, it’s just not in her bones.”

“If you ask me, I’d say she got a pretty damn-good deal. Especially considering she only had a public defender, and that Mason fella was so famous and all,” the man to her left said rather snootily. And even though he was dressed only in a tight pair of Speedos (that left nothing to the imagination), and his particular drawl left him sounding somewhat uneducated, Ashlyn could very-well imagine the man to her left was typically found in an obscenely expensive three-piece-suit.

“After his release, Mason refused to assist us in any way with the Cassandra case. And...” Ashlyn’s voice trailed off, as she dove-in for another long pull of her daiquiri. Then, when she felt like she could keep her face in check, she turned to her left and said, “And Cassandra wasn’t represented by a public defender. She had Darryl Lockley instead.”

Unfortunately for Ashlyn, the businessman’s shock proved too-much for her dwindling self-control, and a slight smile escaped her lips; which she quickly tried to hide by going in for another sip of her drink. But the man knew, and like all the others sober enough to know, he smiled too.

“Good,” was all anyone said, as they all began to drift away, each of them fading back to their own private reality. And for the remainder of that day, Ashlyn was left alone to contemplate the very complicated details of her first case; the good, the bad, and the... *ever so awkward*.

And later, in her room, as the last rays of sun retreated back into the jungle that ringed the small village of huts the resort was nestled among, she realized perhaps the most important thing.

“What is it?” a deep voice asked from the shadows.

“I... I...” Ashlyn stammered for a second, as all of her various thoughts slowly clicked into place.

“I understand,” she told him, as she snugged the leather corset about her waist.

“What do you understand?” the somewhat strained voice inquired.

“Cassandra. She told me that she was trying to make Mason strong, like her. Only not like her... stronger even, and flexible. And to do that she had to be both hard and soft with the man. She had to temper her touch with both fire and ice. She had to create in him a bi-metal blade that would be both infinitely hard, and supremely flexible.”

Ashlyn’s voice grew in strength as her once errant thoughts coalesced into something solid, something concrete...

“But it isn’t lust that tempers a blade. Lust is cold and empty, and devoid of all that is truly required. No...” Ashlyn said softly, as she picked up the end of a long, leather leash.

“No...” she repeated, as she came to stand behind the man kneeling in the center of her hotel room floor.

“It’s love,” she whispered into his ear, as her gloved hands pulled tight the leash holding him fast. And with a nip to his ear, she brought forth an involuntary shiver. And with another, this time to the base of his neck, she coaxed from him some more.

“A man who can love; his wife, his kids, his family dog...”

Ashlyn pulled a small taser-wand from a bag of goodies she’d purchased once she had crossed the border.

“...now there’s a flexible man.” Each of Ashlyn’s words were punctuated by tiny jolts of current that escaped the metal tip of the taser, only to leap joyfully into the waiting man’s ever-yielding skin.

And the man, shivering in delight, could do nothing more than accept whatever she had planned. Short of calling out a ‘safe’ word of course, which was the very last thing he wanted to do.

“Yes, Mistress...” he cooed, when out of nowhere her attentions paused.

Suddenly frozen in place, Ashlyn was struck by another lesson Cassandra had almost gotten right...

“We fight. We women... every bit as much as men, only our war is fought over our Goddamn bodies, and our battles are fought behind closed doors, and in darkened alleyways, and even plastered all over the goddamn TV. But we are destined to lose, each and every one of us - Everything, and Always. Because we are unable to shed that one pesky constraint, that holds us powerless: our morality. And while our captors, our conquerors, our cunning conquistadors, fight-the-dirty-fight, full of despicable deeds and psychological warfare; we stand above, easy and willing targets.”

Ashlyn could hear Cassandra’s words even now, and they made her no-less angry. Only now, here in this place, tempered by everything she’d come to learn, she knew this...

There is only one reason to fight, and that is to win.

And so women will fight, here in the trenches... guerilla-like, a modern warfare where people are as deadly as the terrain. Because now they’ve no choice. There’s nothing else they can do. The war had been brought to them, and already too many had fallen, never to be heard from again. And so, sunk deep within the weeds, they will stalk the snake, because it’s their only hope to survive.

