

WAKE THROUGH THE WASTES

a psychological thriller

S. Whittington

I: The Prowl

She sauntered through the lively crowds outside on the sidewalk, donning her permanent smirk on her flesh-colored lips. The night's desert wind brushed her caramel-brown bob haircut, the even locks ending abruptly just below her ears and barely curling away from her neck. Her unblinking dark-brown eyes swiveled back and forth through the bustling throng of nobodies, scanning for something.

Or someone.

The gaudy flashing lights of Las Vegas bathed her smooth, creamy-tan skin and tight dark-blue cocktail dress. Her outfit severely contoured around her taut derriere, accentuating her hips with her graceful yet clockwork gait. One would be tempted to think her an animatronic doll in her polished high heels clopping through the Strip; there was something so...profound about her...and yet...so uncanny. She was just too perfect.

And sharp. Razor-sharp.

The very sight of her cut hearts and elevated the blood pressures of men, especially below their waists. Her smirk widened, gently showing faint parentheses marks at the corners of her mouth; she wondered how many dicks she had hardened in each pair of pants that passed by her. Ravenous eyes looked her up and down, glancing at her cleavage, with wives and girlfriends rebuking their lustful partners and glaring daggers at the azure temptress drawing gazes. She silently relished in the men's naughty stares, finding the exasperation of their insecure female companions equally delightful. Yet she wasn't there in Sin City for cheap, sleazy fun or to burn away her life's savings, though she would have people believe so. Though she wasn't local to the states, this wasn't her first time here.

There was so much scum to choose from...and so little time.

And there was one in particular. Right at the top of her list.

It was no mystery that Vegas drew the seediest of crowds. Vagabonds. Drug addicts. Drug dealers. Rich Yuppies in pinstripe suits. Security guards. Even an Elvis impersonator. Crooks and party animals of all sorts, traveling from all over the world to this debauched hub of materialistic glitz and copious smut, all prattling on a din of their various languages. Duos of voluptuous feathered showgirls in sequined outfits passed her here and there, strutting like peacocks, gossiping like no tomorrow; one was pregnant, her rotund belly on the verge of popping. The aromas of gourmet cuisine, cologne, and perfumes melded with the odors of marijuana, hot garbage, and raw sewage, all combining into a malodorous bile that filled every pair of nostrils. Rivers of traffic blared in the streets, honking horns with police sirens and strobe lights adding to the flamboyant atmosphere.

But her idea of a good time was considered a tad bit...unconventional, even for Vegas.

But it felt so right. So damned good.

She finally stopped, her manicured right hand resting on her dark-blue purse near her hip, then she surveyed her surroundings. Her head smoothly pivoted back and forth, still seeking, still surmising, ignoring the laughing and catcalling she received from passing delinquents, their voices quickly drowned out by the nightlife's clamor. Across the street to her left, she spotted the casino, a well-known joint, one she hadn't visited in a good while.

But this wasn't exactly a pleasure trip. Not this time.

With a shameless flick of her hair, she proceeded along the crosswalk toward her destination through another drove of simpletons and tourists. Peasants. Slaves. Wretches. Playing that

meaningless game called society. *This* was their idea of fun? They were thrown into this superficial world for whatever twisted reason, growing up to make temporary friends they would never see again in adulthood, eventually lose their parents, *maybe* find a romantic partner, reproduce, then die. She scoffed. She knew better. She knew that life was just an overcomplicated load of shit, an elaborate sham.

But she still had her own reasons for pressing onward.

It still weighed on her. Every night.

What happened years ago...in the desert.

Money and ordinary sex just didn't do it for her anymore. And why should they? Money was just slips of green paper with pictures of dead men printed on it, forgotten "presidents" cross-dressing as old ladies, jackasses whom no one cared about. Green paper. Dead trees. And people all over the world starved to death, ravaged by wars fueled by greedy politicians, all because the poor sods didn't have enough slips of this useless paper to support them. Either as paper...or software. Bitcoin, plastic credit cards, information tacked up in online bank accounts. Electrical data. What laughable trash it all was! And many people wasted away...all because they didn't have enough wads of dead trees or digital signals to sustain themselves, while the so-called "elite" ruled the world in wanton bliss. And here so many people were, in Vegas, throwing it all away in their reckless, delusional attempts to accumulate more of it, only for their pitiful broken souls to stagnate all the more within, another distraction from the inevitable grave.

Hell on earth.

Why bother accruing wealth when one could take whatever one wanted, whether by force or guile, so long as one knows how to get away with it? And the police dared call *her* a "criminal." How amusing. Damned hypocrites, always clad in those glorified Boy Scout uniforms with their Batman utility belts around their lazy, bulging guts, thinking themselves cowboys. She was no prude either. She didn't know everything, just a lot more than most people. And she was determined to get what she wanted yet again, tonight.

If only it would feel like that first time....

And contrary to what people said, what happened in Vegas most certainly did *not* stay in Vegas. Not at all. Like she had any intention for it to stay here, anyway. And unbeknownst to them, she wasn't here to simply get off from these escapades of hers. She was here to make another statement to the world, to that useless waning system they called civilization.

Time to behead the snake.

She walked through the glass double doors of the casino, escaping the churning hordes outside and into the luxurious lobby. Two doormen in uniform stood as she produced her driver's license from her purse and handed it to the one on her left, still smirking. The man scanned it, then passed it back to her.

"Thank you," her soft, delicate Australian voice breathed.

"Enjoy your stay, ma'am," the doorman to the right replied, smiling.

"Would any of you gents like to direct me to the bar, please?" she asked.

The left doorman pointed at the lavish counter far behind him, past the various slot machines predominantly operated by middle-aged tourists.

"Thank you so much," she cooed, almost curtsying in her tight dress.

With that, she strolled toward the distant drinks, her stiletto heels clapping on the black marble tiles like cloven hooves as the men behind her whispered about her like twelve-year-old boys wearing shit-eating grins. She flicked her hair again, pretending to be annoyed; as if they had never seen a lady before.

But perhaps...she was expected tonight.

Especially tonight.

She proudly promenaded past the myriad of gamblers: blackjack, poker, people rolling dice in games of craps, the clinking of glasses from waitresses, the clanking and beeping of slot machines, the clacking of roulette tables. She spotted one plump man in a dark button-up shirt sporting a black cowboy hat with a leopard skin band around the cap, a peacock's tailfeather stuck in its side. How absurd these people were! The women squinted at her with sullen contempt as usual. She could feel their thoughts.

Prostitute. Hooker. Bimbo. Skank. Whore.

She flashed a subtle yet biting smile at the inferior females, deflecting their judgmental eyes. Like they were any better. Where the hell was *their* moral compass? After all, what was romance? Bargaining for sex? Men showered women with gifts and diamonds, not because they cared about women but only to gain access to the pussy, that fleshy temple, selling themselves to each other until they died, always bartering for each other's transient affections.

Was that not a form of prostitution?

How chemical...and trite.

As if genuine compassion was even real. People had a better chance of finding a leprechaun smoking a wooden pipe while astride a unicorn pissing and farting fairy dust everywhere. Everything had strings attached. All men ever did was treat women like disposable jizz-dumpsters with legs and tits. And the women treated the men like their personal dildos, worthless boy toys like Swiss Army knives ready to go, waiting to be manipulated. Both were equally horrible in their own ways. The world was a fucking mess.

And she had found out the hard way, years ago....

She swallowed. She needed a drink. Badly.

As well as something else.

Daintily, she smoothed her skirt down with both hands as she positioned her toned tush on one of the leather stools at the bar, crossing her ankles with one elbow on the counter's mahogany surface, her knuckles underneath her chin. She looked to her right. She recognized the bartender: Alex, an athletic black gentleman with a shaved head, squinting at her, clothed in a white long-sleeved dress shirt with a black bow tie and dark trousers. He was busy cleaning a snifter as he turned and continued his banter with a globular middle-aged man near the counter's end, paying his tab; the round tourist was already quite tipsy with sleepy, jaundiced eyes. She squinted and turned away, staring off into space at the crowd again. She wondered if...*he* was actually here. Tonight. Her mind coasted into neutral as she recalled that harrowing night.

The night she woke up from it all.

"Didn't think you'd show," a male voice said.

She jerked to attention, wide-eyed, beholding Alex's stern face.

"G'd evening," she replied.

Alex leaned into her ear. "Your 'cocktail' is ready."

"Splendid," Vanya told him, taking a twenty-dollar bill from her purse. "And could I also trouble you for an Old-Fashioned on the rocks?"

Alex took the cash and squinted harder. "Comin' right up."

"Much obliged, mate."

"Mm-hmm."

He shoveled ice from beneath the counter with a metal scoop, then carefully slid a few into a rocks glass along with a narrow black straw, then reached for a bottle of Jack Daniel's. "You remember our deal, right?"

"As long as you remember *your* part of it," Vanya chirped.

Alex scoffed and shook his head. He put a folded receipt on the counter, then poured the brown liquor into the glass, the cubes clinking and fracturing on contact, then he placed the beverage on top of the receipt. Vanya quietly took the whiskey, then hastily slipped the paper into her open purse.

"So, where's *your* part?" Alex grumbled.

"Getting there," Vanya claimed, taking a sip of her alcohol.

"Pardon me, miss," a young voice said from her left.

Vanya coolly turned in her seat to meet two boys, most likely in college, possibly jocks, but it was hard to tell in this day and age. Both were clean-shaven, one with dark hair and the other blond. They were clearly dressed for a questionable night on the town, and with smiles like those, they were up to the worst things imaginable, no doubt, wearing some of the biggest devilish grins she had ever seen in her life. Any other night, she would have all the time in the world.

But time favored her primary target tonight.

Wherever the hell he was.

Vanya's smirk returned. "And to what do I owe *this* charming pleasure?"

"Whoa, is that a British accent?" the blond commented.

"Australian," she calmly corrected.

"Oh, sorry."

"No worries." She flicked her hair again. "I'm used to it."

The blond man's grin vanished. "Well, your voice *is* lovely...along with the rest of you, of course."

"Likewise," she complimented. "I'm Vanya, by the way."

"Vanya?" The blond's grin returned. "Wow, that name is...wow."

"You are too sweet," she giggled, then took another sip of the liquor. The alcohol burned her lips, then her tongue...and then all the way down inside her. "Mmm." She eyed the glass quizzically. "Makes me feel so alive inside."

"Seems like it." The blond said. "So...what brings an exquisite *Australian* lady like yourself all the way to the states?" His grin gradually waned again. "I mean, that's...that's on the other side of the planet."

"On holiday," Vanya lied.

"Holiday, uh?" The blond put his elbow on the counter and propped his chin up with his fist. "I bet spending every day with you *would* be a holiday, for life."

The dark-haired young man was clad in a pink button-up shirt beneath his silver pinstripe blazer with pants to match; he resembled a humanoid salmon fillet. The blond sported a similar jacket, yet his was beige with a turquoise shirt under it, amplifying his blue eyes.

Schmucks. Yuppies. Both of them.

"What's *really* on your mind?" Vanya jested, crossing her legs, then took another sip of her whiskey and glanced at his dark-haired companion. "You?"

"Heh," the dark-haired man stammered nervously. "My friend and I...we were wondering if you could, uh, help settle an argument we—"

"Discussion, Frank, discussion," the blond playfully chided, far more confident than his wingman. His grin widened at Vanya's chest.

Vanya grinned back. If she had a nickel every time some hungry douchebag used this archaic ploy on her as a depraved icebreaker, the mythical city of El Dorado and its exotic golden structures would look absolutely impoverished. Nevertheless, she couldn't help but be entertained by their perverse theatrics and allowed them to finish their terrible, over-rehearsed play.

"Go on," Vanya sang.

"Yeah," the blond contrived, "me and my buddy, Frank, here...he and I were needing a second opinion on something. The word 'temperature,' right?"

"What about it?" Vanya inquired, taking another sip.

"It's...it's three syllables, right?"

"It's four, Brian," Frank, the dark-haired man, scolded.

"Temp-err-ture," Brian retorted. "Temp...err...ture." He turned back to Vanya. "Isn't that...isn't that right?"

"Mmm," Vanya hummed. "I'm afraid it's temp-er-a-ture, boys." She placed a dainty hand over her heart. "But don't take my word for it. I'm sure Google can tell you all about it."

Brian snapped his fingers, feigning defeated.

"Told ya," Frank sneered. "Told ya." He turned to Vanya. "But I guess it's 'all-u-min-nium,' not 'aluminum,' right? You know...the way it's spelled."

"Jesus Christ," Alex blasphemed under his breath. "Just go ahead and ask her to—"

"Look," Vanya said. "I already know where this is going. You didn't come here to ask little ol' me for trivial grammatical advice, so let's just cut to it, shall we?" She eyed the dark-haired man. "Frank." She eyed the blond. "Brian."

Brian leaned further down on the counter with his elbow, trying hopelessly to act suave. "And...I'm so sorry, your name was...?"

Alex snorted and shook his head.

"Vanya," she replied.

She extended her hand. Brian shook it like a limp fish.

"I'll be right back." Frank whispered in his friend's ears.

Brian nodded as Vanya watched Frank stroll away down a hall to the hotel rooms. She raised an eyebrow, then took another sip of her Jack Daniel's.

"Hey, barkeep." Brian looked at Alex. "I'll have a rum and Coke, please." He slipped him a fifty-dollar bill. "And I'll...get the lady's drink as well."

"She already paid," Alex corrected, swiping the cash from the counter.

"Damn," Brian said, maintaining his grin. "Strike two."

Vanya shook her head. "No. It's a very sweet gesture. Very chivalrous of you. That's what counts, anyway." She took another swig of the whiskey.

"I agree." Brian ogled her up and down. "So...a beautiful Australian woman walks into a bar...in Las Vegas."

"Mmm!" Vanya said, clearing her throat, almost choking on her drink. "Now, *that* one you *did* get right."

"Well, I'm not a *complete* idiot, you know."

Vanya faked a giggle. Something wasn't right. No normal person pays a bartender fifty dollars for a drink, not even in Vegas—unless they're drunk, of course. And Brian seemed just as sober and fresh as the night was young and arid; the sun had submerged beneath the desert horizon only just an hour ago. And where the hell had Frank gone? Maybe it was just to take a piss. How mundane...and gross. Still, she failed to shrug off the eerie sensation. She had missed something.

But what? She was in control here. Her eyes scanned the casino again. The police had been looking for her, after all, but that couldn't be it; those pigs never unnerved her.

And they weren't even real cops.

She hadn't felt this way in years, at least...not since....

"So," Brian prodded, running his hand to his knee, the fingers creeping closer to her legs. "Why all this way from home? Got family...over here in—?"

"I like to smash puppies with a sledgehammer," Vanya blurted.

Brian froze, then furrowed his forehead. Vanya's ears flushed behind her hair. She had already frightened away two other men at other casinos earlier just this evening with that heinous line. Yet Brian only maintained his suspicious grin, then chuckled.

"No," he finally said. "No, you don't."

Vanya smirked back, swiveling in her seat to face the bar. "Well, maybe I have...and maybe I haven't." She cleared her throat again, then took a good swig of whiskey, the glass virtually empty.

"I mean," Brian said, watching Frank make his way back to them from across the room, "if you smash puppies with a sledgehammer...then I put kittens in a blender."

"Really, now?"

"Yeah, really."

Vanya scoffed, still smiling. "Alright, Brian, you got me. Truth be told, I say things like that to blokes like you to test them, to see if they truly have the stomach for what gets me off." She stirred the ice cubes in her glass with the short black straw. "Of course...it doesn't involve...puppies or kittens, mind you."

"BDSM?" Brian said.

Vanya looked at him with seductive eyes. "Something like that." She glanced back and forth at the two degenerates. "Two for one?"

The boys exchanged depraved grins.

"So," Frank said, "what do you charge?"

Vanya's doll-like eyes widened in mock annoyance. "Beg your pardon?"

Brian elbowed his friend in the ribs. Frank grunted, rubbing his side, scowling at Brian.

"Don't listen to him," Brian laughed sheepishly. "We've had a long drive."

"Really?" Vanya asked. "Where're you gents from?"

"Bel Air," Brian claimed. "We both go to UCLA."

"SoCal, is it?" Vanya flicked her hair again. "Well, I don't charge...because I'm not that kind of gal. But," she placed the rocks glass on the counter with a deliberate, prominent clack, "tonight's as good of a night as any...for a threesome." She crossed her arms. "The question is, though, whether or not you have the sufficient mileage to crank *my* engine. Missionary style won't cut it in the bedroom, especially here."

"Well, I tell ya what, Vanya," Brian said. "I think you'll find my confidant and I are more open-minded than what we appear."

"Got a hotel room?" Vanya inquired.

"Room 414." Frank pointed his thumb up at the ceiling.

Vanya stood up. "Allow me to go powder my nose while I consider your offer."

With that, she walked away, her sensual gait rocking her hips more than before as she peered at the horny schoolboys over her shoulder, fluttering her eyelids. The two whispered frantically amongst themselves as she distanced herself from them, noticing the security guards muttering to each other with eyes squinted.

Glancing her way.

Yet they were not so lascivious.

She squinted back. Something was definitely up.

Vanya entered the ladies' room, greeted by the vomiting of someone in the stall on the far end. A few more hens gossiped at the sink, one who had the physique of lumpy dough and dressed in a floral outfit that was so loud, Vanya needed earmuffs just to look at her! But it wasn't her corpulent body mass index or the woman's attire; it was the arrogant sneer twisted across her round face. Another was reapplying lipstick as they all eyed their newcomer with subtle disdain. Vanya ignored them and occupied one of the stalls, checking her purse. A can of mace. Handcuffs.

And bobby pins and paper clips for picking locks. She went ahead and popped a pin in her mouth, hiding it behind her bottom lip; one can't be too careful.

She checked the other contents: a switchblade right next to her wallet, a silvery revolver with extra bullets, and even a small orange bottle of pills with a few dissolvable hydrogen cyanide tablets rattling within. Outside the stall, she could hear them, rasping about her, uttering their obnoxious tittering. Normally, she did not target other women...but she had made a few exceptions here and there in the past. In Vanya's eyes, she was superior, dominant, and her patience for their insolence was quickly wearing thin by the minute. Hyenas were hyenas, after all, regardless of gender, just begging to be slaughtered.

Keep it up, Vanya thought. You ugly bitches will be next.

Her head felt strangely hot, with a lone bead of sweat trickling from her scalp and down her cheek. Surely that little bit of Jack Daniel's hadn't made her drunk already. She could hold her liquor better than that, contrary to what many would presume about her lovely frame. She might have been from Australia, but her family was Irish, damn it! Maybe she just needed some water.

