

The University of Maine DigitalCommons@UMaine

Honors College

5-2012

The Space Explorer

Rachel A. Carter

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Carter, Rachel A., "The Space Explorer" (2012). *Honors College*. 44.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors/44>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

THE SPACE EXPLORER

by

Rachel A. Carter

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(English & Biology)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2012

Advisory Committee:

Gregory Howard, Assistant Professor of English

Jack Burt, Associate Professor of Trumpet

Tony Brinkley, Professor of English

Naomi Jacobs, Professor of English

David Kress, Associate Professor of English

© 2012 Rachel A. Carter

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

An anthology of short stories, poems, prose, and imitations. These writings explore the idea of space, but not in the “final frontier” connotation. The concept of space presented is that of personal and mental; writings that emerge from revealing internal thoughts and feelings. In addition, *The Space Explorer* builds upon individual aspects to contemplate more general topics.

Such writings will include: imitations of Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*; a short story about a man so desperate to keep his farm from bankruptcy he decides to traffic drugs; short glimpses of thoughts in the form of haiku; and many more.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Line of a Lady	6
Edge of Escape	44
Because you loved me	52
Never Again	53
For the Best	54
Conditional Ownership	55
Thoughts of	76
Out Loud	95
Resting Potential	96
Hybrid	105
Cattle Drive	144
Red Butte Beauty	164
Works Cited	225
Author Biography	226

I n t r o d u c t i o n

An Artist's Statement

Beyond Earth's atmosphere, the expanse of the universe is constantly increasing. Some would even go as far as to say the universe has no edge. Without an edge, how can it be bound by typical temporal concepts, such as area or volume?

Meanwhile, on our modest-in-comparison planet, space is seemingly restricted. Pressures from an exponentially growing human population has our species vying for limited resources, both food and settlements. Space, it would appear is running out. Dragons no longer inhabit the unknown borders of a map. The West has been won.

Despite the encroachment of civilization, there remains an ample amount of space on Earth. All one needs to do is re-imagine the world.

Ecologists use the term niche, a location where "the environmental factors that influence the growth, survival, and reproduction of a species" are situated (Molles 574). For a sheep ked, a parasite that spends its entire life on its host, its niche appears

incredibly small to humans. After all, the surface area of a sheep's hide doesn't amount to much. However, for the sheep, the wool fibers create a forest grander than humans have ever known. Context, perception, and point-of-view are key in understanding how a species can live in such a delineated range.

This process of making a mountain out of a molehill was exploited by Italo Calvino in his work *Invisible Cities*. The two characters of the story, Marco Polo the explorer and Kublai Khan the emperor, sit in Venice, exchanging quips and listening to Polo's stories of the cities comprising the empire. Kublai Khan is aging, and therefore needs outside merchants and explorers to detail the state of his expanse, for he is worried: "The descriptions of cities Marco Polo visited had this virtue: you could wander through them in thought, become lost, stop and enjoy the cool air, or run off" (Calvino 38). This sort of storytelling was exactly what Khan was searching for; walking through his cities without ever having to move. The emperor wants to see his empire, but cannot due to his physical condition.

Because of this, not all details can be known to him; a story can only reveal so much. However, "...what enhanced for Kublai every event or piece of news reported by his inarticulate informer was the space that remained around it, a void not filled with words" (Calvino 38). The blank space on a page gives as much information as the words. Characters are built with what they do not say or reveal. Calvino uses this lack of word expertly. However, this also can be applied easily to nearly any creative literature. In my own story "Cattle Drive," beginning on page 144, a reader learns more about Owen's personality and motivation based on what he doesn't tell his wife. His secrets in the space of silence inform a reader of his mindset better than his words.

The void bereft of language applies equally to minutiae exposed slowly through a story. “Red Butte Beauty,” on page 164, transitions between the present and the past of the protagonist, Delilah. Trouble surrounds Delilah, but it is unknown at first. Only several sections in does a reader learn a portion of the reason. As the story carries on, even more is revealed, little by little. A deluge of information is not enjoyed by a reader. The water trickling through the hole in a dike can create the same end through different means. But the seeping water flows comfortably until the town is flooded.

What everyone wants from a story or a book is what Khan desired of Polo’s stories. To live many lives without ever having to venture forth from their comfort and safety. One can visit the open plains of the American West, or a small southern Appalachian town. A farm in rural Canada. A personal haven in northern New England. Anywhere. Any time. Under any circumstance.

That is one of the goals of *The Space Explorer*. To introduce people to never before visited landscapes. To “... answer a need to get out of that apartment and into fresh air, sunlight, blue sky, and open space” (Tompkins 4). It is by no coincidence that the settings of the stories contained within this anthology are rural, open, or removed. Spaces such as these, especially the western desert, are “...a tabula rasa on which man can write, as if for the first time, the story he wants to live” (Tompkins 74). They are “...land[s] defined by absence...” (Tompkins 71). Returning to the niche metaphor, when there is an empty location in nature, some species will evolve in a way to best utilize that location. People are no different. When one is devoid of something, anything, one will fill the holes. In areas so free of restraints, a person can exploit their surroundings in a way that suits them best. They can find what they went looking for; independence.

Space is not merely what we see, what is obvious. It can be surreptitious, where no one would think to look. In *Invisible Cities*, around halfway through Polo's rousing tales, Kublai Khan makes the observation that Polo never mentions Venice (Calvino 86). While the entire empire is important, Venice is the heart, without which the empire could not survive. Marco Polo then reveals the key to the entire book: "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice" (Calvino 86). Each and every city, it turns out, is a portion of Venice made into its own city; a city within a city.

Now, imagine the world like this. Look at everything that is encompassing your own life. Consider the trivial objects, feelings, and locations you've encountered. All of these are their own city. When you merely glance at an object, it contains an unlimited amount of resting potential. Creativity will depolarize the membrane, forcing the neuron to fire, and carry on the synapse that causes the object to bloom into its own world. In thinking in this way, you will "...never again see ordinary spaces in ordinary ways" (Bachelard *x*).

Memory of times past motivates the resting potential. For that is another type of space; "...a journey through memory!" (Calvino 98). It is a memory of my first turkey hunt that occurs in *Remei* on page 97. Again, in *Bia*, it is a recall of saying good-bye to a Navy Corpsman as he boarded a plane at Bangor International Airport on page 100.

It is not only in the collecting in "Resting Potential" where the space of memory is utilized. It has been said time and time again for an author to write what they know. With a strong background in agriculture, farming is something I write about frequently. It

has been weaved through all my memories. “Cattle Drive” and “Conditional Ownership” are a result of this up-bringing.

Ultimately, our memories have shaped us into who we are and who we strive to be. There is no defined location within the human brain where our memories are stored. And yet, a large space of our mental capacity is dedicated to recalling past events. In a single day, how often do each of us explore the space of our memories? Our reflections on our past create our desires, whether they be for open space or freedom, or anything else in the world.

We may pass through our lives thinking our surroundings have little effect on who we are. When considering a memory, we may cast it off as something solely in the past. Often enough, we believe the path not taken is simply just that. However, every exploration of space defines us. Whether it is landscape, memories, or what we didn't do. It introduces us to the space of identity.

Line of a Lady

Mama told me I wasn't allowed to play with the neighborhood boys anymore. It was awfully hard news to take. I'd grown up the only girl for miles, unless you counted Pearlie. I sure didn't. Papa didn't either, I don't think. I was never certain why Mrs. Revelle came calling so often, but she *always* mentioned Pearlie and I having a play date. Before my mama could cut in, Papa would say we'd, meaning him and Mama, would think about it. Always being told not to lie, Papa explained it was merely a stretch of the truth. Mama and Papa *would* think about it, and Papa would decide the answer was a big *No*.

I gave Bennie the big *No* when he stood at the bottom of the porch.

"I'm a woman now, that's what Mama said."

He wouldn't have left without more details. We'd been friends since before we could walk or talk. That says a lot. You can't just tell your best friend *No* when they ask to spend time with you.

“But you promised, Jane,” Bennie said, eye narrowing, “Recyclosaurus leaves in a week. We got go make our sacrifice to it like we all planned.”

Recyclosaurus was the big ol’ piece of machinery tearing up roads in town, the only ones for miles that were tarred. It arrived just the day before, but we had been hearing about it for the past couple weeks from our parents.

“Tobes can do it,” I said.

My dress hem was too high. Starched fabric scratched up the back of my legs. Guess there was more than one reason I was glad Mama was busy canning. She shoed me out onto the porch for being underfoot. She wouldn’t be happy about where my hem was sitting, or that I was even speaking with Bennie. That was made clear the first five times I’d been caught with him. Fingers, dirtied by fiddling with a wheat stem, pulled the hem down past my knees, toward my ankles. Wouldn’t want to be improper.

“He can’t memorize lines like you can. Our priestess can’t be reading off any torn-out page,” Bennie stared up hard at me, “sides, Tobias” – Bennie was the only one to call Tobes, or any of us, by his given name – “ain’t a girl. Only girls can be priestesses. This hasta be done right. Don’t you dare say Pearlie can do it, neither.”

Behind me, through the open window, I could hear Mama finishing up a batch of string beans. A faint *pop* as each jar set. She’d come get me to run the jars to the basement as soon as they were done *pop*-ing. I straightened my dress collar, the left side flipped upwards, so she wouldn’t notice when she came out.

“Benjamin Moses Mercier,” I sat up straighter, making my back stretch uncomfortably, “I won’t. I refuse. I can’t be running around with you boys anymore. Mama says I have to act like a lady now.”

He wasn't dim by any means, and I never thought him to be, but he stared at me as if there wasn't a light in his head. If there was, it wasn't lit. Maybe this is what Mama meant when she said boys were different from girls. Though, Mama was a girl and Papa was a boy and *they* didn't have to stay away from each other. Why did I have to keep from myself? So called *changes* didn't make me all that different from everyone else.

"Who you trying to kid?" Bennie looked cross, "You ain't a lady."

Time was up; I could feel it twisting my stomach. Every echo of Mama's heels made me twitch and worry; they were counting down the seconds. Switches of birch hung to the side of the front door. They were mostly used to shoo away strays from under the porch. Papa was known to take them to me when misbehaving crept up. Avoiding those switches was foremost in my mind.

"You're gonna have to leave, Benjamin," I imitated Mama, like when she spoke to unwelcome guests, "Don't make me force you."

My voice was sturdy as the ol' chair Granpa made when he was a boy, and to this day sat in front of his hearth. Inside, where my words came from, trembled like the leaves clinging to an autumn tree. Holding onto my sureness was itching to fade. I could feel it collapsing when Bennie *plopped* onto the dirt.

"*Please, Bennie?*" my voice teetered on a whine, "Mama's coming out soon."

His face screwed up, teeth showing through a sneer. But his eyes told me different. Fed up as Bennie's expression led *others* to believe, I knew his eyes showed conflict. Even younger than we were then, we'd made a pact to prevent trouble with parents. He was being stubborn.

Time came when Mama's heels directed toward the door. I could hear each click on the floor in time with my heart. It was thirty steps from the kitchen to the porch. I'd counted. My eyes pleaded as best I could. Words couldn't be said now.

A long moment passed. Bennie stood up and turned away from the house.

"I still say you ain't a lady."

My mouth mimicked the words *I'm sorry*, but Bennie never saw them. He'd already reached the street at a jog. In no time, sprinting took him around the block and out of sight. Mama found me staring off in that direction when she walked out of the house. I didn't dare look at her. She'd see my betrayal of her and Papa's wishes with a single glance. Instead, I watched as she stepped slowly in her heels across the boards of the porch. Next time I walked, I'd take care to do as she did. I looked only up to her back when she leaned on the white railing. My eyes rested at the clasp of Mama's imitation pearls.

"Don't try and hide it from me. I know Benjamin was here." She said, not looking toward me yet. "I won't tell Papa" – she turned – "This time."

Without saying anything, I knew to follow Mama back inside. For the first five times, now six, Bennie came around, there was always the looming threat *next time* she'd tell Papa. Right now, her share was said and I had to accept it. No matter how my thoughts strained against it. There might never be a chance like this again. A priestess in a sacrifice to a god of metal and destruction. How else were we kids to protect ourselves from its wrath? Predictions suggested Recylocaurus would be in town only four days. Four days to convince Papa and Mama. Without it, I'd lose a mess of my childhood. My friends would be gone. They were depending on me. After standing, I flattened my skirt.

Once the string beans were put away in the cellar, I was free to do as I pleased. This troubled me. Had it been the fall, I could busy myself with school work. Summer left me open to any opportunity, but for the restraints Mama and Papa put upon me. In all, I was left with nothing.

Bennie, Tobes, and the rest always had something up. Only a couple days passed since my porch entrapment, but I already missing running around with them. Worst of all, I was going to miss out on the biggest plan of the summer. The porch was the furthest I'd get to adventure. All because of the transition from girl to woman. One small event in my life changed, and ruined, everything.

I would lose the chance for fun. Unless – my mind set to wandering – unless I could flee. Jump from the steps and not let my feet hit the dirt. No trace would be left of me and my crossing the property line. Wind could rush pass my ears. I would hear the whistles of the mountain spirits. Leaping and bounding over logs like the deer.

A bullet pierced the side of the fleeing animal. It crumbled to the ground, blood staining its hide. No way could I escape. Mama would make sure of it. She had her summers just as open as I did. Kitchen-work kept her occupied, but her hawk eyes still saw me. Plus, she'd beckon to the porch when she needed me.

Two days before, just prior to my confinement, I'd heard Mama and Papa talking. Some would say I was snooping, but it was about me. It was my right to hear, though by the end I wished I hadn't.

Mama explained my situation to Papa. She knew what set in motion that morning, even if I hadn't. She knew what I was going through. She'd done the same at my age.

Specifics of the conversation went right through my ears, but Papa's answer to my problem still rung.

“We'll just have to cage her like a bitch in heat,” he'd said, “No more of this running all around the neighborhood.”

Young as I was, much of what Mama and Papa talked about went straight by me. Near misses of arrows whizzing pass. They might not hit true, but impressions were still made and spooked any creature. I wasn't all that ignorant. Still, I knew that a dog – I couldn't even bring myself to think *bitch* – in heat wasn't a good thing. Instant shame washed over me. Everything I was to do from then on was to be judged. Dogs had to be taught. I'd be trained just the same. Dipped in the flea bath to be rid of the pests.

If I was nothing more than a dog, I could live as a stray. Tobes' mama kept saying, when I visited, I was welcome anytime for as long as I want. Mrs. Mercier did too. I could do a rotation to all the boys' homes and never have to return. Chewing through my collar would be simple. Only a latch on the fence separated me from the street. Dirty knees and pressed dresses wouldn't matter anymore.

Maybe it was the porch shaking, not my knees. Our town received small quakes before. I was at the edge. The top step was a long way down to the ground. Even further a distance to the chipped fence. Could I make that break in rule and to freedom? The trees on either side of the driveway loomed shadows across the lawn. Watching, silent. Guards with their backs turned on their prisoner. Twenty paces and I could avoid their long fingers that reached to stop me.

Defiance wasn't a trait I'd ever known before. Apples of my parents' eyes. How could something so simple, ritual, let the apple fall from the tree? Rolling far beyond the knowledge hidden there. One foot, the left, stretched out, ready to drop.

"Jane," Mama called from the kitchen again, "I could use your help again."

The chance was lost. Skies of blue never looked so promising as in the moment before they turned gray. A crow flew in to settled on the great maple sentries, keeping their captive in its place.

I ended up snapping string beans with Mama. We canned a lot to be eaten later in the year. I hoped things were going to turn around. My situation would be the same. I would still be a lady or a woman or whatever words Mama wanted to use to describe me. As a woman, didn't that grant me new freedoms? Ones I had never known before. Baby birds were trapped in the high walls of their nests until they learned to fly. Once they had their wings, they soared. Nothing could hinder 'em.

An hour passed and the next batch of beans was ready. Mama didn't let me help with anything other than prepping the beans and putting the jars in storage. Hot water that filled the jars and the steam from the pressure cooker was too dangerous.

We spent the time talking about anything and nothing. All the while, my heart was begging to ask about Recyclosaurus or at least my friends. Instead, my ideas were replaced.

"Papa and I have been discussing you and Pearl Revelle having a play date," Mama told me, "It's no longer appropriate for you to spend time with the boys. Pearl's the only girl your age. It will be good for the both of you."

That was a conversation I missed. Not much happened in the house at night, so I listened to Mama and Papa when I couldn't sleep. I'd only ever heard Papa say *No* when Pearlle was brought up. Never *Yes*. Life happened after slumber took my eyes and mind.

All the same, Pearlle wasn't who I wanted to play with. She was the same age as the boys and me, but she just seemed so much younger. She hadn't grown the same as the rest of us. She wouldn't want to sacrifice to Recyclosaurus. Pearlle had been kept on her porch just about for as long as she could walk. For different reasons, I'm sure. I was confined for what seemed to be any other bodily function, but it was so much more hush-hush than if a lady had to pee. Either way, trading my porch for the Revelle's porch wasn't what I had in mind for a change.

Morning came sooner than I'd hoped it would. Already, although it was an early summer month, heat settled in before the sun rose. I'd woken in the moment when the sun painted the sky colors of cherries and oranges. Gabel-ends clipped the ceiling of my room to angles, but a window had enough space. Men gathered around the huge metal machine far down the road. White and massive and glorious. My eyes strained hard to make out the men's faces and I thought I could see wisps of steam from their coffees. Out of kindness, Tobes' mother, Mrs. Guillame, planned on providing the workers with coffee each morning.

It was two days since Recyclosaurus rumbled into our neighborhood. Yesterday, it hadn't accomplished much. Mama and I did more destruction in the garden than it did to the roads. The boys would be disappointed nothing happened so far. To me, it was a relief. Longer it took to finish the job meant I had more of a chance of my circumstances

passing. No guarantees had been made that said I'd be free once *my time* was over. Again, it was just blind hope. The box had been opened and it was the one thing at the bottom I remained clinging to.

On the way to Pearlie's house, I eyed for any sight of the boys. They'd probably all already gone out and were headed back home to get cleaned up for lunch. There was a good chance I'd see at least one of them. Bennie's house was out of the way of mine and Mama's walking route, but we'd pass straight by Tobes'. I could only guess that the search for a sacrifice had begun. If it'd been caught, the boys would search me out. A priestess had to bless the victim of pagan religion. Bennie never said where he found his information, but he assured all of us it was true as fact. He was never one to lie in the past.

Of course, had they caught whatever varmint their hands could grab, they'd take it to Bennie's. The sacrifice would be caged and cared for there. But I was sure Bennie would want something special. Catching one of the boy's attentions was an idea that stuck with me. I'd have to see them first before I could call out to them. I needed more information.

Instead, I focused my eyes on what Mama and I passed by on our walk. Something to occupy my mind from the task ahead I wanted to avoid. Misdirection. Tricking my mind into not thinking about it might convince myself nothing was going astray. That everything was normal.

A line of tall trees, like maples and oaks and birches, was broken by the short hedge shrubs that marked the driveway of the Revelle house. Our journey to the unknown

wasn't over yet. The edge of the Revelle property met the road, but it stretched far back. Their house was settled far back, nestled in the woods, enveloped by trees.

Once before I'd been there. Too young an age to remember most of it, though. All I truly knew was Bennie and I had been exploring. Before too long, we'd gotten lost. As the sun began setting, low yells came from a distance. We followed them. When the tree line broke, we saw Pearlie, dressed in nothing but a bed-sheet, screeching around the yard. Mrs. Revelle didn't get a chance to invite us in and call our mothers. We were never seen. We dodged her fast as soon as we got our bearings.

The driveway seemed long then, but that was nothing compared to mine and Mama's walk down the gravel. My sneakers were worn and fraying, with pieces missing. They shouldn't have made my feet feel as heavy as they did.

My skin nearly shrunk off my body when Mama rested a slim hand on my shoulder. Movement stopped in the middle of the driveway. Halfway done and halfway more to go. Wind blurred my view with fluttering leaves and my hair in my face. There was no order to the trees lining the Revelle's driveway. Great roots tore up the gravel. If I hadn't been paying attention, I'd have tripped several times on the way down. Next came the upswing of the journey. I was at the bottom of a valley and my mind had never been darker as it was shadowed by the flanking hills.

"Jane, I know this isn't what you want," Mama looked down on me, "But you're a lady now. You don't see the ladies of town spending time unaccompanied with the men. They keep company with other ladies. Don't you want to be a proper grown-up?"

I refused to look back up at Mama. Facing forward, my ears started twitching as if they could hone in on her movements and tell me what she was thinking. A few birds

passed by my line of sight. Nothing was hindering them. They went as they pleased. They weren't forced to wear starched dresses with old sneakers. Or pressed upon to stand straight, shoulders back, toe to heel.

“Yes, Mama,” I said.

Her hand squeezed my shoulder. She started walking, still clutching me, dragging me forward with her. One of the roots just nearly tripped me, but I caught myself before dirt met my knees again. I always had to try extra hard to keep my knees clean.

I thought we were being accosted when the door to the Revelle house opened. Mama held the ripped screen door ajar. It triangulated around us like a protection. The woman of the house swung the faded wooded door wide.

“Jane, it's been too long since we've seen you,” Mrs. Revelle said, whipping her hands on her apron, “My! How you've grown. A fine young lady.”

One thing I was sick of was all this talk of me being a lady. At eleven, I was a kid. I had many more years left of being a kid. Sure, times happened when I wanted all the glory of a grown-up. It wasn't until recently I realized that meant I couldn't keep my friends. I'd been taught there was nothing wrong with making new friends. It was encouraged. Loyalty was encouraged too. I wanted to be loyal to Bennie and Tobes and the rest of the boys.

“What do you say, Jane?” Mama urged.

Shoulders slumped and eyes lowered, I felt a certain defeat. A cage formed around me. Strength disappeared from my arms. Shaking the bars lacked the effect it

once had. The bars no longer incited rage in me. In this case, they were impenetrable. Fighting would only wear me out. Saving my energy for the larger battle was important.

“Thank you, Mrs. Revelle,” I muddled the words.

She beamed at me, as if I was the perfect example of manners. There was no way she could know my true heart and how I strained against being there.

“Pearl’s outback, darling,” Mrs. Revelle told me, “After I show Jane the way ‘round, would you like to stay for some coffee, Elizabeth?”

More than just about anything at the moment, I wanted Mama to stay. Then she’d see. I was miserable here and was going to be. Mama would only know it if she saw with her own eyes. I couldn’t shout, as much as I wanted to. I’d have to wait for them to finish speaking if I was to get a chance to say something.

“I’d be pleased to, Ida, but I can’t today,” Mama said to my dismay, “Garden’s flourishing. That won’t wait for coffee. You and I both know we’d sit for hours. I’ll never get anything accomplished that way.”

Wild flowers scattered themselves across the Revelle’s lawn, but gardens were organized with a purpose. Far as I could tell, the only plant up-keep at the Revelle house was lawn mowing. No garden. Not that I was making any opinions. They’d already been made. Prejudices from Papa and what the boys said were hard to forget and ignore. Mama tried propping the door to keep my mind open. Closer in-town, every house had a garden paired with it. It was abnormal to lack one. A missing garden wasn’t the only thing strange about the Revelle’s.

“I suppose I understand, Elizabeth. You go on back home and I’ll properly introduce Jane to Pearl,” Mrs. Revelle said.

“Thank you, Ida,” Mama said. After a pause, she spoke quietly just to Mrs. Revelle, “As I told you, Jane’s going through a *special* time. She’s been good about it, but you may want to check with her every so often to make sure.”

A part of me wanted to shout out my *special time* was the only reason I’d been brought to lower myself to this. I didn’t want Mrs. Revelle thinking I wanted to spend time with Pearlie. The boys couldn’t think that either. Already they thought I abandoned them. They hadn’t said it, but Bennie’s tone of voice yesterday let me know. Mama would be embarrassed if I said anything about it above a whisper. Really, if I said anything at all. Ladies, I’d been told, were seen and not heard.

Mrs. Revelle nodded like she understood every minute of the experience that was happening to me. She assure Mama all would be just fine. She’d look after me. Cater to any need I might have. Explain the answers to questions that had a way of cropping up. After all, according to Mrs. Revelle, it might be easier talking about it with an adult other than my mother. Sometimes things were too close to home for comfort.

“And if she isn’t feeling well enough, I can send her right home any point of the afternoon,” Mrs. Revelle concluded.

My ears perked at her last statement. Before, I looked attentive, but that was as far as my attention was actualized. Immediately, I planned an escape. Cunning had been taught best to me by Tobes. He was always getting himself out of things he didn’t want. It wasn’t the proper behavior of a lady, but I had no business of being a lady anyway. Bodily, sure, I was a woman, but mentally I was a child missing the specifics of *boy* or *girl*.

A quick good-bye passed between Mama and I. She needed to hurry back home to work, so she would be occupied. My idea of freedom depended on it.

Nothing said so for sure, but after Mama left, something about Mrs. Revelle's face suggested pity. There wasn't anything to feel sorry about. It was unfortunate I had to be there. I wasn't happy in the least about it, but I didn't need anyone else's solace. Maybe she felt bad for Mama with all those green beans to can by herself. She could send me home at any moment and she wouldn't have to worry. Problem solved.

Even though I was eleven, twelve in seven months, Mrs. Revelle extended an open hand in my direction. I may have been in unfamiliar territory, but it wasn't something I needed to hold a hand for. Did proper ladies do this?

Out back, Pearlie was sitting in the sandbox. Just sitting perfectly still. Not playing with any of the toys surrounding her. To the side was a swing-set, rusting at the joints and hinges. Attempts had been made to cover up the show of age, but the paint thinned and cracked. Sand leaked from holes in the wooden boards that made up the box. Grass in the area, in the spots where it grew, was already brown and dead although it was barely June.

Bennie and I saw this that one time, so it wasn't much of a surprise. Most folks out of town had a lawn like this. They were people of another kind. Not worse or better. Just different. In-town people didn't speak much with those further off. Maybe that's why Papa didn't want me having play dates with Pearlie. She was proof of how those out of town didn't meet the normal standards.

"Pearl Marie," Mrs. Revelle called to her daughter, "Jane Duval is here, like I told you. Do you want to say *hello*?"

Moments passed and Pearlie still sat quietly. I stepped toward her, but Mrs. Revelle's hand prevented my moving. Was I approaching a wild animal? Was caution needed? When meeting new dogs, I'd always been taught to hold my hand out, fingers curled into a fist. That way, if they tried to bite, they couldn't get their jaws properly clamped. Mere scratches would be left. Would the same tactic apply to a girl I didn't understand?

"Pearl," Mrs. Revelle repeated, "Did you hear me?"

Patience was the dominate tone in Mrs. Revelle's voice. From what I'd heard Mama and Papa say of Pearlie, it would have to be. I may not have wanted to be there, but I had to respect Mrs. Revelle for that. My suspicions of Pearlie were being confirmed. That didn't make me want to like the girl. I harbored the same indifference.

All I knew is, if my mama had to speak to me twice, I'd be in great trouble. Something like that didn't seem to trouble Pearlie. She still hadn't moved. My mind wanted me to go out to her sandbox. Some dogs were territorial, though. Calm ignorance might have had her sitting motionless, but in an instant she could snap if she felt threatened. Many of her sandbox toys looked sharp and I didn't want to find out first hand.

Mrs. Revelle bent down, looking straight into my eyes. I could tell by her expression what she meant. Slowly, she released my hand, then rested both of her own on my shoulders. With a quick squeeze, she straightened and went to her daughter.

Like she'd done with me, Mrs. Revelle crooked at the waist to look into Pearlie's eyes. They weren't out of earshot, but that didn't matter 'cause neither one said anything. Least, I couldn't see Mrs. Revelle's lips moving. It could have been Pearlie mumbling. I

wouldn't have known. All I could see was Pearlie's back and how neatly the bow of her dress was tied. My bows never turned out looking so nice.

Ladies, I'd been told, weren't supposed to squat when wearing a dress, such as Mrs. Revelle was doing. When your butt's all scotched down like that, you end up showing people in between your legs. Mostly, you don't mean to. The same day *everything* started, Mama tried using scary stories to keep me in my place. About women who weren't ladies at all. *Hussies*. The word hissed at me like a snake. No way I wanted to be like one of those women. Mrs. Revelle wasn't one of the *hussies*, even though I could see how white her undergarments were. I turned my head, thinking the heat of the sun warmed my face too much. My own dress needed fixing.

Mouth moving, Mrs. Revelle began speaking to Pearlie. I guess I was further from hear range than I thought. Not that it was my business to listen in on other's conversations. That was impolite. Something I was warned against, even before I became a woman. Murmurs and mumbles were all I could make out and that was fine for me.