“Did you hear?” Detective Pfluger had asked.

“Hear what?” Ashlyn had asked in return, playing perfectly naive.

“The photos of Mason pushing Byron in front of the bus have been leaked to the media,” Dt. Pfluger had told her, just hours before Mason was to be released.

“And they came from us,” he said, with no small degree of disgust.

Ashlyn knew better than anyone where the photos had come from, because she’d used Dr. Sullivan’s phone to send them, ‘anonymously’ to the media.

“Do they know who?” she’d asked, pretending to be busy.

“Sullivan, the idiot. Seems he was more upset than we thought about you getting the Cassandra case,” Dt. Pfluger said, looking long and hard into Ashlyn’s eyes, as if weighing in them something only he could see.

But Ashlyn’s vision was more than clear, because she’d come to understand, what Cassandra had said was true. Sullivan wanted her to fail, he wanted her job, and he wanted her office. And the only way to survive was to remove that threat. And for her, it was the only logical end.

Fighting by a code of superior morality only cripples you in a world that recognizes no such limits. Therefore morality must be laid aside, until victory is in hand.

And Oh... to be one of the victorious few, who alone are granted the method and means of moral superiority.

“Hold still. This will only hurt for a moment,” Ashlyn told the man’ as she knitted the fingers of her left hand into his short, auburn curls.

“Yes Mistress,” he purred as the promised paddling commenced.

37 Cassandra

Detective Veda sat patiently in the uncomfortable waiting room chair. Then, after the better-part of an hour, a rather good-looking male orderly came to fetch her.

“She’ll see you now,” was all he said before he turned and trotted away, and suddenly it was everything Ashlyn could do to keep up with him.

“She’ll be in shortly,” the attractive orderly said without turning, as he deposited her inside a rather large and comfortable looking office.

“Thanks,” Ashlyn told his back, as he quickly retreated around the corner.

Taking a seat Ashlyn began another long, uninterrupted wait. Finally, after another half-hour an older gentleman dressed in white came in.

“Hello, I’m Cassandra’s doctor, Gregory... if you please.”

“Hello Gregory, I’m Detective Veda from the Austin police department, but you can call me Ashlyn,” Ashlyn said, still getting used to how the new title felt inside her mouth.

With a knowing smile the doctor turned back towards the darkened-glass wall behind his desk.

“If you don’t mind?” he asked, motioning for Ashlyn to join him.

Ashlyn, without knowing what to expect, joined him in front of the one-way mirror.

“I’d like you to see something,” was all he said, before he reached over and flicked on a switch. And like that, the glass went from opaque to see-through, and on the other side was a room full of children, and Cassandra.

And for a long time the two just stood there watching and listening.

“She’s very good with them,” Ashlyn finally said to the man.

“Yes, very,” he answered in-kind.

“Is this part of her treatment?”

“I guess, but mostly theirs.”

Ashlyn looked back to the children, this time paying closer attention to how they were dressed, and their mannerisms.

“They’re all patients here?”

“Yes, all of them. And some were quite bad, until she came.”

“But why? What does she have to offer them?” Ashlyn didn’t bother trying to hide the astonishment in her voice, nor the curiosity. She really wanted to know.

“Perhaps they sense in her a likeness, a similarity that begs trust. Or perhaps it’s her protectiveness. See how she stands over them? How she moves, in circles, keeping them all together?”

“Can I speak with her?” Ashlyn asked the graying man.

“Of course. I’ll have her brought in.



“I’m sorry to leav`e you waiting. But I didn’t want to leave the children,” Cassandra said, coming into the room; her hair down past her waist, and her face alight with exertion. Ashlyn couldn’t help thinking the woman had never looked so beautiful.

“It’s not a problem,” Ashlyn told her, as Cassandra took a seat opposite from her.

“You seem different,” Cassandra said curiously, cocking her head from one side, and then to the next.

“I think I am,” Ashlyn admitted, a degree of pride coloring her cheeks.

“And Mason?” Cassandra asked without emotion.

“Apparently his career has sky-rocketed.”