She took her phone out, then unfolded the receipt. One the back, a list of men's names showed. She clicked on a contact titled "Lauren," and texted the names furiously. She breathed in and out, her heart thudding, feeling a bad case of cottonmouth develop. What the hell was wrong? She'd never been this nervous before.

Another bead of sweat rolled down her cheek.

After typing the last name, she sent another text: *Addresses?*

She slipped the phone back in her purse, then removed the revolver and examined it, easing the cylinder magazine with as quiet a click as she could manage. It was loaded. Never hurts to make sure. Her heart rate increased as adrenaline pulsed through her loins, permeating all throughout her body. Another score was about to be made. She slowly licked her lips. She loved the sensation, fear and arousal coaxing her back to life once again, an evanescent ecstasy she savored.

The other women snickered about something, then exited the bathroom like the flock of cowardly seagulls they were. They'd better run. She was usually prim and proper about these things, shrugging off such petulant criticisms, but tonight...something seemed...wrong.

She knew she was being watched.

But what were they waiting for?

She took the receipt, then crumpled it, flung it into the toilet bowl, and flushed. Then she took her phone back out and deleted the text conversation with "Lauren," then slipped the phone back into her purse. Should she ditch it altogether? Were they already on to her?

She huffed. Pandora's box had been flung open once again.

Perturbed, she unlatched the lock, then exited the bathroom and back out into the casino game floor. Her eyes shifted to the bar. As she suspected, Brian and Frank were gone...as was Alex.

Even the security detail was nowhere in sight, though they might have been right around the corner. She squinted as another bead of sweat crawled down her forehead.

“414,” she whispered, her heart thrumming in her chest.

She strode to the elevator, passing more mindless dunces staggering toward the slots, then she entered with another slew of morons and hit a button labeled with a “4.” The cables yanked, and the lift ascended. She glanced around at the ritzy, gilded interior, then at the wall to her left: a mirror facing another on the opposite side, causing infinite reflections of all the patrons on board. Their visages spanned out into a black eternity, each set of silhouettes becoming more warped and tinged with a surreal dark-green. Her smirk returned. It was like beholding a multiverse, alternate versions of themselves seemingly identical—and she looked damned spectacular in each one. Yet, no matter how many dimensions she witnessed, they all had the same grim theme.

Each group was trapped....in glass boxes.

Glass boxes that sheltered them from the reality beyond, segregated from the world.

The elevator dinged. Vanya jerked back to attention as the doors opened to the fourth floor. She squirmed out of the lift and into the hallway, following the signs and arrows pointing to the lair of her would-be subduers. But the hall smelled of something, a distinguished fragrance she had not breathed in ages.

A particular aftershave.

Invoking so many memories.

And one stood out from the rest of the mnemonic flow, drowning out what superficial pleasure he had ever brought her years ago. But she shouldn’t be afraid. Should she? She’d made it *this* far, to whatever end.

And besides, she didn’t really know what genuine emotion was anymore, anyway, though there were times in her youth that she thought she did for brief moments. But no. It was all just damp meat inside of her skull, just chemicals and electrical signals that made up who she was. Her smirk widened. Perhaps no one ever felt true emotions at all. She might as well be a robotic mannequin after all, lifeless and forever beautiful...if she wouldn’t stop sweating. Far too soon for the likes of her to be having hot flashes. As she drew close to the door, the realization gradually sank its crooked fangs into her as to what had happened earlier.

A secret ingredient.

She should’ve watched Alex mix her drink more closely behind the bar.

And she actually let it happen!

Her smirk devolved to tightened lips; she was losing her edge. She was a professional. It wasn’t like her to just suddenly slip up like this. There had to be something else at work here, something she hadn’t encountered in a very long time. She couldn’t help but feel a bizarre wave of déjà vu wash over her, coupled with a gruesome nostalgia, something that occurred back when she knew even less than what she did now.

She knocked on the door, then primed the concealed revolver in her purse with one hand. The hammer clicked. It was a shame; she really liked this purse.

The doorknob turned, then opened, revealing Brian’s grinning face. “Come on in.”

Vanya contrived her smirk again and walked through the door, rocking her hips past the threshold, with Brian shutting it quietly behind her.

Then arms swung around her!

She yipped and dropped her purse, the gun still inside, finding herself instantly in Frank’s grasp. Brian aimed a pistol at her head, his smile gone. Vanya let out a playful gasp, eyeing the muzzle of his handgun.

“Oh, that’s so cute,” Vanya mocked in a sultry tone. “You wanna play cops and robbers?”

Brian held up a pair of handcuffs with his other hand, then he glanced at Frank. “Remember, I called first dibs on her.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Frank grunted, then dragged Vanya to the bed and flung her onto the mattress. “Make it quick.”

“Nah, I think I’ll take my time,” Brian retorted, stepping toward the bed, then scowled at Vanya. “Strip.”

A poisonous smirk curled across Vanya’s face, then she slowly eased off the bed. With sensual grace, her smirk melted away as she gently bared her front teeth at Brian, then she steadily unzipped the cocktail dress and slithered out of it as if shedding a chrysalis. She stood up, letting the silky outfit drop to the carpeted floor, revealing only a lacy dark-blue G-string pressing against the outline of her pelvis, all the while shamelessly exposing her braless chest.

Her nipples gradually hardened.

Frank snickered.

“I like a girl who’s got her shit together,” Brian scoffed, eyeing the matching colors of her dress, underwear, and high heels. “Shoes.”

“Oh, honey,” Vanya cooed, sitting back down on the bed, “it’s so much hotter with them on...don’t you think?”

She arched her back, aiming her spherical tits straight up to the ceiling as she bent her right leg up, with one of her ultramarine pumps meeting her ass cheek, then she spread her toned thighs outward. More beads of sweat formed on her skin as she shimmered in the languid light of the opulent hotel suite. Brian almost dropped the gun as he and Frank both gawked at the cute lips of her waxed pussy contouring to her thong.

Vanya tilted her neck to her left shoulder and faced them, her head hanging like a broken doll’s. “Enslave me.”

Brian undid his belt and zipper as Vanya caught a glimpse of his pecker, halfway erect. Vanya bit down harder on her jaw, doing her best not to giggle at the size of it. Disappointing, but not surprising. Frank took one pair of handcuffs and pulled Vanya to the left corner of the bed, shackling her to one bedpost. With the other pair, Brian yanked her right arm and bound her other wrist to the other bedpost with a forceful click. Vanya breathed in and out, her chest billowing up and down, her dark eyes wide, with her cheek resting against the headboard. Brian eased into the bed, the handgun still in his right hand.

He grabbed her thong.

And ripped it off!

The lacy G-string snapped against her flesh!

Vanya yelped as Brian got on top of her lap.

“No, with your tongue,” Vanya whispered.

“What?” Brian griped.

Vanya glanced at both their exposed crotches. “Down there.”

Brian squinted at her.

“You call this BDSM?” Vanya scoffed, squinting back at him. “*Real* men eat the pussy before they fuck it.”

Brian hesitated, then he eased off her, then leaned his face down into her perfumed vagina, a smooth flower rife with carnal pollen, all there for the taking. His mouth met her moist vulva as his tongue plunged into her pink labia.

A fleshy Venus flytrap. All too perfect.

Clamping down on his head!

Brian struggled as Vanya's thrashing thighs closed around his skull, his grunts muffled inside her crotch. Frank bolted up out of the chair.

Blam-blam!

The gun accidentally fired behind Brian as Vanya flung him to the floor, his head bashing against the wall. The pistol skidded toward the bathroom door. Frank gazed downward...and touched his fresh bullet wounds. He examined the red on his fingers, jaw agape...then he tumbled lifeless to the floor.

"Fucking bitch!" Brian squealed.

"Speak for yourself, mate," Vanya laughed.

With her tongue, she fished out the metallic pick from behind her bottom lip, then she bit down on it with her front teeth and leaned toward the right pair of handcuffs, feeding the wire into its lock. She strained as Brian tried to rise to his feet, with a large gash visible on his forehead, running with blood down his face.

"Fuck!" Brian yelled, staring at Frank's body.

"That's a good look for you," Vanya mumbled awkwardly with the pick still in her teeth. "That's all you."

Clack!

The handcuffs broke loose.

She pulled her right hand free, then took the pick from her mouth and cracked the other cuffs loose. Brian's eyes fell on the pistol, then he scurried toward the piece like an overgrown cockroach.

His hand grasped the gun's handle.

Clomp!

"Owww!" Brian shouted, his hand abruptly impaled by the spike of one of Vanya's high heels.

"Told you it was hotter with them on," Vanya sneered.

She knocked the pistol out of his hand, then kicked his face. He whimpered, bleeding from his gored palm and his hemorrhaging head near the spreading pool of crimson near his dead accomplice. She knelt down and clutched the weapon, aiming it down at the writhing scumbag, savoring his misery.

"Aww, poor baby," Vanya teased, her eyes becoming seductive slits again. "You're not scared of me, are you?"

"Please," Brian sniffled up at her. "Don't..."

"Oh, I love it when you beg," she whispered. "But can't you do any better?"

"Please!"

"That's so hot."

Blam-blam-blam!

Vanya hyperventilated with depraved glee at her grotesque handiwork, breathing in the gunpowder and the stench of bloody iron. Her marble-like eyes stared down at her kill, mesmerized by Brian's mutilated face.

The so-called "Red Widow."

The murder machine, admiring her most recent kill.

Then she staggered, feeling woozy, listening to the collective footfall of boots running down the hallway toward the room.

"Damn you, Alex," Vanya cursed.

The door bashed open, revealing two security guards armed to the teeth and clad in helmets and bulletproof armor from head to toe, save for their faces. She eyed them and the submachine guns they brandished. The muzzles of their guns were equipped with silencers. They wore no emblem or insignia yet their fatigues were solid black.

This was no SWAT team.

These were shadows, and she knew precisely whose leash they were on.

Her breath quavered as more sweat dripped from her upturned nose, her teeth gritted. Alex's poison—or whatever the hell they spiked her whiskey with—was slow-working, and she fought its influence with every fiber of her being.

"You blokes mix...quite the cocktail," Vanya slurred, then stumbled again. "You know...it's not very polite to...to treat a lady like that."

Her head felt like a mile-wide anvil as she teetered down onto one knee, then collapsed. As she stared up into the light fixtures above, all became almost like a white void fading to black. The world whirled away, seeming like dying static in her ears as spots appeared in her dwindling sight. She couldn't help but giggle again, showing her pearly-white teeth. They had caught her at last, but it wasn't the cops, nor was it amateurs like Brian and Frank, if those were their real names. Her laughter grew weaker...and weaker, as the blurry silhouette of a man in a ski mask entered her fading sight, looming over her.

Reeking of that same aftershave, one she knew all too well.

It was him. He had returned...for her.

"Hello, Vanya," his Slavic voice rolled.

Her eyes glistened. "Eus...tace...."

He aimed a pistol down at her neck, then squeezed the trigger. Vanya gasped, feeling a tranquilizer dart in her neck, then another. She reached and yanked them both out, yet it was too late. Alex's drugs had done their work. In her last conscious moments, she felt him lift her with his arms, carrying her down the hall, a dark groom with her sadistic bride. The luminous world of Vegas faded around her, its sounds dying away in her ears. As Vanya lay in his clutches, he gazed down at her perfect nude body with a libidinous smirk across his angular middle-aged face.

He had found her again at last. His someone. His lost love.

His queen of death.

II: House of the Falling Sun

Shana peered with glazed eyes at the desert sunset from the rear passenger window of the car, her fist on her cheek. It had been a long three days traveling with her friends from Minneapolis, and while the Southwest's scenery was impeccable, it had already lost some of its luster. Maybe she was tired. Maybe she was disgruntled by the fact that her boyfriend, Chad, had rebuffed her offer to come with them to Las Vegas for spring break. And maybe she was ready for Lance and Robin to shut the hell up in the front seats. But deep down, she knew what it was that caused her stomach to flounder inside, and it wasn't motion sickness.

This was Vegas.

And horror stories abounded concerning Sin City.

She wasn't exactly overfond of the idea of going, and it wasn't like she had money to gamble with, anyway. She would have much rather preferred to have stayed in the Rocky Mountains, admiring the regal peaks. But she needed a break from Minneapolis, and being in her early twenties, she was adventurous enough to road trip; there would come a day that she would no longer be able to. And she refused to be like her late mother, who slaved herself to death trying to appease everyone else.

Only to slowly die from cancer years later.

No one should have to waste away like that, her mother least of all. She stroked the pendant around her neck: a gold crucifix, one her mother had given her one Christmas a few years before she died. She had stopped going to church, though; she didn't see the point. Love your enemies? Angels? Demons? Talking donkeys? Talking snakes? Fiery pillars from the heavens? Resurrection? It all sounded so ludicrous! Then again, so did believing that the universe manifested on its own by exploding out of sheer nothingness, which would violate the very laws of physics and chemistry. Nevertheless, her mother's untimely demise had dealt a scathing blow to her soul—if she had one. She didn't know what to think anymore, and being in college surrounded by a myriad of fake philosophies—including Robin's ostentatious New Age perspective—and being force-fed the biased curriculum of government-funded academia only confounded her all the more. And being a sociology major didn't really help matters. At all.

But she had to pick *something* that would hopefully lead to job security.

College sucked ass. Nothing more than glorified high school, all just to get an expensive, measly piece of paper that read "Bachelor's Degree" in fancy Old English calligraphy. If not that, a Master's. And if one was *really* wanting to bury one's self alive in eternal student loan debt, Ph.D. Academia. What a crock of shit. Still, there was a stubborn spark within her that refused to be extinguished, a part of her that wanted to believe.

But *what* to believe in, she no longer knew.

She sighed and glanced at her reflection in the sedan's window, her smooth milk-chocolate complexion fatigued from the road; already faint wrinkles showed in her forehead from scrunching them at people so much. Donny sat beside her in the back, an introverted Japanese-American engineer major enrolled with them at the University of Minnesota. Both of them were childhood friends, going as far back as kindergarten. Both of them liked the same nerdy stuff, the same anime, same video games, same movies, same music. To say they were like brother and sister was an irresponsible understatement, but they appeared doomed to remain platonic to the end of their days. Which Shana was fine with. He silently scrolled through articles on his smartphone, already bored with the monotonous desert scenery. While Colorado and Utah had proven their majesty,

once they hit south of St. George on I-15, the arid landscape of Nevada spanned its banal panorama of wastelands. Dirt, dirt, and more dirt...along with some sagebrush, yucca, rocks, a few Joshua trees here and there with the rolling distant mountains and canyons, even occasionally passing dried gulches on the road. But the sunset was gorgeous this evening, with lofty cirrus clouds like wisps of gossamer amplified by gold, red, and purple against the atmosphere's backdrop of indigo, violet, and orange. The falling sun had already sunk beneath a few dusty summits far off in the western horizon...and it wasn't helping Shana's unsettled guts.

Robin, a pale goth chick, art major, and self-professed "Wiccan" whom Shana and Donny met at UM, yammered on and on with Lance up front, both of them gossiping and chewing the fat about their nearsighted views of politics. She was a complete manic pixie, so much so that she put cheerleaders to shame—and she and Lance had just consumed coffee not too long ago. Murals of tattoos depicting Asian dragons, roses, tribal designs, and bits and pieces of obscure quotes littered her exposed arms; she even had an ornate Jack Skellington face imprinted just above her ass crack, his circular cartoon skull permanently smiling. She was as flaky as hell. Her naturally dirty-blonde hair, dyed jet-black with a few crimson highlights, was cut in a long bob; a hairclip adorned with a small top hat and black lace protruded out obliquely from her scalp, making her look like a female Mad Hatter. Her sleeveless maroon sweater accentuated her plump breasts, complimenting her curvy hourglass frame, thick thighs, and broad hips contouring to her olive-green short shorts; she deliberately had her bra straps exposed just enough, showing edges of frilly black and pink like the tease she was. And Donny still had a terrible crush on her, which she had confided to Shana on multiple occasions, coming up with "creative" ways to woo her. Shana had advised against most of his suggestions to win Robin, as many of them were creepy, juvenile, and emo as fuck. Donny had eventually mustered the courage and blatantly asked her out a few times, but Robin was sweet enough to let him down easy each time.

But now she knew that Donny wanted her. Badly. Which Robin subtly abused his admiration of her. And Shana couldn't stand it! Robin just took for granted that so many guys wanted to bang her, which she claimed to find offensive after making numerous over-opinionated social media posts and memes about it and many other things, styling herself as an "activist" and "difference maker." But Shana knew the truth, especially after the selfies she had posted of her posing on her bed in slutty outfits and whatever she managed to procure from Victoria's Secret; she always seemed to garner at least three hundred likes at a time from her horny followers, her cult easily exceeding a thousand strong. Despite all this, Robin was cool to hang out with...sometimes.

Other times...not so much.

Lance was no better, though. He was a gaunt, sinewy jock with coppery skin, hoping beyond hope that he would be drafted into the NFL; even if they did accept him, he would most likely become yet another sex scandal in professional sports. He was a total dog, a stereotype, the very paragon of douchebags. Already, he had tried to make a few passes on her and Robin both, just during this trip, not even counting what he had done at school. To think he had that much disregard for Chad. She pitied the poor girls who would mother *his* bastard children for him; so many had met that fate in high school, destroying their lives all because they couldn't keep it in their pants and keep their legs closed. But many argued that "Plan B" and abortion could solve those problems right away, and could also help "save the planet."

How weary she was of that sickening age-old debate!

If that was their mentality, then they should just get their damned tubes tied. That way, they didn't have to kill their babies or suffer the adverse side effects of birth control, and those whiny, preachy fundamentalists would shut up about it. And the misogynistic dogs who knocked them up

should be made to have their balls sawed off while they were at it! At least that's how Shana saw it. Bunch of misanthropists who didn't have any business procreating anyway. Maybe they would mature in time.

Maybe not.

Such was the stuff of millennials and Generation Z; they were all young.

And it showed. Egregiously.

Dusk was fading as the swallowing night invaded the desolate, sandy wastes. Shana looked and glared. Vegas was still nowhere in sight. Robin had at last shut her trap. After an awkward silence, Lance whistled a tune, a famous song. Shana recognized it. So did Robin.

"There is a house...way down in New Orleans," Robin sang softly in her feminine smoker's voice. "They call the Rising Sun.... And it's been the ruin...of many a poor boy.... And God I know...I'm one."

"Man, I love Led Zeppelin," Lance said.

"That's not Led Zeppelin, you uncultured freak!" Robin squawked. "That's by The Animals. House of the Rising Sun?"

"What?" Lance protested. "Are you sure? They did a cover of it, right?"

Robin laughed. "Uh, I don't...think they—"

"How much further?" Shana barked.

"Uh," Lance groaned, "about another...twenty...maybe thirty minutes?"