After a time, Mrs. Revelle's face screwed up. Displeasure undermined that serene look she'd been wearing before. She hugged her daughter with sympathy.

"It seems Pearlie is having one of her *days*, I'm sorry to say," Mrs. Revelle explained, "Your mama wanted so badly for you to have a chance to play with *girls* your age."

The last words drifted in the air and caught on the edges of the wind. I couldn't mistake the emphasis she placed on *girls*. Nobody, whether in-town or out, wanted to disappoint their neighbors. If only I could've told Mrs. Revelle she wasn't upsetting Mama. I would do so much, it would take up all her upset feelings.

“No matter. She’ll come around before too long. She always does, my Pearl,” Mrs. Revell said, “You’re more than welcome to stay. Your mama told me you’re magic in the kitchen. Cookies are just the thing to have Pearl come along.”

It was a suggestion without real choice. Mrs. Revelle was going to try her hardest to make the play date successful. The driveway, and beyond that, was calling to me. I wanted to feel the gravel beneath my shoes as I ran far away. Toward something comforting to me. Putting behind all this – this everything I didn’t understand.

Not wanting to admit it, I thought to myself how much I enjoyed baking. Especially cookies. And Mama was always looking for a way to get her hands on Mrs. Revelle’s recipe for molasses ones. Maybe I could figure it out.

“I would really enjoy to, Mrs. Revelle,” I said, making sure not to shorten my words as usual.

By the time the first batch of cookies were in the oven, there was no sign of Pearlie moving. Stealing to the bathroom more often than I needed, I glanced out the window to the sandbox. Smells wafted through the air. It was enough to call anyone inside. I swore I’d seen forest critters peaking between boughs, hoping for a little taste. They scared off when they spotted Pearlie. Of course, humans didn’t have as strong of noses as animals.

While waiting for the cookies to bake, Mrs. Revelle sat me on one of the table chairs. She placed herself across from me, hands folded just so on her lap. I took note of how she sat, in case I ever needed to imitate it. By *in case*, I meant *when*. I was pulling the lower hem of my dress as close to my knees as it could get. A location not easily

reached. My dress was old and I was growing out of it. The hem was too short as it was. The height of the chair made it difficult to keep my knees and ankles together, but I had to try. Just as I made the attempt to keep my back constantly straight, even though it hurt after five minutes. Thankfully, the timer went off and the first batch of cookies was done.

At the same time, there was a knocking at the back door. No one knocks at the back door. If they're in your backyard, the person is obviously welcome in your home. There would be no need. They could just walk in, as would be expected.

Mrs. Revelle was torn between going to the house door and the oven door. Both could be equally important, I thought. The cookies could burn or you could find a disgruntled visitor. To think happier thoughts, you could pull the cookies at perfection or you could find an overly delighted guest. Ladies had to think positively after all.

Moments were all it took for her to slip a pot holder on her hand, open the oven door, and slide the baking sheet onto the range top. All in a swift moment. The echoes of the back door were calling to her.

She went beyond my line of sight. Helpful, that's all I could be. So, sense told me the nicest thing I could do was to move the cookies to a cooling rack. Even though I knew Mrs. Revelle would have stopped me. Hot pans were too dangerous for a young lady. Only old ladies could handle that, according to her.

A noise, almost a clamor, arose from the back. My hand jumped at the sudden sound. The pot holder fell from my hand to the dirtied linoleum. For a second, I paused to listen. No words could be made out. Not that the voices were too far away, just that they weren't making sense. It was a loud, rising murmur. It was all random sounds, parts of words. Nothing concrete at all. I knew enough it wasn't a monster. I'd heard enough from

everyone about town to know it was Pearlie making those noises. We were the same age, but speaking wasn't something she ever really developed.

Quickly, I noticed I'd been staring in the direction of the hallway, where Mrs. Revelle and her daughter would emerge. Rudeness was not a welcome guest. If I concerned myself again with the cookies, they wouldn't notice. To steady it before I went at it with the spatula again, I grabbed the baking sheet.

Distraction, I'd always been told, was the bane of humanity. Put all of your focus into one thing at a time. Doing things in halves will be your ruin.

Forgetting this advice caused the pain of grabbing a baking sheet barely out of the oven. The other strike against me was nosing into other's business where my nose didn't need to be. The spatula clattered to the ground. Perhaps Mrs. Revelle had a point for young ladies not getting too involved in baking. Especially ones that were unsupervised.

She found me, clutching my left hand, doubled over. I was too pained to notice the hesitation in Mrs. Revelle. Safe as her daughter was in their own home, Mrs. Revelle thought after her first. I was very much still a stranger in their house. Almost an intruder of sorts. It had to have been quick that Mama threw together this play date. I came crashing into the home like an invading army. Steps echoing for miles around, so that you always knew it was on its way. Or it was leaving and all the destruction left behind.

Where I was actually closer to danger than Pearlie, though Pearlie was often a danger to herself, Mrs. Revelle rushed toward me and began cooing. I tried shoving her off. It didn't hurt all that much if I squinted and nearly cut off blood from my hand. Ignoring the pain was all unspeakable to Mrs. Revelle. She rushed me to the sink.

I wasn't concerned about the pain. The worst of it left quickly. A dull ache remained in my hand. Mrs. Revelle fussed and hemmed, *tut*-ing every time she looked at the skin. It reddened up quick with white blisters. I wasn't about to let it bother me. I'd had worse. Splinters of bone poked through the skin of my leg once when I jumped from a too tall tree. Crying didn't even cross my mind then. All I said was a few curse words I'd heard from Papa. I think the talking to I got for my language was worse than the injury.

"This isn't any good, little lady," Mrs. Revelle said, "I know your mama wanted you to have a nice play date with Pearlie so you could get along with girls your own age, but that can't be done in this condition."

Hope, finally another glimmer of hope I could cling to. She was sending me home. I knew it was true. And in a second of time, Mrs. Revelle confirmed. A good-bye wave and I was gone. Wind carried me all the way up the long driveway. At the end of it, where it met the road, choices laid themselves out in front of me.

It was a matter of time before Mrs. Revelle would call Mama and explain everything. No one counted on children to bring such important messages. Minutes, maybe *hours*, would pass before the phone would be picked up. I wouldn't be expected home right off. There was time to explore.

On the other hand, I could do as I pleased and catch it later. The boys needed me. Disdain from my parents was new. I could reject their wishes and do what I wanted. That wasn't the answer, and I knew it too. I felt the pull in my heart. If only I could cut the horses free and use their speed. Do what I want and still get back home in plenty of time.

Well, Mama was always encouraging me to exercise and walks were the most suitable for a lady.

By now, the heat wasn't dry anymore. Water set on the outside of glasses like dew on leaves. Even the air felt wet. I was surprised no rain started, but it only rained when it was cool. That would have been welcomed. Deciding to take a walk was beginning to look like a poor idea.

Not only was the heat troublesome, none of the boys were out. Probably 'cause of how warm it was. Of course, I'd walked just half of my planned route. There was still time and space. The roar of Recyclosaurus rumbled at the edge of town.

This section of road didn't have trees and plants lining it. That was Main Street. Grass was all there was here. Brown, dull, and crunching under my feet. Had there been flowers and trees, I bet they would have been torn up with the tar. Recyclosaurus had come and done its worst, leaving nothing behind. All the rubble of its destruction was taken with it. Dirt roads once again ran through town.

Fresh dirt. Looked almost fluffy and soft, except for the few impressions of footprints. Eyeing those prints closer, they were too small for one of the workers, a full-grown adult. No way they were from of the ladies, not the right fit for a woman's shoe. I'd have bet my piggy bank it was one of the boys. They'd be investigating the path of havoc left behind and figuring what they could do with it. Last I knew, the details were fuzzy for the sacrifice. Sooner than later was better, else time would slip past and the machine would be gone.

I wondered if anyone ever thought of making dirt angels. Like in the light, fluffy snow. The road has the same sort of texture. Perfect conditions for a dirt angel. It was awfully tempting, but I knew I couldn't. A speck of dirt was forbidden to be on my skin. Within reason, at least. A little around me feet and ankles was expected for such a dry summer. Whoever gone and tramped through the road went and surpassed the acceptable amount of dust. It *had* to be one of the boys. The prints were just the right size. I hoped whoever did it was still close by. I couldn't waste much more time for nothing. If I saw someone, at least there'd be an excuse to cover up.

With a stick I pulled from Mister and Missus Fournier's lawn, I acted as though there was a purpose for me to be there. Standing around doing nothing was suspicious. *Keep busy* was advice Mama gave me as one of the rules to being a lady. Dirt angels were out of the question, but there wasn't a reason I couldn't draw in the road. It was plowed out flat. Blank canvases aren't meant to stay blank. They're meant to be filled with the most wonderful pictures.

Of course, my stick-drawings never did amount to much. In contests of speed, I could out-run any of the boys, but they beat me to the line with art. Now and then, I practiced. A line here and there, eventually they'd add up to something I could recognize. Although, other people questioned what they represented.

Right as I was drawing the teeth on a rabid dog, there was a noise behind me. Footsteps and the crunch of grass. I wasn't concerned. No reason to be.

"Whatchu doing here?"

Never before had Tobes taken an angry tone with me. He was usually happy to see me. All the boys were. Sure as sugar, he wasn't pleased. I almost didn't want to turn around to face him. To see his face creased at the brows would've hurt.

"I thought you were a *lady* now," his accusation was unfair. It hadn't been my choice, "Ladies have canvases and paintbrushes. Not sticks and dirt. Don'tcha know your place?"

It wasn't fair. I didn't deserve this sort of talk. Bennie knew everything about my situation. Okay, not everything, but I'd told him it was Mama and Papa's doing, my confinement. Didn't he tell the rest what was up? That way they wouldn't be mad at me. This was hard enough without that.

As blank of a face as Tobes showed, when I finally looked at him, how he really felt showed in his eyes. Creases of anger weren't to be found, but there was a certain dead disappointment in his eyes. But he *had* to know this wasn't my fault.

"Can't it be both?" I asked him. Still squatted on the ground, I knew I had to stand or risk my reputation. Though I wasn't sure how the two were related. "Why is it I can only be a lady or I can only be fun? I've done two things at once before."

Maybe, I thought, maybe if I acted friendly he'd come around a little and realize I wasn't much different. I held my stick out to him as an invitation to draw. For a second, I thought it worked. He leaned forward, hand out toward it. His own sense of right must've taken over. Much quicker, his hand shot into his pocket.

"My ma told me everything. What being a lady *really* means," he said, taking a step back, "She said I'm not supposed to talk to you no more. Bennie's ma might be fine

with him talking to you, and he might be fine with it, but I'm not getting into any trouble 'cause of you. I don't think so. I'll catch it from you *and then* my ma. Not happening."

I was shocked. None of the boys talked to me like this before. We'd always been all happy and getting along. A big group of us wild around town. Like a family. Or so I thought. Apparently thought wrongly, too. I didn't know why Tobes was treating me like some sort of monster.

Turns out I wasn't going to find out. As I was standing there, floored by what he said, he upped and left. Not another word. Though, I'd have put money on the horse that said it was for the best. I don't think he'd had anything particularly good to say.

Watching Tobes walk away made me realize I should have been doing the same. At least an hour passed since I left the Revelle's and there was longer to go yet. I'd taken too much time. It was only a half hour walk from Revelle's to home, or the other way. Mama might have been busy canning all our goods, but that was an art where you kept strict track of time. If fortune was on my side, when I went through the back door, Mama'd be busy fixing a batch of something for the pressure cooker. The hinges squeaked, but it meant I could avoid Mama's eyes.

Good thing this wasn't the first time I'd snuck in or out the back way. There'd been plenty of late night excursions with the boys Mama and Papa wouldn't approve of and didn't know about. Each time the back door opened, the hinges scraped and squeaked. If I lifted up on the door as I turned the knob, most of the sound was gone. Not all, but it was much less noticeable.

"Jane Annette."

Sing-song voices didn't hide what Mama meant. Two out of three names. I was in trouble. No use denying it. I hoped the punishment wouldn't be as bad as I was expecting.

"Come into the kitchen, Jane," she called to me again.

"Yes, Mama."

I knew better than to avoid her beckons. When I got into the kitchen, I saw how busy Mama'd been while I was away. Sixteen un-sealed jars remained on the counter beside thirty-two jars ready to go into the basement. Maybe eagerness would cast her anger aside.

"Do you want me to put these in storage for you, Mama?" I asked her.

Eyes and fingers followed the raised glass patterns on the jars. I saw roses and pumpkins, letters and words, and grapes, and all other manner of vegetables and fruits. Glass colored green with their contents. I was trying to buy my time with anything that might distract Mama. Passage of time might mean a cooler head and less of a punishment.

"No, no, Jane," Mama said, "I want you right here."

Any minute now, it'd be coming. Quiet before the storm. This wasn't a new tactic for Mama. It was old hat. Plenty of times before she had me sit at the counter, waiting for what she had to say. *Before* I would have fidgeted. *Now* I knew it would make it worse. I sat as still as I could. When the next eight pints of green beans went in, that's when it'd start.

A dancing weight atop the pressure cooker mocked me, but also reminded me of myself. With each of its rotations, the *moment* drew closer. In constant pirouettes, it danced all its life, a sort of freedom that was restricted from me. It had its own

restrictions. On top of the pressure cooker, it couldn't leave. Only stay and wait as time ticked down second by second. Sands in the timer were just about gone. Grain by grain, they passed through the chute. The last one gone to the bottom.

Hours, that were actually minutes, went by when Mama took one set of jars out and put another in. Storms rolled in over the horizon. Not all the flash and bangs, just gentle rains.

“When did you leave the Revelle's, Jane?” Mama asked me.

I knew what she was doing. She wanted me to lie and protect myself from punishment. It always came down to tests of character. At a younger age, I woulda fallen for it. No more, though. I knew better now. It would be trouble twice over.

“Just over an hour from when I got here, Mama.”

“What took you so long in getting home, Jane?” her voice grew tense.

Always addressing me personally when I'd done wrong. It was as if Mama didn't want me forgetting it was *me* that'd misbehaved. I addressed her personally out of propriety. From a young age, I'd been told to address those you were speaking to. Now especially that I was a lady. Not to mention, it wouldn't hurt my case being polite. No lies could pass my lips, and the truth wouldn't make Mama happy. Already I could see her jaw clenching.

“I was purposely moving slow at first, Mama,” I said, head bowed low, “And then I bumped into Tobes. We – we chatted a bit.”

A thin line of disappointment appeared on her face. Her lips pressed firmly together and eyes narrowed ever so slightly. Knuckles whitened as she tightened her grip to twist on a jar lid. Maybe too much emotion went into it. She only twisted hard like that

when Papa came home smelling of something strange. Those were nights Mama got *real* upset. And it was looking like a mirror of those actions now.

“Now, Jane, you remember when your papa and I told you not to talk with those boys anymore,” her voice was on edge of control, but barely, “Don’t you, dear?”

“I do, Mama.”

She got close to me. More than was usual. Across the counter, she leaned in so her face was even with mine. I could see her every emotion.

“And how many times have *I*, only me, told you and reprimanded you?”

“This would make seven, Mama.”

“Your papa and I taught you better than that, Jane,” she said, turning her back to me, “You *know* to listen to your elders.”

Tut-tut-tutting, Mama walked out through the kitchen to the front door. Off to the side of the door were the switches. Normally, that job was left to Papa, but Mama’d taken care of it a time or two. I watched her trace her finger tips over each stem, each twig. A fist formed when her hand wrapped around the leather binding them all together. Breath stopped coming from my mouth. My eyes closed shut tight. I didn’t want to see it coming. This was going to be like those nights Papa came home late. I knew how Mama acted when she was this angry.

The swish of sticks through the air didn’t come. The sting of twigs didn’t find my skin. A gentle hand rested on my shoulder. Black spots clouded my vision from how snug my eyelids had been against one another. The switches were still by the door, a warning to me for future faults.

A chance look up to Mama's face showed her looking down at me. It was angry, disappointed, upset. Most of all, it was hardened against what she was about to do. The palm of her hand rested at my chin, the fingers lightly touched my cheek. It was almost like she was admiring me. Or, really, admiring what she brought me up to. That wasn't it; I knew it wasn't.

Hard as I can ever remember, she *slapped* me. I'd been perched on one of the counter stools. After, I wasn't any longer. Somehow, I'd still been caught off guard, though I knew what was coming. I stumbled, feet catching the floor before my face did. This was worse than the switches. More personal. The stick didn't allow for Mama to be right up close so I could see her face and how she felt.

Cold feelings thawed from her face. Her realization hitting her. If she didn't like slapping me, why'd she have to go and do it anyway?

"Your father and I shouldn't have to tell you these things more than once, Jane," Mama said, rubbing her hand she slapped me with, "Listen when we tell you these things. Do not speak with the boys. If you have to, do not do so unaccompanied."

Her hands were getting red, like my one that touched the hot pot was. She was wringing them so. Slowly, she walked over to the kitchen timer, each step carefully planned. It was if a hard step would cause her to shatter, or all her world fall apart.

"You can't go outside, anymore. Not by yourself anyway," Mama said after she came back over to my side of the counter, "The backyard should be fine. The fence will keep you in well enough. But the front porch, I'm sorry, you won't be there on your own anymore, Jane."

To make an attempt at apology, Mama took a step toward me, arms opened wide and inviting. She felt bad after a harsh punishment. Always did. Once, when I was much younger, she spanked me ten strikes. It bothered her so much she let me have a bowl of ice cream before supper. I'd never been slapped before and I wasn't taking too much to her idea of kindness. A step or two, I backed up onto my stool. My own arms were crossed and disagreeable.

Twitches around her eyes and mouth let me know she was hurt by my refusal, my rejection of her hug. Grains of sand emptied the top of the timer. Mama's movements gave away how torn she was. Earlier, Mrs. Revelle was the same way. Go to her daughter or go to the canned goods? Mrs. Revelle chose her own daughter. Mama's priorities were elsewhere. A couple days before, she asked me to forgive Papa for how harsh he was being on me. She didn't agree with the extremes he was taking, but she reaffirmed his ideals *this* was how it was supposed to be. Society set rules to be followed no matter what your personal feelings.

Jars clinked on the cooling racks on the far counter. It took only a couple minutes to put the new ones in and top off the water that'd disappeared. I could of gotten up and left. But I didn't. As upset as I was with Mama, I knew I had to wait to be dismissed.

"I won't tell your father—This time," Mama informed me. A voice of apology. She was focused on twisting the pressure cooker's lid to a locked position. This was the second time *this time* happened, "If you like, we can sit together on the front porch and wait for the beans to be finished."

It was mean of me not to say anything to her, but I couldn't do it. Maybe she'd feel better having us sit like nothing ever happened, but I still knew. I was still furious about it. Like I hadn't heard a word she said, I got up to go to the stairs, up to my room.

Mama never even asked me if my burnt hand was alright.

A week went by, or maybe just a couple of days. It was hard to tell with nothing to do. Nothing to distract my thoughts. Mama'd kept true to her word. She didn't tell Papa about my failures. I guess she didn't, anyway. Secrets weren't uncommon.

Mama acted as if things were normal. Save we didn't speak at breakfast and I couldn't go anywhere or do anything. Silence filled the house. As much as the heat and humidity, it stifled us. Much of my time was spent in my room.

Boredom set in there. Never before did I have to spend a length of time trapped by the four walls. It was a place I slept, and that was it. Trinkets of interest and intrigue didn't live there. Toys to keep me entertained weren't to be found. All my excitement came outside. Though I was bored, I much rathered be up in my room.

Not too long ago, I'd avoided Pearlie with all intents I could. Now I wished for a call from the Revelle's, asking me over for a play-date again. None came. Patience wasn't favoring me. More than anything I wanted to get up and run and play. Instead, I was stuck inside, or on the front porch with Mama, or within the confines of the high-fenced backyard. Mostly I stayed inside. Temptations from just beyond my limits urged me to break the rules. It was best to sideline them, keep them out of sight.

That's not to say I didn't go outside. I did. Finally, fed up with the heat of the house, I needed a breath of a breeze.

We had a large backyard. Larger than most. The room was needed for all of Mama's garden. So there wasn't much spare room for playing. It was all taken up by compost and beans and squashes and all other manner of vegetables. Vine crops invaded. Their offshoots dropped pumpkins in the farthest reaches, and deposited zucchinis here and there. You had to look out for the hidden mines. Pea plants trellised up an old gridiron Papa brought home from work. It leaned up against the fence. I always felt as if I could brush the plants aside and enter another world. But I just hit the iron rods instead. Cherry tomatoes were the best, when they were in season. Heaven forbid I pluck off a nice, juicy, ripe big beeper. Those were noticeably missing. A little cherry tomato went under all sights.

In a corner, away from the prizes of hard work and labor, was a pile of sand. It wasn't specifically for me. Leftovers from filling in between the garden beds. Time was long since passed when it would be needed. Stray cats came and buried their business there, but it was fair enough to play in.

About to put the finishing touches on what I'd meant to be a castle, a strange noise came from the other side of the fence. Okay, not strange. I'd heard it before; it was the sound of a hammer pulling a board. It was unusual to hear someone attempting to take apart our fence. Did I go and tell Mama, or did I wait to see what was what?

Countless times in school, we'd been told about *never talk to strangers*. That line of thinking didn't quite fit with what was happening. I couldn't know if it was an alleged stranger until the fence was torn apart. Already I could see a board bending almost to snapping. It wouldn't be too much longer 'fore I knew.

More exciting things happened in my life, but not since my freedom was taken away. I wanted to jump up, push against the board with all my might. See who was fixing to get in. Mama might be watching from the back door. Such small movements from the fence wouldn't catch her eye, but big flourishes of my body would. I'd be in trouble again for sure. This time, Mama might tell Papa. Her *this times* would run out before too long. Then I'd be in it so deep, I would never see my way out. They'd keep me so out of sight, so restricted, I'd probably be locked up in the basement, or some such nonsense.

For a couple more minutes, I didn't have to worry about being caught. It would take about that long for the final nails to pop free. Even after that, I could be sneaky to keep whoever it was hidden. My hopes were high. Everything could turn out fine. Or it could've been nerves jittering my brain.

"*Psst!* Don't react. It's me," a voice beyond the fence said.

In an instant, I knew it was Bennie. That encounter with Tobes left me shaken about where I stood with the boys, but if Bennie was coming 'round, it must have been alright. It was comforting to know how well Bennie knew me and my family. To know I'd have a hard time containing my excitement. And to know Mama would see it. Straight-faced was the only way we'd get away with this. Even Bennie was at risk. Nobody looked right talking to a fence.

"Should I push from my side?" I asked, "You know, help it along?"

"No, no. I don't want to take the board all the way off," Bennie said, "I don't have the nails to put it back on. It just needs to be loose enough to see you through the crack."

So I pretended to be interested in the sand castle I was building. Fear stopped me from turning to see if Mama was at the window. It would be a dead giveaway for sure.

Luck wouldn't be on my side. All the good fortune was on Bennie's side of the fence.

Before too much more time passed, the bottom half of the board peeled back. In the little sliver I could see of the outside world, Bennie's face appeared. Gosh, it was good to see him. It felt like an eternity went by since the last.

"Only gotten worse, huh?" he said as a statement, not a question, "Any chance of getting out for the sacrifice?"

Half of me hoped he'd come to talk just for the sake of seeing me. I didn't want to have to tell him again that I wouldn't be able to go and pacify Recyclosaurus. When Bennie was thinking about the good of the whole, he forgot about the singular personal needs. I just needed a friend and he needed a priestess. Worlds weren't going to end. This was all make-pretend. Something fun to do to pass the time. Bennie might have been taking it a little too serious. Or maybe I was getting defensive.

When I told him I didn't think so, he wasn't about to take *No* for an answer again. Splinters showed on the board, peeled back more. Too much more pressure and it'd snap. A loud *crack* announcing his presence to Mama. There wasn't a way she wouldn't hear a board breaking.

"Come on. You have to. You owe it to us," he pressed his face further through the loose board and the fence, "We've already got the sacrifice. Remember Mr. Lamont's crippled chicken? He told us we could have it. In so many words, I think. A real, proper sacrifice."

The more Bennie said, the more I found I didn't want to go. It wouldn't be fun for me anymore. Looking over my shoulder the whole time would ruin it for me. Dogs are full of energy, but that's taken away when they get beat once or twice. Forever changed. I

wasn't going to be much different than one of those dogs. Time was what I needed. Not to adjust to the fences and walls, but to get used to this new person I was supposed to be. Mama and Papa couldn't hide me from the world forever. September would come soon enough and I'd see everyone again. Until then, things would be different.

"That's all well and good, but I can't," I told him.

I'd keep my words few. Less of an explanation, the better. Bennie found ways to poke holes in arguments so they sink in the lake, but he needed material to work with. A sentence at a time with refusal to say more wouldn't help him. He couldn't twist my arm from the other side of the fence.

"I thought Tobias was making it up about you, Jane," the cool tone in his voice tripped my hand. One sand tower destroyed, "All what his mother told him about *what* you were now. To look at you, you ain't unclean, but something surely isn't right in your mind. The old Jane wouldn't have pushed us away."

Forgetting my self-control, I stood. My castle was all but unrecognizable now. Piles of sand mix with cat droppings didn't amount to something glorious. Bennie hissed at me to sit back down, but the words were muted. I wasn't listening to him.

"No," I said.

It was the same big *No* I'd tried days before, the same one Papa always used and got his way. A couple days ago, I just said the word with no feeling in it. If I wanted things my way, the same way Papa did, I'd have to do everything in my power to imitate him. Back straight, shoulders back, eyes narrowed, lips thin.

"No," I repeated. My tone regulated by my displeasure.

His eyes were searching. Not my face for what was going through my head, but the space to the side. Empty air. Something caught his sight. If I turned to see, I might lose my control, but I was curious. When I saw, I was filled with dread and relief.

“Benjamin Moses Mercier, I know I spoke to your mother about telling you not to come around here,” my own mama said, “And I know Louise mentioned this to you, didn’t she?”

Cowed, Bennie bent his head and answered, “Yes, ma’am, Mrs. Duvall.”

“As I thought so,” Mama said, “Now, fix my fence and get back to your home. I’ll be giving Louise a call. So know better than to dilly-dally.”

It didn’t take long for Bennie to make himself gone. In no time, he’d straight-line for home. Nobody was as afraid of my mama as Bennie was, I think. On one hand, I was afraid of the punishment she could inflict. But Bennie, I’m fairly certain he was terrified of the actual being, the person. Unlike me, he wouldn’t take his time.

With the fence mended and Bennie gone, Mama turned her attentions to me. She wasn’t happy, but I’d known that by how she talked to Bennie. A blank face was a canvas for any emotion to appear on. White for fear, red for anger, blue for sad. The paints were waiting.

“Jane, go up to your room,” she said. Then there are some colors that you’re not sure what they mean, like the orange, “I’ll come and speak with you later. Get cleaned up first.”

Another couple days passed. When Mama told me got to my room, I wasn’t expecting it to be permanently, as it was. Except for meals and using the bathroom, there

were few times I was allowed beyond my shut door. If I was lucky, I got to go to the kitchen with Mama to help can, or to move jars to the cellar. My chances had finally run out.

For real, this time, Mama told Papa. I knew he wouldn't be happy. It was plain to see what would be coming if he found out. And I was right. The switches came out. Even though they never touched bare skin, the sticks left bubbled up red welts all on my backside. Ten whacks was enough. Papa judged how many was necessary by when tears formed in my eyes. We hadn't spoken to each other since. Not real words, anyway. There was always the customary *How was your day, Papa?* But those words were empty and meant nothing.

From my window, I could see most of the neighborhood. The day was coming to a close. Parents were returning home. Mostly just the fathers, but some of the mothers worked too. Children wouldn't be home for a while longer, not until supper was ready. The road workers left, abandoned Recyclosaurus at the edge of the road. Tomorrow was the last day. Their work of tearing up the roads was finished. Tomorrow they would pack up one set of equipment, haul it out, and then bring in another.

With the workers gone, the boys could move in. There was only a short amount of time, maybe an hour, they had free. They'd still go through with the sacrifice. Even though, in their eyes, I bailed out on them. Bennie was clever, and with the help of Tobes, they'd find a solution.

At this distance, I could barely make out who was who. Color of hair was a giveaway, but other than that it was proving difficult. I wanted to be able to watch and

follow their movements. Maybe even from this distance, if I knew exactly what was going on, I could feel like I was actually there. I could laugh along with them.