And now it was Cassandra who blushed in an unusual show of pride.

“It seems a good sex scandal is just what his career needed. And now he’s Hollywood’s *it man*. And it’s disgusting if you ask me,” Ashlyn said by way of letting Cassandra know just how deserving she felt the man to be.

“It’s nothing less than what he deserves,” Cassandra told the woman defensively. To which the doctor, in-turn, cocked her head.

“He wasn’t in his right mind,” Cassandra explained. “Certainly you can see that.”

To which, “Perhaps,” was all the good-doctor replied.

“And that was because of me,” Cassandra confessed finally, as she pulled her feet up onto the chair in front of her, so that she could wrap her arms protectively around her knees. Because no matter how hard she tried, she still couldn’t get Byron’s last few minutes out of her mind.

“How can you choose her over me?” Byron had shouted at Mason, when he had finally caught up with him.

“Choose? Choose? There isn’t a choice you fucking fairy!” Mason had screamed back at him, with all of the savagery of a wounded animal, taking hold of Byron’s lapel, and shaking him where he stood.

“You couldn’t tell me that last night!” Byron yelled back. And just like that... with a shove... Mason sent him, arms flailing, out into the street.

But he had grabbed him again and was pulling him back to safety when Bryon opened his mouth one last time.

“Maybe I should just fuck her...”

And like that – Mason spread his fingers and let go.

And Bryon fell into the oncoming traffic.

But it was the look of unmasked glee on Mason’s face, as he had served out the sentence that he alone had sanctioned and condoned, that still haunted Cassandra’s every-waking dream.

Because it had been the look of an executioner, Cassandra thought, and one that takes great pride in his work. And it was this look... of utter elation... that she saw every time she closed her eyes. And no matter what she did it was always there... reminding her of what she’d done.

“And how are you?” Ashlyn asked, more than happy to set the topic of Mason aside.

“Honestly?” Cassandra asked tiredly.

Ashlyn gave a gentle nod.

“I can’t seem to lay my suffering aside.”

“And why do you think that is?”

“Perhaps because I know that when I do, I will truly be alone,” Cassandra said simply, her empty-eyes cast out across the room.

“Misery, it seems, has been my only constant companion, and to forsake it now, in place of a happiness, a happiness I’ve never known... well I imagine that would be no different than to abandon a leaking boat and simply *hope* instead for that distant shore.”

“Perhaps, but how can you ever hope to get anywhere if you never make the leap?” Detective Veda asked, surprising even herself by her rather esoteric choice of words.

“When I was a girl I would sit among the trees for hours, and be perfectly content, if not happy. Because in them I felt the same type of loneliness that I knew no other human being felt; a silent opiate that satiates all other aches, this... aloneness, this filling up with ‘void’ displaced it all. And for me... it was enough.”

“Sometimes it was everything,” she added a moment later, but not as an after-thought, but rather instead as if some secret, long-held, was finally coming to the surface.

“And yet you aren’t alone now. You have the children.”

“Yes.”

“And don’t they make you happy?”

“No. Not happy. Responsible perhaps,” Cassandra said before she picked up a stray lock of hair and began chewing at the frayed ends.

Ashlyn, even with her double degrees, and now her new detective’s badge, couldn’t for the life of her work this ever-maddening woman out.

“Why is that?” she asked with a level voice.

Cassandra stood slowly, and then began a slow turn about the office. “I would live every day in pain if my choice was that or to never feel pain again. But I would not make the same choice were it pleasure. No, don’t you see? Pleasure is by-far the more-wicked of the two,

certainly it's more conniving, more corruptible." Cassandra stopped abruptly, and turned her suddenly dark, and troubled eyes upon the detective.

"But pain is something I know a great deal about. So isn't it my job, my duty even, to help? To intercede? To provide for them a road-map so that they can navigate their way back?"

"And how do you do that?" Detective Veda asked.

"I'm not sure," Cassandra said softly as she returned to her seat.

Her bare feet, her hospital-gown made up of a patchwork of old-recycled robes, and her hair, a free-flowing tumble-weed of curls and snarls, all combined to give Cassandra the look of a wild and untamed woman.