"Something like that," Robin agreed. "I know, I'm gettin' antsy, too. I'm dying for a drink. I got a Long Island Iced Tea with my name on it somewhere."

"You and me both," Lance concurred, nodding at the road. "Man, fuck this desert."

"Mm-hmm," Robin hummed, taking a swig from her water bottle, having turned to bathwater a good while ago. "So, Shana, heard from Chad lately?"

"He called me when we were passing through Glenwood Springs the other day," Shana said, running her fingers through her long, stringy curly hair. "Not since then, though."

"Glenwood—hey, was that...was that the one with the uh...the haunted hotel?" Lance questioned, looking over his shoulder at Shana.

"I don't know," Shana replied flatly.

"Why didn't Chad come?" Robin complained, screwing the top back on her water bottle. "He's missin' out on the whole messin' around out here."

"Said he had to do some...charity work, volunteer thing, or something like that," Lance claimed, then shrugged. "I don't know. I tried to talk him out of it, but...whatever."

"Yeah, I bet you did," Shana whispered with venom in her voice.

Robin looked at Donny. "Whatcha readin' over there?"

Donny ignored her, too immersed in the Internet's subject matters.

Robin smirked and grabbed his knee. "Hey!"

Donny jerked and smiled sheepishly at her. Robin and Shana laughed.

"You jumped a mile!" Robin joked.

"My bad," Donny said.

"What are you reading?" Shana asked.

Donny shrugged. "Oh, just reading about how to rig and sabotage slot machines."

"Ooh, somebody's a cheaty-face," Robin teased.

"You could probably do that back in the day," Lance said, then scoffed. "Not so much now."

"You're gonna get us caught," Shana said with a wry smile.

"Nobody's gonna get caught," Donny assured. "I mean...I'm taking a lot of this stuff with a grain of salt...for obvious reasons." He leaned back and showed them the screen. "Either way, it's interesting to read about, 'cause I'm a geek."

"Ain't that for sure," Lance grumbled.

"Guilty and loving it, sir," Donny taunted back.

Lance snorted. "Hey, when you gonna build me my Gundam?"

"Workin' on it," Donny smarted, rolling his eyes. "Gotta build *my* Gundam first."

"Oh, so *that's* how it is, huh?" Lance grinned.

"You gonna invest?" Donny sneered lightheartedly. "Gotta fork over the dough, ya know."

"Wait, what's a Gundam?" Robin inquired.

Shana shook her head. "You are so uncultured."

"You are," Lance laughed.

"Well, I don't know!" Robin giggled. "I'm a girl."

"I'm a girl, and *I* know," Shana chided cheekily.

Robin reached back and slapped Shana's knee jokingly. Shana snickered.

"What's a Gundam, Donny?" Robin cooed, sticking her crimson bottom lip out. "You gonna tell me?"

"She's a big girl," Shana jested. "She can Google it."

"Exactly!" Lance agreed.

"Shh, both of you!" Robin rebuked.

Donny grinned and shook his head, averting his eyes. "It's, like uh...a giant fighting robot."

"You mean like a...Transformer?"

"Kinda."

Robin grinned wide. "Your ears are turning, like, bright red."

"No, they're not," Donny laughed.

"Oh, my gosh, they are!" Shana said.

"That is so cute!" Robin gushed.

Donny looked out the window as the two girls giggled.

"You still watch that shit?" Lance derided Donny. "How old are you?"

Donny sobered up. "Old enough."

Robin furrowed her forehead at Lance in disgust. "Hey, he can watch and do whatever the hell he wants to."

"Look, I ain't judging," Lance lied. "Why you gettin' so defensive all of the sudden? I just wanna know how old he—Donny, seriously, man, how old are you?"

Donny sighed. "Twenty-two." He glanced at the back of Lance's head. "How old are *you*?"

The rest of them fell silent, feeling a strange tension expanding in the car. Shana peered back out her window, longing to escape them all. She could feel Donny's face fall to her left, then she put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"He's an asshole," Shana mouthed quietly.

Donny gave a weak smile and nodded, then resumed his degenerate research.

"Old enough to fuck your mother," Lance muttered. "Fuckin' nerd."

"What?" Robin questioned.

"Oh, wait...wait!" Lance pointed out the windshield, his eyes widening. "Is that...is that her? There she is—look! Look!"

They all gazed where his finger gestured...at a sprawling sea of twinkling lights in the distance, making out a few skyscrapers and casinos of the Strip, the Eiffel Tower and Statue of Liberty.

They all smiled in wonder as Las Vegas outstretched its precarious arms to them, beckoning them forth from the darkness.

“Finally!” Shana huffed.

“I know, right?” Robin concurred.

“What casino was it we were staying at?” Donny asked.

“It was the, um...” Robin trailed off in thought, snapping her fingers repeatedly.

“It’s called...the Parhelion, I think,” Lance said, producing his phone, checking the screen. “Yeah, Parhelion Casino and Hotel.”

“Cool!” Robin said.

“Sounds...intense,” Shana grumbled, halfway sarcastic.

“They always come up with wacky names for these places,” Lance sighed. “They also got a nightclub called *Soirée*—ooh...”

“Wanna know what a parhelion is?” Donny said.

The others fell silent.

“What is a parhelion, Donny?” Shana finally asked.

“So, sometimes, in, like...mist or a haze or something,” Donny said as he Googled an image on his phone, “it will produce a halo, but on both sides of the sun, it will produce two parhelions, or more commonly known as ‘sundogs’ or ‘mock suns,’ one on each side. See?”

One the phone’s screen, Shana and Robin beheld a vivid array of halos and refracted beams of iridescent light around the sun somewhere in Alaska, with two horizontal glares, one on each side.

“Wow,” Shana said.

“That’s so pretty,” Robin admired. “Why ‘sundog,’ though?”

“I think it has to do with Norse mythology,” Donny said. “Like, Fenrir, the wolf, the Nordic people believed that when they saw this phenomenon, that Fenrir was stalking the sun, and that the mock suns produced were his fiery silhouettes chasing the sun around the horizon to—”

“Hey, y’all wanna see some shows or something while we’re here?” Lance interrupted. “Like, does Cris Angel still perform?”

“I don’t know,” Shana groaned. “David Copperfield might.”

“Is he the guy with the white tigers?” Lance said.

“I don’t...think so,” Robin replied, cringing at Lance’s nescience.

Shana scoffed. “Are those guys...even around anymore?”

“I remember...something happened, but I don’t remember all the particulars, though,” Robin claimed. “Maybe PETA finally got on to them, I don’t know. I know what you’re talking about.” She huffed. “Those poor tigers.” She noticed Donny sulking in the back. “But that *was* interesting about the...sundog, though.”

“Yeah,” Donny said glumly. “I wouldn’t mind visiting the *Pawn Stars* shop while—”

“Yeah, *Pawn Stars*, man!” Lance almost shouted. “Meet Rick Harrison and them.”

“Yeah, we can do that,” Robin chimed, then snickered. “See if Corey and ol’ Chumlee’s up in there.”

“I love Chumlee,” Shana said, grinning, then her smile immediately vanished. “I really miss the Old Man, though.”

“Yeah, he was cool, I liked him,” Robin agreed. “Always cussin’ them out and everything.”

“I loved that Old Man,” Donny said.

“There’s so much to do over here,” Shana said, then she leaned forward, peering through the windshield, noticing something down the road. “Wait, what?”

“Huh?” Robin said, then her brown eyes bulged.

They all saw it: the pallid, limping figure of a woman with scraggly blonde hair wearing a tattered shirt and blue jeans, stained with dark reddish-brown splotches. She staggered on the road's shoulder, nearing the oncoming traffic, but she seemed skittish of the vehicles, constantly looking behind her. They saw the terrified expression on her face, moist with weeping and grime. Though they failed to hear it, Shana clearly made out the words the woman was screaming.

"Help me!" she wailed at the traffic, trying to wave her sore arms. "Help me!"

Lance gawked at the woman, yet he passed her.

"Lance, pull over," Shana commanded.

"Probably a vagabond," Lance told her.

"Just pull over," Shana said firmly.

"Take the next exit and turn around," Robin told him.

"What if it's a ruse?" Donny pondered. "Maybe she's not really hurt."

"Exactly! Thank you, Brain," Lance jeered. "After all the friggin' signs we passed from state to state saying not to pick up hitchhikers that might be escaped convicts, and you want me to—"

"Just be a man and turn around, damn it!" Shana demanded.

"Okay. Fine," Lance quipped. "Whatever floats your little heart." He eyed the upcoming exit ramp. "But if she pulls something—"

"Just shut up and do it!" Shana griped.

"I'm beginning to see why Chad didn't come," Lance mumbled, coolly shaking his head.

"Someone may have already picked her up," Robin assumed, peering out the window over her shoulder.

Lance ignored them, cursing under his breath as he took the exit, then drove over the bridge, and into the northbound lane. "Y'all better look for her. I can't see with all those headlights."

Shana looked around. Night had descended all too rapidly, falling on the desert like a dense, starless shroud. Unnaturally dark. Her stomach leapt in somersaults as her heart raced. What if Donny was right? What if it *was* a ruse? And what if someone was after her?

What if it were both?

"Should we call the cops?" Robin asked, holding her phone.

"Cops don't do jack shit," Lance retorted. "Everybody in this car knows that. All they're gonna do is tell us she's probably a vagrant, drug addict, or whatever. Don't waste your time." He squinted at her. "And besides that, after all the homeless people we've seen on this trip, and now the sight of one *finally* plucks one of your rusty harp strings and—"

"Just shut the fuck up and drive," Robin snapped.

They spent another fifteen minutes searching for the ominous female victim but to no avail.

"Maybe she was a ghost," Donny theorized.

"That's not funny," Shana scolded.

"Not being funny." Donny's wide eyes scanned the shoulder another time.

"He might be right. Didn't think about that," Robin mused, rummaging through her purse. "Should've brought some sage to burn. Might have some crystals...."

"Look, let's just go." Lance growled. "Somebody probably picked her up by now. We've wasted enough time."

"Yeah," Robin yawned. "I'm tired, anyway."

As they resumed their trek back to the city, a cold chill wracked Shana's petite body, coaxing goosebumps across her skin. Whether she was a ghost, a rape victim, or whoever the tragic hitchhiker was, it was no good sign.

After all, her older brother, Jeremy, ten years older than she, had vanished somewhere in the Southwest, having gotten involved with drugs with some goons in her hometown. He had last been seen in Tucson, Arizona before he was reported missing by one of his so-called “home boys.” He had told her mother off and left the house in an inebriated rage years back. Whether a group of Neo-Nazis or a pack of highway robbers had kidnapped and murdered him, no one knew for sure. That case went dead and cold long ago, and no other leads had ever presented themselves. Jeremy was a distant memory, seeming almost more like a dream than a real person. One of the few decent memories of her brother was when they had gone to Disneyworld in Florida, back when she was six; pictures of her and Jeremy had sat on their mother’s nightstand back home with the two of them posing with mascots like Winnie the Pooh and Snow White. She remembered her mother sitting up in her bed, holding that picture frame late at night, studying the photo with such maternal intensity and woe, tormenting herself, brooding, praying for an answer.

Praying for closure.

Still, the older Shana grew, the more her brother’s former existence seemed like a fevered myth, a fabricated reality of another lifetime she had never lived. Jeremy had become a stranger, a shadow in her mind that refused to be completely forgotten. Even before this trip, she had only now been plagued by recurring dreams of her elder brother. Why now? He was gone. Was it because they were going out to the desert for spring break? Robin had told her that his ghost might be visiting her in her room at night, resulting in these recent bizarre visions. Shana had rebuffed this, offended by her self-professed Wiccan’s presumptions. A week prior to the trip, she, Donny, Robin, and even Lance had toyed with Tarot cards, doing it for fun; three “omens” had been revealed.

Fortune. Love. And death.

Alarmed by the “death” card, Robin profusely assured them all that the omen did not mean that they were going to die on the trip but instead most likely referred to the dreams about Shana’s “deceased” brother and the potential spiritual visitation in her bedroom, despite there being no evidence of anything paranormal whatsoever at her dorm. She claimed that the “love” card may indicate that Chad was planning something romantic for Shana when they returned to Minneapolis; Donny had anticipated that it meant that Robin would finally develop feelings for him during spring break, but he kept this to himself. The “fortune” card, Robin hoped, supposedly pointed them to winning a jackpot in Vegas, one that was worth millions.

What a hysterical load of shit!

At least it seemed like it at the time.

Shana had initially scoffed at Robin’s hokey scrying attempt, but now, the apophenia of it was wreaking havoc on her nerves and her guts. Since when did meaningless randomized cardstock determine one’s fate? Nevertheless, something was very wrong about tonight. Maybe she was just stir-crazy from the long drive, but witnessing the eerie vagrant shambling along the interstate just now did not help matters at all. Whether Robin was right or not, this was Vegas.

And regardless of what people claimed, what happens in Vegas never stays in Vegas.

An hour and a half later, they had checked in to their extravagant hotel room at the Parhelion, a daunting monolithic casino resort that somehow stood out from all the other odd and extraordinary venues along the Strip. Shana had tried to contact Chad again, yet it only went to his voicemail, for the umpteenth time. There was not even so much as a text from him these past few days. Robin placated her, theorizing that Chad may have simply lost or broken his phone, but Lance vouched for Chad, claiming he had been having trouble with his cell service in the past few

weeks and had been meaning to upgrade. Though Shana recalled Chad dropping his phone and cracking its screen about a month ago, his phone still worked perfectly fine. Maybe the device was just now failing. Maybe not. She didn't know what to think anymore. All she wanted to do was to stay in the hotel room and sleep for a thousand years, yet Robin prodded her to join them downstairs. She did her best not to show her insecurities to the crowd, yet her fatigue and antisocial demeanor was written all over her face; she was not overfond of crowds—especially the likes of this one. Pompous women without a trace of cellulite on their bodies stood in stilettos with statuesque beauty, arrayed in their overpriced cocktail dresses, while pairs of sequined showgirls in their flashy plumed outfits accompanied men in suits and tuxedos here and there, some making their way to the vast game room. Amongst them, tourists and blue-collar slobs donning their average middle-class attire stuck out like sore thumbs amidst the suave elitists, both social groups leaving much to be desired. As they traversed the throngs, Shana's eyes locked on every single couple, with some women wallowing up against their men, kissing each other, just daring anyone to say something critical to them.

Shana grinded her teeth behind closed lips. She wanted to explode.

Why wouldn't Chad answer his damned phone?

The Parhelion's architecture style was a monstrous, vainglorious chimera of art deco, neoclassical, Gothic, and even Egyptian revival, along with some impressive polygonal Brutalist sculptures depicting a myriad of abstract figures, many presumably with either wings or claws sprouting from their "backs." Potted palm plants in tall painted vases and fluted pedestals with busts of various men and women sat in almost each nook and corner as lavish chandeliers arrayed with mirrors and crystals graced the marble corridors of bustling guests. A massive bowl-like fountain spewed from an intersection beyond the lobby surrounded by a mosaic edge, wafting with aqueous minerals and a hint of chlorine; the pool's bottom was littered with coins from either children or drunken gamblers making wishes.

With stupefied awe, Donny shamelessly showed his geeky side and marveled at the designs. "Whoever conceived all this was far more than just a mad genius."

More mad and loud than genius, Shana thought.

Robin, being the artsy enthusiast she was, also delighted in the exotic imagery, carven frescoes and statuary of bronze, depicting such "esoteric" beings and psychedelic portrayals, especially one of a tall, robed female seraph at the front entrance set into an arched, coffered niche studded with brassy stars; her left hand was raised upward, with a fiery two-edged sword clutched in her right, its blade enveloped in burnished tongues of flame. Her six feathered wings, all riddled with unblinking stained-glass eyes, glinted gold behind her, engulfing most of the ornate vaulted alcove, with more stars embedded in its design. A halo of a petrified blaze wreathed the crown of her scalp like a diadem as she stared ahead with proud eyes devoid of pupils. Her lips wore a smirk across her angular face that almost seemed smug.

A fallen sun. An infernal rebel angel, masquerading as a haughty goddess.

Lance didn't give a rat's ass about the surreal decorum, as expected; all he had was money and the blackjack table on the brain, feeling ravenously obliged to fulfill one of Robin's three dubious Tarot prophecies. Donny had similar ambitions, eager to put his newfound saboteur skills to work at the slots.

"I need to go powder my nose," Robin said, then beckoned Shana with a nod. "Come with?"

"Why do girls say that?" Lance snarked. "Like, you're doing everything *but* powdering your nose up in there."

“Oh, I’m sorry, buddy,” Robin mocked back, her voice passive-aggressive. “Would you rather me say, ‘I need to go blow ass all over the bathroom stall?’ Or would you prefer something more graphic, kind sir?”

Shana snickered, but Lance dismissed her as he entered a seat at a nearby blackjack table. He introduced himself to an overweight gentleman sporting an eccentric black cowboy hat with a peacock feather stuck in a leopard-spotted band around the cap. The two women rolled their eyes and proceeded to the ladies’ room. They did their business, then came out of the stalls, talking shit the entire time like the hens they were.

“He’s such a jerkoff!” Robin snapped, washing her hands. “Total creeper!”

“I know, right?” Shana huffed. “I mean, if Chad knew what Lance was doing—”

“Oh, he’d beat his ass for sure!”

Shana’s eyes grew downcast. “I hope that’s not what your...Tarot card thing was—”

“No, definitely not! I am still holding out for the jackpot, the...fortune thing.” Robin placed her hands under a dryer, then raised her voice over the motor. “Of course...the fortune could mean an intangible fortune is headed our way, maybe...enlightenment. An awakening, maybe?”

“An awakening?” Shana raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, why not?” Robin squinted at her. “You...worried about something else?”

“No, it’s just that...” Shana sighed. “I haven’t been able to get a hold of Chad since the other day. He’s usually more consistent. It’s not like him to lose his phone.”

“Do what? I can’t hear you!” Robin shouted over the dryer.

“Chad! He better not have ghosted me!”

The hand dryer cut off, then Robin flicked her fingers at the walls. “Nah, he’s probably just busy with the volunteering thing is all. I mean, guys are generally douche, but I got a good feeling about Chad.” She giggled. “Did you see Donny’s face when I touched his knee in the car?”

Shana rolled her eyes. “What about that...woman we saw? That was freaky.”

“Yeah, it was, but...” Robin groaned, “as much as I hate to admit it, Lance was probably right about that. Probably just some sneaky hobo trying to carjack somebody, I don’t know. People are crazy.”