A shock came when I saw someone I didn't recognize from the regular team, but did from regular life. It was *Pearlie*. I didn't think Mrs. Revelle let her out of sight. She certainly wouldn't let her help in a ritual sacrifice to a being of steel and destruction. Sure enough, it was Pearlie. I could tell by the long, thin hair wisps. She stood at the mouth of the metal beast, the center of the semi-circle with the boys. A book was in her hand. Of course on such short notice she couldn't memorize the lines.

At my distance, I watched the group roll through their tasks. Before I'd been shunned away from society, I had been informed of the process. I knew what they needed to do and when to make this official. One mistake would mess the whole thing up. Not that we believed in pagan rites, but life wasn't meant to be done sloppily. *That* was a fact we did believe in.

I couldn't see their mouths moving. I couldn't read lips, anyway. There was no way to tell if Pearlie was getting her lines right. I thought I could hear her shriek when Tobes pulled out his brother's hatchet and took the head off the chicken. No way her lines were spot-on then. Imagine, a priestess who couldn't dip her fingers in the sacrifice's blood to write ancient runes on *Recyclosaurus*. It was unheard of. Bennie took to it instead.

It was too much. I had to turn my head. Blood wasn't bothering me. Death wasn't what was troubling my mind. They were messing it up. It should have been *me* down there. I'da gotten it *right*. Chicken beheadings weren't no surprise to me. Mama did that

once a month for a Sunday supper. As for blood, I'd soaked up to my elbows when I helped make blood sausage.

What surprised me most was Bennie, normally a perfectionist, laughing. He wasn't that forgiving with me. No one was. Everyone had high expectations of my actions.

E d g e o f E s c a p e

Everywhere I go is a memory, with him, of him. Even happy ones bring back sorrow. That's why I went back to my childhood. Breathing came easy again as all my defenses dropped, falling to the ground with the leaves that surrounded me. Miles away from everything, the wood enveloped me rather than fear. I could start over here. It the only haven I've ever known, the only place I never told him about. Summers in the north, away from everything running free through the forests. Now that I'm older, I could make my life where I had camped. People were always so friendly and welcoming in this little town. I needed that.

A deep breath of fresh air calmed the quick pattering of my heart. Weeks would have to pass before I no longer had to remind myself nothing was going to go wrong. I had trained myself to be so cautious, always looking over my shoulder, prepared to sprint. Now I could feel the muscles on my neck tense, straining against my will to keep looking forward. I had trained myself to be so watchful, so I could do the reverse. People always spoke about the wonders fresh air could do for a person.

The week after I arrived in that small wooded town, everything was on its way to being settled. Camping was always one of my favorite parts of growing up, so it didn't bother me to sleep in a tent for a while. There was the promise of the future that kept my resolve. I was now the owner of a piece of land. The deed bore *my* name. Construction on a small house would begin in a month.

In two days I was to start my job. Remote towns never have much to offer, so I considered myself fortunate, even if it wasn't my first choice. Working produce at a grocery store in the next town over was a respectable job. I was no longer trapped by the thought of lettuce...

Eating is necessary to survive. Intravenous drips can sustain you, but that's not living, it's only existing. I haven't been living for a year now. The needle is in my veins. It's constantly feeding me thoughts I wish I'd forget. I got used to the needle eventually, but I'm always aware of its presence. It itches, and I want nothing more than to rip it away. These things linger, preventing me from even just entering a grocery store without sideways glances.

I feared for the moment *Sandra* flows through the air to my ears, as the syllables slide their way across my shoulders. Another grocery store, another town would be better. The migration trails of habit always led me back here. The feeling of looking out for him was one I never tried to avoid. I knew exactly where everything was, so I could minimize time in the store. Get in, get out as quickly as possible. Changing convention would save me from accidental run-ins, but I would have to start my familiarity over with a new

store. I needed that familiarity, something in my life that was the same. It had nothing to do with missing him.

I was trapped between displays of apples and oranges. The produce section was where I needed to be most aware. It was his assigned location within the store, his specialty. Months had passed since I had last caught his eye near the pineapples. My empty basket had clattered on the floor as I ran to the car to escape a confrontation. If only I had been able to make it to the deli. I would have been free. Hills and valleys of shelves could hide me, lost in a forest of cereal boxes.

Behind me I heard tires rolling over gravel, an engine quieting down. A beautiful autumn day, someone else was coming to enjoy it. There were already a handful of people at the rocky beach. The last traces of summer wouldn't last for many more days. It was refreshing to no longer have over the shoulder glances. No more worries. I could keep enjoying the view of the wind ripples on the water and the way light glimmered...

Light reflected off the windshield, that's what caught my eye. I tensed, knees bent, ready to sprint from a vehicle I could never outrun. I couldn't draw attention to myself by stopping in the sidewalk, so my walk continued. I could feel myself starting to shake and worried how it would affect my mobility if it came to escape. All signs pointed to *ready to run*. He wouldn't faze me. I wouldn't let him. The thoughts he had once

ingrained in my mind had been pushed away. They wouldn't be allowed to weave their way in-between my conscious again.

In a moment, the truck flashed by in a streak of hi-ho silver. Adrenaline still quaked my body, but I was washed in relief. I wasn't noticed. The red of brake lights didn't pour into my eyes like a head wound. There wouldn't be an encounter.

Something wasn't right. It was a more stream-lined chassis. The plate number wasn't his. White numbers against a green background. It should have been black numbers with a white background, a V in bold red. It means "veteran," but "varnished" was more fitting for him. He had never served. His grandfather, whose truck it had been, had been in the Navy for twenty years. I always thought the plates should have been changed when the name on the deed changed. I kept my opinions to myself.

Trucks are always something to be cautious of. Loud, dangerous vehicles whose owners' personalities are often duplicates of that. Roaring up behind anyone on the road then blowing by, and in an instant are no longer seen. Seconds to be there, seconds to be gone, but something sticks, unnerved feelings linger. The flies kept coming back every time I shook my head. That's why my guard was always up, my head always shaking. Or the flies would lay eggs and maggots would hatch, eating my flesh.

The lake suddenly got cold when a northern wind picked up. I shivered as my hair snaked around my neck.

"Sandra?" a familiar voice said.

I feared to turn around. I was in the wilderness with no one around who could save me and with nothing to defend myself. It was too much of a coincidence. How could I have been found?

“It’s been so long. How have you been?”

The arrival of a dog made me turn around. Animals always put me at ease...

The dog ambled toward the door as soon as she saw the mailman’s flashing lights. She would have heard the car first if it wasn’t for her age. A few quiet *woofs* let me know what was happening in the front yard. The mail is another dangerous thing. It’s easy to find addresses and then anyone can send you anything. I’m glad the dog, in her slow way, warns me. I could move, just like I could change grocery stores, but my home is safe. I know where everything is. Escape plans are ready for an emergency. Besides, he could always find me again.

The house is safe enough for now, though. When the sun sinks the floor turns to lava. Hardwood is a hard place to fall when you’ve been pushed down or thrown down. Clean as I might, I could never get those blood stains out. No one else can see them, but they’re there. Thoughts can be pushed from my mind, but an idle mind creates idle worries. Tenseness didn’t leave my shoulders, even when I’d lie down to sleep.

I worry that he’ll drive by in that truck of his when I go to the mailbox. It wouldn’t be the first time. The last time the Toyota rolled by, windows down, fifteen miles per hour, it was winter. I jumped. The ground found me the same time adrenaline did. Blood pounded to my muscles as I scrambled to escape, to get up, to move. I could

get back to the house, I could be sage. A door slamming told me I needed to move faster, disregard the mail in the box. “Do you want some help?”

Still on the icy ground, I knew I was in the vulnerable position. Somehow, I managed to get away. I dashed to my door, locking it, drawing all the shades. When I looked between the blinds, I didn’t see the silver truck. A red four-door and a confused looking woman were in its place. He had been there. I paused for a second, eager to hear the engine of the truck fading into the distance. There was only the hum of the sedan, and then a door as the woman drove off.

Spit went down my throat. Trying to dig up the courage to go outside after a memory like that was difficult. It set me on edge. I didn’t want to bump into him. A few deep breathes and I was able to turn the nob and pull.

Three letters were in the box, all addressed to the only person who lived at my house number. *Sandra Rudman*. My eyes blurred the name in my mind, creating other names. A changed last name or his name. Thankfully my name had remained as it was given to me when I was born, and the return addressed didn’t bear that last name. I no longer received pages of confessions and accusation, loved mixed with blame. There were only a few times I wasn’t glad to get mail in the box.

It was the game warden, but not the same one that I had met as a child. He was familiar all the same. Summertime, childhood friends are never forgotten. The memories were happy ones and I was relaxed again. Disaster had been averted, the biggest

coincidence of my life hadn't happened. I hadn't been found by the person I had excised from my life.

"I'd heard you'd come back to stay," Danny said, looking out over the water, "I thought I'd find you at the lake. Any truth to these rumors?"

My first real smile in weeks, months even. Using muscles that were unaccustomed to moving stiffened my face. I could feel how the grin spread across my face, always aware of my emotions. "Good for you," he said, moving his eyes to me from the lake.

My smile remained, it ghosted across my lips, but it didn't fade completely. Some thoughts never can leave my mind, somehow they still remain. All those years, I had thought I was at a home, not just a house, a building. My home wasn't confined by walls. It was here. Surrounded by all of this; nature, the people, the feeling of peace.

The winds changed. A warm eastern wind became a chilled northern one. Danny made his motions to head back to his warden truck. I decided it was about to leave the lake and settle into my cabin for the night. The ledge caught my foot, tripping me up and I was falling...

Plates crashed to the ground from the force of my body colliding with the wall. It didn't hurt as much as I thought it would. After all, my back missed the coat hanger. The agony from that would be worse. I staggered forward. Was I trying to escape? I must have been. There was no way I was moving closer to my attacker. Hands gripped my shoulders and I was back against the wall. More china shattered.

This time I stayed put. My house was so non-threatening. I had nothing to defend myself with. On the counter there was a pineapple I hadn't taken the knife out for when I decided to cut it up. The keys to his truck that were tossed carelessly when he sauntered in here looking for a fight I gave to him. A few letters. Nothing. Nothing of use.

Breath was gone out of my body when the back of his hand swung across my face. I fell to the ground with him towering over me. Another hand raised high, positioned to strike.

Gravel scraped the back of my legs as I pushed myself backward. Someone was looming over me. Male, tall, imposing, intimidating. His hand was stretched forward. I couldn't let this happen to me again. Again? Or was this still the same account? Getting away was the only thing on my mind.

An unfamiliar voice caused my eyes to focus. "I said *Are you okay?*"

My arm rose in front of my face. Both defensive and a sun block. It was Danny, he pushed me down and now the back of my legs were dripping blood from the gravel. He took a step forward, hand still raised above me. The dog jumped between us. Teeth weren't barred, but I still felt like it was trying to protect me from an attacker. Then its tail gave me one quick swipe across the face. A shiver went down my spine and I jarred back to what was happening. Danny was trying to help me. He wasn't hurting me. I couldn't let that go.

B e c a u s e y o u l o v e d m e

Suddenly I am free,
Floating above the ground,
Just because you loved me.

Traveling 'cross the sea,
No worries I might drown,
Just because you loved me.

Capture; a need to flee,
Escaping from the hounds,
Suddenly I am free.

This I could not foresee.
No longer am I bound.
Just because you loved me.

Though I had lost the key,
Easily it was found.
Suddenly I am free
Just because you loved me.

Never Again

You want what we once could have been,
(and the past you cannot rewrite),
I could never love you again.

You changed your tune, to my chagrin
(you tried so hard to make it right),
I could never love you again.

All attention to me did send
(I ran, just like a bird in flight).
You want what we once could have been.

You think this is something to mend
(it's not as though this is trite).
I could never love you again.

For you, my heart will not open
(it has nothing to do with spite).
You want what we once could have been.
I could never love you again.

F o r t h e B e s t

Telling myself it's for the best:
I can hold on and suffer, or,
I'll forget you at your request.

I'm trying to ignore unrest,
I will just need to close the door;
I'll forget you at your request.

It's myself only I detest.
You won't hear from me anymore;
Telling myself it's for the best.

Not another unwelcome guest,
No longer an imposing war,
I'll forget you at your request.

Thoughts remain, but I'll run. Protest
These memories that shook my core.
Telling myself it's for the best
I'll forget you at your request.

C o n d i t i o n a l O w n e r s h i p

I.

Was this all it took to make her happy? Sun bleached all colors. It would have been a perfect day to be out in open land. Cut down hay didn't dry in the fields. Not this day. Instead farm work carried on in a different manner. Rays from the sun touched earth in particular locations. Signals of a bright beginning. Glimmers of light reflected on the metal trailer backed into the yard.

Holly's smile had never shone brighter than a June day before. Not like this. She'd been happy the first time she entered the calf barn. Adoration was easy to focus on the fuzzy faces of week-old heifers. Who couldn't smile at the soft mouths of calves searching for milk from fingers?

Try as he might, Mason couldn't compare how Holly looked in this moment to anything he could find. The day was beautiful, sunny and warm, but Holly surpassed it. Pure happiness by pure happenstance.

It was one of those things he would never understand about women. One of the myriad occurrences. Just a few words and all could be right in the world. The opposite was also true, but for now Holly was overjoyed.

“She’s yours.”

That was all. Words said merely as an afterthought when Mason took the lead from Holly’s eager hands. A smile like never before spread across her face. Mason swore he saw her skip instead of step.

The cow was nice, good breeding, but nothing to get *this* excited about. A cow was a cow. Treat her well and she’d milk the same as the rest. If she was an extraordinary cow, she’d produce more poundage. Of course, Holly didn’t know that. Now Mason’s girlfriend was making plans for the Holstein as if she was planning for a wedding. Half of Mason’s mind was waiting for a comment about what color flower would best compliment. She’d probably say purple.

Let her focus on the cow, Mason thought, If she’s looking for something to plan, it’s best it’s not an actual wedding. This is something constructive.

As happy as Holly was, maybe he’d give her a cow next time she was upset with him. See where that went. A ready-made excuse to purchase more.

The trio began walking, slow and lumbering. At each step the cow stopped to inspect its surroundings with its nose. Any stone that protruded from the gravel driveway was passed by with a wet nose-print left behind. The bordering lawn was pulled short.

“D’you think she carries red-factor? Oh, I’d love to see some reds in the pasture,” Holly said, running a hand over the cow’s shoulder, “Life isn’t just black and white.”

Holly was always trying to prove that. There was more to life. Grey showed through. Things aren't cut and dry. More than one side to every story. Mason heard all the little quips. Think positive. It wasn't that he was a pessimist. You had to be a realist on a farm. Mason didn't imagine a woman from the city would understand all there was to farm life. He'd underestimated Holly, sure. She may not have comprehended everything on the same level as him, but she exceeded him in the genetics of the cows. The first thing she put her mind to was learning all the hereditary traits he didn't understand. Red-factor meant the cow was black, but could possibly throw red calves. That explanation was good enough for Mason. Holly took it to the level of alleles and loci.

Waves of hide rippled beneath Holly's hand, shaking off the foreign touch. An action meant to shoo away unwanted pests. Holly withdrew her hand from the cow's side. Sad lines flickered at the corners of her mouth. An age she hadn't reached showing.

How long had it been since Mason first brought Holly to the farm? Three months? They had been dating for a couple of weeks at that point. She'd expected towering silos and pristine red barns with black roofs. A long, tarred driveway lined with ornamental shrubs. Her expectations went unmet. Mostly because of all the experience she lacked. She had never seen a cow being milked before. Never even *touched* a cow. Bull calves kept at fair petting zoos didn't count. Despite her suburban up-bringing, she always tried her best. That go-get-'em attitude of hers. Couldn't bring her down with the failure after failures in her learning process. Not enough familiarity yet. She just didn't have the same cow-sense. No matter how much grey you thought there was in the world, Mason's Holsteins were still just black and white.

“D’you have her pedigree handy?” Holly asked about the one aspect she excelled at.

Two crinkled-together papers were pulled out of one of Mason’s back pockets. The smaller of the two read *Bill of Sale* boldly across the top, as set of figures scribbled below in the previous owner’s scrawlings. The wasn’t important to Holly at the moment, but to Mason it showed he’d gotten a deal. Holly wanted *Certificate of Registration*, bordered with blue.

Creases of age and wear stubbornly left their marks on the paper, although Holly did her best to smooth them out. Soon the lines of Holly’s forehead reflected the state of the paper. Shallow wrinkles showed something beyond her years again. When she concentrated, her eyes outlined exhaustion. Morning milking ended at five, before the sun had risen. There was only half an hour until the afternoon shift. Holly had been awake all day to help with each. It was the weekend; the help had Sundays off.

Mason tugged on the lead of the cow’s halter. The frayed rope roughed poly-plastic fibers across his skin. Free-stalls were an appropriate home for the cow. He’d leave Holly to her thoughts. She could always catch up to him.

“Her grandfather was red,” Holly said, the worn-out look falling away, “Rats. *Grandsire*, I mean.” – she paused after correcting her mistake in terms, still looking at the paper – “None of the red bulls are any good. But if we find another red-carrier, she *could* have a lovely little red baby.”

Sometimes when Holly spoke it seemed like little more than self-talking. It was cute at times. Surely she had noticed his mind was already set on the next task. He was halfway to the barn. Distance between them caused static in their communication. Mason

didn't really process what she said; only continued on with what he was doing. A nodded head and a far word of agreement.

Several steps behind him, Holly stood with her arms down by her sides, slack. The hand holding the registration paper went limp, and the certificate fluttered to the ground. Holly brushed off a little dirt when she bent to pick it up. Around her, the sun was still illuminating the world to a new level of beauty. It truly was a perfect day. A brown smudge would always streak across the cow's name on the paper: *Placide*.

II.

A loud *thud*, followed by whispered curses from a polite mouth, and Mason knew what happened. It happened to everyone. There weren't discriminations for how long you've worked animals. This would be the first time it happened to Holly. He didn't hurry inside the parlor, though. When a child falls you don't rush to them, crooning over their scraped-up knees. They have to get back up on their own. Another lesson in life to be learned the hard way.

Five minutes later, finally in the parlor, Holly wouldn't look Mason in the eye. Something begged to be said of her independence and resolve. Never before had anyone forced themselves to be so absorbed in the task of milking a cow. She seemed to forget the double-four set up surrounding her. Not to mention all the other cows that existed and

needed to be milked. Wearied determination shadowed her face as she wiped an udder clean. The wet paper towel frayed in the center then tore. Remnants dropped to the dirtied cement. The towel was balled up and still Holly persisted at her task.

“That’s just black pigment on her teat,” Mason told her, coming up behind, “Not manure.”

Holly moved, but not to turn in protest. Shoulders dropped, followed by a long sigh. Her eyes looked forward toward the offending cow, but she didn’t really see anything. Nitrile-gloved hands made a few more motions of wiping the udder. The soft flesh was pliable beneath her fingers. The right, rear quarter began leaking milk. Holly’s movement was slow and lacking true effort.

“No, there’s still shit –“ she began to say, “Oh, you’re right.”

No contortions of coming tears showed in her face. Just shame, defeat. Holly avoided looking at her boyfriend, still. Her head cocked to a far enough angle for Mason to see her expression. A battle had been fought and lost; Holly wasn’t the victor. Motionless, her hands rested on the cool cement.

A fight wasn’t offered when Mason turned Holly slowly to face him. There it was. A solid imprint of a hoof, dark against the tank-top Holly was wearing. Stains marred the shirt in the past, but they were from splatter and grazes, near-misses. New marks were added in that moment when a neighboring cow lifted her tail. An unappetizing by-product released, loose. The human pair was in the splash zone of liquid manure.

Looking back to Holly’s shirt, there was no mistaking it had been a full impact. Strange was the way the tips of the cloves met to form a heart-shape. Love never returned.

Holly flicked her eyes to Mason's face, just briefly. Not long enough. In that instant, all blame was placed on the farmer, but Mason couldn't gather a reason why he was at fault. It wasn't as if he forced the cow to kick her. She'd been on her own in the parlor. Holly quickly looked away again.

She was losing the control she had over her tears, a reaction normal for the situation. For a woman, at least. For Holly. The first time she saw a dead calf, she cried then too. As a boy, Mason might have cried when a cow struck him, but he deserved it more often than he didn't. He was a child then, though. It was just another aspect of farming Holly would have to get used to.

Instead of giving into the shock received from being kicked, Holly pushed her shoulders back, fixing her face to determination. Mason knew the root of this attitude, the causal agent. The story had been told in the first couple dates. In college, when her part-time job fell through and she was no better than stranded hundreds of miles from home, she prided herself in her ability to keep collected. There was no other choice. Finally she had words, a mantra, to attribute to that idea and feeling. Mason gave it to her. *The cows still needed to be milked.* No matter what hitch occurred, it couldn't affect you; the cows still needed to be milked.

Mason reached a hand out to take Holly into his arms. A nice gesture, of course, but one ignored by Holly. She started to put the machine on the cow which had kicked her.

"Here, let me take care of that for you," he told her.

Every step she fought him. Her independence wouldn't let her submit to him. The cow had since calmed down, but Holly still avoided giving into Mason's help. She was

acting like a fresh heifer, first time in the parlor. Pulling against all restraints, pushing against all barriers. Mason could have told Holly this would make her feel better, just as a fresh heifer being milked relieved the strain on the udder, but her senses would have thundered against him. Obstinate refusal. In a final bit of strength, Holly wrenched vacuum hose toward her torso. The machine clattered on the cement.

There wasn't silence. There was never silence on a farm. The background pulse of the pump overarched the quiet between the two people in the milking parlor. Holly looked up to see Mason looking at her, eyes cold. The structure of the milking machines had a certain level of resiliency, but could still crack on the cement if enough force was applied. Her idleness and clumsiness could become costly.

Holly turned her eyes downward again, toward the machine that lay cast upon the floor. Bending to pick it up, the tears she'd been stopping let go. At first, Mason let his girlfriend cry without any touches of comfort. There wasn't any need for it as far as he could tell. She needed to buck up. He reached for the machine, eyes to the back of his head at just how childish Holly was being. Her hand was there first. Tears still in her eyes, she glared at him, full to the brim with defiance. Positive attitude: she'd get this done.

It was only when the cow scraped her foot the length of Holly's arm that Mason finally took pity on her.

She was a mess of swears and shit, but Mason enveloped her with his body. Slight arms struggled; trapped against his chest, there wasn't far for them to move. She still wasn't going to give into his comfort. In response, he held her tighter. In Mason's mind, it was reassurance that she was okay, everything was fine. Unfortunately, he was able to

understand how Holly viewed his actions. To her, it was easing her acceptance of failure. She choked out a breath in response.

Behind the pair, a soft *merr* prodded its way to their ears. The newest addition to the herd looked in on the scene, not understanding what had occurred. She poked her head through the cows' doorway to the parlor, inspecting. It had been only a week since she came to the farm. There was still so much she didn't know. Placide heard the commotion and wanted to know. Her eyes weren't large like Jersey's, but there was something in their soft, brown hues that steadied Holly. The cow stretched her nose toward the woman, expecting a friendly hand.

Holly forced herself from Mason's grip. She would not allow herself dependence on another person. This far in her life, she relied on herself. She ran toward the cow. There was something entirely comforting in wrapping her arms around Placide's face. To Mason, there was something entirely unsettling in his girlfriend not thinking to look back toward him. She only knew the cow because of him. Naught a word of thanks had ever been given.

III.

The noise coming from the back pen of the barn was low and quiet, but it said all it needed to. Night sky overtook the day with an array of colors splashing through the windows. The dust within the barn swirled in the beams of light casting themselves upon the cow stretched out on the barn floor. With every swish of her tail, she unsettled the dust, sending it into new patterns.

Two people flanked the cow. One, a young lady, was at her head. The hand of the woman moved automatically, stroking the long face of the cow, fingers tracing where white met black. Her mind elsewhere. Her eyes were directed toward the frosted planks of the wall in front of her. Cold weather already found itself settled happily, much to others' dismay.

The cow picked her head off the ground. Bellows from the other cows inquired about Placide's progress in calving. Her response was strained as she swung her head around to check on her back end, where Mason was helping her along. Third time is supposed to be the charm, but Placide was having difficulty.

"Rox, how are you holding up?" Mason asked the woman at Placide's head.

She blinked at being addressed, shifting her attention from the wall to her boyfriend. It was all new territory to her. A new frontier. Horse farms were one thing, but a dairy was a whole other beast. Suburban living shielded Roxanne from anything too heavily agriculturally related. Dressage horses were not livestock, that was perfectly clear. Meticulously trimmed hedges and white-picketed yards were what she was used to. And the stable she boarded *Revolutionary Bronze* at was one of those high moneyed

places. It was a far cry from M.R.W. Farm. All her familiarity was replaced by barbed wire and rows of corn. The businesses she was used to, located just outside the city, were replaced by a business foreign to her. A month into the relationship and she was already viewing a birth.

“This isn’t about me,” she replied, hand tensing on the bridge of the cow’s nose, “Placide just needs to be okay.”

There was something in the way Roxanne spoke that struck Mason’s heart. Sometimes calves needed to be pulled. It didn’t always mean something serious. Not all ends were bad ends. On occasion, the calf was a little too big for the cow. This was the case with Placide. Mason explained that to Roxanne, and then reassured her with a hug. She had experience with animals, alright. With her champion dressage *gelding*. No worries about birth there.

Her care for the well-being of the cows, each individual bovine, reminded Mason so much of Holly. He thought of the herd as a whole; both Holly and Roxanne thought of the parts. With Holly, Mason never appreciated that way of thinking. Like he had never appreciated her up-beat approach to life. Or even just appreciated *her*, a person.

Disturbing his reveries was the matter at hand. Placide let her stress known with another bellow, louder than the last. More contractions shuddered across her hindquarters. Mason pulled the chains attached to the calves front legs in time with the mother.

In twenty minutes, the calf was on the ground, hunkered down in a nest of straw. Placide stood to inspect the new life from her womb. The calf was wet from the amniotic

fluid, the placenta draped over its haunches. Colored patches of fur, the non-white, were dark and concentrated on the face and neck, then radiated across the rest of the body. A typical specimen of a Holstein. Placide immediately began licking the calf dry. Holly had been disgusted by the bovine method of cleaning away birthing fluids.

“What is it?” Roxanne leaned close, but kept a distance from the mother, “Colt or filly?”

It took some convincing, but Roxanne finally moved closer to the calf. For all her life, she’d seen videos of how protective a new mother was. She wasn’t about to risk angering a cow. An upset horse, she said, was dangerous enough, and they were *refined* creatures. If anything, this behavior was bemusing to Mason. Quirky. He lifted one of the calf’s back legs.

“It’s not *colt* or *filly*. You’ve got the wrong species,” Mason said, and pointed between the legs, “You see those four little things there, like fingers? A bull would have a sack in place of those.”

Roxanne’s eyebrows knit together for a second. Confusion was plain on her face. Placide took a second to look up from her job of licking the calf. She stared straight at Roxanne and blinked. The woman returned the puzzled look. A moment passed.

“Oh! It’s a girl?” she smiled, “It’s a *heifer*. Great!”

She pushed her hands on her knees to stand. Hands on her hips Roxanne looked down proudly at the pair. The heifer calf stretched her front legs out in front of her. Next, she splayed her hind legs out underneath. She was standing, just briefly, and then collapsed back onto the straw. Placide ran her tongue behind her miniature’s poll in comfort and congratulations.

Roxanne's face changed, emotions showing the excitement at the calf's triumph. Mason's new girlfriend was enthralled. This sort of event was what kept a person farming, or made them decide to accept it as a part of themselves. He knew what kind of attachment could grow to an animal. Mason was all too aware how a calf could mean so much to a person. He had seen how Placide affected Holly, almost creating a dependent relationship between the two. Each leaning on the other. However, the only thing Holly wanted from Mason was independence.

When Holly claimed that freedom for herself, the cow bellowed and looked forlorn for weeks after. Holly looked back. Not that day, but a month following, after not speaking for so long. Another bad news phone call from his then girlfriend. She asked not about his own health, but about the health of the cow. Had she been preg-checked yet? When was she due to calve? Holly no longer cared for him, just the cow. All that still tied her down, and to Mason, was her love for Placide.

"She's yours," Mason's voice cracked.

In the months following the break-up, he realized much and vowed to change it. Promised himself the same mistakes wouldn't be repeated in the future. He'd been oblivious. He wouldn't be unfairly hard the next time, *this* time. He would find the time for *them*, not just *him*. Those were all Holly's list of grievances. So far, with Roxanne, he was keeping true to his claim.