"I thought I knew. But I failed with Mason. But I know now... I couldn't have hurt him enough. Pain alone was never going to strengthen him."

Ashlyn stared at the woman, afraid to cough, afraid to move an inch, for fear Cassandra would stop talking.

"I was wrong in thinking that pain alone was enough to make him. But I know better now. Pain is just a tool, nothing more. And it must be wielded by more than just a capable hand."

"Love," Detective Veda said slowly after a significant pause.

Cassandra, for all of her sullen ways, could not help the smile that slowly over-took her face.

"Yes," she said, the smile ringing louder and truer than her light-raspy voice.

"Yes, and what is suffering if not loving everyone and everything, and still never seeing that love returned?" Cassandra pondered aloud as the detective stood up to leave.

"Indeed," Ashlyn replied as she walked slowly through the office door.

"What indeed?"



Two days after Ashlyn's visit, Cassandra received two other visitors, the first being the paparazzo Oscar Perez.

"Perez," Cassandra said in a low and sultry voice, as she was escorted into the familiar office.

"Cassandra," the middle-aged man said with an apparent degree of discomfort.

"I was surprised to hear you'd come to see me."

"Really?" he asked, his voice sounding genuinely surprised.

“There’s little I can do for you here,” Cassandra said rather dryly, as she reached out and stroked the man’s hand.

“Well maybe there’s something I can do for you,” he told her, as she led him towards the sofa.

“But you’ve already done so much,” Cassandra told him, which in her mind was the truth.

“And maybe I haven’t done enough,” he told her darkly, his thick eyebrows knitting themselves together in the center of his forehead.

“What is it?” Cassandra asked, now more than a little worried.

“I told you I would testify on behalf of Mason, that I would provide the altered photos, on one account…” the man began, but then seemed to lose his courage.

“Go on,” Cassandra prompted, starting to lose her patience.

The small man pushed himself back onto the sofa until his feet were just barely touching the floor. Then turning to Cassandra, he laid a hand on top of hers.

“…on account of you. But perhaps it wasn’t such a smart thing to do.”

“Why? Why do you say that?” Cassandra asked, knowing full-well she didn’t want to know.

“Because I followed him.”

Then, before she could wonder, the photographer took a stack of photos from his case.

“I took these last night, with a telephoto lens.”

And there suddenly before her was Cassandra’s greatest fear. Mason, whip-in-hand, had become the thing she dreaded the most; a cast-iron man, hollow of feeling, and devoid of humanity, he had become the very devil she loathed.

“And so pride does goeth before the fall,” she said, as the photos fell from her hand, to scatter across the table.

“He’s had her for at least a week,” the man beside her said.

“I didn’t know,” was all Cassandra could think to say.

“You owe me,” Perez said, filling in the silence, like only a man can.

“I do.”

“So what will you give me for these?” he asked, a lecherous smile spreading across his face as he waved his hand over the ghastly images.

“Anything you want,” Cassandra told him softly, as she began gathering up the photos that had been scattered across the wooden surface of the coffee table.

“I want…” the man began, but Cassandra wasn’t listening. Silently she dropped the photos one-by-one into a large, glass vase, and then with a long match made for candles she set them ablaze.

“I want you,” he growled, growing incrementally bolder.

Cassandra turned to him, a growl of her own tucked away into the empty closet of her chest, and simply said, "I know."



A short time later she was called once again into her psychiatrist's office.

"You have another visitor," the kindly man said.

"It seems I just can't help myself today," Cassandra cooed, though it did nothing to fool the observant man.

"Would you like me to stay this time?" he asked, taking up her hand.

"No, I think it's best if I hear him out alone."

"Very well mon cher."

And with that he was gone, and a moment later the door opened again. Only this time it wasn't the repugnant face of the Hispanic photographer, this time it was the face of an angel.

"Cassandra," he said, sweeping into the room, and sweeping her up into his arms in one fell-swoop.

"Happy Birthday," he whispered into her ear.

Cassandra tried to make her body stop, tried to make it obey, so that it wouldn't flinch at his words, so that it wouldn't betray just how she felt.

But she failed.