Shana didn’t answer, only looking at her appearance in the mirror. She was short, and she hated it. She was by no means a living Aphrodite; she considered herself to be below average, nothing more than a glorified teenager, still plagued by pimples and the occasional repulsive “bacne” that would swell up usually around her shoulder blades, right where she couldn’t reach. Her face was already partially marred with multiple scars from breakouts, resembling dents among her overgrown freckles on her milk-chocolate skin, and even a few fresh zits had sprouted just in the past few days. What did she do to deserve to be such a pizza-face? Her arms and legs had some fuzz on them, though the hairs were fine and virtually unnoticeable, so long as no one was studying her closely. There were even some under her armpits, much to her chagrin—but she was not about to shave, not for a man, not even for Chad! Why should she? It would just grow back thicker, then her appendages would simply accumulate more mutilations where she nicked herself with a razor. She liked to have died when Chad first discovered them. So did Chad, for she wanted to kill him for what he said to her.

Damn, was that ever a fight!

He had vehemently apologized to her, having bought roses, chocolates, and other gifts to assuage her, but the damage had been done; the wound had only festered in her as the love of her life took more note of her imperfections with each passing month...and sneaking glances at mindless, waspish bimbos more beautiful than Shana. She was no Barbie doll. She was no

mannequin. She never would be. She barely constituted as girl-next-door pretty. But she was a legit article, and it just wasn't enough for some piece-of-shit superficial society that only thought it knew what looked good and what didn't. Why should she shave when men got to be as hairy and gross as they pleased?

It was so unfair!

She had developed a chronic muffin top around her waistline, one she constantly tried futilely to conceal by sucking it in or wearing hoodies, yoga pants, and certain pairs of blue jeans. Why did people like Robin not have to deal with the curse of blemishes or a misshapen body mass index. Though Robin was a little chubby herself, her fat distribution seemed to be in all the right places, her hourglass shape, voluptuous booty, and rotund breasts making the guys at school hard below the waist. All Shana's butt ever did was sag and jiggle in an unsightly way, at least as far as she was concerned, thanks to the hideous array of dimples along her posterior. Though Shana saw Robin as her friend, she only felt like she had to compete with her more and more, and the feeling only worsened with time, silently sundering their relationship, quietly alienating them.

Segregating them.

She felt so inferior, as if trapped in a glass box everywhere she went....

"Hey," Robin said, putting her hand on her shoulder.

Shana eyed her, snapping out of her train of thought.

"Let's just enjoy the trip." Robin smiled. "I mean, the next time we blink, we're gonna be graduating, and after that...it's all downhill from there. It doesn't get any better, trust me. These are the best years of our lives right now. We can't be worrying about all this petty drama and bullshit, who we're gonna marry or how many babies we *think* we wanna have. This is the time to live, girl. You only live once—c'mon, this is Vegas! You should be having a blast! The rest of us are! So should you!"

Shana nodded reluctantly. "Yeah...yeah, you're right."

"I think I've told you this before," Robin went on, "but I wake up every day telling myself, 'I could die today.' That's why I'm so...flaky and weird, because I don't give a shit what people think of me. I'm brutally honest like that. Sooner or later, we're all going to die. Life is too short to brood and worry. All that shit we thought was important in high school." She shook her head. "It's all gone. It's dead. It's not coming back. The same is true for college and all the other stages in our lives. It's not like we're promised tomorrow—"

The restroom door banged open as a corpulent woman and two other females, a blonde with a bob haircut and a brunette with a thick, wavy mane draping her shoulders, accompanied her, all three of them in dresses and high heels exchanging excited banter.

"And she was just so snotty," the heavysset woman told them.

"She was, the way she walked and all with her fancy British accent," the blonde said. "Little freak." She walked with her back straight and her hands around her hips, palms down, then strutted mockingly in an overly-feminine gait, rocking her pelvis back and forth with each step. "Ooh, look at me. I'm so perfect. Chip cheerio!"

The other two laughed. Robin stared at them while Shana anticipated her friend's belligerent political rhetoric to issue from her mouth like dragon's fire at any moment.

"I think someone tried to rape her or something last night," the brunette claimed.

"Yeah, they found two guys gunned down on the fourth floor, handcuffs and everything," the plump woman explained. "Nobody heard any gunshots, though—and now they can't find her. Supposedly, the surveillance system screwed up and lost the footage of what all happened yesterday, which I think is sketchy. All people heard were some boots stomping upstairs and one

person screaming. All they have to go on is like one eyewitness: a poor, little ol' lady who was standing just outside her room at the end of the hall. It's all over the local news! It's crazy!"

"What is?" Robin asked.

All three of them looked at them with furrowed brows.

"You didn't hear the commotion last night?" the overweight woman told them.

"We just got here about an hour ago," Shana told them.

"I love your hair, by the way," the blonde said to Shana with a warm smile.

Shana blushed, taken aback by the surprising kindness. "Thank you."

"W-wait—who...who got shot and raped?" Robin questioned, eyes bulging.

"Just two douchebags from UCLA," the fat woman said. "They had it coming, the little perverts. I don't know what happened to the chick who got abducted. I think the news said her name was...Vanya...McNeill, Mc...Dougal—I don't remember. I think she was in here last night it some...slutty blue dress. I mean, she was a skank and all, but I wouldn't wish what happened on my worst enemy."

"Geez," the brunette commented.

"Well, my friends and I are going to college in Minneapolis," Robin told them, throwing a thumb over her shoulder at Shana. "We're on spring break."

"Nice," the blonde said. "I miss those days."

"We also saw some woman in ragged clothes walking on I-15 a few hours ago just outside the city," Shana said. "We thought someone was after her—she kept looking over her shoulder. We turned around to go find her, but she was gone."

"Probably just a hitchhiker...or a carjacker baiting her next victim. It's happened before, unfortunately." The heavy woman shrugged. "Then again, you never know for sure. I mean...this is Vegas. I grew up here. A lot of shit happens here every day. Can't be too careful." She sighed. "Just stock up on cans of mace, tasers, and whatever else you can cram into your purse. Plenty of pigs out there."

"For real," the brunette agreed.

"Way ahead of you," Robin told them, patting the metal-studded punk handbag.

"Oh, that's cute!" the brunette complimented Robin's purse. "Where'd you get that?"

"Hot Topic," Robin told her with a shy smirk.

"That's really cute," the brunette repeated.

"Thanks." Robin looked to her friend and mimicked one of the fakest Southern accents. "I reckon I needs me a drink, Shana."

The three other women laughed, then the rotund woman pointed at the door. "Ask for Mitch at the bar. Makes a really mean margarita. It will not disappoint, trust me."

"Okay, now I'm just freakin' paranoid," Shana almost squeaked, gawking at all of them, "about the...human trafficking...and—"

"Oh, I didn't mean to do that, honey!" the hefty woman chuckled with a grin. "Nah, Vegas...Vegas is a cool place, as long as you know how to watch yourself. Everywhere is getting to be like that, anyway. Always gotta watch your back, 'cause, you know...us *chicas* gotta stick together, know what I mean?" She winked.

"Ain't that the truth," Shana said dryly.

"C'mon, Shana, I'm thirsty," Robin pleaded.

"It was nice meeting you," Shana contrived as she and Robin walked out the door.

The two women meandered through the hallways, seeking the proverbial bar. But Shana was watching the crowds. Any of them could be watching, waiting for the precise moment to strike.

Her heart fluttered like a maddened caged bird within her ribs. This whole trip was a mistake. They should never have come! All she wanted in that moment was to be in Chad's arms again, no matter how whiny or corny that seemed. Why hadn't he called? Why couldn't she get a hold of him? Was volunteer work more important than she was?

Robin looked back and forth. "Man, the more I see of this place, the more it seems like a...temple...labyrinth...than a cas—oh, ooh, there it is!" She pointed at the luxurious counter at the other side of the vast game room. "C'mon!"

They made their way to the sleek mahogany bar, equipped with stools of leather cushions. A variety of curvaceous crystal glasses displayed in the rear on racks, along with top-shelf liquors neatly arrayed in cabinets and coolers. A bucket with bottles of champagne jutted from a pile of dry ice. In the back, a long mirror showed, reflecting the vociferous gamblers at their respective tables. Servers, both male and female, made their way through the crowds with silver platters of beer, wine, and spirits.

Above the bar, Shana observed a hollowed-out alcove like the metopes of a Greek temple's exterior, showcasing bronze carvings of airborne winged demons with barbed bidents flying over a dark canyon towards a cliff top assailing two robed figures; the effigies were of excruciating detail. She recognized the art from her world literature class back in Minneapolis: one of Gustave Doré's etchings depicting a scene from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Shana's stomach churned, agreeing with Robin's words just now. This place *did* seem more and more like a temple than a casino. It was all too eccentric and foreboding, even for Las Vegas's standards.

What was this dark basilica on hell's borders?

Steadily, Robin and Shana took their seats as a balding man cleaning glassware behind the bar finally noticed the two. Robin smiled, her elbows on the counter.

"Good evening, ladies," the man greeted, stepping towards them.

"Hey, you Mitch?" Robin asked.

The man grinned and nodded. "You better believe it! What'll it be?"

Robin flashed her teeth. "I hear you make a mean margarita."

Mitch chuckled with a twinkle in his blue eyes. "Now where'd you hear that from?"

Robin giggled. Shana only stared blankly at the mirror, growing sicker to her stomach by the minute, watching for any suspicious activity. She thought she could see a few eyes on the other side of the room, men glancing in their direction, assessing. Plotting. Normally, she wasn't so neurotic, but the ghastly blonde hobo on the road earlier and the harrowing testimony of the women in the restroom had only magnified her trepidation. She tried to think of ways to escape should someone try to seize her, suddenly wishing she knew martial arts, or any kind of self-defense techniques. She looked at Robin's purse. Did she really have a spare can of mace? Or a taser she could borrow?

"I'm feeling something kinda...citrusy...maybe kiwi? Pineapple?" Robin shrugged, fishing for money in her purse. "Green, whatever it is."

"You got it, sweetheart." Mitch turned Shana. "And for you, doll?"

Shana didn't respond, eyeing the obscure figures in the hallway as they vanished.

"Ma'am?"

"Shana!" Robin elbowed her in her ribs.

Shana whipped around. "I'm sorry?"

"What're you having tonight?" Mitch queried.

"Just...a beer, please," Shana requested.

"Bottle or tap?"

“Tap, please.”

“We got Budweiser, Coors Light, Michelob, Miller Lite, Corona—”

“Do you have Guinness?” Shana reached in her purse for cash.

“I do,” Mitch said, snatching a beer glass from behind the counter. “Excellent choice, by the way.” He placed the glass under the spigot and pulled the lever as the dark beer slowly foamed into the curvy glass. “You seem kinda out of it tonight. Everything going okay?”

“Just...received some bad news is all,” Shana replied, still searching for her money.

“Sorry to hear that,” Mitch claimed.

“Same here,” Shana grumbled.

“I got it, Shana, don’t worry,” Robin assured, slapping some bills on the counter.

Shana started to object but remembered how huffy Robin had gotten the last time they had gone to a bar. All she wanted was leverage over Shana—and it was insufferable! She was loath to have people do stuff for her because of it.

A gift wasn’t a gift if there were strings attached.

“Well,” Mitch said, shrugging at Shana. “Whatever it is you’re goin’ through, it’ll get better. It’s bound to, regardless of what it seems like. That’s what I keep tellin’ myself. Gotta have a positive attitude, y’know? Keep your chin up.”

“That’s what I keep telling her,” Robin said, a dash of contempt in her voice.

Shana glared at her as Mitch handed her the frothy booze.

“Show me how you mix this bad boy, front and center,” Robin said, aiming her index finger down at the counter, trying to veil the caution in her voice. “I wanna see.”

“Not much to it, but if you insist,” Mitch grabbed the chrome margarita flask, then moistened and salted the edge of a margarita glass and proceeded to brew the cocktail. “What was it that James Bond would say? ‘I’ll have a martini. Shaken, not stirred.’”

“Yeah!” Robin said. “He is such a smartass in those movies.”

Shana remained silent, sipping the Guinness as it went smoothly down her throat. She waited for their idiotic banter to subside so that she could demand the room key from Robin. She’d had enough of shit for one day.

“You know,” Mitch went on, rattling the concoction in the flask. “I once had a guy try to do that to me a few years back, a young prick. He said that line—he had met one of those hookers—and, uh...he...he said that line, and he did, like, the worst Sean Connery impression, too, trying to be fresh and all, y’know?” He stared into Robin’s eyes. “And I just poured tap water into a martini glass, stirred it with an olive on a toothpick and just handed it to ’im.”

Robin guffawed as Shana turned and noticed Donny at one of the slots a few yards off. Some of the security guards were peering at him like hawks. Robin continued to supervise Mitch, making sure he didn’t spike their drinks with anything questionable; she, too, was growing increasingly unsettled, doing her best not to show it.

“And I says to ’im, like, ‘That’s how it’s *really* done, kiddo.’” Mitch laughed. “Anyway, he got pissed and stormed off. ’Course...my manager chewed me out for it later, but *I* thought it was worth it—I thought it was funny. I was like, ‘You ain’t no 007,’ y’ know?”

“This looks like the kind of place James Bond would come,” Robin looked around, swiveling around in the stool. “Like, where he’d meet one of his MI6 contacts, or the proverbial female CIA agent or something.”

“Yeah, it’s ritzy,” Mitch said, glancing around the décor. He poured the margarita and garnished the glass’s rim with a generous pineapple wedge. “The guy who funded it, had it

built...he's kind of a whack-job, like...I heard he's into the occult and all...and some other bad shit."

"Whack-job? What's so 'whacky' about it?" Robin questioned, offended as she reared her head back, then she put her hand over her heart. "I'm a Wiccan."

"Oh, really?" Mitch feigned interest like the professional he was. "Like, what...what *is* that, exactly? I've heard of 'em an' all." He resumed polishing another rock's glass. "Is it the same thing as a...a witch? C'mon, tell me about it. I need to...I need to learn these things, y'know?"

Shana tuned them out, eyeing Donny again. He appeared to be making progress with his hijacked slot machine...and security was taking severe interest in it. That idiot! Did he not know they monitored those things digitally? She gulped a good swig of the Guinness down as she saw a commotion arising at Lance's blackjack table. The jock's toxic ego was taking over yet again, and those around him were responding in kind, particularly the guy in the cowboy hat. Their argument was escalating as the card dealer pushed a button beneath the table, signaling authorities. Maybe they would just throw Lance out. But he was the one who paid for the room...and had the car keys. Did they have money to bail him out should he get arrested? As Shana wracked her brain for solutions to the mounting negative possibilities, somewhere around the nearby elevator, she swore she heard it again: someone whistling that same song.

House of the Rising Sun.

Yet it seemed far more ominous than before, as if the person was deliberately exaggerating the notes, instilling a disturbing dissonance that cut deep into her soul. She couldn't see who it was. As she stood up to look for the whistler, the melody disappeared as she heard the elevator doors around the corner shut, virtually drowned out by the game room's din. Why did she need to see the whistler? Was he after them? Was she losing her mind? Her paranoia was reaching its demented zenith. She had to calm down, lest she have a heart attack right here. Shana looked back at Robin, who was obviously sipping her margarita, carrying on with the bartender. She took another slug of her Guinness, the glass almost empty. She had to get out. She had to warn Donny.

But they would think her his accomplice.

She sighed; they already knew the four of them were together. They would capture them all. Lance was on his own for all she cared. But they had to leave. They had to go somewhere else before they were all seized. But where?

"Damn it, Donny," Shana grumbled. "You're almost as thickskulled as that jockstrap over—"

"Hey!" Lance yelled.

He swung at the bloated cowboy. Men and women scattered from the table, then two other blackjack players reluctantly joined the fray: a pot-bellied black guy in a baseball cap, blue jeans, and a short-sleeved button-up shirt and a white gangster wannabe in a dark-red tank top and baggy khaki shorts with a buzzcut of orange hair; some of the most ostentatious blings Shana had ever seen hung from his neck—even a few of his teeth had been capped with tarnished gold. He looked like a used cotton swab with scrawny arms and legs. For one errant moment, Shana mistook the thug-like redhead for the rapper, Eminem, then came back to her senses. The melee grew into a mosh pit, with chips and cards flying, as others at the adjacent tables stared. Robin finally turned and beheld security guards converging onto the scene.

"We gotta get Donny," Shana said.

Robin nodded absentmindedly as the two briskly walked to the geek. Donny pulled the slot machine's lever again, then at last turned his gaze at the violent mess Lance had made. Shana grabbed his arm. He jerked and peered up at her, wide-eyed.

"We gotta go," Shana rasped.

“What about Lance?” Robin asked.

“Fuck Lance!” Shana spat. “He made his bed, and now he’s gotta lie in—”

“Excuse me,” a firm male voice said from behind them.

They turned and faced one of the suave, bulky managers in a pinstripe suit, his arms crossed, with two security guards in body armor, one on each side of him.

The manager pointed at the absurd amount of winnings on the slot machine’s screen, glowering daggers down at Donny. “You’ve been tampering with my machines?”

“No, sir,” Donny lied, shaking his head.

The manager pointed at Shana and Robin. “You all together?”

Shana nodded.

“I won this fair and square, sir,” Donny claimed.

“‘Fair and square,’ huh?” the manager said, then leaned into Donny’s face. “Kid, we’ve been monitoring everything you’ve been doing over here, so tell me another one before you rig another one of my machines, you prick.”

Donny squinted, clenching his fists at his sides. “I guess it takes one to know one.”

“Donny!” Shana hissed.

Donny shrugged. “Ain’t nothing wrong with calling a spade a spade.”

“Boy, you don’t know how right you are!” the manager barked. “Get up, wise ass!” One of the security guards yanked Donny out of the seat, then the manager pointed at the women. “You two! You’re all coming with me!”

The two security guards corralled the three as the manager led the way, storming down a hall, then turning left, then right, then down a flight of concrete stairs. The manager constantly pushed Donny forward, yet it only stoked Shana’s fury all the more. She eyed a pistol holstered at one of the guard’s hips. Her fuse had been lit. And the nauseating powder keg that had been plaguing her this entire trip was about to blow.

“Think you’re fresh?” the manager taunted, noticing Donny’s bravado evaporating. “Let’s see how fresh you are after we cook you ass downstairs, you weasel motherfu—ah!”

Shana snatched the pistol and shot at the manager’s back, sending a projectile that buried itself into his thick neck.

“Shana!” Robin squealed.

Before the guards could react, Shana shot the two soldiers point-blank in the face multiple times. Everything was a maddened blur as she stood in disbelief at what she had done. The manager groaned and collapsed as the guards dropped like ragdolls to the steps.

“Fuck you!” Shana huffed through clenched teeth.

The three of them gawked and noticed the things that protruded from their wounds. Where bullet holes should have been, only silvery darts fletched with thin red plumage jutted from their skin.