"Name her, and she's yours."

It was a minute before Roxanne spoke. She stared at Mason, unmoving and unspeaking. Was it too soon for such important relationship milestones? The sun had long since set. The barn was dark, save for the dull illuminations of a few lights. Before

that moment, Mason had done nothing to show a sense of long-term commitment. This changed things.

After agonizing seconds, *finally*, she smiled and rushed forth with many strung-together *Thank you*s. There were rules to name Holsteins, which Mason explained. Little self-debating before Roxanne settled on a name: *Perrine*.

Words of gift-giving said with intent.

Placide ignored Mason and Roxanne as they hugged. She had eyes only for Perrine. The little calf was finally drying off. Cold November weather couldn't stop a mother's attentiveness. No longer covered in birth fluid, the dark patches were lightening in color. Perrine was no longer a supposed black and white Holstein. The world was no longer black and white. There was a little bit of red showing through.

IV.

It was the close of a perfect day. Excellent to be on open fields in the cab of a tractor, with Roxanne perched on the wheel-well. Acres of cut-down hay would dry in the fields by the next afternoon. Bursts of sun-color made their last spread across the land. It was summer again. June. A year to the day that Mason owned Placide. Now he had the makings of his best cow family.

Already Roxanne had gone home. She had a crucial presentation the next morning. Mason was going to do everything in his power to be there. It was just as important to him. The choice to leave after lunch had been given, but she wanted to stay through milking. After all, it had been a great day. Why let it end so soon? Just maybe, she asked, he'd teach her to drive a tractor, now that he already had taught her to change her car oil. There was so much Roxanne was willing and genuinely wanted to learn. He knew then that *he* was the cause of this happiness. And, he was certain, Roxanne was the cause of his own.

As Mason settled into his nightly, post-milking routines, he couldn't help but remember a time when life wasn't going his way. When everything angered him, whether it was good news or bad. One day in particular struck him as the worst of any.

Never before in a single milking had Mason been kicked so many times. A week prior, to the day, he received a few quick ones. He brushed it off. As each day passed, the number increased exponentially. It was his own damn fault. Tearing through the barn, not giving the slightest tender look to a cow. It used to be he'd slowly take the machine off a cow. Certain levels of satisfaction came from ripping it off and seeing the cow's shock.

What was he so mad at anyway? Sure, he and Holly were over. Inconsequential. The cows hadn't done anything to harm him. Through everything, they were still there for him. They didn't play a role in the end of their relationship.

Or maybe the herd did. She never understood what it meant to farm. Holly was always caught up on the wrong things. She never would have been able to accept it. If it weren't for the cows, she would have accepted him.

Good riddance to her then. The cows were a part of who he was. This farm had been in his family for three generations. He couldn't let all that history go to waste. When his father met his mother, she readily threw herself into the farm. Mason's mother had a little more livestock experience than Holly, but nothing comparable to a dairy farm. Holly just wasn't as dedicated, apparently.

She could never get the hang of the farm chores, anyway. It was just one let down after another. She didn't get the cows had to come first, even if it was her birthday. He couldn't run away from the farm just for special occasions. Besides, hadn't she adopted the ideal *The cows still needed to be milked?*

And what business did she have bringing up his past mistakes, *again*, on the phone when they broke up. More than once it was discussed in person. It wasn't necessary to do again. That had been months ago.

She *had* been there, though. Always asking questions. Trying to learn how the farm was run. Looking up answers to questions Mason couldn't answer to her satisfaction. Her job was all office work, but she spent all her spare time in the barns. Milking cows, cleaning stalls, throwing hay. Anything needing to be done, she volunteered for. Hell, she even pulled a calf when he wasn't around.

The effort wasn't enough. For more than one incident, she abandoned him with work to be done so she could have a girls' night. She'd taken off for three days to visit her cousin who had given birth for the first time. No one makes such a fuss when a calf

was born. Then there was the ultimate desertion. Leaving him, without a word, for two weeks, only to end the relationship over the phone. What cowardice.

There was no point in fighting for the relationship when Holly decided to call it quits. No matter how hard she tried, she always would fall short of his expectations. That was not what he needed for a farm wife. Of course, he had considered marrying Holly. As much as they joked about it, all his buddies told him if he was smart, he'd knock her up and put a ring on her finger. In that order. In turn, he'd joke about matrimony with Holly. Her reaction always troubled him. It was obvious when she'd tense, looking like she was always about to flee. She wasn't ready for such commitment to a person, to a lifestyle.

A year of memories he was still holding onto ended a week prior. Life wasn't any easier. It was harder. He missed that little bit of extra help he didn't have to pay. And every time he saw that damn cow, what's-her-name, Placide, it was a new pang to his chest. Sure, Mason told Holly the cow was hers. He let her pick out the bull Placide was bred to. He even taught Holly how to artificially inseminate a cow. Holly hadn't been too pleased with what that entailed. Each life path the cow took, Holly decided it. Free of any burdens and encouraged with advice, supplemented with research.

As if a few words, *She's yours*, were legally binding. And as if Holly would have had place to keep a cow. Her landlord wouldn't have allowed it. Clutching the cow's collar and weeping into her neck did nothing. Holly's good-bye to the cow was more tear-stained than her one with Mason.

The two hadn't spoken at all yet, not since Holly stopped by that afternoon to gather her things. Mason was sure Holly missed Placide more than she missed him. The

cow wasn't Holly's though. She never was. Not really. Ownership was placed in Mason's hand all along. Placide was his to do with as he pleased and always had been. Anything he wanted could have overridden Holly's wishes for the cow. If Placide hadn't been bred, he would have put her on the truck the day following the break-up. Holly wanted independence? He could sever the last rope connecting them. In three months, the cow would calve. Mason would milk the freshness off her, then Placide would be gone. They last of Holly's memories would be gone.

Now, in retrospect, he had taken everything out of proportion. Although Mason may have felt, at the time, life wouldn't get better, it certainly did. Maybe Holly's can-do attitude was revealing itself in him.

Obviously, he hadn't sent Placide away on a trailer to be ground into hamburger like he had planned all those months ago. More than almost anything, he was thankful he didn't go through with that decision. And not just because she was making over one-hundred pounds of milk a day; she was his top producing cow. No. Placide had given him Perrine. In turn, Perrine solidified his relationship with Roxanne. That was something to be thankful for.

His friends joked Roxanne was Holly, but version number two. New and improved, they said. Before, Mason went along with these jokes. They were funny then, but not anymore. There were similarities, but Roxanne was different. She didn't want

freedom and independence out of life. She wanted to form a partnership; two people discovering the world together. Holly hadn't wanted to be tied down, and she told him so.

In a couple of days, Mason was going to teach Roxanne how to halter-break Perrine. A couple of years had passed since Mason was too old to be in 4-H, and a few years less since he'd brought any cows to the agricultural fairs. Roxanne would get a kick out of that. He knew she would. Judging by her dam, the little heifer would excel. Mason would break Roxanne of her show horse patterns given enough time. Already, she had moved *Revolutionary Bronze* from the fancy boarding stable to the back pasture at M.R.W. Farm.

Drifting off to sleep in his recliner, the phone rang. Neon green glowed the answer of who it was calling. He smiled.

“Hey, Mason?”

Thoughts of*Ante*

June 6, 2009

The cows are out at
pasture. They ran and jumped, played.
Good thing; they were loud

Jun 13, 2009

The hot fire blazed
Blonde hair was singed severely.
Cut away the burnt

June 17, 2009

An isle alone.
What to bring? Who? Not a soul.
Just singular nouns.

June 22, 2009

I can be like a
wild horse. Your possession
but not always tame

July 22, 2009

Mud wrestling is
Quite hard with something ten times
Your size. I still won.

July 23, 2009

Carpe noctem. Seize
The night. You never know what
Might come of it; hope.

August 2, 2009

Reincarnation
Of free sailing pirates through
Carbon recycling.

August 12, 2009

Melted chocolate, a
Metal slinky; the content
Provides the context

September 23, 2009

Ghosts, of course, what
Else. Always paranormal,
Not mundane reason.

October 30, 2009

Love and war. All is
Fair, they say. But why bother to
Acknowledge either?

October 31, 2009

Darkness is seen as
Sinister, but dark skies show
And reach for the stars.

November 7, 2009

Frozen deer in car
Headlights die. But moose attack
And do the killing.

November 21, 2009

Repeated set of
Three. Not echoes. Purposed. Like
A signal call for help.

December 11, 2009

Closed doors, closing in.
Claustrophobia. Or a
New type of freedom.

January 6, 2010

Slip in the water
Bubbles in precarious
Places. A warm bath

January 8, 2010

Slip blissfully to
Unaware. Unconscious takes
Over. True thoughts known.

Inter/intra

April 21, 2011

The taste of salt on
Your neck, my body arched to
Yours. I remember

May 7, 2011

Eyes light up when I
Hear the news. You are the first
One I want to tell.

Waiting behind the
Blades. A green wall. Colored stars.
Blurred eyes. Just waiting.

May 8, 2011

Swiftly, silent on
Soundless wings. Talons sharp, set
To spear simple prey.

You gave me something
No other has. Desire to
Write, create. A muse.

May 9, 2011

I will not allow
Myself to wait for you. No
Point. Only pain

We could be the next
American Gothic. A
Pitchfork is needed.

May 10, 2011

Two arched necks away
From their flying vee. All they
Need is each other

Run from the future?
No. It's not as frightening
If it is with you.

May 11, 2011

Finally, right when
I give up on waiting, your
Words enter my mind.

Volleying back and
Forth. All is now in my court.
A shift in power.

May 12, 2011

Constricted feeling
'round my heart. What is this? You
Are not mine to miss.

She was nigh perfect.
Head on his chest, breath raising
Her body. Sleeping.

Moment's notice. At
A drop of a hat. Gone. Not
Returning. Leaving.

May 14, 2011

Quiet. A partridge
Mistaken for quickening
Of my heart. Forest.

Frantic searching. Lost.
Always the last place you
Look. Waves of relief.

May 15, 2011

Foreign words. No way
To understand. A smile.
Something romantic.

Gripped by the fear.
Waves crash. Foam sprays. Consuming.
At the water's edge.

Unexpected snow.
Unthought of chill. A cold wind.
Solution: shared warmth.

May 16, 2011

The black cat. Bad luck,
They say. Eyes lighting up an
Evil held within

Hustle on the street.
A rough bump from a stranger.
A familiar look.

May 17, 2011

She didn't know what
It was that drew her to him.
Summer sun. The heat.

May 19, 2011

Rain for five days. More
Expected. Biblical floods.
Coffee brings smiles.

It isn't even
about the physical want.
You make me happy.

May 20, 2011

You don't forget. It
Is just like riding a bike.
Well, I forgot how.

She looked like she was
Tired. Waiting for something
That wouldn't happen.

Words from my mind to
the page. Created like a
puzzle. The pieces.

May 21, 2011

Memorize the planes
Of your back, caresses from
Tips of my fingers

When will I admit,
Commit to words, announce with
Voice, my love for you?

May 22, 2011

Spoken words trip me
Up. Stumble on uneven
Ground. But written words

It looked on in
Silent reverence. Always
Eternal watcher

All those things every
One of us want before our
Time is up. Do we?

May 23, 2011

I will ignore it
For now, when asked the question:
“Oh, no. Simply friends.”

Do you ever think,
Wonder, “What if it’s over
Tomorrow?” Why wait?

May 25, 2011

Running toward or
Away? Chasing or being
Chased. Awake asudden.

You lured me in
To a branch, but if you don’t
Act, I’ll fly away.

May 26, 2011

Your words won't ensnare
My wings again. I flew from
you. I won't be caught.

May 30, 2011

Right on that sharp edge
Of giving up. Something pulls
Me from that ledge.

June 2, 2011

I could jump off the
Edge and know I won't fall.
These wings will catch me.

June 7, 2011

Lean in close. I want
To brush my lips 'gainst your ears.
Breath speaking secrets.

Don't only give me
Memories. They are the past.
Give present, future.

True love? Knowing no
Wait is too long. Nothing will
Deter me from you.

June 21, 2011

With coffee, I can
Do anything. I feel the
Same when I'm with you.

June 29, 2011

I'll wait – Until walls
crumble, cities sink into
the sea – just for you.

July 10, 2011

Unsmiling months you
Changed. That's why your power could
Take it away again.

July 13, 2011

I love the feeling
I get from being in love
With someone like you.

Rain falling gently
On the fold – think of sweaters
That do not, can't shrink.

August 1, 2011

“You don’t have to wait.”
My obligations aren’t to
You, but to my heart.

Post

September 2, 2011

A flash in the pan
Of wanting. It’s good news. But
I can’t anymore.

September 7, 2011

I’m not figuring
This out on my own. I still
Have your memories.

September 19, 2011

A feverous night
Spent alone. Caused by you and
Memory remnants.

September 28, 2011

Fluttering stomach
California condors
All from just a wave.

A symbol of death
Found at every turn in the
Road. It's partridges.

Waiting and hoping.
Something never to come. That
Won't be me anymore.

A fear. Afraid. Run,
Flee. Escape is foremost in
Mind. Don't. Face head on.

October 12, 2011

A substitution
For something I can't replace.
I cannot move on.

There is only one
Interruption that isn't
An interference.

November 6, 2011

Perfection shows when
-- my hand in yours – space between
Tightens and shortens.

In a year, you might
Forget me. Unless I do some
Thing memorable.

The sun rose and set
with my thoughts only focused
on what you might mean.

November 7, 2011

Say what you will of
Me. Your words can't enervate
The strength my heart bears.

I will start, and end,
The day revering the sun.
Beginning. An end.

One day you will see
What my obstinacies mean
In the depths of soul.

Pandora kept one
Item at the box-bottom.
A fool's paradise.

Give a horse to me,
But forget about kingdoms.
Nothing has the worth.

You weigh on my mind
The choices presented me
Of independence.

November 8, 2011

Hide with me in a
Fortress of blankets. Nothing,
Nothing need find us.

With the stock of that
Kalishnakov, you knocked all
Sensibility.

The strength I need it
Resist you is simply: I
Sleep better alone.

I think of what, a year
Ago, you were doing. All
before I knew you.

Talons rend the skin
Over my heart. Claws cannot
Damage what it holds.

Why? Why do I hold
To nothing? It's everything
To me. All I want.

The ocean in an
Empty shell echoes all my
Memories of you.

Dreams waver, a breeze
Of willow wishes, home
I long for with you.

November 9, 2011

Failure is okay
In life, on occasion. Learn
From experience

Biological
Clock disarmed as if it was
Ticking like a bomb

Scenarios in
My head never to exist
Or actualized.

Struggle with me through
All hardships. The night will not
Appear as so dark.

November 10, 2011

Surrounded by the
Glory of my achievements
Is but empty dust

Will you remember
The time before you truly
Conceived who I was?

I found a home with
You where I had been homeless.
Why take it from me?

Perhaps forgetting
Me is too easy a task
By my own doing.

This independence
Equates sober, exacting
Dull reality.

A few small blessings
To turn my day around from the
Dark, drear November.

Already it is
Happening. You are slipping
To someone I knew.

November 11, 2011

A simple cup of
Coffee. All the memories
I wish we could have.

Distance separates
The open fields of knowledge
Contained in my heart.

November 12, 2011

Condense air into
Something fluid, to concrete.
Wayward emotions

Serpents tempting with
Apples of worldly knowledge
Likewise I to you.

What do we learn from
fairy tales? True stories are
darker than ones told.

November 13, 2011

A kingdom of all
The light touches, a sea of
Shelves and books and stacks

Searching for answers
To unexplained protocol.
What's correct? What's wrong?

If you will, I'll do
The same. I'll hold on as if
I'll never let go

Following like a
Shadow don't forget my heart
So I know my home.

November 14, 2011

Memories with you
Like a timeline of events
I cannot forget.

O u t L o u d

Hidden within a blackened shroud
You know the words I would not say.
Don't dare have me say it out loud.

Words never before said aloud
Urged by you to arise, but nay,
Don't dare have me say it out loud.

Discrediting comments that plowed
Sentiments I didn't convey
Hidden within a blackened shroud.

Memories in my disavowed
Infrared heart 'neath skies of gray
Don't dare have me say it out loud.

A stubborn ass, a high horse proud;
I'll forgive you, *myself*, one day.
Hidden within a blackened shroud,
Don't dare have me say it out loud.

Resting Potential

X X X X

It is a cold night in Citra. A temperature that penetrates to the core of the earth and through to your bones. Dark radiates from the light of windows. You can see into the homes. The images you see vary on the same pattern.

Maybe you look into the kitchen. A couple stands at a cast-iron stove. Soup bowls in hand, ladling out their suppers.

Or, perhaps, you see a sitting room. A mother in front of her hearth. Her hands are busy at work, knitting a blanket for the child she is expecting.

Going further you might see a bedroom. It belongs to a child preparing for a night of sleep. Parents of the child tuck her in a heap of blankets. Book in hand, they read until her eyes close.

But window-light isn't the only cause of illumination. High on a hill, a fire burns. Not large, but enough to keep two people warm. From nearby shadows, you see that's the

exact number warming their hands. The smell of citrus floats on the air. As you walk closer, you see the pair are father and daughter. The father sits on a crate. On the side of the crate is a painted orange.

He stands to pull out two round objects from the crate. The smell of citrus intensifies when the father throws the peel on the fire and hands the orange to his daughter.

X X X X

A traveler, walking west, traversing through forest paths, would miss Remei. Quick movements, a flash of light between the trees catches a weather-worn eye. To the right, the south, there is what would not be considered a city under normal circumstances. No people walk the cliff jutting several yards out from the edge. There are no places of residence or business. Signs that point toward the existence of a civilization do not exist. Save one.

At the far end of the cliff is what can be assumed to be a monument. Shaped from the same black rocks of the ground, smooth and spherical. Dirtied hands once brushed against the stone. Gentle strokes that left only the lightest layer of brown. No way to tell how long ago fingertips ran over the monument or for what purpose. Only remains of proof that someone once observed.

Nothing on or around the sphere gives any indication of its purpose.

The traveling happening upon Remei might stop to stare at this wonder. They would trace the stone like so many before them with their eyes to ascertain its existence. When nothing resulted of their observances, they would turn their back. Completely missing the flight of a wild turkey as it passed before the sphere at the end of the cliff.

X X X X

Nothing in your surroundings suggests civilization, but your heart fills with feelings of charity. Something hints at a presence. Unseen, someone is welcoming you to Artemisia.

Without a guide, you take your time in touring the city. The buildings are narrow, tall, and covered in a rough brown substance. Roofs, broad and green, touch at edges and corners. If it weren't for the certainty of concrete, you would assume Artemisia is a forest of never changing trees.

You cannot find a door on the buildings. There is no way to enter them to discover what secrets are hidden within. Are they homes or businesses? Flat, chipped concrete crunches under your feet. Simple sounds float on the air, but you cannot feel a breeze. Life is still.

There was once a purpose for your arrival in Artemisia. It called to you with intent. The scenery has sidetracked you, made you forget. Trees made of concrete have distracted you. A lack of people isn't troubling. It's a comfort. All the time is yours to spend as you will without consequence. Responsibilities are few, save for your own safety.

Caught off guard, the only living thing in Artemisia startles you.

X X X X

Approaching Domatia, it looks like a solitary house. A roof, two dormers, four tall windows on each of the two floors. When coming in closer, you see this building is comprised of hundreds of miniatures of the larger view. To enter Domatia is to enter a house. Each the same. Each a part of something larger. It makes you long for your own comforts, but those will never be attained in Domatia.

The day passes in half hours, each an exploration of a house. There are no people you have found, yet. An empty city. No person to keep up the management of the spotless counters and furniture. Inside of the houses are identical and bare.

As night finally blankets colors of the day, you expect a mass arrival of families. People returning after a hard day's labor from away. You still have one house you haven't entered, yet.

It makes up the doorknob of the larger house, the whole of Domatia. In an instant you know it is not merely a house. It is a home. It has dirt, it has mess. It has been lived in.

You follow the dirt footsteps from the front door, past the foyer, to the kitchen. Smells of fresh baked cookies wafts in the air. Next to a large stack of plates stands a woman. She turns to you and smiles.

X X X X

The only way for travelers to approach Bia is by water. On the edge of a lake, the rest of the city is surrounded by impassable mountains. It is a city built by fishermen who crashed upon the rocky beach in a storm. They left their homes on the opposite shore, expecting a fine day of fishing. Instead, they found themselves stranded.

When you first reach Bia, you notice how divided it is. An upper level atop sheer cliffs and a lower level sloping gently to the water. The people of lower Bia pay no mind to what lays above them in Upper Bia. Their lives are carried on as normal.

Living near the lake, much of their livelihood depends on what can be done with the water. Lower Bia survives. Water wheels provide them with clean water and energy from the river that feeds into the larger body. The people, in turn, feed from the lake. A collection of docks house the boats of the fishermen, decedents of the very first. A fish market isn't needed because the fish is plentiful.

And so life carries on for Lower Bia with little concern for the rocky ledges that loom over. However, every so often there will be a young woman that weeps by the one section where the cliffs can be ascended. It is not always the same woman. They change places, each mourning a different man that has gone to face the challenges that wait in Upper Bia. New women join the ranks of the mourners periodically as their men disappear above the cliffs into that unknown territory. No man has ever returned.

In fact, as you enter the city, gazing at the water wheels and the fishermen as they cast their lines, a woman is begging her lover not to leave. But you don't notice. No one notices the hearts breaking.

X X X X

It is by pure accident that you stumble upon Aura. Though stumble isn't the most fitting word. Ground, which was seemingly upturned, likely by some passing creature, gives way to a drop. It is only moments blind in darkness before you hit a new level of earth. A dusting of loose dirt above a layer of compact. Lights surround and focus.

An unseen voice booms from above. Turning about, frantic heart pounding, you search for something. Sight is distorted from the artificial sun blaring down. All around you is shadows. Although your vision is handicapped, you believe you are at the center of an arena of Aura.

The voice blanketed everything. Something intangible radiates over the area and vibrates in your body. Numbers, steadily increasing in worth, are called out. The prices attributed to an unknown. People in the seating surrounding, merely silhouettes in your eyes, flag and the number announced by the voice goes up the next increment.

Balance and sureness return enough for you to rise to your feet. The arena, an open enough space, closes in around you. Walls of dark figures appear far too near. The speed of the voice is slowing down. Unseen pressure on your shoulders forces your knees to the dirt again. Dirt that cuts your knees and Aura is a part of your blood. As your blood is a part of the civilization.

The summer storm, the voice, hammering down upon your back slows and lightens to a gentle rain. A few more words, a few more raised hands of the lookers-on. The rain has passed and you, still on your knees, are carried away in chains.

X X X X

Most people never find Branta. You stumble upon it by pure accident. Crashing through dense woods, the trees open up to a wide expanse of field. To the east, a wide river ends in a waterfall, but your eyes do not focus on the mists rising. Tall grasses circle around a clearing, where glistening skinned women dance upon the banks of the river. They appear to be the only citizens of Branta.

Few other people watch the dancers, all visitors to this feminine city. Something reminds you of a bird. Veils of black around their heads, covering their graceful necks. Brown dresses flapping around their backs. White exposed where the fabrics don't cover their bodies.

You stand at the edge of the clearing, observing how each of the four dancers, while dressed the same, has something that sets her apart. It might be the chain tightening around her arched neck as she dances, trying to pull toward freedom. Or it might be the cage constricting her escape. Perhaps it is the way her movement doesn't express what is in her soul, due to bandaged arms. Or the way the final dancer's feet barely touch the ground, emulating flight.

There are no buildings, just the field, the trees, the waterfall. The other travelers begin to leave, but some force holds you. Shadows stretch across, overcome the women as they gather dinner from shafts of oats. Their dances have ended for the night.

As you turn your back on Branta to leave, the dancing women are no longer women. Their arms fold into the wings, the fabrics covering their bodies transform into

the feathers of the birds they were imitating. Each still bearing the restraints of their human forms.

X X X X

H y b r i d*One*

There *were* amniotic fluids, and there was a placenta. But there were no contractions, no guttural moans, no flesh stretching and tearing. With the announcement of *It's a boy*, no cigars were passed around. No celebration was to be had. How could it, a he, be born? He didn't emerge from a womb or an egg.

Instead, there was a tank filled with viscous fluid and a metallic tube masquerading as an umbilical cord. An emulation of femininity, but removed from the body and sterile. Simply *in vitro*. A glass house.

The glass container was emptied and removed from its base. At its floor was the creature, limp in its attempts to stand. His link to nutrition was severed, faux-maternal plasma drained from his lungs, and he was dried off. There was wanting and desires in his form.

The first meal, what he longed for, was served shortly after the “birth;” dairy cow colostrum, the best money could appropriate. Fed from a bottle, but without accompanying motherly warmth. The small grey mass of mohair was quite content. He knew no different.

Fingers scurried across keyboards, typing out the details of the procedure. For posterity, for future repeats. All of these identical files were titled one thing: 8 – 15.

Two

As in life, change happens. A grey ball of hair could, and did, transform. Black stripes pushed their way through the grey mohair as the strange creature matured. The darkened streaks found themselves encircling its eyes, leading down to its black nose. A matching pair raced down its back, a short distance from shoulders to haunches. Dark roads leading to the same goal, but distanced, never to connect. Although he didn't understand why the new alterations appeared. A quick look and a startled fall. One day, he simply noticed them. No cause or reason.

Another thing continued to baffle him. Daily, he was prodded. Those doing the pokes and jabs repeated the word *tests*. Absolutely necessary. No matter what the beast did to avoid the grabbing paws, they found it by the end. The paws would take him out of his cave, proceed with their *tests* and replace him where he never wanted to leave.

Steel bars fenced him in. There was no hope for escape, but there was also nowhere for him to go. So there he lived. Alone, with no comfort from the spindly paws or the bodies attached to them. It was not deserving of such affection.

There were others. They had paws, but weren't the same as those doing *tests*. From afar, they only watched. Sometimes, they would come up close and look at him. The *test*-runners called him 8 – 15 and called the others *guards*. The guards, though, they identified him as something else entirely. At first, it was confused.

It bore some weight, the name; that was another thing he didn't understand why. Other than it being said in reference to him, he had no other knowledge of it. But he liked the guards. They never touched him at all. Still, no contact was better than *tests*. Deep in the annals of his mind, he knew he was missing something from his life. A figure of care and warmth. He was quickly growing to an age where that didn't matter any way. At the same time, the guards represented what he was lacking. Which is why he liked the name they had given him. The *test*-runners disapproved; the guards called those *scientists*.

Many words of their babblings, he didn't comprehend. Slowly he was learning the most repeated, the important. Tests, guards, scientists, weight, progress, growth, hybrid. How much more was he going to have to understand? Of course, there was the name, he had learned what everyone addressed each other as was a *name*, the guards gave him: *Ruger*. Why did it seem to mean so much more than he was?

The scientists mostly just called him hybrid. This was different than a name, it was a description. Words didn't make their meanings known immediately to him. Just like his food receptacle, *Ruger*, he much preferred thinking of himself as *Ruger*, had to work at them. He had a lot of time to think. Often, he wondered about what sounds came from the scientists' mouths. At the heart of things, he didn't know what a hybrid was, except he was one.

At six months old, *Ruger* had grown a lot, but there was still a lot of growing to do.

Three

What Ruger hadn't known, those seven months prior, was what the tests the scientists performed were for. As in life, they served a specific purpose. Progress and growth were of key importance for the scientists. Deadlines were to be met and without Ruger meeting expected rates, the deadlines would pass them all by.

All of this was of little concern for the hybrid. Extra food rations merely meant a fuller stomach with shorter intervals of hunger. It was a happy time in his short little existence. But it would not last for long.

Once Ruger's reports met certain specifications, someone new entered his life. Someone there were not yet any words to describe. It looked similar to the scientists and the guards, but older and slower. Its walk wasn't quite as it should have been. The left leg dragged across the floor as it approached Ruger's cave. *I wonder*, thought Ruger.

In that moment, he found he had a voice.

"I wonder," growled out of his mouth, soft and true.

It came as a shock to all around, Ruger included. Before, yes, he made noise. Small *mews* of a youth, but this, this was a language. The guards and scientists looked on in surprise. Never before had 8 – 15 sounded so sure and steady. The newcomer narrowed his eyes and limped forward.

"I wonder," Ruger growled to himself, "What's this one? Guard or scientist?"

That day, the hybrid would learn the newcomer was neither of these things. He watched as the one with the limp was circled around to the old-doers, ones who were there from the start. It was introduced to each of the others as *Lieutenant Ronald Twigger*. The string of words held no meaning for Ruger. That was its name, but what did it do?