Pushing her out to arms-length, the priest looked Cassandra square in the face. "Maybe not your real birthday," he said, a sad smile threatening his eyes.

"But a day to celebrate you. That you're here," he said so sincerely it nearly brought a tear to her eye.

"But it's just a day, picked randomly..." Cassandra started to complain. But then she thought the better of it, as she knew nothing Father Cormac had done had been at random. And so instead she changed the topic.

"How are you?" she asked him, more than eager to know.

And at that Father Mahoney smiled one of his killer, mind-blowing smiles; a smile to endear children and beasts alike.

"I'm good. I'm good," he told her, as he pulled her in for one more hug. And then releasing her again, he took a small step back.

Looking thoughtful, Cassandra opened her mouth to speak. But no words came from her lips because she could see it in his eyes... the memory of their first fateful meeting... how she must have looked to him in those first few seconds that he had seen her....

But perhaps it was stamped permanently onto his memory, and no matter what that was all he was ever going to see.

“How long has it been?” she asked, knowing full-well how long it’d been.

“A long time,” Father Mahoney told her in a suddenly strained voice.

And indeed, it had been a long time, nearly a year, since that fateful day, when they’d first met. And from the troubled look in his eyes, Cassandra knew Father Mahoney was recalling that first day as well.

When he had come barging into her cell...

With Sister Margaret Mary nipping on his heels, screaming, “You can’t go in there! You can’t go in!”

But in he’d gone.

And with him came a thunderstorm. Or so it had seemed to Cassandra, as she knelt there naked upon the floor.

“I’m sorry,” she told him.

His eyes, still lost in thought, lost in memory, seemed to be suddenly drowning in emotion, and when he spoke, the priest’s voice was raw, and yet unyielding.

“Why?”

If she closed her eyes, Cassandra could still feel the cold tile press, hard and cold, against her knees...

“It was my fault,” she told his stomach; because it was the only place she dared to look.

Father Cormac had come with news of making her a nun. He’d come to rejoice. He’d come to celebrate. But Cassandra had seen a light at the end of the tunnel. She’d glimpsed freedom...and so she had refused.

And because of that, she had been doomed.

“No,” she had told him.

To which Father Cormac had simply replied, “I will not have you backslide.” And before she knew it, Cassandra was thrust back into that old nightmare again. Stripped naked, forced onto her knees, arms tethered out in front of her... Father Cormac was once again asserting his dolorous dominion over her.

And that’s when her knight in shining armor had arrived, in his flowing white robes and fire-kissed hair. Cassandra had thought him an angel when first she’d laid eyes upon him; as he stood there in the open doorway, with the light of the failing-sun shining in behind him.

Haloed in light, he had looked like an angel. Even his rage had seemed divine, as if it were reigning down upon her from heaven.

Because in a flash of white, Father Cormac was ripped from her, and thrown across the floor. And suddenly all Cassandra could do was crouch there, naked, like a snared wildcat, with her teeth barred and back arched.

But it was Father Cormac the angel had come for, and in a vision of ecclesiastic-white, the angel had rained destruction down upon the man.

“No!” the angel had roared, as he beat the naked man with a large brass candlestick. Over and over, he beat the man upon his head and face, until the graying priest was totally unrecognizable.

“No!” the angel screamed again, this time as Sister Margaret Mary snatched away his bloody instrument.

“I was my fault,” Cassandra confessed to the priest standing before her. She had always wondered what she would say to him, if she ever got to see him again, and now... with him standing in front of her, after everything... all she could manage was “it’s my fault”.

To which the young, handsome priest simply asked “Why?”

When Cassandra didn’t answer he went on.

“If only the pool of my indiscretions was so shallow,” he said with a light-hearted shake of his head, before he took a seat on the corner of the psychiatrist’s desk.

“No, I’ve never been so lucky as that. You see, I didn’t come to this collar all sanctified and pure Cassandra. I came to it because I have a great deal to atone for. And if I can rectify some... other things... along the way... well then, all the better.”

“And no,” he continued. “Because what I did that day was a blessing and not a sin, because Father Cormac was more beast than man. And he needed to be put down.”