“Tranquilizers?” Shana questioned, quizzically examining the gun.

Robin knelt around the sedated men, then pulled out one of the darts.

“The hell?” Donny said, bewildered.

Shana only stared at them, her glances alternating between her traumatized friends and her handiwork lying on the floor. Her rage was replaced by a horror slithering like a cold snake through her veins.

“Shana, you...” Robin said, shaking her head. “You were gonna blow their heads off.”

Shana shook her head. Her breath quavered as the pistol trembled in her hands. Tears welled up in her eyes. “I don’t feel good.”

“Give me the gun, Shana,” Robin said.

Shana glanced at her warily as silent tears rolled down her cheeks. Her grip constricted on the tranquilizer gun’s handle. She sniffled, trying to be strong. Robin was right. She *was* going to blow their heads off! And she wanted to. She wanted to paint the cold gray cinderblock walls with their wretched brains, fully aware of her morbid decision. Was it a tranquilizer...or poison? Were the men asleep...or dead? She had become a whole other person, as if her previous self was nothing more than a cheap, artificial cocoon of submissive flesh, containing the grisly, rebellious metamorphosis within. How she longed to go back to what she was, no matter how mundane it proved! It was safer than what she was now. She tried hopelessly to cram the horrors back into the Pandora’s box she had flung open in her psyche. But there was no closing it now. What was wrong with her? What was happening? What was this noxious fevered dream?

“Shana,” Robin demanded. “Give. Me. The gun. Now.”

“We need to find Lance,” Donny suggested, trying to stymie his tremors.

“What’d I say about Lance?” Shana growled. “He’ll just end up jumping us too!”

“What?” Robin snapped.

“Like those chicks were talking about just now in the bathroom,” Shana said, her voice crazed. “You know how he’s been acting around us, Robin! This whole trip? The woman we saw on the road? Someone took her too—and we couldn’t stop it! Lance is just like those guys they found in the hotel room last night! He just wants to take advantage of us—he’s a pig! And what better place to do it than Las fucking Vegas?”

“Shana, you’ve got to calm down!” Robin rebuked.

“Calm down?” Shana’s voice cracked.

“I know he’s an asshole, Shana!” Donny retorted. “But we still gotta—!”

“What?” Shana fumed.

“Shana?” Lance yelled from above the stairs. “Robin? Donny?”

All three of them looked up and saw the jock running down the steps toward them, then he stopped and gazed at Shana and the two unconscious guards.

“The fuck?” Lance squawked. “A’ight, we *definitely* gotta split now.”

Robin wrung the pistol from Shana’s hand, then through it down the stairwell.

“What’d you do that for?” Lance complained.

“Probably empty anyway,” Robin lied, glaring at Shana.

They followed Lance through an emergency fire exit, which, of course set off the alarm. Thankfully, they were in the parking garage...but on the wrong level. The car was just above them. Shana gritted her teeth; all the world was blaring bells and flashing lights in the unforgiving din of the fire alarm. They scampered toward another set of stairs, ducking and avoiding the shouting guards. None of it seemed real. Surely, Shana would wake up from this nightmare at any moment.

Right?

This wasn’t real—it couldn’t be!

Before she realized it, they were back at Lance’s white sedan. All of them piled in as Lance cranked the engine and sped out in reverse, then he forced the gear in drive and peeled out down a ramp.

Almost striking a blue SUV!

“Fucker!” Lance cursed, blowing his horn.

The other driver returned the horn blow as Lance revved out of the garage and onto the street, narrowly escaping the crowd spewing forth from fire exits like psychotic ants. He gunned the engine, racing through a red light, then another.

“Lance, what’re you doing?” Shana growled.

“What’s it look like?” Lance blasted back.

They traversed the last of the Strip, heading south on a frontage road, paralleling I-15, Shana and Donny looked through the rear window at the display of blue and red lights flaring far behind them. With shaking hands, Robin opened Google Maps on her phone.

“How do I get back on the interstate?” Lance asked.

“Just follow this road.” Robin pointed through the windshield. “There’s an exit ramp up here.”

Lance squinted at her. “You sure?”

Robin scowled at him and showed him the phone screen. Lance nodded and proceeded down the street, passing up the last of Vegas’s outskirts. The desert had been reduced to a dark vacuum all around them, save for the harsh pale glare of a few streetlights and billboards. Shana’s breathing only calmed some, yet her stomach had all but converted to lead.

Was she really about to kill those men?

Regardless of how shitty they were? How much they deserved it?

They reentered I-15, with Lance and Robin both checking the mirrors. Donny looked behind him again, through the rear window.

“Sure we don’t need to go to the police?” Donny suggested.

Lance stared at Donny in the rearview mirror and raised an eyebrow at him.

“Well?” Donny asked.

Lance procured the snub-nose revolver from the console. “Who needs the police when you *got* a piece?”

“What the fuck?” Robin blared, staring at the firearm. “You had that the entire...?”

Lance put the gun back down near the dual cup holders. “And if the police *want* a piece of me, they better—”

“You had to say something, didn’t you?” Shana griped.

“What?” Lance snapped.

He looked back at Shana, who was fixated on the sudden manifestation of menacing blue and red strobe lights behind them, drawing closer.

“Shit,” Lance hissed.

“Lance, just...just stop, okay?” Robin huffed.

“Fuck,” Lance sighed.

He slowed and pulled over on the blacktop’s shoulder. The car finally halted. Shana and Donny looked back and forth at Lance and the stopping police cruiser pulling up just behind them. Lance let out a guttural sigh and put the gear in park, then he leaned his head back on the driver’s seat.

“Just be cool, a’ight?” Lance said. “Probably just gonna ticket us for running red lights and speeding, a’ight?” Lance looked at Shana. “We good.”

“Better be right,” Shana’s voice grated.

Lance scoffed and faced the windshield, shaking his head.

After what seemed like an eternity, the officer finally exited his cruiser and walked toward the driver’s side of the white sedan, shining a flashlight at the window.

Lance rolled down the window and feigned a grin. “Hey, how ya doin’ tonight?”

The officer shined the light in the backseat. “Shana Hawthorne?”

Shana hesitated as the others looked at her. “Yes?”

“Can you step out of the vehicle, please?” the patrolman ordered.

Shana and Lance exchanged squinted stares, then she peered back up at the cop. “For what?”

“Ma’am, step out of the car.”

Reluctantly, Shana opened the passenger door and stepped onto the asphalt. Her heart was thrashing the hell out of her sternum, feeling more light-headed by the second. Her ears were ringing.

The cop pulled a pair of handcuffs from his belt. "Hands behind your head."

Tears streamed down Shana's face as she obeyed.

The cop shackled one of her wrists, then the other. "You're under arrest for attempted murder and high treason."

Shana's eyes almost popped out of their sockets. "High treason?"

"Do what?" Lance furrowed his forehead.

You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can—

"Wait, they were kidnapping *us*!" Shana sobbed. "They attacked *us*!"

The cop huffed. "Can and will be used against you in the court of—"

Blam!

"Lance!" Robin shrieked.

Shana's eyes bulged as the cop fell down, a fresh bullet hole through his skull, producing a spreading puddle of gore on the pavement. Lance bolted out of the car and snatched the keyring from the officer's belt.

"'High treason,' my ass, motherfucker," Lance snorted, unlocking Shana's cuffs. "You're welcome, by the way."

Shana just stared at Lance. He scowled back at her.

"Whatchoo waitin' on, girl?" he snarled. "Get the fuck back in the car!"

"Oh, God!" Robin whimpered.

"What now?" Donny pleaded.

"The desert," Shana blurted. "Just...go into the desert."

Lance put the gear in drive. "Don't have to tell *me* twice."

Tires peeled out as they raged back into the road. Robin quietly sobbed in the front seat as Donny stared at Shana. Shana only peered back out the window, eyes wide, with more tears streaming down her face, her fists trembling.

All the world had become a black void around them, the desert vista replaced with the shadows of hell swallowing them whole. High treason? Where the fuck did they come up with that? Shooting tranquilizer darts into people's necks wasn't high treason. Neither was whatever stupid shit she may have said on social media. Donny put his hand on Shana's shoulder, yet she wrenched it away from her. Donny sighed and gazed out his window, away from her. All of them had grown silent in the car.

Deafening silence.

Here she was, trapped in her own living horror story.

Stained by Sin City. And something far darker afoot.

Lest it be the ruin of many a poor soul.

And God knows, she's one.

III: Glass Walls

Vanya slowly opened her eyes to the dimly-lit room, seated in a lone metal chair with her head feeling a mile wide. She moved her feet, her high heels lazily scraping on a concrete floor. Beads of sweat rolled down her body, then abrupt waves of goosebumps wracked her bare flesh as an air conditioner from somewhere activated, humming from a louvered vent on the ceiling. She uttered a dainty gasp from the frigid air, jolting her. Her blurry vision gradually adjusted to the stark, compact black box of a prison cell, with the dark mirror surface of a one-way window displaying her reflection.

She was nude!

All that remained of her outfit the night before—or whenever it had been—were her scuffed stilettos. Her wrists were bound behind her by chains, with another set of steel links tightly around her abdomen and the back of the chair, held together by a digital padlock. She felt something else, fingering something entwined with the chains.

Wires.

Something whirred with energy behind her.

Her feet nudged something clamped to the chair legs.

She peered down. Jumper cables.

She scoffed, then shut her eyes, then gently leaned her throbbing head back. She couldn't help but manage a weak grin. She truly didn't have to look far to find another who shared her morbid kinks and deranged sentiments. The very thought of it all jumpstarted her twisted sociopathic heart, thrumming like an engine inside her chest, sending the livid heat of adrenaline rushing through her shapely loins...and throughout the rest of her frame. Her soft breathing quickened, with the billowing of her lungs smoothly moving her pert bust up and down. Her exposed nipples hardened. She uttered a dry, caustic giggle as she soaked in the pitiful sultry paradox: death was at her threshold again—and it made her feel so damned alive!

She had become another one of his victims.

“Ready when you are,” she whispered.

Above, the twin fluorescent bulbs illuminating the crude dungeon emitted faint flickers occasionally, gleaming on the sleek curves of her tan skin. She opened her doll-like dark-brown eyes and admired her shameless womanhood in the window, her lascivious doppelganger staring right back, observing her lewd comeuppance. A few scabbed scratches and bruises were evident on her face and body; some piece of shit had already manhandled her.

She winced as her left breast throbbed once, then she squinted down.

Just how long had she been out for?

She recalled some of that night in Vegas, the threesome that almost was with Brian and Frank, the two fuckboys she had slaughtered in the hotel bedroom, feeding her bottomless sadomasochistic appetite while simultaneously in her wayward pursuit of unattainable redemption for what happened years ago. There was something else, though. Yet recollection failed her otherwise; the rest was a vexing blur.

More icy beads of sweat rolled down her perky breasts, long legs, and toned abdomen. Some of the perspiration matted some of the bangs of her bob haircut, now a mess.

A hot mess. Just like the rest of her.

All of her was made captive here. Only a small handful of abject wretches on this miserable planet would have the stones to pull a fiasco like this on her...and actually live long enough to tell the tale.

She wondered....

"That you, Eustace?" her tired Australian accent trilled at the one-way window.

No answer. Only the soft, cool draft of the A/C vent above her continued its dull drone through the air duct. Vanya slowly licked her flesh-colored lips, unblinking and staring at the window.

"Euuuu-stace," she cooed in a playful sing-song voice. "Where are you?"

"There's no fooling you, is there, my dear Aussie?" a man's Slavic accent rolled through an intercom. "I see you've been extra frisky as of late."

"You know me all too well," Vanya smarted.

Eustace chuckled through the intercom. "It *is* good to see you again, Vanya."

"Been a while, hasn't it?" she replied.

"It has."

Zap!

Vanya yelped as electricity surged from the chains into her nude form. She moaned and pressed her thighs together, with her legs angled outward. The voltage whirled back down as she panted.

"You remembered, didn't you?" Vanya flirted hatefully at the window. "Back then, I would've thought you were more sporting than that."

"That's for true, Vanya," Eustace said through the speakers. "I *am* a sportsman. Just thought you might enjoy some of my affections...for old time's sake."

Zap!

Vanya squealed as more buzzing volts coursed through her again, then powered back down. She chuckled; she couldn't deny her depravity, with libidinous rage rising within her. What a morbid thing to absolutely loathe—and somehow adore—being another's plaything all at once.

Especially his!

"So," she huffed, "if it's for old time's sake...when's it gonna be *my* turn, love?"

Something beeped behind her, then clicked. The chains loosened as the digital padlock clanked down from the chair. Vanya let out a gentle gasp, then stood up, the seat moist from sweat and her shameless carnal stimulation from riding the lightning. She glanced to her left...and finally noticed the faint outline of a black door, virtually camouflage to the dark walls, then she looked behind the chair. A car battery within a homemade contraption was hooked up to the jumper cables clamped to the metal legs.

She eyed the window again. "Why'd you stop? Just when it was getting good?"

Eustace's staticky voice sighed. "I'm in a bit of a pickle as of late."

"Casino not doing it for you anymore?" Vanya sneered.

"Some loose ends need to be tied up," Eustace said through the intercom, his voice sobering. "I've had a few runners. One of them is a viable asset I require. I need a tracker. And you're the best there is."

Vanya faced the window. "And this is my problem how?"

"She may be able to stop the storm coming. She and her friends escaped the casino last night."

"A storm, you say?"

"Well, you *do* have a choice," Eustace claimed. "I know you well enough that you're more sadist than masochist. You could either take the mission I offer you, or stay here...and be my toy all over again."

"Oh, it's a 'mission' now, is it?"

“Come,” Eustace said through the intercom.

The door to Vanya’s left buzzed, then unlocked and slid away, revealing another black corridor alit with more fluorescent lighting. In walked two armed guards clad in black fatigues, tactical gear, and ski masks equipped with goggles, presumably the same ones that bagged her at the casino the other night. Each of them carried an MP5.

Vanya eyed a jingling keychain around one of the guard’s belts.

Her left breast throbbed again. She glanced at her chest, then back at the keys.

The two guards moved out of the way; one of them nodded Vanya to the doorway. Vanya smirked and sauntered toward them. It didn’t take a genius to guess both of them ravenously fondling her up and down with their eyes, just itching to bend her over and squeeze the living hell out of her tits while forcing themselves right up inside of her. She was almost tempted to let them.

But she had plans elsewhere.

“My, what fine gentlemen you are,” she quipped as she passed them.

The men said nothing and followed her into the corridor as the door scraped closed. Vanya’s heels clopped with hips tenderly swaying to her gait, then she stopped and turned to her right...and beheld one of Eustace’s “art exhibits.”

A house of horrors. And she didn’t even bat an eye.

The hall was lined with two glass walls, each barring the way to a narrow room carved with geometric grooves and arcane jargon in several languages, including Latin. The chamber before her beyond the glass showcased bizarre paintings tarnished with a sepia-colored tinge, a foreboding vellum illustrated with dried blood and God knows what else, depicting portraiture of women, scarred and bound in agony...and also apocalyptic landscapes from various perspectives.

Vanya glared. She recalled that fateful night.

One painting in the middle was harshly juxtaposed from the other provocative memorabilia, displaying the surreal facial profile of a ragged plague doctor’s bird-like mask, hollow, bleak.

Eyeless. Pitiless.

As if nothing were there behind it.

The grim canvas appeared worn and aged, an old tattoo on desiccated human skin stretched out. It was as if a demonic visage had invaded and possessed one of Leonardo Da Vinci’s schematics, usurping a sketch of one of his flying machines and its labeled parts. More goosebumps washed over Vanya’s bare form; even she was unsettled by the plague doctor’s empty gaze, seeming to stare right at her.

Vanya pointed at the plague doctor’s image. “What’s *this* one?”

“The one we’re trying to stop,” Eustace told her. “My intel has reported him operating somewhere in the Southwest, and no telling where else. Based on what my men have reported, he means to engage in biological warfare, a genetically-modified plague. His cult never seems to meet in the same place twice.”

“What a wonderful story, Eustace,” Vanya scoffed. “Have you tried your hand at writing high fantasy as of late?”

“You don’t believe me.”

“Should I?”

“You distrust me at your own peril.”

“What’s his name?”

“Don’t know, my dear. Not even sure he has one.”

Vanya rolled her eyes and continued to scan the rest of the chamber. A few more vertical slabs of glass positioned in thin pedestals of electronic mechanisms in the tiled floor, two panes for each

slab. Each of the two panes tightly sandwiched a mummified sliver of a human being's internal anatomy, mainly women, slices of them from head to foot, as if Eustace had made real life-size images of diagrams from a med school textbook. At the other end of the hallway, another automatic sliding door stood.

With the distant, muffled screams of a woman resounding behind it.

"Ed Gein would be proud," Vanya snarked quietly at the mashed cadaver slices. "Giger, too, I suppose."

She eyed the door, then tilted her head toward one of her shoulders and took a few steps, observing the disturbing "projects."

"This escapee," Vanya asked. "Who is she?"

The glass wall before Vanya bleeped and became like an oversized computer monitor. A window opened up showing muted surveillance footage of the casino from the previous night. In the video, more of Eustace's guards ran down a stairwell after four college students: two men and two women.

"They came with a young man named Lance McMullan, the athletic gentleman you see before you. The other three are Donald Takahashi, Robin Abernathy, and Shana Hawthorne."

Shana's image flickered on the screen. Vanya raised an eyebrow.

"Shana is the one we need."

"Who's 'we,' Eustace?"

"You know damned well what I speak of," Eustace snapped.

"Why is *she* important? Expanding your palate? Or are fat sex slaves in high demand now?"

The woman behind the door screamed again.

"She has a rare blood type, one this shadow cult is apparently interested in," Eustace said. "If we can acquire her before this mystery terrorist does, perhaps we can—"

"Oh, spare me!" Vanya laughed. "I see you've been working on this whopper for quite some time. Love it! Love the creativity and effort."

Another computer window bleeped on the glass surface and showed a scene in night vision. Vanya quickly sobered as she saw several mercenaries in black military gear in a desert cavern, standing around a bonfire...with a man in a plague doctor mask and black trench coat standing on a rock, arms raised up to the sky. Vanya looked at the plague doctor painting, then back at the plague doctor on the screen.

"You always did throw quite a party," Vanya mocked. "Especially on Halloween. How do I know these aren't *your* men?"

"Perhaps it'd be best for you to see for yourself," Eustace replied.

Vanya glanced up at the ceiling. "And I suppose a simple blood sample from Hawthorne wouldn't do?"

"We would need to run many tests, Vanya," Eustace claimed. "So, no, it would not. And if *they* get a hold of her, who knows what sort of damage they could do? We're not fucking around on this one, Vanya. And besides...."