It felt great to Ruger to have finally found his ability to speak. All he wanted to do was a continuous stream of words. It was new, it was exciting. Forming words was even better than the rare times a guard would slip him a piece of something edible, but not from his strict dietary measures.

“I wonder what it does?”

In his life, Ruger had two categories for the moving beings that were not him. Scientists: they ran tests, poked and prodded him, looked very stern, and tracked his progress. Guards: Ruger wasn't sure what they did, but mostly they just looked on without active participation; he liked them far better than the scientists. So how did this newcomer fall into these two groups?

As the sounds rumbled across his vocal cords, the newcomer came closer. One of the guards, the one that was always extra attentive to Ruger, came forward too. He watched the pair, anxious to learn more and say more. With his own words, maybe now he could finally communicate.

The latch at the top of the steel bars clicked open. Paws of the newcomer lowered down to Ruger's scruff at the back of his neck. Raised high in the air, then set on the slippery floor outside of his cave, his comfort. This newcomer wasn't as gentle. Not that Ruger was delicate. He had strength to spare, but it was caught up in gangly limbs and a

body not proportioned right just yet. Too long limbs tangled when Ruger's body collided with the floor.

A string of words undulated from the newcomer's mouth. Simple ones, Ruger smoothed out, but many he didn't know. All he could decipher was the disapproving tone used. The interested guard moved his paws and non-walking legs as if to explain. Even one of the scientists advanced into the defense. Again by the scruff, the newcomer shook Ruger upward, back onto his feet.

New monitors, ones that weren't temporary, hooked up and were attached to Ruger. Fur was shaved to get the closest fit, the most accurate readings. New tests. What was being measured now? Lieutenant Ronald Twigger might have been a different kind of scientist with this apparatus it hooked up to Ruger. It was behaving in much the same way. Attach something to him and then let him go about his business. Usually, he was in his cave. The newcomer left him out on the slippery floor and stepped away.

Firsts didn't happen every day. Not for Ruger. Never before had he been allowed to roam outside of his enclosed cave without some sort of leash. There was a whole outside world to explore. It loomed before him. Intimidating, but calling to him. Anywhere, he could go wherever he pleased. Imperfect eyesight prevented him from seeing the edges of his real-life map before that moment. Now nothing could stop him. Devices for monitoring could impede him, but they couldn't prevent him.

Without warning, he was on the floor again. Lieutenant Ronal Twigger had taken its bad leg and slid Ruger's back legs out from under him. Completely absent of any reason Ruger could imagine. As soon as the hybrid got his legs situated, the human did it again. Again and again this happened.

There was no time like the present to explore his surroundings. *And* to escape the monotonous efforts of the newcomer to introduce Ruger to the floor. After repeated attempts, the seventh time Lieutenant Ronald Twigger brushed his leg across the tiles, Ruger darted forward, out of the way. Briefly, he twisted his head around. As he continued to run, he heard the word he was waiting for; the description to match to the crippled newcomer. *Training.*

Four

By this point, Ruger formed his whole vocabulary. In addition, he understood much of the *humans*’, as he learned they were called, language. However, the humans neglected to absorb the knowledge of his. This was wholly unsatisfying as he had so much he wished to tell them. And they were ignorant of his pleas.

A *trainer*, that’s what Lieutenant Ronald Twigger was. A something widely different than a *scientist* or a *guard*. In the past year, Ruger learned what that meant. Hard, active, rigorous movement, constantly until each exercise was perfected. His top speeds were upward of twenty-five miles per hour. Not spectacular in comparison to the animal world Ruger didn’t know about. For a hybrid, an entirely new species, who really knew what to expect. The fastest speed he achieved, twenty-seven miles per hour, had pushed him to a collapse. Fifteen minutes of rest and the trainer had him back at it. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

There were the speed tests, of course. Augmenting those were the endurance tests; how long, how fast, how far. Weight pulls. Reflexes. Precision. Mostly he was trained with defensive maneuvers. One scientist told another, Ruger wasn’t meant for the attack. He was designed to survive. To relay information. A modern day carrier pigeon.

All of that over the course of a year. Now, Ruger had passed yet another benchmark. Another check-off for progress and improvement.

The trainer sat in a chair a couple of feet from Ruger's cave. In one hand he held a peculiar clamp, in the other was a tiny square. The two objects most decidedly had something to do with the other. Ruger had learned *lieutenant* was a title, not another portion of the trainer's name. It signified a rank of importance that the others didn't have. The lieutenant set the square, a reflective piece of metal it seemed, between two sharp prongs on the clamp. The attentive guard, always the most interested in the going-ons of the scientists, looked on from a close distance.

"What's that for?" it asked.

Before explaining, Twigger, as everyone called the trainer, waited for the guard, Shep, to step closer. Ruger could see the lieutenant didn't quite trust Shep. He could smell it in the air. Something about the guard made Twigger on edge.

"Once it was believed everyone was going to get a microchip similar to this," Twigger said, and held the item, the *microchip*, up to the light. "It was all the rage to put them in pets in case they wandered off. If eight-dash-fifteen wanders too far of the course of his missions, the microchip will apply a mild stimulus to set him back on track."

The microchip was reinserted into the clamp. A few slight movements set it just so, aligning it where it needed to be.

"Eight-dash-fifteen's purpose is to acquire information we're not already privy to and have a difficult time acquiring by other means," the lieutenant continued, "Inside the microchip is a small camera that is linked to a United States intelligence satellite. From there, the information is sent to a base, where it will be reviewed."

The limp in Twigger's step was something Ruger noticed the trainer always tried to hide and consistently failed at hiding. Weakness, Ruger was learning, was not a good

thing. It meant vulnerability. These training exercises were attempts to rid the hybrid of any weakness.

“Would you bring eight-dash-fifteen to me?” Twigger asked of Shep.

It was uncommon for the guards to interact with him, save staring at him, which they did frequently. In fact, this was the first time anyone in charge permitted a guard to touch Ruger. They were supposed to look only. Maybe Ruger wasn't the only one Twigger was training.

Once Ruger was placed on the stainless work table, Twigger motioned for Shep to stay and hold the hybrid down. Never disobey handlers. Never struggle with those not posing a threat. These were dogmas Twigger instilled. Ruger had no reason to fear violence from either two. Still, something was out of the ordinary and Ruger wasn't pleased.

In one fluid movement, the clamp closed down. Without warning, without preparation. Sharp prongs pierced skin and when they exited, were empty of the microchip that was once there. Fur all along Ruger's back stood on end. The struggle to escape the pain was futile; Shep held him to the table. Shaking his head did nothing. The sharp pangs didn't go away. A stinging sensation remained targeted between his eyes. Blood trickled, following the contours of his face, to the corner of his eye. It stung and blurred his vision. With a paw, trying to wipe it away only smeared the grey fur with red. A new stream of blood began to flow.

A handkerchief was pulled from Twigger's pocket. It dabbed the blood away as best as it could. Ruger felt slight pressure on the bridge of his nose. A comfort that dulled

the pain. Soon, a seared hot touch burned flesh and hair. The blood flow stopped and Ruger continued to squirm.

Five

At the age of two years, and then some, Ruger's life fell into a set pattern. A mixture of sleeping, eating, and training. Every day was a variation of these three. He never left the four walls that contained him beyond his cave. From the light streaming in from clouded windows, there had to be another world. Something more than concrete barriers. The humans all went somewhere at the close of the day. He was never completely abandoned, but the exodus made him wonder where they all went.

It wasn't a good day for Ruger. On a large scale, nothing was different. There were no shifts in the stars. His stomach felt like it never had before. And in the process of excretion, not all was as it should have been. Looking at what should have been pellets, he saw a softer replacement.

Fecal matter consistency wasn't his main concern. Sure, it was unfortunate, but Ruger was surprised to see the reaction of the scientists to this discovery. Debates broke out among them. Immediately, they began research. A dedication to attempt to get to the bottom of this anomaly.

It took until noon to sort it out. Ruger heard their discussions, heated and intense. Each wanted to place blame on someone other than themselves. For some time, they argued over whose fault it was, rather than rectifying the problem.

"No wonder they never get anything done," Ruger said to himself.

And he watched as the scientists packed up their belongings and left for their noon-time meal. Even though they found their answer, it would have to wait until after lunch. Nothing was to disrupt their schedules. Everything had an order and everything had a place. At times of meals, and late at night, it was a small crew; one guard and two scientists.

Whether the room was full or it was a skeleton crew didn't matter to Ruger. It was all the same. When his training began, it was interesting, but even that grew dull after the first three months. He was in prime shape. Improvements weren't possible anymore. He reached his maximum capacity.

Noon meals didn't last long for humans. Ruger didn't understand specific times for meals; he had free choice for most of the day. To pass time in accordance with the humans, Ruger ate a small amount when they did.

Time passed and everyone filtered back in, radiating back to their proper stations to start work up again. The scientists who were dedicated to the fecal task began arranging for acquisition of the new dietary materials.

One of the guards returned to the corner where a desk with chairs was set up. The other, the attentive one, Shep, remained motionless in the doorway. Sad and pathetic. The other guard was waiting for it to continue their game of cards.

A loud, metallic *click* sounded through the room when the thick, metal, sound-proof door closed. Others took much more care than to let it slam. Infinite silence nearly always filled the room and the door disturbed it. Everyone looked up for a few seconds. Seeing it was only Shep at the door, the workers returned to their tasks. Something still

wasn't right. Finally, Ruger knew it wasn't with him. There *was* something going on larger than his own needs.

Continuing to watch the nice guard, his every movement seemed strained. Part of Ruger's training had been to analyze actions. There was no way to track his progress on this, but Twigger felt it was important. Shep was not his regular, friendly self.

Then the guard's expression changed. Hatred. Anger. Revenge.

"For three years, you have known me as Shep Moriarty. You laughed with me. You told me stories of what your children and wives were doing at home. What they were doing without you as you slaved away under the hands of the government," Shep's voice was even and cruel, "I am not who you thought I was."

Everyone ducked as the first bullet flew through the air. The sound was deafening and the echoes that followed were just as bad. No training could have prepared Ruger for this. Every instinct urged him to flee, but he was trapped. For the first time, his cage didn't envelope him with comfort; it was a snare holding him to death. His tactile paws grasped the cold steel bars. The latch, he had watched numerous humans lift it, but it was at the top of the cage, beyond reach. He wanted to run, reach maximum speeds and get away. Far from the dangers in the room. It was no longer a desire to see the world. Ruger wanted safety.

"Why Shep?"

The words of one of the humans drew Ruger out of his frantic panic. It was one of the other guards who said it, a raspy voice through gritted teeth. A large stain was beginning to form on his chest. A smell of fresh meat pervaded the air, entering Ruger's nose. It drew him to the edge of the cage, closest he could get to the enticing aroma.

“I am Ignatius Pollington,” the once friendly guard said.

As far as Ruger could tell, the actions of the humans were fairly consistent over a stretch of time. Small daily activities changed, but as a whole they were the same. This could no longer be said of Shep, or Ignatius. The different identifier confused the hybrid, though he was called two names as well.

From his cage, Ruger watched the guard with the gun. In past training exercises, he had learned about guns, enough to know they were bad news. Flesh splattered the wall when the guard shot its brethren. Others tried to run, but few made it very far. Apparently, Ruger wasn't the only one to have honed skills of accuracy.

Some pleaded for their lives. No mercy came. Out of sight, at the back of the cage, Ruger remained silent. If he wasn't seen, he might survive. In all, his training was for that single purpose; continue living. That's all anyone in the room wanted at the moment, but it was taken forcibly from them. Bullets pierced the air. Ruger watched the face of the man who betrayed them all. In an instant, the gun fired again, and that vision was gone.

Six

Screams from down the hall reverberated inside the walls of Ruger's mind, each hit painful. In reality, the clamor was a distance away, muffled by walls and doors. But in Ruger's aching mind, they sounded directly in his ear. Every influx in pitch or volume was clear. Each time a yell faded away, the pain was worse. All voices he recognized as someone who had provided for him, cared for him, helped raise him into what he currently was. They had each spoken indifferently to him. Their voices were never saturated with the love of a parent or guardian. Now there was one overarching emotion seeping through their words. Pain.

Water dripped off Ruger's grey fur as he stood on three legs, shaky. His water bottle had been victim to a stray bullet. Its contents spilled across the floor of the cage. Pain. Ruger was having his own experience with pain. He lay in shock for some time, his fur soaking through on one side, after a bullet struck his rear leg. Little less than full amputation would have stopped him.

Dozens of times everyday Ruger watched his handlers open the cage door that was above and out of reach. His paws were just small enough to slip between the narrow bars. Just dexterous enough to undo the latch. What did it matter if he couldn't reach it? Worst yet, it looked as though everyone in the room was dead. The killer had left to maraud the remainder of the building. Ruger surveyed the room in despair.

The guard, the first one to be shot, hadn't died despite the two bullets lodged in its body. It heaved itself upright. Each movement strained the wounds, causing a new outflow of blood. There wasn't much time left. Ruger watched as it three-leg crawled over to the cage.

"Protecting you was my only job," it wheezed, "Can't do that if you're stuck in this cage. You should know what to do."

It was clear to the hybrid that all of the human's strength was going toward freeing him. Death wasn't a new concept to Ruger, but never before had it been so close. Determination saw the human through to the end of its task and equally its life. There was no time for Ruger to consider this valiant act. The door was open, but a couple of feet stood between him and freedom of the cage. Painfully, he stretched his front paws upward until he was perched on his haunches. Still out of reach. A jump that nearly blinded him with pain got him to his destination. A short drop and he was onto the floor.

He paused. Never before had Ruger been unaccompanied outside of his cage. New opportunities awaited him in every corner, every nook. Immediately, he took charge to identify a curious smell in the air. Good sense told him to continue on with his escape. Instinct told him otherwise.

It wasn't wholly unfamiliar, the smell. Comfort almost wrapped its way around his frame when he thought hard on what it could be or mean. It was almost of iron and the raw beef he was fed on weekends. Clever a beast as Ruger was, he'd learned semblances of calendars and the passage of time. This certainly wasn't a weekend.

Nose in places it had never been, Ruger thrust his head straight forward when the gun fired again. Echoes bounced in the hall and into the room. Three more times the gun

fired. Ruger gazed at his surroundings, but nothing was moving. Nothing was living anymore. When silence followed, he carried on with his olfactory search.

The smell of iron and raw meat strengthened as he neared one of the bodies. With a forepaw, he clawed at the dead researcher. Folds of the white lab coat unfurled, revealing the fatal injury. Ruger pressed his nose into the wound for accurate investigation. Scent of the bullet caused the creature to recoil. Like a cat, he licked his paw and wiped it across his face. Smears of blood streaked across his fur, but the feeling of the bullet on his nose wouldn't go away. When he re-wet his paw to make another attempt, the blood lingered in his mouth. It was an interesting taste that he quite liked.

Once more, he pressed his nose to the wound. This time, he didn't jump back upon touching the bullet. He ripped away the blood-stained shirt, then tore away a portion of flesh. Hunger hadn't been a thought in his mind. Survival was the most important instinct he had been following. In the moment he began gnawing on the flesh and bone of the dead researcher, cravings for sustenance took over. Trying the meat had been to settle his curiosity, then to settle his appetite.

A thought snuck its way into the back of Ruger's mind. A thought that wormed its way into the flesh of his brain and caused him to forgo finishing his meal. Although no one human had been particularly warm or kind to him, they had given him a home. And now, he was eating one of them. All the researches, as Ruger vaguely remembered, had created him and given him a home. They fed him, made sure he was healthy.

The piece of meat fell from Ruger's paws to the floor. As delicious and satisfying as it was, he couldn't eat something, *someone*, who had cared for him. Nothing but the soft padding of paws could be heard as Ruger bounded off toward the door, to leave

behind disaster. The door had been propped open by the arm of a researcher trying to escape. A bullet found him first. Fortune was on Ruger's side because this meant the locks hadn't trapped him in a room with no way out and no resources.

Pushing the door open even further, Ruger slipped into the hallway. It was empty, surprisingly so. It was devoid also of sound. This was all new for him. He paused a moment in awe. Most of the time, he had lived solely in a single room. Whenever he did leave for his training, he was transported in a crate with holes only for air. There had never been a way for him to get a good look at the surroundings he passed by. Until a few minutes had passed, Ruger didn't realize there wasn't anything to be in awe about. It was only a plain, grey hallway with wooden doors lining it.

Heeding every door he passed by, Ruger limped down the hall as fast as he could. At each opening, Ruger paused to listen for any movements or more gunfire. Waiting for any signs of life. Everything remained quiet. It seemed as though Ignatius Pollington had already finished his task and left. Shep Moriarty, who Ruger had known far better than the madman who replaced him, died with everyone else.

With his paws and nose, Ruger pulled open the next door in his way. Bounding up the stairs, he stopped when, distantly, he heard a vehicle's engine start. The sound faded and Ruger continued. At the top of the stairs, he pushed through another door into an office area. This room was also completely empty of the living, though it was full of cubicles. He wanted to take his time to inspect each, but iron returned to his nose.

Nose in the air, Ruger searched for the source of the smell. He found it at the entranceway of the building. On the floor, blood seeped into the carpet. An unfamiliar

human lay dead from a bullet through the throat. Ruger, leaving Evelyn behind, jumped through the broken glass of the front door and into the world.

Seven

Living on his own in the wild, far from civilization, was harder than Ruger could imagine. For a week he wandered almost dying of starvation. Never in his life had he had to search for his own food. It had always been prepared and presented to him. There was never a want in his mind before.

Instincts kicked in after the first week. Instincts and something he couldn't place. The scientists always expected so much of him and hinted at *enhanced intelligence*. Some might say the delay in instinct was from living in a cage all his life. Others might say his brain was addled. Either way, the time had finally come for Ruger to understand what he had to do in order to survive. Foremost was finding food.

A river seemed like a prime location to begin the search. If he failed at finding something edible, at least he could quench his thirst. Water flowed around rocks and the rushes. Using the claws of his forepaws, Ruger dug into the bank. The ground was dense. Progress was slow. Lines from his claws were the proof of his shallow attempts. After digging for ten minutes, the surface of the ground had barely changed. What Ruger was hoping to find, he wasn't sure.

Noise from behind made Ruger spin around. The entire time, he had left himself defenseless. He became quite aware of it when he looked to the water. Facing in his direction was a peculiar looking animal. Its fur was slicked down from swimming.

Although, Ruger didn't know of many animals aside from his reflection, the set-up of the new arrivals body was markedly strange. On its face was a bill of sorts, its tail was long and flattened, and something in it reminded him of himself, but they looked nothing alike.

“What are you doing here?” it asked, its voice old and wary, “I've not seen you, or any type like you, around here before.”

Of course, Ruger had never seen any creature like what was before him before either. Ruger had seen his own reflection in mirrors before. It would be argued the hybrid was a highly intelligent creature. By any means, Ruger didn't feel unintelligent, simply disadvantaged. Whatever his level of aptitude, he was unable to recognize himself in his reflection. But, he was aware that there was a being that existed which was grey, black, and stout.

“I'm looking for food,” Ruger finally said with difficulty, “What are you? Who are you?”

The animal gave a grunt and shifted its weight. Uncomfortable as well, Ruger matched the movements. He looked toward the horizon. Near the river was limited fertility, but further away it was primarily dirt and inedible bushes.

“I should ask you the same thing, but I can tell life's been harsh to you. Let's hope *that's* the reason you forgot your manners,” the creature said, “I'm a platypus. You can call me Zeno. In your place, I wouldn't be looking for food there, if that's what you're doing. If you ever get through the clay, you'll hit rock before too long. Come over here. There are some tubers in the ground.”

Without another word, the platypus waddled further up the bank in the direction he nodded in. Close behind, Ruger followed, nose to the ground, trying to take in every scent. Attempting to determine if he could smell the tubers before he had to start digging. When Zeno reached the motioned to spot, Ruger began digging. As the true hybrid clawed through the dirt and mud, Zeno waited patiently. Soon, Ruger pulled his head and paws out of a shallow hole. Looking pleased with himself, and covered in dirt, he first offered a tuber to Zeno. The platypus refused.

“So who are you? And let’s not forget the *what*.” Zeno said, “Where did you come from? You look to be half starved.”

Food occupied most of Ruger’s thoughts, but he noted Zeno’s questions. First, finishing at least another root was in order.

“I have two names. I like *Ruger* far better than *eight-dash-fifteen*,” he said, “It was at a big place. A building. People looked after me every day. But... When I left... Everyone was dead.”

Silence, save for the stream, covered the conversation. Life when everyone you knew was dead. There were no words for that. No way to express concern or sympathy. Thoughtfully, Zeno nosed another tuber in Ruger’s direction. It sat on the bank untouched.

“I don’t even know what I am,” Ruger said, “I really don’t know... I never thought about it. Isn’t everybody the same?”

Head lowered below his shoulders, Ruger looked at the ground. In the building, everything had a descriptor of some sort. Desk. Cage. Food. Floor. Ceiling. So on and so

on for everything. As individuals, the humans had names, but together they had a catch-all term: *human*. He wasn't like anything else he'd seen in the building.

Zeno watched Ruger carefully. If this creature had lived with humans, then he probably forgot how to take care of himself, if he ever knew in the first place. Not all was right in his unusual head. There was a time when Zeno himself had questioned his existence, but for quite different reasons.

"Ruger, if you can fit, you can stay in my burrow for a few days," Zeno said in hopes the offer would alleviate a few worries, "If you can't fit, well, we'll figure something out."

Water separated and coalesced. Small ridges of waves lapped against the banks. The platypus had slipped into the stream without a thought for anything else. Halfway across, Zeno paused. Twisting his body, he saw Ruger standing at the water's edge.

"Forgotten how to swim too, eh?" Zeno asked, "My burrow's on this far side. Swimming might be the only way to get there."

Webbed forepaws. Ruger always wondered the stretch of skin between each of his toes. Testing the water, he ran one paw beneath the surface. Resistance and a perfect scoop. He had watched Zeno. The platypus' paws were similar to his own. All he would have to do was mimic the movements of the experienced creature. Slowly, he ventured further into the water, further from the safety of solid ground.

Taken unaware, Ruger slipped in the mud. Luck wasn't with him. It wasn't shallow water he landed in. Not far from the bank was a steep drop. He began to sink. Fearing he might drown, he kicked his legs about. No order, no method. Just panic and hope for survival. More distance between him and the water's surface.

Random flailing wasn't working. After a time, a pattern started up. One leg and then another. And soon, Ruger was ascending. His head rose above the water and he managed to stay afloat. Despite his best efforts, he wasn't a strong swimmer. Safety on the bank is what he longed for. With great struggle, he returned to solid ground. Effortlessly, Zeno swam over to join him.

"I'll be fine in a minute," Ruger said, "I slipped. Surprised me, that's all."

Instincts told him he could swim. He *knew* he could swim. Even if he nearly drowned, Ruger wouldn't stop trying until he succeeded. The distance wasn't that far. A few minutes, and soon he was ready to try again. A lunge toward the water.

"Wait a second, will you?" Zeno said, "I'll swim beside you. Give you hints and the like. Make sure you don't drown."

The platypus dove in first, then water for Ruger. Water was an enemy. He had to look at it from all angles. Gather as much intelligence on it as possible. To anyone other than himself, Ruger was eying the water warily.

On a few words of encouragement, Ruger slid into the water head first, streamlining himself. Advice went on a straight path from the platypus' bill directly to Ruger's ears. Most of the words were a variation of telling Ruger to stop flailing like an animal cast in the mud. Eight-dash-fifteen barely had time to think for himself, so there certainly wasn't space for him to sink. The opposite bank drew closer and closer.

Tired and wet, nearly exhausted and soaked through, Ruger collapsed onto the bank, coating his front with mud. The slight incline was too much for him to attempt. Zeno had ideas other than resting. It was a short distance yet before they reached his

burrow. With all the strength he could muster, Ruger rose to his feet. His legs ached, but he dragged his paws and followed the platypus.

When they arrived at the burrow, Ruger instantly knew he was too large to fit. It looked like it was tight even for Zeno and Ruger had a little more heft. Despite protesting, Zeno still had Ruger try to enter. Pushing and clawing at the opening only resulted in Ruger getting stuck. It was doubly difficult for Ruger to remove himself from the hole. It took nearly half an hour's time and it was starting to get dark. At that time, Ruger kindly thanked Zeno for all of his help, but he needed to leave.

No amount of convincing would make Ruger stay. Although Zeno did try for some time. True, Ruger learned quickly, but there was much knowledge the mixed creature was missing. If only he would stay a night, preferably more, Zeno could build the foundation of Ruger's survival. Instead he had to settle for a quick run-down.

Tubers were all safe and good, but not all plants found in the wilds were eatables. Some contained toxins that would cause grave bodily harm. And if enough of that plant was eaten, even death. Zeno rattled off a list of plants to look out for and the best descriptions he could give of them. Spotted hemlock, horsebrush, lupine, bitterweed. The list went on and Ruger did his best to commit it to memory. Many plants were edible, though. Despite the long list of poisons.

Then a final warning. People, humans, may have treated Ruger kindly in the past, but not all were to be trusted. Lately, humans had been developing the surrounding land. Tearing down trees, tearing up ground. Just in the past month, many animals had died because they couldn't adapt after their homes were destroyed. Others had come close to

dying, but managed to struggle through. Under no circumstances was Ruger to believe a human he came across was going to help him.

Zeno watched Ruger leave. There was a spring in the creature's step that he hadn't observed when he first saw Ruger. Hope lightened the worries from Ruger's back. Was it enough? Would Ruger survive?

Alone, but no longer starving, Ruger moved on, his limp barely noticeable. With instincts and newly gained knowledge on his side, he just knew he was going to fair better in the wilds. Days passed and Ruger continued to learn. The vegetation that Zeno had advised him to eat was easy to find and abundant. Luckily, the plants edible for a platypus were the same for Ruger. Even more fortunate, he hadn't come across the toxic plants.

Plant matter was enough to sustain him, but there was one aspect missing in his diet. For two weeks, he hadn't eaten any meat. The last bit of protein he'd consumed was the flesh of one of the researchers. Of course, Ruger had tried to catch passing animals, but each time he was unsuccessful. Something went wrong each time. He was too clumsy, or the prey was too fast, or another predator got it first.

He was just as determined as when he had learned to swim. Since that day, he seized every opportunity to practice in the water. Now he was taking every chance to practice his skills as a hunter. In the meantime, he would continue to eat roots, and grasses, and plants. It was a bland diet, but it kept him alive, albeit malnourished. He wouldn't give up on his hunts.

Eight

One night, the moon full high in the sky, Ruger was woken by gunshots. He jumped, his mind fleeing back to the institute. Images of blood and bodies floated before his eyes. Muscles tensed as they prepared to carry his body far from there. Grey walls and bars were closing in on him.

As sudden as he had woken, Ruger remembered where he was. Days of travel turned into weeks. He was far from the river, and far from the barren bushes he had seen at a distance. Trees pressed around him. A tight thicket made for good protection and temporary shelter. This was the second night Ruger spent there. He was tired and needed rest. Protein lacked from his diet. His hunts had still been unsuccessful.

He settled back down onto the undergrowth, but stayed vigilant. More gunfire followed shortly after. Minutes passed. From the thicket, Ruger could look out onto a clearing. Moonlight shone into the center of it and he could pick up each detail of the fallen leaves. Soon, a slow rustle shook a bush across the clearing. A large, lanky animal backed out of the bracken, dragging something in its mouth.

By the silver light of the moon, Ruger saw the dark grey fur of the animal and its white underside. Sharp teeth glistened with blood around the throat of another animal. The smell of iron returned to Ruger's nostrils. The bushy tail of the killer swished back and forth in anticipation of a meal.

The dead animal was white, but staining red. Slender legs that didn't have much promise of meat were sleek and black. Its body was covered in fur that wasn't typical. It was more fluff and somewhat like, but unlike, Rugger's hair. The smell of iron was coming from the dead beast and it had Rugger entranced.

Cautiously, Rugger walked toward the grey animal. Although he was trying to be quiet, his focus was too much on what was in front of him. He forgot his feet and stepped on a twig. It broke and snapped, cracking the silence of night. By the moonlight, Rugger saw blood on the animal's mouth when it whipped its head around to face him.

"Who are you?" it barked, "And if you dare give me away to that farmer, I'll rip your throat just the same as this one's."

Hair on the animal's neck stood straight, its lips pulled back. A low menacing growl told Rugger it was best to take a few steps back. Forgetting its kill briefly, it stalked toward Rugger. Its eyes reflected the moonlight, giving them a hollow look that chilled Rugger.