“But I did fail... that day and every day since...” he said ever-so-softly.

“...with you,” he finished, as his hand came to Cassandra’s cheek; moist and warm, it was the opposite of everything she’d expected it to be.

Of course she had no defenses against such things.

“Here, there’s something I want to show you. I’ve wanted to show you for a very long time.” He said the words with a coy smile that did a funny thing to Cassandra’s heart. Or very near to where her heart ought to have been.

But then, as his fingers moved to the top button of his cassock, her heart very nearly stopped.

And should she have tried for a hundred years, been given a million do-overs, Cassandra knew she would never have been able to stop the gasp of shock that escaped her just then.

“No... no... here, I don’t want to...” he began, but stopped when the right words just wouldn’t come.

“I was only trying to show...” he began again, trying a different tack. But somehow that one failed him as well.

“It’s okay,” Cassandra told him, as she reached out to unbutton it for him. After all... this was something she knew.

“No!” the priest barked, swatting her hands away.

Then, after squaring his shoulders and straightening his back, he made quick-work of the numerous buttons on the front of his dress-robos. And then, before Cassandra had much time to think, he pulled the jet-black robes from him.

And for a long time Cassandra just stood there, staring upon that alien design that was painted to look so familiar. Painted in scars, scars stretched out over time.

“I didn’t know,” she told him.

“And that’s why I wanted to show you.”

“How? Why?” Cassandra asked, reaching out a tentative hand to touch one of the more notable scars that criss-crossed his chest.

With a light chuckle, Father Mahoney said, “Those are always the questions.”

Gently he gathered up her hand, and kissed it, exactly as a priest would.

“But I think the more important question is, *What now?*” he said with a smile, but it was one Cassandra knew well, one people in pain often bandy about – as if others don’t know, as if others can’t tell.

“I…” she said, but then couldn’t go on.

“I…” he echoed back playfully.

“I should have thanked you a long time ago. I would have… only…” Cassandra’s voice trailed off as, just as before, the words failed her.

“No. It’s me that should be thanking you Cassandra. Dearest Cassandra. You didn’t have to take the blame for me. I was more than prepared to face the music.”

“They didn’t charge me for it anyway, so there’s nothing to thank. Just be glad that Sister Margret Mary kept her end of the deal.”

“Speaking of Sister Margret…” the priest said, as he slid back inside his cassock. “She has been removed from the convent. And for now, she is doing penance in a mission down in Brazil.”

“Brazil?” Cassandra asked; wonder coloring her voice and her cheeks a bright pink.

But the Irish priest just laughed and then pulled her in for one more hug. This time a bit longer than before.

“Father?” Cassandra asked in a small and hesitant voice, as he slowly released her from his grip.

“Yes?” he asked, turning the full weight of his gorgeous green eyes upon her.

“Can I ask… a favor of you?”

“Anything,” he said, even before he knew what she’d have him do. Because it was true. Anything she would ask – he would do. He owed her his life after all. And if not his life, at least his freedom. And that was something he swore he’d never again lose.

Ten minutes later, Father Mahoney was at the door. And suddenly there was nothing left, but goodbye.

“Cassandra,” the priest said softly, as he stepped backwards through the door.

“Father,” Cassandra replied, equally as soft, as she slowly closed it behind him.

And then, when it was shut, and he could no longer hear, she laid the palm of her right hand on the flat wooden surface and in a fragile voice said, “Never again.”

Epilogue

Four days later Mason finally got his wish, as his sudden death made headlines all over the world, because finally... he'd outshined them all.

Actor Mason Harlow was found dead Wednesday morning in his LA home, where authorities say a make-shift dungeon was found. Witness accounts state that a young woman escaped from this home-made 'torture chamber' just hours prior to Harlow's sudden and mysterious death. Autopsy reports suggest that he died of autoerotic asphyxiation, and yet foul play has not been ruled out.

By contrast, it should be noted, that less than a week later a body was discovered floating just off the Mexican coast. And though the short, cantankerous man would die, much as he lived, out of the spot-light and anonymous to fame, some could argue the importance of the paparazzo's role in this most inglorious game.