Vanya scowled at the screen.

"It might do your soul some good...after what happened."

"What makes you think I have a soul?"

"You wouldn't have come if it weren't there, Vanya."

Vanya averted her eyes from the screen, then relaxed her face.

"You know I'm right."

"If you know so much about them already, why do you need me?"

"They went off the grid not too long ago," Eustace sighed. "Guess they got smart and disposed of their phones, lying low and what have you. That, and we've had some technical issues we're currently trying to remedy."

"You don't say?" Vanya muttered, her eyes glancing back and forth.

The woman beyond the door shrieked, then whimpered. Vanya eyed the door, then back at the screen. Her left breast throbbed, sharper this time, then she rubbed where her bosom met her rib cage. It was unusually sore, yet there were no cuts, bruises, or burns. No abrasions whatsoever. Eustace hadn't shocked her that bad.

Then again...it *had* been a while....

"You're no angel, love," Vanya said.

"Speak for yourself," Eustace retorted. "But would you truly want this saboteur grabbing the reins? The world belongs to those like you and me, not these slobbering charlatans, this pied piper and his pompous magicians."

Vanya squinted as the two guards stepped closer, one on each side of her. She eyed them both, up and down.

"I still think you're shitting me," she whispered.

"I shit you not," Eustace claimed.

"You and I both know you just want more toys. You never had even a fraction of the expertise."

"Vanya, my dear," Eustace sang through the speakers, "I don't think you know me as well as you think you do."

The woman behind the door screeched again, louder than ever.

Vanya glanced at the guard's keychain. "I don't have to."

She twirled around and broke one of the men's noses with her fist, sending him to the floor, then she snatched the machine gun from his hand and fired on the other guard. Bullets shattered glass and carved through meat as the other man went down bleeding. As the remaining guard strained to rise, a twisted grin curled on Vanya's face.

Crack!

Down came one of her stiletto heels, right through the guard's jugular and snapping his neck. Vanya bent down and snatched the jangling keys from one of the dead guards.

An alarm blared, signaling white flashing strobe lights throughout the chambers.

"Maybe some other time," Vanya taunted Eustace, peering up at one of the intercom speakers.

She darted to the other door and tried a few of the keys in a panel next to its molding. The shouts of more mercenaries sounded in distant corridors, growing closer.

Clack!

One of the keys finally fit as she turned it.

The door slid open and revealed more hallways and a four-way intersection. With one hand, Vanya slung off her ruined high heels and tossed them to the side, gripping the MP5 tightly to her tits with the other.

Her left breast throbbed again, faintly stinging.

From another nearby prison cell door, the woman's screams resonated, along with the sound of two yelling men. Vanya sighed. Though she brandished a psychotic smile, there were some things she refused to tolerate.

Maybe she could make it right this time.

The sound of the rushing soldiers grew closer.

"Shit," Vanya groaned, then unlocked the prison cell door and barged in.

"Bitch!" a guard snarled as he grabbed Vanya's head.

Blam-blam!

Vanya shot the guard's leg. The guard growled and clenched his wound as the other soldier came at her. Vanya whirled around and gunned the two mercenaries down. The MP5 clicked empty. Vanya cast the weapon to the floor, then took a breath and huffed it out.

"Gettin' a good workout, anyway," Vanya smarted.

"Help me!" the woman yelled at Vanya.

Vanya glanced at the long-haired petite blonde woman, handcuffed in a reclining position to a rusty operating chair. The woman's body was riddled with fresh scratches and a few burns, mostly nude and barefooted with only a ragged pair of frilly black panties contouring to her hips. Tears ran down the woman's face. Poor dear couldn't have been over her mid-thirties, with what appeared to be an old C-section scar across her lower abdomen. On a tray attached to the chair, numerous bloody utensils lay stained.

Vanya's gaze turned at a nearby blowtorch on a shelf...next to a smaller oxygen tank.

"Oh, they were gonna have a *wonderful* time with you, love," Vanya snarked, staring at the woman's wrists. "What, they don't give you gals nametags anymore?"

"Get me out of here—hurry!" the woman squealed.

"What're you complainin' about?" Vanya cocked her head to one side, observing the woman's underwear. "At least they let you keep *something* on...such as it is."

"Help me—they're coming!" the woman snarled, yanking at her handcuffs.

Vanya looked at the door. "Wonder what's taking the blokes so lo—?"

"You crazy bitch—get me the fuck out of here!"

"If it'll make you shut it," Vanya sighed, then took her keychain and unlocked the shackles. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Tabitha."

"Delighted," Vanya groaned.

"Who are you?" Tabitha asked.

Vanya said nothing, then undid the last of the handcuffs, then picked up another MP5 from one of the dead guards on the floor and handed it to Tabitha. "Any good with one of those?"

"Uhhh..."

"Quite all right, mate—I got it," Vanya huffed again, cocking the machine gun, then she nodded at the shelf. "Be a doll and take that blowtorch...and that can of whatever the devil it is, will you?"

"Gladly," Tabitha snapped as she snatched the pyro from the shelf.

"You good with *that*, aren't you?"

Tabitha squinted at Vanya, then ignited the blowtorch, the flame in one hand and lugging the oxygen tank in the other.

"Never hurts to make sure," Vanya jested, then started out the door. "Shall we?"

Tabitha followed Vanya out into the hallway. "How the hell do we get out of here?"

"Just stick close," Vanya ordered, holding the MP5 tightly.

The clomping of men's boots sounded only yards away at the hall's four-way intersection, to the two women's left. Tabitha lurched out in front of Vanya as several guards appeared and aimed their guns at Vanya. Tabitha unscrewed the valve on the oxygen tank; the gas hissed as Tabitha's blowtorch blew a jet of roaring flames at the mercenaries. The men screamed as they combusted and fell to the floor.

The oxygen tank caught ablaze.

"Throw it!" Vanya shouted.

Tabitha squeaked and clumsily tossed both the tank and the blowtorch down the left hall as more soldiers came towards them. Both the blowtorch and tank pinged and rolled.

"Get down!" Vanya barked.

Vanya and Tabitha ducked behind the corner and shielded themselves, eyes shut and teeth gritted. The men yelled and retreated from the fiery tank.

Boom!

The left hall conflagrated and collapsed the ceiling. Sparking cables dangled as the lights flickered, revealing part of the air duct. Vanya and Tabitha opened their eyes and wheeled around, then Vanya peered up at the gouged, smoking ceiling; the slouching debris had created a makeshift ramp leading up into the duct. Vanya looked down at her MP5 and clicked on the flashlight fastened to the bottom of the gun like a bayonet.

"Through there," Vanya said, pointing.

"How do you know?" Tabitha growled.

"Stay put if you like," Vanya quipped, making for the rubble.

Tabitha grunted and followed. Both of them coughed from the smoke as they crawled up into the old duct. They shimmied on their hands and knees through cobwebs and rust, turning left, then right. Tabitha did her best not to look at Vanya's toned ass in the dim glow produced by the machine gun's puny flashlight, and having to put up with Vanya's bare pussy just inches away from her nose was not helping matters. At all.

"You've been here before," Tabitha said behind Vanya. "Haven't you?"

Vanya didn't answer, though the facility's layout did seem rather familiar to her. Yet it looked far different than it had the last time, if it was the same place. It had been years since her last run-in with Eustace. That was the trouble, though; he was a hard man to read, even for Vanya.

This seemed too easy of an escape.

Way too easy.

And she knew why.

"I think we've fucked ourselves," Tabitha grumbled.

"Just keep up," Vanya rebuked.

"Look, we're lost! We need to backtrack," Tabitha panted. "They're probably waiting for us."

"No, they're not."

"How do you know? Who the hell are you?"

"Just a friend."

Tabitha scoffed, utterly sick of Vanya's derriere in her face.

After what seemed like an hour, the duct finally turned right. Vanya smirked and saw a faint orange light up ahead, coming from an inert fan, stuck in place from heavy corrosion. She didn't recall *that* before, but it did little to stymie her dubious hope.

"Is that...?" Tabitha gazed past Vanya at the fan blades.

"Yes," Vanya said, then passed the MP5 to Tabitha and pointed at the fan's oxidized hub. "Shine here."

Tabitha obeyed as Vanya folded her body in a fetal position, just tightly enough to aim her legs at the fan. Tabitha breathed a sigh of relief, no longer having Vanya's genitals menacing her nose. With a few sharp kicks, Vanya beat against the corroded fan blade.

Ping! Ping! Clank! Clank! Clang! Clong!

The fan blade fell out and tumbled into a shallow dirt gulch populated by sagebrush. Vanya slipped out, then Tabitha crawled and exited the duct, wiping away cobwebs from her hair. A lone orange streetlight shone above them, over a short bridge along a paved highway.

"Told you," Vanya said.

Tabitha rolled her eyes and stepped around the rocks. She peered up at the desert night sky, then at the highway.

"I'm Vanya, by the way."

"Charming," Tabitha groaned, making her way up to the asphalt.

Vanya followed her as both stood on the lone highway, utterly devoid of traffic...save for a lone pair of headlights in the distance. Trucker headlights. Vanya smirked and took the MP5 from Tabitha.

Tabitha looked down at her exposed bosoms, then stared at Vanya. "Think we'll have any luck getting a ride?"

Vanya's smirk became a grin as she eyed Tabitha up and down. The blonde's chest wasn't quite as plump as hers, yet the bird shouldn't have trouble turning heads. She looked at Tabitha's face, then squinted. Goosebumps wracked her flesh again.

The trucker was only a quarter of a mile away, yet he was already slowly down. Vanya nodded Tabitha forward, then the two women marched toward the truck. The vehicle steadily lost momentum, its brakes hissing. Vanya's muscles tensed.

The driver's side opened up...with a double-barreled shotgun in the bloated, middle-aged trucker's hand, aimed right at Vanya. Tabitha shrieked!

The trucker glared at Vanya. "The hell are—?"

Blam-blam-blam-blam-blam!

Down went the trucker.

Tabitha gawked at Vanya. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Vanya shrugged. "Kill or be killed, dear."

Tabitha backed away from Vanya. Vanya walked over and grabbed the shotgun in one hand, then she cocked her head again...and aimed the MP5 at Tabitha. Tabitha froze.

"Get in," Vanya said, nodding at the truck.

"What?" Tabitha whimpered, tears streaming down her face.

"Did you think you were getting off so easily tonight, love?" Vanya said. "You're a liability. You don't know that crazy bastard like I do, how far and deep his tentacles reach. You really want to roll those dice?"

Tabitha shook her head, staring at another pair of headlights, then another...and another right behind it.

"Get in," Vanya said, her voice growing stern, then she glanced down at the dead trucker. "Or you'll look like this bugger here. Choice is yours. The night is young."

"What're gonna do with me?" Tabitha sobbed.

"Just going for a ride, partner," Vanya claimed. "Need to go see another friend. 'Fraid she may be in danger...along with the rest of us."

Tabitha looked at Vanya, then at the distant approaching traffic.

"I'll give you three more sec—"

"Please don't hurt me," Tabitha whined, arms raised, as she made her way to the passenger's side of the truck.

"Atta girl," Vanya said. "Steady as she goes."

Another chill wind blew dust around them as Tabitha reluctantly entered the cab of the truck. Vanya got in behind the wheel, then she slammed the door shut with the shotgun in her lap, then she slid the MP5 down near the seat on her left. With trembling hands, Tabitha jerkily fastened her

seatbelt. Heat blew from the cab's air vents as a talk show garbled unclear nonsense from the radio, the voices staticky from bad reception. Vanya scoffed, then flipped the heat and the radio off.

"Ow," Vanya said, rubbing the side of her throbbing left breast.

"What?" Tabitha snapped.

Vanya didn't answer, then she put the truck in gear and placed her foot on the gas. The truck lurched forward on the shoulder of the highway, leaving the dimly-lit bridge. She checked the sideview mirror; the headlights behind them were growing closer.

And they damned sure weren't tourists.

Vanya took one last look at the trucker's corpse, then up at the road ahead. Time became a vise, closing in on them from all directions. There was no sanctuary out here. She pondered Eustace's words, about the plague doctor, about the blood sample.

About Shana.

Vanya took a breath and took one last look at the trucker's cadaver. They didn't have long. They would need a new vehicle soon...and some clothes. It wasn't the cops that bothered Vanya.

There were no cops out here. There were no heroes.

Only murderers.

IV: Pretenders

Shana stared from the shade of the gas station's awning at the sprawling desert beyond Barstow with wild eyes. Her heart churned in her chest. She felt like she was going to puke. All four of them did. They had run out of cash and had no choice but to use their debit cards. Someone would find them. After the last couple of days, on the lam, it was inevitable. It was suffocating, unable to trust a single soul, not even the police. And if Donny didn't stop prattling on about crossing the Mexican border, they would probably shoot him next.

Even more disturbing, all four of their phones had glitched up, rendered useless.

And it was no coincidence. Not even their family could reach them.

Who the hell was after them? And why?

It was so random. Why them?

She was beyond pissed at Lance for what he pulled the night before last, even if the cop was supposedly crooked. It just made all four of them all the more guilty. At the same time, she was secretly grateful, even if Lance was a dog. He had saved her life. But that didn't mean she had to lick his asshole! Still, she actually pitied Lance; it was eating away at him, what he did. Trauma poisoned them all. Whatever idiot coined the phrase, "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas," needed to be found and shot!

It was a contagion that could not be contained.

Speaking of contagion, something nearby smelled like sunbaked death, fusing with the stench of garbage cooking in the heat inside an old dumpster at the edge of the parking lot. She had noted some roadkill earlier over there: the gruesome carcass of an armadillo.

And the wind was blowing it right in Shana's direction.

But to the shock of the others, that horrific night wasn't enough to deter Lance from ruining their spring break. Denial was a wretched, obstinate thing. What madness had truly driven them all the way to Southern California? Shana couldn't help but feel they had plunged only straight down into the belly of this beast.

Then again, what the hell was the point of it all?

Wasn't survival just a mere instinct? She twiddled the delicate crucifix around her neck, gleaming like a cheap trinket now, weightless, almost nonexistent. She scarcely noticed it half the time on her flesh, not even sure why she even bothered to wear it anymore; not even a superficial sentiment no longer seemed to justify it.

What sort of God would orchestrate such hell on earth?

The brusque desert wind blew in her ears as her eyes drifted toward a towering dust devil far off, twisting slowly and lazily, meandering anywhere and nowhere. From the distance, it looked harmless, haunting, serene, and mesmerizing all at once, a serpentine ghost swaying in a drunken dance, yet she could notice the puny glint of a faraway car's windshield in close proximity with the blowing dust. It must have been huge up close, blowing debris everywhere, yet it appeared like a winding thread from where she stood. One form of pressure collided with another, raging against each other, ever contorting in a destructive whirlwind, never to cease unless some other reactions were to occur...and annihilate it from existence, whether it was due to a seemingly random consequence, or being at the whim of some arbitrary force greater than the world. Nevertheless, such violent phenomena obliterated everything in their path.

Wasting everything in their wake.

For no reason. No good reason, at least.

"Here," Robin said.

Shana shook and turned to her plus-size goth friend, handing her a bottled Coke.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare ya," Robin said, with a Barq's root beer in her other hand.

"It's all right," Shana replied, then took the cola. "Thanks."

"Mm-hmm." Robin nodded, then sighed and looked at the dust devil. "Wow, I've never seen one that big."

"I've never seen one at all," Shana told her.

"Seriously?"

"Not up close. Not in real life."

Both the girls carefully unscrewed the caps of their respective sodas. The drinks hissed, releasing their sweet, delectable aromas. It was the scent of something familiar, something from home. Something innocent. Yet it did little to abate the dark gravity of paranoia gradually crushing them.

"What's takin' 'em?" Shana griped, then took a sip of the Coke and peered through the gas station's wide window.

"Donny's gettin' some snacks." Robin turned to the glass, her eyes shifting left and right. "Lance is...fuck if I know."

"Taking a shit?"

Robin rolled her eyes. "Probably jerkin' off in there."

Shana snorted. "Wouldn't put it past that boy."

"Look, I know I sound like a broken record about this, but..." Robin trailed off, her wide eyes beholding the dust devil again.

Shana took another swig from her drink, then cleared her throat, the cola biting all the way down her esophagus. "I still don't know. After the other night..."

"They can't *all* be crooked, Shana."

"Sure 'bout that?" Shana glared. "I ain't no 'high-treason' *nothing*, motherfu—d—does no part of this scream shady BS to you?"

"Yeah, it's BS! I agree with you, Shana! I'm on your side, one-hundred percent, but we—"

"But what?"

"Shana," Robin rasped. "We're in another state! We could try the gas station phone! Or a hotel somewhere! Surely—"

"Girl, I don't think you know cops like I do," Shana lectured. "There either crooked, or they don't care at all. Trust me, they do nothing—*nothing*! They're pretenders!" She took another sip of the soda. "Your tax dollars at work."

"So, what? We just keep riding?" Robin spat. "I think the vacation is over."

"No shit," Shana retorted. "I've *been* wantin' to go home! Tell that to the damned Neanderthal that's been behind the wheel this whole trip, and..." Shana glared at the gas station's automatic sliding doors. "Where the fuck are they? It's too damned hot! What's takin' 'em—?"

"What?" Donny blurted, walking out of the doors with an open bag of corn chips in his hands. The two women squinted at Donny as he approached them, munching.

"Want some?" Donny offered.

Robin reached into the bag and grabbed a few chips.

"I can't see how you can have an appetite," Shana criticized. "Especially after we ki—"

"Shh—shush!" Robin hissed, eyes bulging.

"I don't know—finally got it back, okay?" Donny snapped. "Gotta eat sooner or later, y'know. Who the hell is 'we,' anyway? Lance was the one who pulled the—"

“Shh—shut up, both of you!” Robin rasped, looking around.

Shana sighed, then shook her head and looked away.

Donny popped another chip in his mouth. “Kinda ready for some *real* food, though.”

“Me too,” Robin groaned, with a mouthful of chips.

“I still say we make for Mexico,” Donny said.

“And have border patrol arrest us there?” Robin scoffed.

“Nah,” Donny told her. “We get somebody to smuggle us over—”

“Oh, wake up!” Robin scorned. “This ain’t *Breaking Bad*, and you’re not the freakin’ Heisenburg, alright? You’ve been watching way too much damned TV!”

“Okay, Mom,” Donny snapped back.

“Even if we could get to Mexico, what then?” Shana questioned. “What do we do afterwards?”

“The beach,” Lance said, striding through the doors toward them with a piece of paper in his hand. “Got a reservation at a place at...” he squinted at his scribblings, “San Simeon?”