"I'm Rugger," he tripped over his words. This encounter wasn't as he was hoping. Apparently, all animals weren't friendly, just as all humans weren't. "I was looking, that's all. I don't really even know what a farmer is, or why I'd be telling it anything. Besides, I was here first, sleeping. I'd like to know who and what *you* are."

Back against a tree, there wasn't any more room for Rugger to move away. He wasn't cornered, but he wasn't in a good position for fighting or fleeing. Not giving an inch, the animal pressed its blood-covered nose to Rugger's. The smell of iron and raw meat persisted. Predatory instinct surfaced above Rugger's passive nature. He leaned forward, looking into the animal's eyes.

“Don’t think it would be so easy to kill me, either,” Ruger said, lips above his teeth.

As the smaller of the two, it was quick work to slip around the offending beast. Circles and circles closing in on a target. There wouldn’t be a place for it to go. One strike at the throat and all would be done.

“What makes you so sure you could stop me?” the other animal said, “I’m bigger than you and not half so arrogant.”

A warning came first. Drawn blood at the shoulder, not that Ruger could reach much higher. The other animal recoiled, but struck out when the shock wore. Fur flew off of bodies, tit for tat. Little blood was drawn, aside from Ruger’s first hit. Death wasn’t the goal. Everything in Ruger’s animal mind urged a kill. There was enough control to realize the strength he would gain would be fleeting. To overcome his opponent, force it to submit, opened doors to survival in knowledge.

The shoulder wound left the larger creature limping. It favored the leg, letting it merely brush the ground. Off-balance. Ruger lunged upward.

“Who are you?” he snarled.

He had gained the upper hand. The animal was on the ground, on his back, stomach exposed. Ruger stood atop its chest, muzzle inches from its throat.

“If you must know,” it said through gritted teeth, “Lycaon... A wolf.”

Finally, names to attribute to the beast. Ruger stepped off Lycaon’s chest. An instant shift in the hierarchy. However, Ruger hadn’t forgotten about the meal Lycaon had dragged into the clearing not too long before. It lay dead, almost all its blood spilled, becoming one with the earth.

It was a sheep, Lycaon explained. A particular delicacy. Slow and stupid and fattened up for the kill. It had begged for its life before its death. Cornered away from its flock, all it had wanted was to return to its fellows. It didn't know what to do on its own.

Of course, the farmer, an owner of sheep, wasn't pleased at finding a wolf in the pasture. Gunshots followed after him. That was the life of a wolf. Kill and run, or to be killed themselves. Lycaon was more pragmatic about near-death misses than Ruger was comfortable with. With manners that didn't hint he had threatened death not to long before, Lycaon asked Ruger to keep an eye for the farmer. The wolf was going to dine upon his well-earned meal.

There was something strange about Lycaon. On one hand, he snapped at everything Ruger said. The wolf's eyes strained at the wrong movements Ruger made, but he said nothing. Asserted dominance was not to be questioned. Despite the abrasive nature, Lycaon seemed generally pleased at the company.

"Is it easy?" Ruger asked, "To kill, I mean. I've never had to before."

"It had been easy. It had always been easy with my pack," Lycaon stopped eating, "We looked out for each other. I failed them as their alpha."

From what Ruger could gather, wolves were meant to be in packs. To travel together and never be alone. It was clear Lycaon missed his. Ruger missed the people at the institute. He too had been away from his pack. But he knew he could never return to them.

"What happened to your pack?" Ruger asked, "Why aren't you with them now?"

"There was an accident. It had been a difficult month. Rabbits were all we'd been eating. They aren't very sustaining. I was sending out scouts to search for better fare,"

Lycaon said, not yet touching the sheep again, “One morning, Stubbe came back all in a panic. We followed him to a clearing much like this. At the center was a human boy, lifeless. Stubbe had killed him for food, but it could only ever be more trouble for us.”

The wolf looked at the carcass at his feet. Nose lowered to the flank, but he paused. Shaking his head, he looked back up at Ruger.

“We did eat the boy. Wasteful not to. It was fine for some time. Nothing came of it until the following spring when all the pups were born. Three litters worth,” a ghost of a smile was on Lycaon’s face, “Little by little, the pack got smaller. One day at a time, others stopped coming home to the dens. In the first week, Stubbe and Tala, the only pupless female, were victims of the traps. I tried to keep them alive. Food every day. But I couldn’t figure out the metal. The men took them away.

“It didn’t stop there. On a return from a hunt, the dens were quiet. None of the happy noises of growing pups. A den with three litters is never silent,” Lycaon continued his story, “Kaude and Eald dashed in. I yelled at them to stop, but they wouldn’t listen. Before too long, Kaude stumbled out, completely out of breath. The mother and pups, they were dead. And so was Eald. And then Kaude. It smelled like poison.

“I left. I didn’t want to die. For weeks I wandered alone. Eating only what I could catch. It worked fine. Eating just enough to live and not much more. There was nothing else to worry about. No pack members to look out for. Just myself,” Lycaon said, “Then, what if, I thought, what if Kaude wasn’t dead. I’d left in such a frenzy, I hadn’t checked. Perhaps, I thought to myself, there had been, and still was, something I could do for him.

“Back at the den was a mess. Within weeks, the humans had turned it unnatural. A place that was once my home, a home to my family and so many others, was demolished. Completely gone and replaced with construction.”

In the telling of his story, Lycaon hadn't touched the sheep again. Exposed flesh no longer enticed him. Worldly matters weren't on his mind. His thoughts turned to those who were dead. The past was where it belonged. Lycaon ripped a piece of the flank and tossed it to Ruger.

“You look starved. Once you get past the wool, it's not too bad.”

Happily, Ruger began tearing away at the meat. Lycaon was wrong. It wasn't *not too bad* once he got past the wool. It was wonderful. Possibly the best meal he had eaten in his life. After starving for a week, then eating only vegetation, protein was just the thing he needed. With greed, he gnawed away at the bone when all the muscle and ligaments were gone. Splinters of bone dug into his gums. Blood from Ruger mixed with the sheep's blood. He wasn't yet satisfied.

It was a short trot to the carcass. Lycaon hadn't gone back at it yet, so it must have been fair game. Looking up with an avaricious gleam, the wolf bared his teeth, snarling. The earlier fight had established Ruger's place in Lycaon's pack, but it hadn't cemented his authority, although he had been the victor. It was Lycaon's role to divvy up the rations.

Despite all the modifying the researchers had attempted to cover up animal instinct, Ruger jumped again at Lycaon's throat. Earlier, the wounded shoulder had worked to Ruger's advantage. The ache remained, but it didn't impair Lycaon any longer.

A slight duck resulted in escape from Ruger's jaws. The hybrid lashed out with forepaws to make up for the miss. Howls cut the night sky as claws struck their mark.

Underneath the full moon, the fight picked up where it previously ended. Where there onlookers, the fight would have appeared as a death match. As it were, they were fighting for the alpha. Lycaon wanted that position of authority.

Both panting heavily, they paused to catch their breath. So far, the two seemed evenly matched. While Lycaon clearly had size and heft on his side, Ruger was far more agile. As opposites, they balanced each other.

The wolf went for Ruger's throat for the first time. When Ruger backed down, Lycaon stopped. They looked at each other. Both saw a disheveled mess of fur, sweat, and fresh blood.

"You've got the basics. I'll teach you the rest," Lycaon said, "Hunting and killing. It'll be a help to me at least to have a second set of jaws. After tomorrow we'll start. Still plenty of sheep left."

For the rest of the night they slept. Not a sound was heard from the farmer, whose sheep Lycaon killed. In the morning, the wolf told Ruger they were leaving. Staying near the carcass could prove to be trouble if the blood trail was followed. Either the farmer, or scavengers looking for a steal.

Nine

They went westward. Grapevine rumors had told Lycaon there was a small flock of emus. If that turned to be false, at least there was a large flock of sheep to hunt in. Domestic animals were a far better target for the new hunter. By the time the next day came, they would reach the sought after location. It would take nearly a day of travel.

While they walked, Lycaon instructed Ruger on strategies. With only two of them, there wasn't much they could do. It all depended on the terrain. One could push the prey, and the other could attack. More than likely, that would be their only resource. Thoughtfully, Ruger chewed on a clump of grass to take the information in. Lycaon was appalled. Never in his life had he much use for omnivores. Much less use for herbivores, save as a food source.

After hours of traveling, night settled over the land. Although there was light still, the two travelers were tired. More miles would have to be passed in the morning. For now, they could move no further. Under the waning moon, they slept as if they were dead to the world. Sooner than they would have liked, the morning came. Sun filtered through the treetops, casting shadows upon the ground. Images of leave mottled the bodies of Lycaon and Ruger as they stretched awake.

Sore from being unaccustomed to so much travel in so short a time, Ruger took longer to wake fully. Joints cracked individually and then as a chorus of sound. When he

paused in a yawn, Ruger noticed Lycaon already awake and waiting. The wolf pushed the hybrid to his feet and they continued.

It was noon before they reached the pasture. Wooden fences surrounded a field of woolly sheep. Not a guard, be it human or animal, watched over the defenseless animals. Their only instincts were to run. The fences that were meant to protect them, trapped them without a way out.

The predators slipped through the fence with ease, trespassing. None of the sheep noticed the intruders. The wind shifted, blowing the scent of the wind in their direction. The sheep didn't know what the smell meant, only that it was danger. Panic entered their eyes. For protection, they huddled together in a corner. The sheep had done their work for the hunters. Lycaon and Ruger paced up either side of the fence to where it converged at the mass of sheep. As they neared, the sheep ran and all turned to chaos. Ruger was far too short for Lycaon to see him to bark orders.

Encircled by fleeing sheep, Ruger had to wait only for the right moment. They rushed passed him as if he wasn't there. *Wolf* was a scent of danger. Even their scattered brains knew that. Nothing in their experiences had told them to fear Ruger. In-born instincts had no notion of his existence. Until they learned and remembered, the hybrid could snake his way between their bodies. Not a wolf in sheep's clothing, but in plain sight.

Soon Ruger saw his opportunity. The mass of sheep was thinning, almost all had run by. Toward the back of the flock was a straggler. Lycaon had told him to look for those. It was favoring one leg, forcing it to fall behind the safety of the flock. Bee-lining

to catch up with its family, it never thought to swerve away from potential trouble. With the sheep running by him in a few moments, Ruger readied himself.

He could have jumped. Jaws could have closed around the sheep's throat in a killing strike. A windpipe could have been crushed and torn. Morning sun could have glistened off the freshly spilled blood. Warm, proud congratulations could have beamed upon him from Lycaon. Ruger could have finally had a successful hunt.

Involuntary trembling overtook his body instead. Muscular strength disappeared and Ruger slouched to the ground. Hazed vision watched the last sheep limp beyond reach. Giving up wasn't an option. Ruger struggled to stand. When he managed to get his front legs to support half of his body, he went into convulsions. Foam frothed at his mouth and he collapsed to the ground again.

A gun shot preceded Lycaon yelping in pain. Ruger no longer had control of his body. Everything in his mind urged him to get up and see if there was any hope or help for the wolf. Eyes rolled in the direction the shot had come from. Ruger couldn't see where Lycaon lay. The shadow of Ignatius Pollington blocked his view.

Ten

Groggily, Ruger opened his eyes. Somehow he knew days of time had passed. All the while, he had been asleep. So, he shouldn't have been tired. His energy was drained. There was a feeling in his limbs that he easily recalled. At the institute, when he was quite young and his handlers didn't know how he would react to human interaction, they tranquilized him. His legs felt heavy, as if each was asleep and he would soon be feeling the pins and needles.

A smell of burnt wood, charred grass, and various other things hung in the air. As Ruger looked around, he knew had never been in this place before. If he had, he was sure it would have burned into his memory.

Fire had ripped through the land several days before. Flames died down, leaving a smoldering mess. Smoke rose from hot ash. Trees looked about to crumbled, but they defied the destruction that had been brought upon them. Almost everything was black. The trees attested to that. As did the scorched ground, singed bones. And the birds that loomed were coal.

Shakily, Ruger rose to his feet. This place was dead. As was everything in it. Save the birds scavenging the bodies. Seeing the crows, a low rumbled came from Ruger's stomach. How long had it been since he last ate? Could he finally have a successful hunt

or would he have to scrounge the dead for meat? It had to have been two days since he last ate. He wouldn't have the strength to pounce on one of the birds.

Slowly, he nosed through the carnage. Most was nature destroyed. On occasion, he'd step on a gun. Some looked like the handgun Ignatius had used to murder everyone working at the institute. Others had much more power. Framework of vehicles sat waiting for rust. Ruger continued turning over debris until he found a carcass. Beside for being burnt, it didn't look too bad. As soon as he leaned in to bite, something called from above.

"Get away from that or I'll have your eyes out!" a large, black bird screeched, "No idea what you're doing here. War remains are for crows!"

Scolded like a pup, Ruger left the bird to peck at the carcass. Being in completely removed from any knowledge of informative media, he hadn't known the progress of World War Three, or of its existence. The opposing sides had completely devastated Poland, where Ruger now was. Many towns and forests had been burnt down by the Russians, who believed their enemy was hiding troops. They weren't going to allow the Pollocks any places to give reprieve to enemy soldiers. This was what remained of one of those such forests.

Ruger learned by trial and error, as long as he avoided the crows, he could eat the dead and stay alive that way. After all, there wasn't any vegetation he could subsist on. It turned out the crows weren't so tough when Ruger began talking back to them. There was enough carnage for Ruger to scavenge for maybe a week. Maybe then he would move on and find a stable home.

Eleven

For a few weeks, Ruger did manage to stay alive. Raw meat had always been his preference, but he was becoming accustomed to it being cooked well-done. He wasn't going to complain. It was all he had to survive on.

After weeks on his own, something twisted in Ruger's once agreeable personality. He snapped at everything. The crows were the most troublesome. Other scavengers had moved in to optimize on the openings in the habitat. Ruger forced them all out. He'd made a castle of a burnt-out car. On the roof, he could see everything and everyone that entered his kingdom. If something was out of line, he'd attack.

In addition to the carcasses, Ruger had been dining on those that trespassed his territory. He was, for no lack of food, losing weight rapidly. Skin stretched over jutting bones before too long. Hair loosed from his hide when he would bend to bite at his feet. They itched something fierce. The tingling sensation on his paws made it almost unbearable to walk. His motor movements soon took to disagreeing with the commands his brain sent.

A change in diet was all Ruger attributed it to. But he was wrong.

Genetics were always a prime factor in eight-dash-fifteen's make up, as it was for any living being. More so for Ruger, though. His entire existence depended upon a

correct fusion of genetic material. The researchers had been so focused on merging the factors they wanted, something slipped through the cracks.

There was a reasonable explanation for all of Ruger's symptoms. The researchers had neglected a disease commonly found in sheep; Scrapie. It accounted for the downhill slope of Ruger's health.

Tired, but not from lack of sleep, Ruger collapsed at the base of a tree. Charcoal rubbed off on his hairless skin. It was a black spot on his life. His life had always been a black spot on the world.

Cattle Drive

The farmer watched from the driveway, paused with the fire reflecting in his eyes. Lanes of drying hay crackled, the windrows a path leading straight to the barn. Cows still at pasture bellowed for all their worth, trying to get through the blaze to their comforts. As soon as the fire reached the loft, the barn would be engulfed in flames. All that stored hay would take only seconds to burn. Owen couldn't move to make the call to save his livelihood. Generations of hard work lost. Everything would be gone after a lifetime of straining.

Owen shook his head. The images fell from his eyes. The drought was bad, but not so severe it'd cause a fire, yet. It was no good to think like that. It wasn't the first time he had stared at the fields and envisioned them consumed by flame. Imagined everything he had work so hard for demolished. He needed rain. It was far too dry for June, and nothing was growing. Owen looked to the farthest field, the last in his pasture rotation. In the distance, he could see a black and white body plodding toward him.

Another followed behind it and another, until he could see a long train of cows. It was only noon, only four hours since milking. If the cows were headed in already, they'd found no feed on the field. After ending their thirst caused by the blazing sun, they would look for feed.

The cows wouldn't starve. Owen wouldn't let them. He saw his father make that choice during the Depression. Old Farmer Campbell chose skeletal, malnourished cattle over dead. Though once or twice a cow would be standing just fine, and then drop. The herd turned back around once finances were up. Owen's father's anguish took him down a different track of desperation. Owen wouldn't jeopardize the cows in that way if that's what it all came down to. The stored feed wouldn't get replenished this year and the hayloft would run empty. He'd buy the feed and scrape together the money somehow. Thoughts of how to provide for the farm had been in his mind for a long time. How far would he let himself go?

Other farms were taking this weather hard, but those were the ones already teetering on the edge before. Farms went under, sold out, liquidated the cows. There was one more option. A troublesome lump sat in Owen's throat. Euthanizing cattle when they were too far gone was considered "humane." As soon as a human used those means upon themselves, ethics change.

Looking at the rafters of his barn, Owen shook his head again. In the entryway of the barn, Owen turned his eyes to the kitchen window. Susan was at the table, forehead furrowed from discontent. He saw her left hand scratch numbers across the balances, and the other pulling back a handful of hair. Ever since the heat and the drought, finances had

been doing poorly. No grass on the fields, no milk, no money. He would make sure they fought through this.

Owen saw Susan's shoulders quiver and her hand letting her hair fall in her face. She pushed her chair away from the table, as if to get far away from the bad news that was spelled out on the papers. Owen could ignore it. It would be easy to pretend he hadn't seen anything. It wasn't as if she knew he could see her all apart. He could go into the barn, distract himself with work. There was feed to push up in the bunk, calves to halter-break, hoof trimming cleaning the parlor. Any of those would make a good excuse. He would be helping the farm that way. His morals got the better of him.

"How's it look?" he asked his wife once he was inside.

Her face broke him. When they were first married, she knew what she was getting into. Times were easier then. The hard work had a decent pay off. It all seemed worth it to continue the traditions of the family farm. Owen had always known he wouldn't retire from the farm; he'd die first. Susan could escape from the farm if she really put her mind to it.

Reading other people's expressions was difficult for Owen. He could have saved a life if he was better at it. But the thirty years he'd been married to Susan made him an expert on her. She was defeated, broken down, despaired. Sad lines replace the usually content look on Susan's face. He wished he could give her that same smile that he saw in the wedding picture on the mantle.

His words were simultaneous with his wife rising from the chair, rushing toward him. A soft *thump* as their bodies met and Owen wrapped his arms around his Susan's frame.

“That bad, huh?” he asked, his words a little more than a whisper.

They stepped away from each other, Owen’s hands on her shoulders, so Susan could wipe her eyes. It took only a moment for her to recompose enough to be able to speak.

“Oh, I’m just worrying too much,” she said with another sniff. “We’ll have to look for another income, that’s all. If we have to buy all our feed for the winter to make up for what we don’t get from our own fields, we’re going to run short. You already knew that. I saw you looking across the land *again*. Day terror about the fire?”

He didn’t notice her intent look. A grunt lacking commitment was the only answer she received. Owen was focused on the memo pad on the table. Susan’s lips thinned.

“I already made a list of other sources of money,” she said.

Susan’s angled writing filled half the page in a bulleted list on the memo pad. Owen read the first two points while fingering a torn piece of paper in his pocket. He tried to focus on his wife’s list, but his attention was straying elsewhere, to other solutions they might take.

“A woodlot,” Owen said, pulling the first item on the list, “A lot of people in the area have been putting in woodstoves. They’re cheaper than furnaces. The Eberle’s on Spring Street said they have been searching for ten cord of wood. Ol’ Hank even said he’s split it himself if it was cut down for him. I’m still a few years younger than him. I can handle it.”

Owen got up from the table and kissed his wife’s forehead, hoping that it was a reassuring gesture. He took the memo pad and walked into the next room over, their

make-shift office, where all the farm records were kept. Underneath white-washed walls were the faint baby blue color and the remnants of an alphabet border. A room that many years ago was meant for a child who never came. Paper overflowed the filing cabinet, bull catalogues were stacked high on the desk, and the newest addition to the mess, the memo pad, sat in the center of the desk.

The seat-torn chair was uncomfortable, making Owen fidget. His mind twitched along with his body, always going back to the piece of paper in his pocket. He tried taking out the aerial-view map of the farm to search out an image of the best area for a woodlot. Focus wasn't with him. Soon he was fishing about in his pocket for the torn paper.

It was an uneven rectangle, torn out from a letterhead with *Maur*—severed at the end. With the last three letters alongside, the letterhead gave the name of Owen's late best friend, Maurice Tremblay. The torn paper gave the number of a contact Maurice had before his passing. Owen was one of the few people that knew the truth behind this contact, an American who claimed to get better beef prices. It was possible that Canada's southern neighbor was getting higher beef prices. American farms had been doing poorly for years, even before this hot weather. Few farms, fewer cows, but still a high demand for beef.

Weeks ago, Owen had gone through his paper work. In a good year, he would have been on the fields, at some stage of haying. In an exceptional year, he would have been planting corn. The sun's heat had dried up the fields, slowing growth. It would be a few more weeks still before first cut could be chopped. He had been thinking about this American's offer for a long time, trying to think of any other means of surviving. It

hadn't worked for Maurice. Owen wasn't the same man as his best friend. He was different, *stronger*. He wouldn't resort to a rope from the rafters. He wouldn't leave his damn friend to find him as the last nerves fired and twitched. Owen would survive.

This mind frame had forced him to consider which cows to cull. Jenn had been having problems with a uterine infection since she calved three weeks prior. Even with the aid of oxytocin, Calamity wasn't letting her milk down. Calypso was a three-titter who was low on production even before there was no feed on the fields. High somatic cell cows went on the list, low production, problem, old, any cow that wasn't paying her way on the farm. Owen wouldn't let the cows starve, but he sure as Hell would ship them. It was a huge drop in numbers to go from one hundred milk cows to ninety, but throughout the summer, twenty springing heifers would be calving.

The American's number was displayed on the desk. Maurice had always said, if Owen needed some extra cash, just give this man a call. No name, just the number and vague awareness of what would transpire if the number was dialed. The other end of the line rang until the answering machine picked up. "You've reached Joshua Blanchard," the answering machine said, "Leave your name and a message, and I'll get back to you. Thank you. Bye."

"Good afternoon. It's about one on Thursday. My name is Owen Campbell. I got your name from a Maurice Tremblay. I have a couple cull cows. Also, I already know about the other offer you have," Owen said, giving his call-back number.

Ready to move onto some work in the barn, Owen closed his phone. Shaking hands, that was something he wasn't expecting. It wasn't a mistake. It was just good business. It was self-preservation. Once finances were comfortable again, he would stop

this whole mess. Susan could be happy again. He wouldn't even have to consider the same fate as Maurice.

As Owen was leaving the room, his cell phone buzzed and rang.

"This is Joshua Blanchard," the voice on the other end said. "I just got your message. I'm always glad to hear from one of Maurice's acquaintances. Such a shame what happened. Hanging himself in the barn he built with his father when he was just a boy. Five generations of farming, over like that." – there was a pause on the phone – "I haven't had any customers since Maurice died, so I'd be glad to take your cows. How many are we looking at?"

Even with Owen's inability to read people, there was no doubt this man was paranoid. This wasn't something that needed to be deciphered by analyzing body language and tone inflections. The man's voice was jumpy.

"Ten cows," Owen said.

"Good, good," Joshua trailed off. "That's a good start."

Silence on both ends paused the conversation. There was only one part of the conversation left unsaid. Owen knew it needed to be discussed, it was crucial to his farm staying afloat.

"If you knew Maurice and he gave you this number, he obviously also told you about my side business," Joshua said. "I won't beat around the bush. We both know how I make my money. Don't let what happened to Maurice sour you. Different circumstances. He was too far gone. It was only a matter of time."

Owen clenched his jaw. Of course, the signs pointing towards suicide had been there. Studies always explain that fact. This case wasn't different than any other. No one realized the hints were there until the legs were dangling.

"Ever since Maurice died, I haven't had any one to transport the drugs. My sources have cut back. I'll have to get back in contact with them," Joshua said. "I'll give you a call when I'm ready for your cows, and we'll discuss the details then."

The farmer gave his thanks and goodbye. Then the phone was quiet. Owen sat down in his office chair to think over what just transpired. This man, Joshua Blanchard, his voice had calmed down over the course of the conversation into a business drawl. A distance would be kept between them, Owen told himself. The paranoia of old age that Susan joked about was a little more than mere jests. The scuffle of his wife's steps neared the doorway.

"Who were you on the phone with?"

"I got the number of an American that says he can get good beef prices. He'll take a few of our cull cows," Owen explained to his wife. He paused before continuing. "It won't be right off. He has a few matters to get in order first."

Her hands, wrinkled and aged from years of life and work, rested on Owen's shoulders.

"You're tense," Susan said, "Don't think he'll call back?"

"It'll be some time before he does. I'm not going to rush it too much," Owen said to his wife, "Before the call, I was looking at a map of the farm. We might still want to put a woodlot together."

He'd keep her out of this as long as he could. She didn't need to be involved in it, other than knowing some cull cows would be leaving the farm. The woodlot could be a cover. Or their means of extra money if the drug dealer never called back.

Joshua Blanchard didn't call back that day, or even that week. The idea went to the back of his mind, but it was still ever present. He couldn't focus on the negative. He had to keep moving forward. Find something that would keep his farm afloat.

Two weeks after the initial call, Owen was in the heifer barn, feeding up. Susan had already gone through the first two groups of cows in their double-four parlor. Once heifer chores were done, Owen would join her. He appreciated this time alone though. Time to think about what his next move would be.

He had just put the feed down for the oldest heifers when his particular favorite shoved her head through the gates. A little red-and-white crossbred that would be good on butterfat, if her dam was anything to go by. Owen was a little disappointed with how she was coming along. She was smaller than the rest her age. She was fierce, though, always pushing her way to the front of the group to eat. Blue Bell was a fighter, like Owen recalled about the guy who had pulled her. The weekend Blue Bell was born, Owen had been away and Susan had a sprained wrist. So Owen's go-to guy of so many years, Maurice Tremblay, took charge. Owen had heard the story when he returned to the farm. But on this present day, the old farmer thought about Maurice in a negative light. His best friend had his own farm that he left behind when he abandoned the world by his own choice. It was a sad reverie, but Owen forced it out of his head with bitterness. He had never pegged Maurice as a coward. At least Owen had the strength to keep searching

for a means of survival. His thoughts were disturbed when a buzz came from Owen's pocket, followed by a jingle.

"Hey," the voice said as soon as Owen picked up, "This is Josh Blanchard again. Sorry it's taken so long. I've got everything all sorted out. I'm ready to take your cows at any time."

Owen set aside the pitchfork he'd been using to push hay up to the heifers.

"Good, good. The cows are ready any time you are," Owen said, "I have two questions, though. When will the extra supplies be here? And, how have they been transported in the past?"

It was a couple months back that Maurice originally informed his fellow farmer about this trade route. At the time, Owen hadn't wanted the specifics. He wanted to deny that his friend would resort to such low measures. Maurice had forced the torn paper with the phone number on it into Owen's hands. He insisted that in a short time, the trade route would be looking for another driver.

"I can bring the supplies there any time," Joshua said, "Maurice always just took a small batch of packages and hid them various places with the cows, in the trailer, in or on the truck. It wasn't very efficient, so it's no wonder he never made enough money to save himself."

What Joshua was saying was what Owen had been thinking about Maurice for months. Such desperate measures and with nothing to come of it, except a pinewood box. Still, he hated the American for being so flippant about someone's life. Everyone was only given one life. One has to do what they can to make it through.

“I just thought of a way we could take larger amounts at once,” Owen said, “I’ll need two weeks until the cows will be ready, now that this new idea has come up. Then it will be a couple more weeks after than until they can be taken across the border. I’m going to have to ask for a higher cut of the profits.”

“I really can’t give you much more than what Maurice received. Eighteen-percent and whatever the cows bring for beef,” Joshua’s voice was flat.

Negotiations on prices for cows was a fun part of the job for Owen. Taking drugs across the Canadian-American border was a lot riskier than purchasing a good Holstein. He needed the proper motivation before putting his neck out like that. After all, he still had the safe route he could go to make extra money.

“From what you told me, you need me more than I need you. You don’t have a driver and your drugs are already purchased. All they’re doing now is sitting God knows where, not earning you any money,” Owen said, “I don’t have as nice of truck as Maurice. It’s old, bad on gas. I also have a better herd of cattle than he had. They’re worth more money, but that won’t show up in the beef check.”