Shana raised an eyebrow and watched Lance open the driver’s side of the sedan. He ducked in and rummaged in the console, then he paused, seeing the revolver he used the other night, then he resumed his search.

“What’re you lookin’ for?” Shana asked Lance.

He said nothing, then pilfered through the glove compartment...and came across a small, unlabeled orange bottle of pills.

“Hey, what the—?”

“What, Shana?” Lance barked, putting away the bottle and slamming the glove compartment and console shut. He stepped out of the car and glared daggers at her. “What? I told you we’re not going back home, not yet!”

“Are you holding?” Shana protested.

“What?” Robin growled at Lance.

“Is *that* what this is about?” Shana hissed, “Are you—?”

“I saved your lives, didn’t I?” Lance snarled with arms outstretched. “What’re ya gonna do, tattle? Think I give a shit? Go ahead, Shana! Tell ’em! Tell them pigs! Go psycho chorus girl on us! We’ll *all* go down together! Wanna hate me because I’m trying to salvage what was *supposed* to be a badass spring break? Think I wanted this shit to happen? Think I asked for this?”

“Uh, guys?” Donny said, glancing at a black car on the other side of the parking lot.

Shana clenched her teeth. “Just because you’re some dope-dealin’ piece-of-shit crackhead doesn’t mean—!”

“I ain’t no crackhead!” Lance fulminated.

“Guys?” Donny pleaded again.

“Bullshit!” Shana seethed.

“Stop yelling!” Robin griped. “Or somebody will call ’em on us any—!”

“Guys, shut up!” Donny shouted.

Lance scowled and stomped toward Donny. “Think you growin’ a pair over there, mother—?”

“We’re being watched!” Donny rasped at Lance with his eyes still fixed on the black car.

Shana and Robin followed Donny’s gaze, then Lance whipped around.

“Don’t look at ’em!” Donny grumbled.

Shana, Robin instantly looked away and eyed the distant dust devil again. Lance squinted at the dark silhouettes of two men sitting in the car.

“That’s nobody, dumbass,” Lance rebuked Donny.

“They’re staring right at us,” Donny claimed.

“Stop it, Donny,” Robin chastised.

Donny glanced at Robin. “I’m not doing any—”

“Stop looking at them,” Robin growled.

“How can you tell they’re lookin’ this way?” Lance said, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hands. “I can’t see—”

“Definitely got to go to Mexico now,” Donny said.

“Fuck Mexico!” Lance fumed.

“Let’s just—let’s just go,” Shana said, her voice quivering. “Please.”

They all grew silent, then one by one, they all piled into the white sedan. As Shana stepped into the backseat of the car, she took one last look at the black car, the glare of the afternoon sun shining on its windshield. Her eyes ventured back at the dust devil, steadily drawing closer to Barstow.

“Get in, Shana,” Robin complained from the front passenger’s seat.

Shana slumped into the car and shut the door as Lance cranked the engine and put the vehicle into reverse. The car sped backwards, tires squealing as Lance slammed on the brakes and jerked the transmission into drive. Robin glared at Lance as the sedan lurched into the road, cutting off another driver blowing his horn.

“Fuck you, man!” Lance blared at the other car, giving the driver the middle finger.

“Lance, chill out!” Shana snarled.

“Nah, I’m just a ‘crackhead,’ ’member?” Lance fired back.

“Just drive,” Robin huffed.

“What’s it look like I’m doin’ right now,” Lance muttered as he drove to the interstate’s exit ramp. “Everybody’s just whinin’ and bitchin’ up in here.”

Shana rolled her eyes as Donny continued to munch on the corn chips. Robin removed her phone from her purse and tapped the glitched-up screen, to no avail. She emitted a heated sigh and turned the device back off, then she stuffed it back into a pocket inside her purse.

They were fucked.

And Shana was gradually being tempted into caring less and less.

As they merged into the interstate, Shana looked at Lance, noticing him squinting and constantly double-taking at the sideview mirror. She looked behind her and noticed a black vehicle far behind them. Was it the same as the one at the gas station? She couldn’t tell. She was beyond sick of Lance. She almost wanted them to get pulled over. Again. What would Lance do, then? Repeat bloody history?

They would all die sooner or later...just like her control-freak mom did years ago.

She never told anyone about what she had attempted shortly after her mother’s passing, not even Robin or Donny. About the sleeping pills in her bathroom. About the *real* reason why there were scars on her arms. Like she needed a bunch of clucking hens at college, a glorified high school, gossiping all over the place, about her trying to leave, trying to escape.

Trying...to end it all.

Yet she had stopped herself. In hindsight, she never knew why she prevented it. Maybe they *should* go all the way to the West Coast, to San-Whatever-The-Hell-That-Place-Was-Called. Might see some seals, sea lions. Sharks? A whale, maybe? Maybe she could escape in the Pacific’s tides, lose herself in the rich azure waves.

And end herself in the salty undertow of...

She shivered! A silent tear rolled down her eye as she struggled to dam up the rest of her imminent lamentation from flowing down her cheeks. She damned sure didn’t want Lance seeing

it, lest he waylay into her again. If only Chad was with them. He wouldn't have that shit, especially from Lance. Did Chad even know something was wrong? Would he care? He had seemed strangely distant from her these past few weeks, right before they took this trip. Was that stupid charity function really that important?

Why didn't he come?

She closed her eyes, accidentally coaxing two more tears down her face as she strained to picture her and Chad on the beach, at sunset, making love on the sand, bathed in the vibrant ultraviolet colors of the incoming dusk, listening to the waves crashing on nearby rocky sea stacks. Washing away.

Watching herself end it all...in the salty undertow...of....

"Damn it!" Lance cursed again, scowling at the rearview mirror.

"What?" Robin snapped.

Shana opened her eyes as the faint sound of sirens drew closer behind them. All four of them blew guttural sighs as Shana squinted at Lance.

Donny looked out the rear window. "Is he coming for us, or...?"

Shana turned and saw the highway patrolman's SUV closing in on them, nearing their tail.

Lance sighed again. "Yeah, he is. Shit, man—this dude, man!"

As Lance merged onto the road's shoulder and slowed the sedan, Shana peered back out the rear window. Far behind them at the police cruiser...the piercing sheen of another vehicle's windshield pulled over and stopped. Goosebumps plagued her skin as her heart floundered more inside her...along with her tumultuous stomach all over again.

"Were you speeding?" Robin scolded Lance.

"I—people goin' faster than I am on this bitch!" Lance growled, gritting his teeth at the sideview mirror.

"He ran the plate, probably," Donny said, putting away the corn chips. "From that, you know, the, uh...the other—"

"Shut the fuck up, Donny." Shana exhaled, staring up at the car's ceiling with glazed eyes.

"Why don't you just kill this one too?" Robin whispered coldly. "Worked the other night."

"Why don't you talk outta your ass where I can't hear you?" Lance grumbled at Robin, finally putting his seatbelt on for show.

He opened the console, eyeing the revolver again. Shana glanced at the gun, then back up at Lance's tightened face; she could have sworn she saw the beginning of tears welling up in his bloodshot eyes. With a heated breath through his nostrils, Lance shut the console and stared at the cop car in his sideview mirror.

"Here, piggy-piggy-piggy-piggy," Lance muttered at the police cruiser's reflection. "Come on down. Come get a piece."

Shana looked back through the back window and saw the patrolman exit his SUV and approach, clad in sunglasses, bulletproof vest, and all.

"That's it," Lance continued taunting the officer. "Just slow-roll your ass right on over."

She squinted at the black car far behind them...and saw two other men in sunglasses and dark suits leave their vehicle, seeming a quarter of a mile away. Men in black, in the flesh—and not the kind tracking down space aliens, either. Her blood froze over as the "agents" both gently closed the black car's doors and casually walked toward them.

Lance squinted at the two suspicious newcomers. "The fuck?"

He rolled the driver's side window down, then turned the engine off, leaving the keys in the ignition. Shana looked at Lance's twitching fingers tapping on the console's handle, his breathing quickening.

"Oh, shit," Robin mouthed silently, leaning her head back against the seat's headrest.

The highway patrolman finally reached the driver's side of the sedan. Lance looked up and feigned a grin up at the looming cop.

"How'ya doin'?" Lance nodded at the officer.

"All right," the patrolman claimed. "License and registration, please?"

"Yeah," Lance said, fidgeting for his wallet, then he pulled out his ID and insurance card. He handed it to the officer. "There."

"Thank you," the cop said, examining the cards.

Shana turned back at the incoming duo drawing closer to them.

"Minnesota, huh?" the officer said.

"Yeah," Lance replied.

"Long way from home," the cop told them.

"We're on spring break," Robin blurted.

The cop leaned lower and stared at Robin. "Yeah?"

"Uh, yeah," Lance said.

"Where ya headed?" the officer pried.

"The beach," Lance said.

"Really? Whereabouts, exactly?"

"Uh, Santa Barbara," Lance lied.

The officer peered at Shana. "Ma'am, everything okay back there?"

"Huh?" Shana jerked around, wide-eyed. "Y-yes, sir!"

"You all mind stepping out of the vehicle, please?" the officer requested.

"What for?" Lance questioned, his fake smile evaporating.

"Step out of the car," the officer ordered. "All of you." He pressed a button on his radio. "I'm gonna need backup."

"Ten-four," a woman's staticky voice garbled back from the radio's speaker.

"Out of the car," the officer persisted.

Reluctantly, all but Lance opened their doors and eased out of the sedan. As they shut the doors, Shana saw the two men out of the corner of her right eye, seeming only yards away. Lance only faced forward in stony defiance; his fingers slowly clicked the console's handle open.

"Lance," Shana rasped.

"Sir, step out of the vehicle. I'm not gonna ask you again," the cop warned Lance, his hand on his holster. He looked at Shana, then at Donny and Robin. "The rest of you, put her hands on the vehicle."

Robin and Donny complied, wincing and hissing through their teeth as their tender hands embraced the searing heat of the car's chassis wrought by the ruthless desert sun.

"Sir!" the patrolman demanded.

"Or what?" Lance grumbled, glaring up at the officer. "You gonna shoot me?"

"Lance!" Robin growled.

"I think I'm gonna puke," Donny groaned, shaking his head.

"Lance!" Shana barked, then turned to the cop. "Officer, please—!"

"Hands on the vehicle," the cop snarled, drawing his pistol and aiming it at Lance's head. "Wanna go to jail, son?"

"I ain't your 'son,' bitch," Lance sneered with a caustic smirk curling across his face. "Fascist dickface. Go ahead, blow my head off. Kill *another* black guy, you Nazi motherfu—hey! Hey, bitch—whatchoo—hey!"

"Cop-killin' piece of shit!" the officer roared, flinging the door open and dragging Lance out, pinning him to the scorching asphalt. Hastily, the patrolman cuffed Lance with his knee on his back.

"The fuck, man—I didn't kill no cop!" Lance yelled.

"Stay down!" the cop roared.

"Fuck you—get off me!" Lance coughed.

"I said stay down!"

"Get off him!" Shana snarled at the cop.

The patrolman turned his scourging gaze to Shana. "Wait your turn, missy!"

"Ah, man!" Lance coughed again. "You crushin' my ribs, I can't—"

"Shut up!"

Something in Shana snapped. She was so sick of being powerless. She growled, then charged the officer and pushed him tumbling into the freeway.

"Shana!" Robin screamed.

"Bitch!" the cop grunted.

A car horn blared—then the blur of speeding metal struck meat, plowing into the cop and sending his body flopping several feet down the road. Shana froze in icy shock at the officer's limp body with Lance sputtering and squirming up to his feet near her, hands still cuffed behind him. None of them noticed the screeching tires of the SUV that had taken the patrolman out.

Lance snorted, then hocked a loogie in the cop's direction. "Yeah! That's karma, bitch! That's whatchoo get, mofo! Fuckin' cracka! How's it taste?"

"Shana," Robin whimpered.

"Fuck, Shana," Donny managed to utter.

Shana stood there, quivering, tears streaming down her round face, staring at her grim, nauseating handiwork, lying mangled in the right lane of the interstate. She was a killer. Her veins grew more glacial in the desert sun, feeling the warmth of innocence empty from her. She was a murderer now, a walking death. Was this what power truly was? She bent over and heaved; all her guts were coming up, ready to explode, within and without.

"Geez, Shana, breathe." Lance looked over, furrowing his sweaty forehead.

Robin walked to Shana and put her hand on her shoulder—then Shana knocked it away.

"Get the fuck back!" Shana retched, with hands on her knees. "Oh, God."

"Shana, just take a breath," Robin's voice quavered.

"Oh, God!" Shana sobbed.

Lance looked at the cop's corpse, at the keys shining on his belt. A river of cars continued to zoom past, dangerously close to the cadaver.

"Shit," Lance cursed, then he turned to Donny. "You got a paperclip...safety pin, somethin'?" Donny shook his head, mouth still agape.

"Fuck, man!" Lance yanked at the handcuffs. "Man, fuck this sh—!"

"You made quite a mess," a male voice said behind them.

They all turned and faced the two agents garbed in black, each in aviator sunglasses. One had short blond hair, the other with dark, curly locks tied in a ponytail behind his head. Shana eyed the insides of their suits; they were carrying.

"Satan's cartel again," Lance sneered at the two men. "Back for more, huh?"

Smack!

The blond man slugged Lance across the cheek down to the asphalt. As Lance strained to get up, the click of a cocking gun chimed above him as his eyes met a pistol's muzzle aimed right down at him.

"Just sit tight, will ya?" the blond man ordered flatly.

Lance grew still, his eyes shifting around at the others, then at Shana. Robin and Donny took a few steps back. Only Shana stood her ground, huffing and fighting the excruciating urge to projectile-vomit on the two men.

"What do you want?" Shana growled.

"You Hawthorne?" the man with the ponytail questioned.

"No," Shana lied, shaking her head.

"Lie much?" the ponytailed man quipped. "Because you suck at it."

"I'll ask you again," Shana said through clenched teeth. "What the fuck do you want?"

"Looks to me like you're in a real bind," the ponytailed man said, then removed his sunglasses and slipped them into his blazer pocket, revealing his tired brown eyes. He glanced at the cop's dead body, then back at Shana. "We need you and your friends to come with us right now. In return, we'll see to it that you don't get locked up. A clean slate."

"Oh, is that what you were tryin' to do in Vegas?" Shana seethed.

The two agents raised their eyebrows and exchanged looks.

"Jaeger," the blond man said.

The ponytailed man nodded, then sighed. "He knows, then."

"What? Who knows what?" Robin blurted.

"Hell of a thing to take a human life, isn't it, Shana?" the ponytailed man said, nodding at the officer's body. "You care what his name is? His wife, maybe?" He took a few steps toward Shana. "Or his kids?"

"Shut up," Shana rasped.

The ponytailed man managed a wry smirk. "Poor kids'll probably be wondering why Mommy will be crying her eyes out...and why Daddy didn't come home tonight."

"Shut up!"

"Or *any* night, for that—"

"You shut your fucking mouth, right—*oww!*"

The ponytailed man flung Shana against the white sedan, shattering one of the rear passenger windows. Robin and Donny approached but then stopped as the man drew his piece from the holster inside his jacket. Shana grunted and staggered, scowling so hard at her adversary that her face ached.

"Think shit's bad *now*?" the ponytailed man taunted Shana. "The blood never truly cleans off. This is just the beginning of a lifelong nightmare."

"You ain't gonna shoot shit," Lance cursed.

"We just need Hawthorne," the blond man claimed, then looked at Shana. "Whether she wants her three buddies to live is entirely up to her."

"But she has three seconds to make up her damned mind," the ponytailed man added, then squinted at Shana. "What's it gonna be, *chica*?"

From the top of an incline near the interstate above them, the distant sound of a diesel engine revving grew closer, just beyond the barrier of concrete and chain-link fencing, separating a parking lot from the freeway.

Growing closer. And closer.

"You already killed a stranger like it was nothing, Shana," the ponytailed man derided, then looked at Robin and Donny. "Will it mean anything to murder the ones you love, with your ass-headedness?"

Tires shrieked on the concrete barrier's other side as a distant freight truck's twin exhaust pipes peeked over the chain-link fence. And it was coming in hotter by the second.

"What do you want with me?" Shana asked.

The ponytailed man looked at his watch. "Your three seconds are up."

He looked and nodded at the blond man.

"Shana!" Lance yelled.

Boom!

The freight truck smashed through the barrier. Shana and the others watched as if in suspended animation as the mad engine descended down to the freeway, crushing the ponytailed man and pasting his fragmented gore onto the right lane. Vehicles screeched out of the way as the truck's smoking tires howled to a halt.

Shana turned and punched the blond man in the face, knocking the pistol out of his hand and sending him to the ground. Then the truck's driver's side opened, followed by the cocking of a shotgun. Out strode a voluptuous woman with tan skin, brown eyes, flesh-colored lips, and a caramel bob haircut, the locks blowing furiously in the desert wind.

"G'day," the woman greeted in her sultry Australian accent.

"Who the fuck...?" Lance squawked with jaw dropped at the woman's direction.

A blonde woman exited the truck and joined her fellow femme fatale, MP5 machine gun in hand. Both women wore T-shirts, blue jeans, and combat boots, most of which still had the tags on them. Stolen merch. Shana glanced at the newcomers, utterly incapable of processing the trauma unfolding before her.

Then she recognized the blonde woman: the same one pleading for help outside Vegas the other night. Or at least similar. Was it the same one?

The blond man scurried to his feet, with the shotgun's muzzle in his face.

"You," he growled at the Australian.

"It's been lovely, mate," she jested dryly.

Boom!

Buckshot blasted from the gun, obliterating the blond man's face and sending him to hell as his body crumpled to the dead grass. Blood sprayed the woman's left cheek, her expression unfazed by the heartless deed. With a callous pump, she ejected the empty smoking shell from the shotgun's magazine, then she bent down and picked up the pistol, then stuck it in her waistline behind her shapely buttocks.

"For God's sake, Vanya!" the blonde woman yelled, noticing the fresh crimson spatters on her new blue shirt.

"Comes out in the wash, Tabitha," Vanya sang calmly, flashing a grin. "Don't have an aneurism. Steal ya a new one." She looked at Shana. "Hawthorne, I take it?"

"What do you people want?" Shana roared at Vanya.

"I'm your only godsend out of here," Vanya claimed firmly.

"God sends some crazy bitches to the rescue, huh?" Lance grunted, hobbling back up to his feet as sirens whirled faintly in the distance. "Sounds about right."

"Whole bleedin' world's crazy," Vanya huffed, fishing a couple more shells out of her pocket and loading them into the shotgun.

"What the hell is going on?" Shana demanded.

“That’s what *I’m* trying to figure out,” Vanya snapped, getting into Shana’s face. “And unless we don’t get out of here right now, none of us will find out, will we?” She turned behind her and nodded at the incoming police cruisers. “And those aren’t real cops, by the way.”

“The truck’s shot,” Tabitha groaned as steam spewed from the hood.

Vanya turned and saw another woman standing near the SUV that had struck the patrolman. She waved her arms at the approaching cop cars.

“This way,” Vanya said, then looked at Tabitha. “Keys.”

“On it,” Tabitha said, jogging to the dead officer.

Vanya looked at Lance, then at his handcuffs. “Behave yourself, and they’ll come off.”

“Shit,” Lance cursed and shambled with her.

Vanya turned to Shana. “Come with?”

Shana, Robin, and Donny all exchanged horrified stares, then gazed at the phalanx of cop cruisers. More pretenders headed their way. Shana turned back at Vanya, the inhuman death machine, a psychotic gunslinging vixen. An unfeeling angel-faced wretch.

Her only saving grace.

Inside Shana’s head, her mind screamed at her not to go...yet her legs moved toward Vanya anyway, jogging with her, with Robin and Donny running with them. This was beyond insanity. But it was the only thing closest to sense—on the precipice of annihilation!

The SUV driver saw the weapons Vanya and Tabitha brandished, then quickly opened the passenger door. With panicked fingers, she unbuckled and snatched the car seat with her squalling infant daughter within.

“Please don’t hurt me or my baby!” the woman sobbed at Vanya.

“Just need your car, sweetie,” Vanya said. She smiled and waved at the wailing baby, then turned to Shana and her friends. “Someone, find a lap to sit on.”

Reluctantly, Shana, Lance, Robin, and Donny all scrambled into the backseat, with Donny’s scrawny posterior on Robin’s broad lap. Vanya hopped into the driver’s side of the running SUV and saw Tabitha running to them, with the officer’s keys glinting in the sunlight and the cop’s sidearm also in her waistline.

“Move your ass and get in!” Vanya ordered Tabitha.

“Had to get his mace and taser too!” Tabitha said, leaping into the front passenger’s seat and slamming the door.

Vanya closed the door and faced the mother and her child through the rolled-down window. “Dreadfully sorry ’bout all this. Have to make it up to you sometime!”

With that, Vanya sped down the interstate’s shoulder, tires peeling down the asphalt. Shana looked out the window at the desert far off, at the two dust devils from earlier. Both were about to collide with each other, on the verge of forming a more violent force of nature. So much for the beach, the West Coast. Or San Wherever-the-Hell-It-Was.

So much for the rest of their lives.

Behind the driver’s seat, Shana dug her fingers into the upholstery of the backseat and glared at the back of Vanya’s head. “How ’bout some answers? Now!”

Tabitha turned and aimed the MP5 at Shana’s head.

Vanya sighed. “About to ask you the exact same thing, love.”

V: Level

Shana glared at the machine gun in Tabitha's hand as Vanya's lead foot pressed down on the SUV's accelerator. Her traumatized brain was too pissed off to fully register the living nightmare she was now trapped in, and what could be the very last few moments of her existence. But to either die quickly like this...or slowly and painfully like her mother did with cancer, both were a hell of a way to go out. She almost didn't care anymore.

Almost.

She looked at Lance, still with his hands in cuffs behind his back, with his eyes fixated on Tabitha's silvery ring of keys rattling on the dashboard, glimmering like a jagged cheeky grin in the hot desert sunlight. A twisted part of Shana almost coaxed her into smirking at Lance, the worthless fuckboy she had suffered all week long. Then she gazed at Robin and Donny, both with tears streaming down their faces. She couldn't let them die, especially because of her.

"Talk," Vanya commanded behind the wheel, her eyes scanning for a suitable exit ramp.

"I don't know shit, okay?" Shana hissed.

"You *do* know," Tabitha snapped.

"Sounds like you know more than I do—*you* talk!" Shana blasted.

"Tabby," Vanya cooed. "Put the gun away."

"My name's not 'Tabby,'" Tabitha growled.

Vanya nodded. "Put it away, babe."

"She's lying!" Tabitha protested.

Vanya's head swiveled calmly to her counterpart. "Is it so hard to believe her?"

Tabitha hesitated, then groaned gutturally and withdrew the machine gun.

"Well, what *is* going on?" Robin demanded.

"You gonna give me the keys or what?" Lance griped.

"Oh, but you look so kinky in those." Vanya turned to Lance and winked at him. "You'll make such a cute little lapdog. Fit you right in my purse."

"I'll fit me right in your sweet ass, bitch—take 'em off!" Lance flailed in the backseat.

"Ooh, you hear that, Tabby?" Vanya whispered to Tabitha. "He's getting *sooo* flustered."

"I see that," Tabitha taunted Lance.

"Hey!" Robin shouted at Vanya.

"Long story short," Vanya said. "Word has it that some plague doctor cult wants to unleash a killer disease, and your friend, Hawthorne, apparently has some—"

"Oh, fuck you—go to hell!" Robin sneered.

"Plague doc—wait—*what*?" Lance squawked.

Vanya shrugged. "You asked."

"I have what?" Shana questioned. "What do I have?"

Vanya sighed. "A rare blood type."

"O negative?" Tabitha asked.

"You're O negative?" Robin said to Shana.

"How the hell should I know?" Shana barked.

"So what?" Donny said to Vanya. "Just because it's a rare blood type doesn't mean that Shana is the only one on the planet with it."

“What makes you think they *haven’t* already kidnapped others in Vegas—and other places—with O negative blood?” Vanya told him. “She’s just next on the list. And whether you believe me or not, they’re all after us, as you can clearly see.”

“What’s so special about it, other than it’s rare?” Shana asked.

“It makes you a universal donor,” Tabitha replied.

Shana raised an eyebrow. “And?”

Vanya looked over her shoulder. “Really wanna get to the bottom of it all, dear? Because *I* sure as hell do.” She fluffed her hair with one hand. “I was having such a lovely vacation, too.”

“My heart bleeds for you,” Robin smarted flatly.

“We were on spring break,” Donny groaned.

“Yeah, just tell ‘em everything, Donny,” Lance rebuked.

“Level with me,” Vanya said, “and I’ll level with you.”

“‘Level’ with *you*?” Shana sniped.

“Why’d they stop following us?” Donny said, looking out the back window.

They all turned as they exited Barstow, entering the desert hills. The police cruisers had grown strangely distant on the interstate. More cars appeared, speeding, ranging from SUVs, pickup trucks, even a few Humvees, all occupied by men in black military fatigues, goggles, ski masks, tactical gear, and assault rifles firing at the cop cars, creating a makeshift blockade near the railroad tracks at one of the exits.

“I thought you said they weren’t real cops,” Tabitha said to Vanya.

“Some might be.” Vanya clicked her tongue. “Lots of interested parties out here.”

“Like?” Shana demanded.

A dark-blue SUV and a Humvee painted with desert camouflage disbanded from the impromptu blockade and came for Vanya and her captives. She spotted a dirt road on her right, then cut the steering wheel toward it. All of them held on as the SUV careened onto the sand and gravel. The car fishtailed as Vanya struggled to regain control. The pursuing vehicles skidded and tore after them, guns blazing and bullets whizzing.

And shattering the back window!

All of them ducked as shards sprayed everywhere. More bullets pinged against the chassis of the car. Vanya continued as the road entered a narrow passage through jagged crags and rocks.

“You know, if you wanted to kill us, you could’ve done it back there!” Robin snapped.

“Could have,” Vanya chirped calmly, then peered at the rearview mirror.

“Where are you going?” Tabitha growled.

Vanya shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, the hell with this!” Tabitha snarled and rolled down her window, readying the MP5.

“Aww, you’re making yourself useful,” Vanya taunted Tabitha. “How sweet.”

Tabitha grunted and fired back at the pursuers, striking one in the shoulder and pelting their windshields with her fusillade. More bullets ricocheted off the crag walls before the MP5 finally clicked empty.

“Shit!” Tabitha cursed.

The gunmen launched another salvo as Tabitha retracted her body back into the car.

“Really got some skill with that thing, don’t you?” Vanya squinted at Tabitha.

Tabitha only glared at Vanya.

“Sure you haven’t done this before?” Vanya pursed her lips at her accomplice.

“That’s it—pull over—just pull over!” Shana yelled.

“You don’t have leverage here,” Vanya said.

Shana eyed and snatched the pistol out of Vanya's waistline—then aimed it at her own head.

"Shana!" Robin squealed.

"Pull over, now!" Shana growled, her voice quivering. "Or so much for your so-called 'O negative' blood!"

"They'll kill you!" Donny shouted.

"No, they won't," Shana said, failing to mask the fear in her voice.

"They'll damned sure kill *us*," Lance rolled his eyes.

"You won't pull the trigger," Vanya said. "I already know that much about you."

"Bitch, you don't know shit!" Shana roared with tears rolling down her face.

"Think you can do things on your own terms?" Vanya derided.

Vanya looked at a clearing in the road. Slowly, she braked and brought the car to a grinding halt. She huffed, then got out and opened Shana's door—then yanked her out of the seat.

"Hey, what—?" Shana blurted.

"Vanya!" Tabitha yelled as she opened the passenger door, drawing her handgun.

"What the fuck?" Robin shrieked. "Shana!"

"Shana!" Donny called out.

In a whirl of motion, Shana instantly found herself in Vanya's headlock with the pistol now in Vanya's other hand and aimed at Shana's temple. Tabitha hid behind a rock, pistol ready with two ammo clips she had obtained from the dead cop in the road. Vanya smirked at Tabitha, then the two pursuing vehicles came into view again around the corner and stopped.

Five mercenaries flung their doors open, three from the Humvee, two from the SUV, and scurried out with their weapons aimed at Vanya.

In the car, Lance looked at the ring of keys on the dashboard, then at Tabitha's taser lying on the floorboard. He faced Donny and nodded at the keyring. Donny furrowed his forehead at the keys, then back at Lance.

"You gonna just sit there and jerk off in her lap all day?" Lance barked at Donny.

Outside, the mercenaries slowly approached Vanya and Shana.

"This what you call 'level'?" Shana seethed through clenched teeth at Vanya.

"This is me teaching you a lesson about life," Vanya retorted.

"Give us the girl!" one of the mercenaries commanded in a Slavic voice.

"Oh, blimey, you don't know how this works at all, do you?" Vanya mocked. "Drop your weapons, or no specimen for your plague doctor."

"Fuck you!" Shana cursed Vanya, straining in Vanya's grasp.

"Shh, don't fuss," Vanya jeered at Shana. "It'll all be over soon."

"Stop fucking around!" the mercenary blared again, taking a step closer.

"I think she'll make for a wonderful bulletproof vest," Vanya retorted.

"And your head will make for a nice hood ornament!" the mercenary scorned.

Shana watched as Tabitha took aim at the gunmen behind the boulder, then Lance, Robin, and Donny crept out of the right side of the SUV. Vanya stepped backward, toward the front of the car with the pistol's muzzle pressed firmly against Shana's skull.

"Time's up," Vanya sniped as she and Shana crouched behind the car's grill. "What'll it be?"

Blam—blam-blam! Blam!

Tabitha opened fire on the mercenaries, killing two, right around the eyes. Vanya released Shana and joined the shootout as the remaining three plague doctor fanatics scattered and shot at the femme fatale duo, peppering the rocks and the side of the SUV with bullets.

Shana flailed to Donny and Robin, with Lance, uncuffed, holding the taser in his hand. All four of them ducked behind a rock as bullets pinged and ricocheted off metal and stone.

"What do we do?" Donny rasped.

Shana looked down the road, then up at the cliffs...then at Lance's taser.

Two more mercenary cultists went down, then the last retreated behind another rock. A bullet grazed Tabitha's arm. Tabitha yelped and took cover as the merc's assault rifle clicked empty. Vanya's pistol jammed as the cultist drew a handgun from his holster and cocked it.

"Damn it!" Vanya snapped as more bullets dinged against the SUV.

One struck the fuel tank, spewing gasoline from the hole.

"It's no good," the mercenary called out. "More of my comrades will be here in a matter of minutes. You're done! It's over!"

Vanya crouched and noticed the taser in Lance's hand, then back at Tabitha. Blood seeped through Tabitha's fingers as she applied pressure to the wound. She shook her head at Vanya.

"And what?" Vanya shouted to the merc. "You'd have us go belly up, just like that? Think we're alone out here? Eustace Jaeger will close in before your plague doctor does! Talk about one bleedin' shootout!"

"Tell me one more lie!" the mercenary yelled. "Please!"

"You first!" Vanya challenged. "Keep blowing ass all over the place!"

"My men are headed from the other end of that road as we speak!" the mercenary claimed. "You're cut off!"

"Shit!" Shana said.

"He's bullshittin'," Lance grumbled.

"How're we supposed to know that?" Robin griped.

"What're ya waitin' for, then?" Vanya said to the mercenary. "If you're so confident, then why're ya hidin' behind the bloody rock over there?"

"We just want the girl!" the gunman told them.

"What for?" Vanya questioned.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" mercenary blasted.

"No shit!" Vanya fired back. "That's why I asked."

The mercenary grew silent. Vanya squinted as Tabitha reached for another ammo clip.

"She's a popular gal, isn't she?" Vanya quipped at the merc.

"Send her out here," the gunman offered, "and maybe we can work something out."

"Oh, can we, now?" Vanya laughed.

"Or you can keep screwing around and die!" the merc snarled.

"Come get her," Vanya goaded, then tossed her pistol out into the open. "Gun's jammed."

The mercenary peered from around his boulder. "And the other?"

"Dead," Vanya lied. "You got her."

The fanatic looked at Tabitha's blood spatters on the road.

Vanya chuckled. "Your roll, mate."

Tabitha quietly reloaded another clip into her pistol, her hands stained with crimson as she cocked the weapon. Slowly, the mercenary crept low into the open, alongside the SUV, and reached Vanya, sitting with her back against the grill of the car.

She smirked up at the cultist. "Lovely day, isn't it?"

Blam!

A bullet pierced right through the gunman's cranium as he collapsed to the desert sands. Vanya groaned and lumbered to her feet, then dusted herself off. Then she noticed the smoking muzzle of Tabitha's gun, aimed at her forehead.

"Had a feeling you were Eustace's new pet," Vanya sneered at Tabitha.

"I'm no one's pet," Tabitha growled, with blood running down her arm. "And you don't know jack shit. You wouldn't have had me tag along if you did."

Vanya sauntered a few steps toward Tabitha, her smirk widening. "It's always nice to have an extra pair of hands to travel with, no matter how shit-stained they are. We can either live dangerously...or die cautiously. I prefer the former." She tilted her head to one side. "Was my pussy really *that* unbearable to look at?"

"I don't swing that way," Tabitha claimed.

Vanya tilted her head upright. "I don't believe you."

Slowly, Shana, Robin, and Donny peeked around their boulder.

"Come on out, all of you!" Tabitha called. "Move!"

"Do what you're gonna do, Shana," Vanya sighed. "Listen to this cunt if you want to, but I can assure you—"

"None of you can 'assure' shit!" Shana snapped.

"Shana, listen to me," Tabitha said. "This woman is a psychopath—she's a serial killer!"

"So are you!" Donny protested.

"If you really want to live," Tabitha barked, "I suggest you—*aah!*"

From behind her, Lance jolted Tabitha with the taser. Vanya twirled around, then snatched the bloody pistol from the double agent—then shot her in the head. Reddened brains spattered the dirt as Tabitha's corpse fell down, eyes wide.

Vanya aimed the gun at Lance. "Good dog. Now, drop it."

Lance obeyed, his hands up. Vanya bent down and picked up the taser, then flicked her sweaty locks out of her face. She looked at Shana, then holstered the gun back into her waistline.

"What a shitty mess," Vanya huffed.

She walked and picked up the assault rifles, ammo clips, and other gear from the mercenaries' dead bodies and loaded them into the Humvee's backseat. Voices garbled through some of the cadavers' radios. Vanya squinted, then looked up at the dirt road ahead.

"Maybe he *wasn't* bluffing," Vanya said, hopping into the Humvee's driver's seat. "Hmph. Imagine that."

She revved the engine and drove up to Shana and her friends, the open doors wobbling as she gently pressed the brakes.

"Like I said, Shana," Vanya looked at them. "Do what you're gonna do. Come with...or stay with the coyotes tonight...or worse. And you've already seen worse. It's your call, but you have ten seconds to decide."

"Man, fuck this psycho bitch!" Lance snarled. "I say we walk back to Barstow, and—"

"Back into the fire I just rescued you ungrateful assholes from?" Vanya questioned. "And how did fucking around in Barstow pan out for you just now?"

Lance rolled his eyes and grumbled curses.

"What's your angle in this?" Shana demanded Vanya. "Just out to get some sick kicks?"

"If my 'sicks kicks' are the one thing keeping you alive, then who are you to complain?" Vanya told her. "Not sure if you fully grasp the gravity of this beggars-choosers situation on our hands, but if you want to die, that's your choice. The same is true if you want to live."

Shana glared at Vanya, then at the dead bodies, then up the road.

"Five more seconds," Vanya said.

"You said to level with you, then you'll level with us?" Shana said.

"Already leveled with you, loves," Vanya looked at the carnage. "Time for you to level with me. I'm a sweetheart compared to what's coming."

"Shana, no," Robin pleaded.

"Two seconds," Vanya warned.

Shana emitted a quavering sigh and hopped into the front passenger's seat and closed the door.

"Shana!" Donny snapped.

"Get in," Shana told them.

"This is some shit," Lance snarled as he stomped around and leapt in the backseat. He peered out the back window, eyes wide at the bed of the Humvee. "Hoo, shit! These motherfuckers 'bout to go to war back here!"

Shana looked in the Humvee's rear. Her eyes bulged. RPGs, an M-60 machine gun, MREs, grenades and ammo for days! Her stomach felt as if imploding on itself as she fought back more tears. Trauma left her brain fried as Robin and Donny shambled into the backseat alongside Lance, then they shut the door.

Vanya adjusted the rearview mirror, then her left breast throbbed yet again. She grabbed her bosom and winced. Then she froze. Her fingers felt a lump. She squinted hard; she was too young for this. She couldn't die from something like that. She refused!

Shana looked over and noted Vanya's sudden sober expression. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Vanya lied.

She put the Humvee in reverse and backed the vehicle around, then jammed it back into drive and peeled out of the road, flinging rocks and gravel on her gory handiwork in the shootout behind her. Guess the buzzards would think it a holiday, gorging themselves with the worms. Vanya was happy to oblige the vermin, as the throbbing lump on her womanhood nagged her with the one thing she truly did fear: a slow, crippling death, wasting away on a hospital bed somewhere. At the same time, though, she almost didn't care either way.

Almost.