“Fine. Twenty-percent, what your cows go for, and cost of gas.”

“That’s all pretty nice, but twenty-five-percent is the lowest I’ll go.”

“Twenty-two-percent,” Joshua said after a short pause.

From where Owen was standing in the heifer barn, he could see straight into the parlor. Susan was happiest when she was with the cows. When they were younger, he joked that she’d divorce him, take the cows, and hire his best friend to do the field work. Susan had never learned how to properly drive a tractor, no matter how many times Owen attempted to teach her. Of course, now his best friend was dead. Maurice had taken

his life when finances on the farm got too tight. Worst of all, Owen had been the one to find him hanging from the rafters of the barn when he was making a friendly visit. The coroner in town had confirmed Maurice had died just minutes before. Now Owen was taking over the drug trade Maurice had left off. He wouldn't let himself have the same fate.

Susan had just finished milking another group of cows. When she let them out, she looked out the doorway and could see her husband. She waved, a smile on her face. The look was sincere, not a ruse to hide her worries of their situation. The sorrow on Susan's face from two weeks ago was still all too fresh in Owen's mind. Thirty years they had been together, and he had never seen such a look, one filled with despair and defeat, on his wife's face before. Not even when they learned Susan was barren, after trying for a child for five years. She had directed the pain to humor, joking she was just another free-martin heifer. Back then, she still had the cows and calves, substitutes for motherly affection. Now, everything she loved was at risk. Owen didn't want to see Susan look like that again, as much as he didn't want to fail.

"The twenty-two-percent included everything else listed, right? The beef check for the cows and the cost of gas?" Owen asked and Joshua let him know that was correct. "Alright, I'm in. Bring your supplies to my house two weeks from this Saturday."

Owen gave his address and hung up the phone. All this was being done for Susan, he told himself. He wouldn't admit that his own selfish tendencies were taking over this drive to succeed. It was for her. That is why he had to hide it from her. She couldn't find out. It was for the best, for her. He would have to keep telling himself that.

The day Joshua was due to deliver the *supplies*, the farmer made sure his wife wouldn't be present. He suggested Susan pay a visit to Maurice's widow. For as long as he could, Owen would keep his wife out of this.

Joshua lived up Owen's expectations. Or really, matched what Owen had pictured him as. There weren't many expectations to be had. The American was short and scrawny. So much that Owen believed, even in his old age, he could easily pick the other man up and toss him a foot of distance. Paranoia was definitely prevalent, as Joshua looked over his shoulders frequently. Starting at every quiet moo. Looking to the large van had arrived in every chance he got. After all, that was where he was keeping the drugs until Owen informed him what was to be done.

Over the past two weeks, six heifers and three cows had calved. Owen wasn't sure how many packages of cryovac-ed drugs Joshua had acquired, but with that many cows, he should have been well prepared to store a sizable amount.

The van backed up to the milk cow barn, where the fresh cows were being kept. Owen held up a hand, palm flat, signaling to stop. The doors to the back opened to the sight of what looked to be hundreds of one-kilogram packages. Owen had requested Joshua make sure the packages were small.

"So, what's the plan? I thought you'd just stuff 'em all in the trailer with some hay or something, like Maurice did," Joshua said.

Owen reached into his pocket to pull out a glove. The glove unfolded as it came out of his pocket. The long, pink glove was more than just a simple glove worn while milking that went a little higher than the wrist; it was an arm-length glove.

“I’m not quite the same person as Maurice. I’ve got a different idea,” Owen said, “It’ll all be stuffed somewhere, for sure. Grab an armful of the packages.”

It was an odd sight to see, as Owen strolled down the barn alley, passing by stall after stall. His determination kept him moving forward. Cows looked over their backs to see their owner with a face they had never seen him wear before; almost angry.

Following closely behind was Joshua, who was just trying not to drop anything, not paying attention at all to the cattle. At the very end of the barn, the nine cows were locked into the head-gates, standing patiently. The youngest sent a leg backward, just barely missing Joshua.

Owen took the long glove and slid it onto his arm, securing the top to his sleeve with a clothespin. Reaching into his back pocket, he grabbed a bottle of lubricant. At this point, he hadn’t told Joshua what procedure they were using. The American was looking, but what was happening hadn’t quite processed. Owen squeezed a sizable amount of lubricant onto the gloved hand. The other hand grabbed the first cow’s tail, setting it out of the way on his shoulder. Grabbing one of the packages from Joshua was all it took to stir the drug dealer’s worry.

“What are you doing with that?” he asked, horrified.

No verbal answer was given. Trying to explain would take too much time and Joshua would only try to dissuade Owen. The farmer’s hand plunged into the cow. Fluids squelched as the lubricant mixed with the cow’s vaginal fluids, and air entered the reproductive tract. Fleshy warmth enveloped Owen’s arm as he pushed it deeper into the cow. He knew he had reached the cervix when the muscles contracted on his hand. It hurt; those muscles were meant to hold back a calf weigh upwards of ninety pounds. He

took a second to wait until the cow relaxed again. Owen moved his whole body forward to get his hand into the uterus. He moved his arm downward, toward the stomach, to the bottom of the uterus. When his hand was finally where he wanted it, he let go. Slowly, he pulled his arm out, his free hand grasping the top of the glove, and held his hand out in front of Joshua.

The other man stared directly at the glove, which had various vaginal fluids and remains of the lubrication sliding off onto ground. Owen moved his hand closer to Joshua, shaking it to get the drug dealer's attention. Eyes wide open, the American placed another package on Owen's palm, careful not to let any fluids on the glove touch him.

The process continued until about thirty packages of drugs had been placed into this first cow. There was always the chance that the cow's body would reject what was just placed inside, immune system and all that, trying to force it out. Owen, with his knowledge of cattle and how their bodies worked, had planned on that. From another pocket in his coveralls, he took out a long, curved needle, a thick piece of thread looped around the eye.

The cow jolted back when the needle pierced the skin of her vulva. She snorted out a bellow and fought against the metal of the head-gates. Normally, this was a method used to close up a cow after she prolapsed, all her reproductive tract pouring out of her. It worked just as well to keep the drugs inside. Owen's face remained dead-panned. Only three stitches through the skin would be necessary.

"Well, it'll take two weeks for the cervix of each cow to close up and I'll take the stitches out then," Owen explained, "Then give it another two weeks for the scaring to fade. I'll truck the cows then."

Joshua still hadn't made any comments. He stared in disbelief, unmoving. His jaw would have been on the ground if he hadn't been so wary of it getting covered in shit. The cow that had recently been packed with drugs stood in the locks, shaking her head, her tail flickering.

"Well, don't just stand there. We've still got eight more cows," Owen said, "And no way am I doing all this work. This time you should have a try."

The border patrol didn't notice anything out of the ordinary with Owen's load of grade cows. He was calm, collected composed. He never let on that he had slowly getting more and more anxious as the days drew closer to this one. Even the cows seemed to play along with the masquerade. Quietly chewing their cud as the border vet checked over their health papers and matched numbers to tattoos. Owen was waved through when everything was checked clear.

An old stock trailer rattled behind an even older farm truck as he cruised over speed bumps onto the open U.S. road, leaving the crossing behind. Owen took his hat off to run a hand through his hair, laughing off nervous energy. For all his convictions to go through with this, he sure had begun to think to might be impossible.

Four miles down the road, he heard the familiar buzz and ring of his phone.

"How'd it go?" the speaker, whom he recognized as Joshua, said.

Owen hitched the phone on his shoulder. Two hands on the wheel as he passed a van.

"Just about pissed myself, but no problems, no non-standard questions," he replied, pulling back into the right lane.

“Refresh my memory, I was a little shocked from the visceral horrors when you first explained it to me,” Joshua said, “But how are the drugs getting *out of* the cows?”

“Simple enough. Each cow will get a shot of Lut’ and in seven days’ time, it’s all gold,” Owen said, “Or cash, really, like you said.”

After all the drugs had been placed inside the cows’ reproductive tracts, nothing had gone wrong. Sure, Joshua had to take a trip to the manure pit to empty the contents of his stomach, but that was a minor detail. None of the cows tried to force the drugs out of their bodies, and none of the stitches ripped. After the thread was removed, there were not infections, little scarring. Everything was going according to plan. The Lutalyse, a medicine that could induce estrus or miscarriages in livestock, would empty the cows when it came time to remove the drugs.

“All this isn’t going to wreck them, is it?” It was too late to act on second thoughts, but Owen was still having them. He thought back to Susan and how much she loved these animals. “It’s a lot to put a cow through.”

“Christ, they’re all going to beef anyway. What’s it matter? If they don’t turn out fine, it’s not my problem,” Josh was indignant, “Look, this is only the our first run. If we’re going to continue doing this, you can’t care about what happens to the animals. It’s all about the money. You can buy more cows with it. Better cows. Take your wife out to a nice dinner. You don’t want to end up like that shit, Maurice.”

Cash to keep the farm afloat had always been the goal. Spare money could solve and prevent all problems on the farm. He had half an excuse prepared already to tell Susan. That’s what the woodlot was a cover for. She would be thankful. Then he

wouldn't have to see that look of sorrowful despair, or consider the rafters of his barn again. They could both rest easy until they retired.

Something still wasn't sitting well with Owen, although he was clear past the border patrol. He closed his phone. A look in the rearview revealed the recognizable sight of the trailer nose. Glancing to the extended mirrors showed the reflection of flashing blue lights. It could be something innocent. The trailer was old, there might be a light out. He could act like a good citizen and pull to the side of the road. Or he could slam his foot on the gas. As far as Owen could tell, he only had these two options.

His foot on the brakes slowed the truck and trailer down as he pulled to the side of the road. Committing one felony a day was enough for his docket. For a brief moment, Owen hoped the cruiser would continue down the road, but luck wasn't with him. He leaned over to his glove box to pull out the paperwork he knew the officer would ask for. If he focused on that small task, he wouldn't spill everything. There was still a chance this wasn't about suspicions of drug smuggling.

"License and registration," the officer said once he was at the driver's-side window.

With a shaking hand, Owen gave the papers to the officer, who walked back to the cruiser to run his license. This wasn't the first time Owen had been pulled over. He had done some pretty stupid moves in a vehicle when he was younger, on several different occasions. Speeding, burnouts, crashes, you name it. He had been a cocky kid. Susan had grounded him and calmed him down. Not all the way, as he had now put her at risk and he might go to jail.

He looked in the side-view mirror again. The officer was still sitting in his vehicle, waiting on the report that would list Owen's various mistakes. This was just another in a long line. It would have been quick money, but it was dangerous. He wanted to succeed with the farm, stay alive, but maybe a steadier, safer means would have been best. He should have just stuck to the woodlot.

"Could you turn your right blinker on for me?" the officer asked when he returned to Owen's window.

It wasn't a real question, and Owen would have complied even if it had been. The officer, the uniform said *Demortier*, looked toward the end of the trailer on the passenger side.

"The signal light on your trailer isn't functioning," Demortier said, "I'll let you off with a warning this time, but that needs to be fixed. Have a nice day."

"Thank you, Officer," Owen said when he took his license and registration back.

A faulty blinker, that was easy to remedy. Most likely, it was caused by mixed wires. The trailer had the same problem before. Eventually the wires and lights would have to be replaced, but the temporary fix was a quick fix. Getting away from the police without anything more than a warning renewed Owen's confidence. Within the next few drug runs, he'd have made enough money to buy a new truck *and* trailer.

Owen put his papers back into the glove box and put the truck into drive. It was only another four hours until he reached the rendezvous farm where the cows would be given their shots of Lutalyse, then kept for a few days while everyone waited for the drugs to be pushed out. The cows went straight to the slaughterhouse after that.

An hour of time passed. It was quiet in the truck as Owen didn't listen to the radio. It was all just unnecessary noise to him. He only liked it when Susan rode with him, quietly singing along to the German *lieder* on whatever station she found that played that type of music. Thinking about his wife softened his expression. Lately, he'd been so pressed on one goal. Going through with this crazy idea that would allow him to stay with her, give her something to be proud of. He'd been so focused on the journey, he'd forgotten about the destination. Thoughts of Susan brought him home.

His eyes focused in front of him, on the road mostly, but also on the hood of his truck. This trip was a lot to put his old vehicle through. The last long journey he made, going to Madison, Wisconsin for the World Dairy Exposition, the engine started smoking. He had taken care to make sure the truck was in perfect order before this trip. He was hauling valuable cargo.

Red Butte Beauty*Chapter One*

For want of oil, the doors creaked open enough so a man could slip through. No dramatics. No show. All hope of going unnoticed. The prayer was almost granted, save the few suspicious patrons blinking at the light. Likely those keeping an eye out for the law or those with something to hide, as was common. Their whiskeys settled untouched for brief moments, ripples dying in the glasses. Several times a day, every day, those doors opened. Folks were used to it. Squeaks of double-barrel hinges meant nothing to them.

Everything would have gone as wished, unnoticed, but for the wanted men that kept their eyes to the door. Others took a second stare by proxy. Half couldn't believe who made it through the doorway; the other half didn't want to. Theatrics were added to the scene where they weren't wanted or needed. Chairs tipped with people rising from

their seats. Sylvester Clairbourne, confirmed dead from various sources, returned to the small Pony Express relay station.

Rumors had stretched like old leather. So worn and worked no one could truly tell what they started as. Some said he didn't need spurs because he could speak to the horses without words. Or they were just too scared to balk any command. Most would take truth from either tale. The heels of his boots were absent of metal jingles either way. Echoes of his stride wouldn't be heard inside the saloon. Too much noise, too much alcohol. It was merely his presence making eyes slant in his direction.

Riders blew in and out of Red Butte weekly. Shoeless horses tore the ground in a straight line toward Willow Springs or North Platte. Some riders were there for seconds, long enough to change horses. Others lost wages in the saloon for a day or two, then took over as a relief rider for a tired soul. Few, very few, found a life and settled in. Just three days was all Sylvester needed to cause the damage that tailed him.

Entering the saloon, he made his way to the bar, a solid fixture in a place of usual constant movement. A long glance down the oak top led to the stage where a group of five dancing girls stood still. On the back right, the eldest of the girls had eyes wild, like a spooked horse pulling at the reins. There was something familiar about her. He couldn't quite place it yet. It would come to him.

The tune from the piano started back up, a few off-key notes at a time, and the girls stepped back into their routines. All except the scared filly, the familiar horse. She darted beyond the faded velvet curtains, the sham of a back drop. Sylvester watched. No movement from the drapes. No reappearance. He ordered a glass of water, followed by a bottle full of amber whiskey.

Glass in hand, he surveyed the saloon from his stool, searching for the right trough to settle at. He couldn't table with fellow Express riders. They stuck together better when they weren't throwing bets against one another. They were already up against the odds. Other gamblers were suited best.

A game of blackjack was easy to win if the cards were counted, easy to lose if there was too much booze. Sylvester made sure to get the balance right and tipped back his glass.

The first game he lost to calm the table. Others wouldn't agree with his losing with purpose. Take all you can, they'd say. It didn't matter none. He won one way or another. Sylvester knew he could earn the bet back in triplicate or more. Guns wouldn't be drawn if he lost a game or two. One loss was a good trade so long as the ante was low. Just as predicted, the second and third games were his favor alongside the second and third glasses of swill.

About the fourth hand, Sylvester's mind set to wandering. Four dancers remained on the stage, but the fifth never returned. The steps were off, ruining the show to eyes experienced in knowledge of bawdry dances. The balance was wavering back and forth between the missing center. Somewhere in the miss-matched routine and the sixth glass of whiskey, Sylvester's memory jarred. He knew the fifth dancer and his way around the saloon to find her. He needed that balance.

Anticipation widened the eyes of the youngest Abbott girl as she dashed to the parlor window. Fear wasn't a sentiment she ever considered. Her eyes strained, hoping to spot a new form of excitement, or even one of the old ones. Her ears had already heard promise of hooves. Drawing nearer with each contact with the ground. The sound grew louder and closer.

Red Butte had proven boring. Not at all like the novels of the west. As soon as her daddy had told her of their move, she scanned all the dime novels. They left her with particular expectations to be disappointed. No guns fired in the middle of the night. No men bleeding out in the streets. Nary a lady-of-the-night had been seen. Only one thing claimed this town.

"It's only another Pony rider," Fanny called from the sill, "D'you think we've got letters?"

She turned her attention back to the window. A full gallop was hard on a horse, she'd heard. Not that she had first-hand experience. Her dearest sister cautioned a horse was too dangerous to ride, and carriages were better suited to ladies. By the look of the one coming into the station, bobbing its head like a bored horse at carriage, that might've been true. Though Fanny wouldn't admit it aloud. Dust disturbed and settled as each hoof connected with the ground. Front legs lifted off the ground in mock of white Spanish stallions as the hocks angled. It had been given its head and the makeshift rope halter around its muzzle didn't hold it in check. The rider, every bit as worn and dirtied as the horse, grasped the twine reins in one hand and a parcel with the words *U.S. Mail* emblazoned on it in the other.

“Frances, leave the man alone. He hasn’t even reached the post office yet.” The elder sister, Delilah said, looking over her reading glasses, “And its *do you*. Not *d’you*.”

It was too late. Fanny had her eyes set and feathered hat on. Proper easterners didn’t act as such, but the youngest daughter embraced the roughish life in the west too readily. Delilah shook her head and set her book onto the chaise lounge. There was only so much Jane Austen she could read in a sitting, but preventing Fanny from fooling herself wasn’t an ideal distraction. What Delilah wouldn’t give for her sister to look after herself, for once.

Even before the door could slam, Delilah was pulling on the handle to keep it open. She didn’t need any embarrassment from her sister. Their father wouldn’t be impressed if either of them consorted with the Pony riders that whipped through town. The bank kept him busy most time, so perhaps he wouldn’t notice this accidental transgression and failure.

“You’re late,” the postmaster grabbed the mail satchel. Papers shuffled. New letters going in, letters for Red Butte residents leaving. “You’re lucky we’ve been short riders or you’d be gone.”

The next rider waited on a blanketed Appaloosa, hand extended. Dust left behind them as he kicked the horse into a gallop. The horse’s spots on its rump matched the skies it was running beneath. No stopping until Willow Springs, twelve miles.

“I would’ve been here earlier, but I can’t go far on a horse with a broke cannon. You’re not a horse man, I know. ‘Magine if a took a sledge right there to your shin. That’s about the short of it,” the young, haggard rider explained. He dropped to his knees,

eyes flowing with mockery. “She wanted me to beg your forgiveness. She told me she felt so bad the mail wasn’t going to be on time. Then I took the revolver between ears.” – he spit a stream of tobacco to the ground – “I’ve been through nine stations. I’ve earned a rest. So’s this wild one. Awful stress to tame a mustang s’quick. Enjoy my addition to the fleet.”

Useless hands brushed the dirt off his pants when he stood. Turning to continue on his way, he got just two yards to the saloon, to a bath and whiskey, when he was intercepted by a blonde. Peacock feathers were at eye-line. The rider had seen many women at the stations he stopped at. Women of all kinds. He’d been to Sacramento five times already, but never to the start of the trail. Never too far east. This girl before him was all he guessed a suitable eastern woman to look. Not at all like the harlots that approached him at Bedeau’s station.

“My name’s Frances Abbott,” she introduced herself, eyelashes fluttering like dirt was stuck in her eyes, “But please, call me Fanny.”

Along with the variety of women, he’d also seen dust storms travelling across the wide expanse of plain and prairie. The rotation of debris through the air. He’d dodged a cactus come back around more than once. That alternation wasn’t unlike the switch from the blonde, Fanny, to the empty space that traded her. She lurched immediately out of sight. Filling the empty space stood a taller, withdrawn lady. He could only compare the two with what he knew best. Fanny, a sturdy built mustang, but this new woman a high-bred Andalusian, elegant and strong. Both breeds their own, respectively, but coming from the same Spanish stock.

“I apologize for my sister,” the Andalusian said, a hand on Fanny’s arm, turning to direct her away.

On the plains, the mustang was either well-worked or wild. Common. Andalusians were a rare beauty. He’d seen a carriage pair once, of all the carriages he saw. Graceful, but still powerful and fearless. Something like that catches your eye and your fancy.

“Name’s Sylvester Clairbourne,” the Pony rider called to the older sister, “Hope to see you again.”

But her back was already to him. The wind whipping his words away.

Her back was to the door, a cloth napkin at her face, dabbing away tears. The white silk had long since marred to grey. But it was something to hold on to. She let out a great sigh as Sylvester took his place, leaning on the doorframe of the room reserved especially for the dancers. Dresses were splayed across any and all furniture. A mixture of satins and velvets, reds and blues. Miscellaneous dressing items dotted the scene. The Pony rider watched the tremors in the shoulders of the fifth dancer. A hand tucked loose hair behind an ear. Stress had freed it from its bonds at the nape of the neck.

“Never would have thought to see you here,” he said, his voice low and pitying.

There was a strained tone she never heard before, as if the recollection of thoughts were painful. He hadn’t sounded that way when he left. Promises ring hopeful most

times. She let the barricades down once before, but her defenses were up, the doors barred.

“You know well my daddy brought me here,” she replied.

“He brought you to red Butte, but not for the life of a saloon girl, Delilah.”

Silence. She remained facing the wall, rigid on a wooden stool. The mirror in the far reaches of her eyesight allowed her to see Sylvester on a slant. He had been clean shaven all those months ago, though grime left the impression of a shadow. When he rode in on what he claimed was a half-wild mustang carrying the U.S. mail he hadn't been tacked in Pony livery. He had a thick mustache now that hid the scar from walking into a post as he left. A brimmed hat shaded most of his face, but she could see he looked more tired than she remembered. Not so full of sparks. No longer wearing the energy of defiance. Lines rode across his face like cow trails at pasture.

Sylvester was tempted to prompt her to speak. If she was the same, she soon would on her own. Precision was one of her best traits. He just had to wait.

“You're the only man – My father didn't bring me here to get impregnated by some orphan looking to die either,” – the tight curls of her hair whipped as she turned to face him. Sylvester wasn't the only one whose demeanor changed – “He *disinherited* me. I was told to leave the house and not return. I was pregnant. – Did those letters reach you? – I was homeless. The father – *You* were gone on some death mission.”

Wells, Fargo, and Company claimed to be nearly perfect in its reliability. Just *nearly*, though. Letters slipped by, got lost or destroyed. The letters Delilah penned with eyes full of tears were clearly amongst the missing. Never knowing he was to be a father

robbed Sylvester of all her planned barbs. He stepped closer to Delilah and rested a hand on her shoulder. She turned away.

“Now, Delilah, it wasn’t no –“

“I heard eight different accounts of your death. How was I not to believe at least one to be true? You can’t ride off in a storm with talk of Indian wars in the next territory over and say you might not die. It says right on the posters *willing to risk death daily*. You abandoned me.”

Fabric creased and unfolded over her shoulders as she folded her arms. As she spoke, she kept her face fixed forward at the wall, but Sylvester could use the mirror to see her. A merging of emotions showed on her face: anger, disappointment, defiance. Rattlesnakes hurt less than the next words out of her mouth, but both stung like poison. Sylvester would know.

Either way, I couldn’t keep the baby. I was scared,” her arms tightened around her chest, “That ol’ sawbones, Doc Sharpe, performed an – he applied a treatment of sorts – I didn’t have to worry about providing for two mouths any more. I thought my daddy would take me back in. Everything was kept quiet. Not everyone knew what I’d done to shame him. I was wrong. I owned a debt to Sharpe and with no money I could only – I did *favours* – After all that, dancing seemed like the least shameful thing I’ve done in some time. Daddy wasn’t breathing down my neck any more, either.”

There was so much for her to say, but sobs took her voice. She was weak, vulnerable. It seemed the strength of her defenses had failed again. Sylvester had always suspected the walls would come down. No amount of chill on a heart could resist. The

Express rider saw Delilah's hand slide its way up the skirt of her dancing dress. Sylvester turned her around on the stool. Wrapping his arms around her, he kissed her forehead.

"It'll be alright, sweetheart," he whispered, "I'm here now."

Kisses trailed down the side of her face to her neck. The frost was warming already. Her body flashed to limp, yielding. Then it tensed against him. Delilah pushed him away when she stood.

"Sylvester Clairbourne, if you think I'm going to be so easy to win over again, you're wrong. I've learned a thing or two since you were here last," a gun hammer clicked, "Now I suggest you find your way out."

Chapter Two

Miss Fortune dealt the right cards to Sylvester. The same wind that left him speechless granted him a second chance at an introduction to the Andalusian. Open plains left the gusts unfettered, their strength remaining at its fullest. The two young ladies pushed against the invisible force. Another power deterring Fanny, or Frances, whichever the mustang wanted to be called, from returning home. She held fast to her hat. Her sister, head uncovered in her hurry out of the house, had her mane kept in style by a ribbon that loosed and fell.

Sylvester watched the ribbon take its path in the wind currents, from the braided mane of the elder sister to where it landed in the dust. He saw it as no consequence at first. A lady as such had to have many hair decorations and wouldn't miss a little bit of fabric. Realization struck him as the wind meant to carry the ribbon further afield. The lady might not particularly care for the hair-piece individually, but she could still appreciate its return, perhaps.

“Miss,” he called to the Andalusian, ribbon in hand, “Miss, this fell from your hair.”

It was Fanny that looked back. Hair fanning around her head in the wind, she looked something like Medusa. Eyes glowing with excitement that this man had taken to

following after them. Something new in their same-old routine. For certain, the rider must have taken a liking to her. Earlier, she had the courtesy of introducing herself, unlike her chilled sister.

“What’d you say your name was, sir?” Fanny asked, eyes fluttering again, “I couldn’t catch it with my sister dragging me away.”

Heels driven into the ground from the younger sister caused the elder to stumble briefly. Another hitch in her step preventing what she wanted. Time leading up to when their father would notice them missing.

“Frances, there’s no time for this,” the elder sister said, “I have lessons to teach you.”

The longer this prolonged, the more likely it was they’d catch grief from their father. The Andalusian, mane now free to move with the wind, tugged at her sister’s arm. Simple trespasses weren’t easily overlooked by their father. There was a schedule to keep to.

“Sylvester Clairbourne,” he said, “And I apologize for keeping you, but I was hoping to speak to this lady on your arm. Y’see—“

Disappointment as slight as this meant nothing to Fanny. So, the Express rider preferred her sister. This only meant a different opportunity for entertainment.

“Oh, Delilah? She’s my sister, senior by four years,” Fanny explained, “I can’t imagine she’d want much to say to you.”

A name to place the person. It made all the difference. Despite his current life, Sylvester’s past acquainted him with learned experience. The meaning of the name

intrigued him. Could such a reserved lady as the one before him cause the same betrayals as the namesake?

“I don’t mean to bother you, Miss Delilah—“

“Miss Abbott,” her words spited the heat.

Fresh broke horses resisted. The crossbred he’d stolen and claimed to tame wasn’t happy with the situation. He expected the same reaction from Delilah and got it in spades. Guessing at the family history was easy, even if unfounded. The sisters’ mother must have died, leaving Delilah to step up into a responsible role sooner than warranted. Proof of this was yet to surface.

“Miss Abbott, then,” Sylvester corrected, “This fell from your hair as you were leaving with your sister.”

Dirt and dust besmirched the yellow ribbon, just as it done to everything in Red Butte. There was no escaping it. The effects were added upon by the grime that built up on Sylvester’s hands from hours on horseback.

“It might look a little worse for wear, but I don’t think it’s been ruined,” Sylvester looked with apologies.

For a second, Delilah’s eyes lost their stones. The second was quick and ended, the rock-wall mended. Her hand was controlled as it reached, but it shook. The bearing rein of a carriage horse keeping its head locked high, each step of the hoof deliberate. Every measure articulated by a particular master. Sometimes, the master asked too much and pushed the horse to its limits.

“Thank you so kindly for returning this to me,” Delilah said, “I’m sure something can be done to repair it.”

A horse dropped to its knees beneath him. Simple trips could throw a rider. It wasn't the flat voice the lady spoke to him in that did it. Warmth wasn't a reaction he expected. As she took back what was hers, he noticed a flash of silver on her ring finger.

Reflexes against danger taught him to react fast. Wild animals were intimidated by spread arms, it added dominance. Doing the same with a scorned woman, he hoped, had the opposite effect. It exposed every vital organ possessed in a human body to imply a certain defenselessness. Sylvester had entered her territory unarmed.

“Use some rationale, sweetheart,” Sylvester insisted, taking a few steps back, “Accidents happen when many don't meant them to.”

More careful words could have been chosen, but faced with a revolver barrel robbed his mind of sense. Delilah's face bore rage against the world, no kind thought for anyone or thing. On the morning they met, she was reserved, a lady in control. She tended the hidden fire of anger keeping it in a ring of stones. Time and circumstance allowed it to burn wildly, spread across expanses. On this particular day, Sylvester doubted it would return to the depths of conscious.

“It was irrational for me to yield to you seven months ago,” she didn't lower the handgun an inch, “My thoughts haven't been more directed by reason than they are now.”

Two more steps backward and Sylvester reached a wall in the small room. Now, a gun was between the way to safety and it was drawing closer to him. Aimed firearms weren't something he wasn't accustomed to. Friends were sparser than enemies. Never

before had he not had a means of escape. Tension in the room tightened around him like a saddle girth. Hold his breath as he might, there was no avoiding it.

“I haven’t spent these months idle, Mister Clairbourne,” Delilah said, “I’ve made friends of the nastiest sort. I bet you can imagine who breezes through this settlement. Turns out there were others willing to teach me to handle a gun. There isn’t a single soul that would miss you.”

The barrel pushed up under his chin. He didn’t dare speak in case he tripped himself into a worse fate. There was one thing worse than having a gun pointed at your person; being shot, which Sylvester wanted to avoid. One thing he’d learned as an Express rider was always to live to the next day. Always find a way to stay alive at any and all costs.

“You’re an orphan and most already think you’re dead, anyway,” Delilah pulled the revolver back, pointing it toward his heart instead. The few layers of roughened leather wouldn’t protect him, “I certainly believed the reports.”

“I’m sorry, Delilah,” Sylvester made himself small before her. Arms dropped to the sides, “You have to believe I never meant for any of this to happen.”

Words, he hoped, would make all the difference. In directing horses, an expert rider can control the beast with mere body language. When a horse won’t respond to leg pressure, reassuring them with words can urge them to listen.

“Your whispers might work on your mounts, but I’m not counted among them anymore,” Delilah said, the knuckles of both hands bleached white “You change horses and forget about them. If chance throws them between your legs again, they don’t remember you. I’m not a horse. I remember.”

While she spoke, the end of the revolver lowered toward the floor. Handguns were lighter than the rifle slung over his back, but they wore your arms if held aloft too long. Especially for a woman. Her eyes softened to a look she kept only briefly. Seven months prior. When Sylvester leaped past the defenses.

“I don’t want to remember anymore,” she raised the revolver to heart-level again.

Chapter Three

No amount of whiskey would have made Sylvester admit his hopes had risen with the sun. Without hopes, he wouldn't have to admit disappointment either, or possible defeat. That Andalusian, Delilah, she was something pretty, but judging by the left hand ring, she was only to be looked at. Just as were the carriage horses she reminded him of, unless he were to steal them. He tipped back his glass of amber-colored liquid.

Dame Harp looked out the window at the sky. The plains were wide open and one could see across them for miles. Never any surprises with a view like that. Thunderheads were rolling parallel to Red Butte. Not storms, just heat lightening.

"Must be glad you don't have to ride out in this weather," she commented to Sylvester, "Spook the horses, it would."

She leaned onto the bar nearby where the Pony Express rider was sitting. Noticing his glass was empty, she grabbed the bottle to top it off. Alcohol splashed onto the counter. He tipped his hat in thanks.

"Take your hat off at the tables or the bar, dear" Dam Harp said, "Don't give me that look. My establishment, my rules. I don't have to serve you."

She put a hand on the freshly filled glass and drew it away. Atop Sylvester's head was an old, wide-brimmed hat. Its previous owner had gone and died too early, but not

before leaving behind a young wife and a son for her to care for on her own. None of this history was of any importance to Sylvester, just the result which he caused. He complied to the dame's request and she returned him his drink.

"I may not be headed out, but other riders still are," Sylvester said, "I can't celebrate other's misfortune."

Lawless was always the word to describe the western states by those in the east. Much of what was constructed in Washington didn't apply to what was still unfounded, but it was far from lawless. There were unspoken agreements. Sylvester, whose morals were questionable, demonstrated these in the dedication Pony Express riders had for one another. He was benefiting from his reprieve of riding, but that meant some other soul took his place in danger.

Annoyances replaced the danger he could have been in. Flourishes of color at the door drew his attention. The younger Abbott girl, Fanny, the mustang, preceded echoes of *clip-clops* over to the bar. In a second, his hat was off the chair-back and in her hands. She looked it over with keen eyes narrowed as if she was deciding on a new piece of finery. With a smile, she switched her peacock-feathered hat with the worn and dirtied one. Dame Harp turned her back. It was all the flash and bang of a storm without the rains.

"I was hoping to find you here."

Sylvester crossed his brows in response. Empty chairs flanked his sides. The left front closed in with Fanny leading the charge.

"Don't worry. I may act as though I haven't an intelligent thought, but I know it's not me you're looking after."

Expectations had her hoping he'd offer a drink. The dame wouldn't sell her alcohol directly, but a few sips could be hidden. Even though Sylvester didn't know it yet, Fanny was there to do him a favor. Altruism rung hollow. Her own entertainment was her order of business. A longing for a new scent in the air.

She waited. Rolled eyes and a sigh, Fanny adjusted her skirts and tipped the newly donned hat backward, lighting her face. Sylvester hadn't yet gotten a chance to touch his second glass of whiskey, so Fanny took care of it for him.

Lack of a mother left many doors open for her. Delilah rushed ahead to close as many of them as possible, but there was only so much a young woman could do. Fanny grew wearisome of the day-in-day-out routine of Red Butte. Taken to finding adventure got her in trouble more times than one, or ten. Distanced amusement was a new experience. Fanny could sit back and orchestrate while other got in trouble, but still watch the play.

“Okay, Mooncalf. You want to get to know my sister?” she looked at him over the top of the empty glass.

Noon, and just after or before, was a busy time at the saloon. A stockyard of people waiting to reach the troughs. Patrons pushed aside when they saw Delilah emerge from the bowels of the building. Away from eyes, no one could have known what had occurred. People might have heard, but the echoes of guns weren't uncommon. All too frequent, a horse was ridden to ruin and wasn't allowed to live for longer.

The patient cattle were suspicious of the quick darts, but much more concerned with their own present lives to put much interest in a dancing girl's fleeting fancies. Dame Harp had taken the ruined lady under her care five months prior. Just like all the other girls there for various times and illicit reasons. No, she hadn't acted as a replacement for a dead mother, but as a stern authority. Logic and reality.

Adrenaline hadn't quite yet taken Delilah's mind, as it had already done to her body. Each muscle tensed and was ready to go, take off like one of the Pony Express horses. Heart racing across the open plain to the next destination. Blood pushed fast through her veins. Her head, though. Every thought was articulated and precise. Steps for this occasion had been planned in her head. She was prepared.

"Is the spare horse still in the stable, Isabelle?" Delilah asked as she came up to the table the dame was aiding, "I believe it is a fine day for a ride."

Her even, practiced voice contrasted to the shakes of her body. Mental facilities strong enough to control her tone, but not enough to master involuntary actions. Heart beats felt louder than the solitary gunshot.

Isabelle Harp reached south of the neckline of her satin dress and pulled out a brass key. Aged dulled the shine from it. No matter how many times the dame would tell the girls the spare "horse" was, in fact, a mule, they never got it quite right. *Roan and reliable*, she always told the girls when they took a moment to listen, *That's the difference with mules. You can depend on them.*

"Just lock the door when you leave," Isabelle said.

Hair that was tightly curled that morning lost its tension with the passing of the day. The waved locks had tangled amongst themselves, giving Delilah a bedraggled

appearance. She looked young. Too much like a girl child fresh in from wild storms. Naïve to the worries of the world. Embracing had never been permissible within the saloon for the girls and their dame. Farewells were never spoken. Delilah's face aged back to proper, set stern, as she gave a quick nod.

She turned, making her escape. Getting away from an ensnared life, finally. For months she had wanted to leave. Something held the cards in her hand, too afraid to slap them on the table. A single catalyst forced her to break free.

“Delilah,” Isabelle said, voice calm, “Watch yourself. There are plenty of dangers out there.”

The words caused the young woman to pause. Which dangers? Ones from nature, storms and snakes? She knew little of what the untamed world held. Or the hazards from fellow human beings? She was too accustomed to those.

Delilah only considered what Isabelle said, but didn't face the woman to answer her. Sense was leaving her as the urge to run crept to her thoughts, grabbing the reins. Flight was the one thing she wished for. If the mule could sprout wings, all her prayers could be solved.

Delilah told herself she hadn't made a mistake with Sylvester. Not this time. Others might even agree she had done the right thing. Found justice by her own means. There weren't no laws the Express rider had violated. She wasn't the master of justice, and those that were would claim she had done wrong. A grave wrong.

Hours had passed with Sylvester Clairbourne speaking with Frances Abbott. He sat, stool swung away from Fanny, cross in every sense of the word. Outside, every grain of sand reflected a different color of the sunset. Grass that broke up the plain tainted orange. A dark silhouette of the latest post racing into Red Butte streaked across the horizon. The namesake land formation, the red butte, loomed over the relay station, the shadow casted away giving the residents a full view of the sun's retreat.

Fanny should have been reined in and stabled two hours past. Her heels were kicked into the sides and pushed her luck. The heat lightning long since passed and the young lady's face matched the calm. Agitation screwed up Sylvester's face. He'd strained to get her to take her feet off the bar, walk out the door with no more words. Used every vile curse that blessed his knowledge. Steadfast, she'd smiled and flutter her lashes. Full well, she knew what she was doing, but acted as if she didn't. Tobacco spit ran down his chin, mixed with phlegm. A dainty white cloth had been held in Fanny's hand, which he used, marring it with brown saliva.

The horse had gotten away from its rider, searching out fresh oats and a warm stable. She'd directed him toward home, but apparently forgot the means to the end. Lest she had purposely kept it to herself. Promises of a chance to add the Andalusian to his stable kept him at bay. Their conversation had lasted since she first tempted the words, flicked her tail from side to side, picking up her feet in an overjoyed prance. Time slowed her, and now she rested, waiting for the next dash of energy. It was growing dark outside.

Doors to the outside creaked open enough so a single person could slip through, hoping to go unnoticed. One or two of the patrons looked up, their suspicions not yet drowned in their cups. The new arrival was covered in a long jacket and a hat shadowed

their face. Most looked back down to their sorrows. Although there was nothing determining in the figure, Sylvester could see the femininity hidden beneath the roughened leather. It, the form of an unknown body, straight-lined to their table.

“Frances Marie Abbott, it’s time to leave.”

It was Delilah. She made no indication she had seen Sylvester. His existence was of no concern of hers. She had one thing on her mind.

“You know our daddy is going to be home soon. Come with me”

The small flash of silver caught Sylvester’s eye again when Delilah reached out a hand to take Fanny’s wrist. In the hours that passed, the younger Abbott girl explained away the Express rider’s worries. Delilah wore it on the finger as an engagement ring, and it was. A smooth, thin band topped with a tiny diamond. It warded away guests, unwelcome as Sylvester was. Guests unwelcomed by Delilah, least ways, and encouraged by Frances. Few in Red Butte knew its original bearer was Mrs. Abbott, the mother. She passed to another world long before the family made it westward. Delilah wore it as a reminder and a restraint.

No suggestion was given that Fanny heard a word from her sister. She sat politely, ankles crossed, and attempted to strike conversation with Sylvester. The elder sister did not raise her voice or do anything to cause a scene, as many might. She was calm. After the initial glances of her entrance, no one gave her any more mind. Delilah intended to keep it that way.

Sylvester stretched his ears toward the two sisters, hoping to hear what words Delilah might utter to convince Fanny. The Andalusian bowed her head almost close enough to touch noses with the mustang. Fire passed between the two Spanish breeds.

Pride prevented them from yielding to the other. When Delilah opened her mouth to speak, the glinting white from her teeth made Sylvester recall how horses adverse to each other would bit and nip. A play in dominance was all this was.

Whatever Delilah spoke was unheard by Sylvester and had no effect on Fanny. Her eyes narrowed and brow crested, but she wore the same defiant smile.

“Ten minutes,” Delilah said and walked further down the bar.

Lost was the show of propriety. As soon as Delilah had her back turned, Fanny ignored the pressing manners and knees-together as she swung around her chair to watch her sister. She waited, a sliver of tongue sticking between pressed lips. As much as she casted away etiquette, Delilah held onto it, even through the jacket covering her and hiding her identity. She was far beyond hearing, but every motion and action could be seen of her and the saloon owner, Dame Isabelle Harp, who was behind the bar.

For all the restraint Sylvester saw Delilah to possess, she knocked back a glass of clear liquid with ease. She placed the empty glass upside down on the wood.

Conversation with Dame Harp started as if the two exchanged words at frequent intervals. Perhaps the sister set traps to capture Fanny too many times and acquainted the two. Or perhaps it was just the qualities of a saloon owner; setting anyone at ease in order to ease them away from their money. Dame Harp succeeded in that area all too often with Pony Express riders. Maybe, just maybe, Delilah wasn't as proper as she carried herself. Maybe there was a touch of rebel longing. There was hope in Sylvester's eyes.

Chapter Four

Fire encircled Delilah and reflected in her eyes. It surrounded her and became her. Smoke tendrils wisped skyward, blending in a haze of streams of stars. Shadows fenced her in a circle of light. The flames were both protecting and endangering.

For so long she had convinced herself if the rumors of Sylvester's death were false and he returned for her to dispatch of him, she wouldn't have to run. Life had run her down so many times, she had been left hoping for the final time she was raked over the coals. Murder was the surest way of that in her eyes. Don't flee and let the law handle it.

She spent the last ten years of her life caring for Fanny. Assuring her sister stayed out of trouble on their mother's behalf. When they moved to Red Butte, there was no organized school like back east. It was up to Delilah to ensure Fanny grew up into a respectable woman, someone their mother would have been proud of. In the off time, Delilah forgot about letting herself grow into someone their mother would have reveled in. She lost herself in a mother hen.

Three months was all it took for her to realize Sylvester had abandoned her. Hope kept her strong in wait for his return. Two months after his leaving, she found she was pregnant. Before the third month was out, the pregnancy was no longer a concern, though

Mr. Abbott believed it was and refused her admittance to the house. The mother hen was gutted of all feeling.

When it came down to it, after firing, Delilah discovered adrenaline pushed her. Defeat fled and her survival instincts wished her to do the same. Self-preservation came foremost to her mind. A deafening crack of shot sharpened her sense of mind. Isabelle always told the girls to plan on a back-up in all aspects of life, not just their dances. Always think of a way of escape. Delilah didn't think she was going to need it, but Isabelle had insisted.

She had no conscious idea which direction she kicked the mule into a gallop in when she left Red Butte a few hours before. All she wanted was to survive. She realized that now, when months ago she only wanted to die. To live, she needed to get as far away as she could. She would figure how she was going to live her rescued life later. Time passed and the mule needed a break. As did Delilah, she realized when she dismounted. She was unaccustomed to the terrain and the particulars of riding. After stumbling onto the ground, dirt a fresh taste, she recognized she was headed homeward. Toward the east.

It was no longer home. In her mind, she ran the list of what was left for her there and came up null. Her father moved her, Fanny, and everything westward to Red Butte when he took over the bank there. All relatives remaining in Missouri, her mother's family, would have heard how she shamed her father and of her disinheritance. They wouldn't want anything to do with her either.

Twenty minutes passed on the ground before Delilah moved to saddle back up. The plain extended in all directions. Nearly bare and empty, but for scattered shrubbery and grasses. On the occasion that Delilah's eyes passed over a tree, it was short and

stripped by the wind of leaves long before. The rock formation that was the butte stood resolute. It appeared smaller with the distance, but still ever present in Delilah's view.

When she remounted, the reins pulled around to the left. Back to the west, but pointed away from Red Butte. Straight lined for ten paces, then the powder ignited, but the gun misfired. A mule wouldn't gallop unless it wanted to. Another hitching post to tie Delilah back.

Alcohol lacked the effect on Delilah that Sylvester had been hoping for. No intoxicated whinnies from a horse snuck alcohol. The proud, reserved Andalusian returned to the table after the promised ten minutes not worse for wear, despite her two drinks. Her facilities were still fully about her. Not a single trace of ankles weakened by liquor as she sauntered over, still undercover. Any other proper, true lady, like the ones before Sylvester persuaded, would have slinked to the greasy floor.

"Time's up, Frances," Delilah said, her voice even more sure.

The younger sister bore the same countenance of simplicity. Growing up in the societies eastward taught her precise control. Delilah did all she could, and continued to, to reinforce these teaching. Of course, Fanny wasn't the only eastern lady. Delilah attended the same academic and life lessons. She'd been teaching Fanny these societal rules for years. She knew them better.

Although Sylvester sat for hours exchanging words with Fanny, he never gathered how this was supposed to help him get to know Delilah better, if at all. Forget about a

second glance, she hadn't given him a first. Facing away, glaring at her sister, granted him a fine view of her profile.

"Would you like some help removing your sister?" he asked Delilah, sounding assured, not hopeful.

He remained quiet since Delilah first walked in. At first, he figured Fanny would make way for a better introduction. But then, he knew better than to get between two horses in a fight. When he spoke, he expected her to spook as a horse startled by nothing does. She avoided his guesses. Side-eyes looked him over warily. He'd cleaned up since first riding into town. There wasn't a way he was respectable, but he was at least approvable now.

"I can't talk her out," he said, "But I'm rugged enough to carry her out. 'S a favor. That's all."

Defeat wasn't portrayed in Delilah's acquiescence to Sylvester's suggestion. In its place was acceptance. Surrogate mothering to Fanny acquainted Delilah with the stubborn tendencies of the former. She'd passed up being a mustang and instead locked her knees like an ass, hooves digging into the dirt as her lead was pulled. No amount of vocal persuasion would convince the younger sister to comply. Hours of life added up in which Delilah had tried. She nodded in Sylvester's direction for his help.

All it took was one swift movement and, before she knew it, Fanny was swept off her feet. A fight never came. She didn't pound her fists onto Sylvester's back. She didn't scream or protest in any manner. She never took off the oblivious smile she wore when Delilah first walked in. The elder Abbott wasn't suspicious. She took it as Fanny enjoying the attention. An idea of an ulterior motive hadn't crossed her mind.

Fanny couldn't have planned everything to turn out so well.

Even when the Abbott's lives were uprooted from the safety of the east, during the weeks of travel, Delilah always had a roof overhead at night. They would stay in saloon hotels or in the houses of bank acquaintances, good folk only. Harold Abbott ensured his girls wouldn't encounter the wilds of the west too close at hand. Such sights weren't suitable for their delicate dispositions.

After being disowned, Delilah found shelter. It wasn't the comforts of home, but it was suitable for last minute. For all the parts Fanny played in Delilah's fall from their father's graces, she made up for it. Guilt seeped into her heart. Those periodic trips to the saloon, when Fanny conversed with Isabelle Harp, netted something positive. Sure, the dame knew Delilah, she wasn't a complete stranger, but Fanny blessed the saloon with her presence daily.

But now she was surrounded by everything those buildings kept out. Grit from the ground dirtied her once pristine hands. Scratches added new designs to the metalwork of her mother's ring, previously a fine piece of jewelry. Not too long before her dress was a brilliant blue, shimmering iridescent. Now, it was an off-colored, reddened sky. As a saloon girl, a morally murky profession, she was clean in body. Those that watched her expected it. Unaccustomed to the harshness of the plains, her skin was drying in the sun. Already she could feel the cracks on her lips when her tongue slid over to moisten them.

Months ago, Delilah took too much stock in the dime novels Fanny read. She read them herself before approving them for her sister. Images of riding free and easy across the land tempted her desire for freedom. When Sylvester first skidded into Red Butte, she was sure those mental pictures were actualizing themselves. She saw her way out, but his handsomeness and charisma caught her.

Instead, she was further trapped. Even being ejected from her father's home didn't grant her independence. Bills came due and she had to pay. Dame Harp didn't board free-of-charge. The longer she stayed, the more she was held back from leaving. A cage was traded for a leash. An aimed revolver snapped the cord.

Now Delilah had what she wanted. Short sight kept her eyes too much in the present, not enough in the future. She hadn't seen past her retreat from Red Butte. Where she might end up, where she might go, she never planned for. One action seemed important, at the time, no others. Dame Harp urged Delilah to have plan of departing Red Butte, but nothing after. Good sense would direct her rightly.

What abilities did she have to offer? If possible, she wanted to avoid going back to an employment like the one she just left. No, actually. She wouldn't return to that way of life. No matter what, she would find a better means of survival. Years of her youth were spent raising Fanny. Other children could benefit from her experience.

One day at a time, though. First Delilah knew she must travel a great distance from Red Butte. In order to do that, she had to rest.

The lone tree, stripped of all its dignity, provided shelter with its trunk. Delilah searched for miles, the mule slowing as each one passed, for a better prospect. A rock

over-hang was her ideal, but she didn't trust the mule not to wander off in the night. Not to mention, such a formation didn't exist for miles. The tree was the best she could find.

It was far into the night when she had come upon her resting place, the only tree in eye-sight. Silhouettes from moon-shadows played across the horizon. They could have been anything. Visions created by her mind. Or perhaps some untamed animal. Too tired, the thought it could be someone searching for her drifted by as a cloud.

Dame Harp merely looked from the corners of her eyes when Sylvester stepped down the stairs about noon the next morning. The saloon delivered people from one entrance, the wide double doors that wandered out onto the dust street. One entry point suited just fine as Dame Harp was the only manager, in addition to the owner of the place. She sat at the bar until late hours, early hours, waiting for the last of her patrons to leave through the door or trip up the stairs to the few rooms. The Pony Express rider of interest returned at a reasonably early hour for having gone, in a way, to visit a lady.

As a fact, she watched him leave, carrying young Fanny on his shoulder, followed closely behind by Delilah. Half an hour past, he showed back up. Just about the amount of time it took to walk to the Abbott's house and back. Isabelle knew for all the times Fanny bragged of counting in order to avoid trouble with her pa.

Wearing the already damaged bar down more, Sylvester spent the best of two hours peeling back splinters and tipping back glasses. Dame Harp wrapped his knuckles

once or twice in effort to save what was left of the bar. Business was booming, but it just wouldn't germinate and bloom into a new piece of oak.

Miracle hangover cures weren't found in Red Butte, or anywhere, but there were plenty of alleged ones to be had. Acting a fool wasn't something Dame Harp ever learned to do. She displayed a whole set of her own brew of cures every morning.

Much to the dame's surprise, Sylvester passed straight by the bar and her tinctures. They weren't repellant, she thought to herself. The color may have looked like manure, but many put faith. Without a pause, Sylvester sat down at a further table, not near the door or the bar. Dame Harp took time to study him. For all he drank the previous night, he wasn't afflicted by the curse of the drink. Not that he should have. Sylvester likely slept most of it away. Still, he wasn't sitting quite right.

"Something I can help you with, dear?" Dame Harp asked.

The proprietor of the saloon was an uncompromising woman. She had to be as an unattached lady in the west. Most proper ladies didn't go anywhere without an escort of sorts. Isabelle was a proper lady, but the only accompaniment she needed was the shotgun behind the bar. The west wasn't the kind of safe a woman might be suited to, even in an established location such as Red Butte.

Stern as she was, Dame Harp was also perceptive. She'd seen Sylvester's eyes dogging after the eldest Abbott all while she was in the saloon to retrieve her sister. It wasn't the first and wouldn't be the last she fetched for her sister, but it was the first time a rider got close enough to Delilah to speak with her. When Delilah'd been chatting with the dame, she set all kinds of warnings against Pony riders. For certain, the girl needed a

life outside of care for Fanny, but it was best gotten elsewhere. The prideful child was all too certain there would be no worries.

“A special lady in your life you thinking ‘bout?” she asked Sylvester.

He snorted, suggesting just what type of special he considered Delilah. A haughty Andalusian was a sight to behold, but the pride had to be broken before they could be controlled under saddle. The saloon owner stood waiting for a spoken response as Sylvester un-holstered his revolver, taking a good look at it. Eyes down the barrel, he found it clear of debris. A smile answered the dame simply once the gun was on the table.

“Well, now. I have a mind to know what your intentions are. Maybe you’re the type to like a challenge,” – Dame Harp absently shined a glass, voice casual – “But I’d tell you, you might want to reconsider. Her daddy has a temper, you see. Either way,” she said and set the glass down, “I reckon you better decide ‘cause your filly just arrived.”

One female in Sylvester’s eye-sight was replaced with a second. In the doorway, no disguises, was Delilah dressed as a proper eastern lady. The light let in by the open door revealed dust particles, shimmering, suspended in the air. Just beyond, a carriage passed by, the wheels spinning faster as the horses were urged to gallop.

Delilah hadn’t any other plans in the saloon other than to speak with the man who assisted bringing Fanny home. No sooner Fanny’s feet touched the ground that he disappeared. He hadn’t granted her the right to thank him. Later, it dawned she could have caught him on the arm to stop him for the moment it would take. She’d been flustered. In all the years she’d been caring for Fanny, no one took time to help her when the girl was being difficult. Never before had she not had to go it on her own. It drew her in. Although Delilah would have preferred, on principle, to put a great distance between

her and the Pony Express rider, she had decent manners to thank him. Anyway, it would take no time at all.

“I would like to extend my gratitude toward you, sir,” Delilah said, but received a cross glance, “Sylvester. If you would prefer. I don’t know what sort of hellion possessed my sister last night, but she was being doubly obstinate. I’m thankful for your help in returning her home.”

Some of the strength he saw her take with her sister was coming undone, fraying at the edges like the curtain on the dancing stage. Her words were highly spoken, but she stumbled over a few. The Andalusian had come up against a rattler. Too scared of the bite, she didn’t move.

“No problem a’tall, miss,” Sylvester answered. He took a cloth to the gun still lying on the table, “I was tired of speaking with her anyhow. Glad to be rid of her.”

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t trouble you during your stay.” – Delilah’s eyes focused on the shine of the revolver as she spoke. Mr. Abbott never let his daughters set sight on a gun so close – “I can imagine you’ll get to stay much longer with the recent election of Lincoln. Everyone will be posting about it.”

“Oh, I imagine I could find reason enough to stay a while longer if the opportunity presented itself,” Sylvester commented with a meaningful look.

A hand on the grip, Sylvester sighted the revolver toward the dart board on the far wall. Eyes followed the movement of the gun with precision. Delilah, of course, had seen firearms of all sorts before. Just at a distance or under a glass case. Her father stored the family’s protection under lock and key. Something caught her fancy in this revolver of Sylvester’s. The eye of her mind could almost picture a scene. Racing across the plains,

wind streaming through her hair. Alone, save her mount. No one to follow her. No responsibilities tailing behind. No sister to watch. No father looming over. No roles to attempt to fill. Just herself and her whims.

Delilah's interest in the gun didn't go unnoticed.

"She's something, isn't she? Look at the craftsmanship, the etching along the barrel and trigger," Sylvester said, "Money can't buy a finer gun, I'd say."

He spoke about the revolver as though it was a piece of art. Reverence. It was important to respect something with such power.

Chapter Five

The night passed fitfully. Exhaustion forced sleep to set quickly, but not rigidly. Delilah's mind, still connected to the world and her worries, made her jump at small sounds. Most originated from the mule. Whether it shifted its weight, or sighed in its restful sleep.

When she wakened, the sun had long since risen behind grey clouds that masked the sky. A hazy appearance was granted to the land. Every rock was distorted. The ground and the sky blurred together. Delilah's unfocused eyes couldn't place a landmark for an intended direction.

Sleeping at the base of a tree meant roots were her bed for the night. Each found a different spot on her back to aggravate. Her legs were equally sore from being so unaccustomed to riding. Let alone riding across the prairie for miles and hours. Speeding over ground raised the hem of her satin dress, not thinking to change before she fled the scene. Rips and tatters exposed her legs to the scratching fingers of shrubs to grab and reach for her. The further she got from the North Platte River, which ran along Red Butte and limited her travel, the drier and sparser the land became. Fewer opportunities for prey animals to hide in the brush. The river was long since out of sight.

Arms stretched toward the sky, Delilah stood. Each muscle ached for relaxation. A warm bath. A warm bed. A warm meal. A rest. Something, anything that was a comfort. She wasn't seasoned to such a life.

A root tripped up her stride. Her foot dragged her back and suddenly she was on the ground at the mule's hooves. The gelding swung its head around as if to question why she had fallen, once again. Mocking her inexperience. Too tired the night before to untack the beast, the saddle provided a hand-hold. Delilah pulled herself from the dirt by the saddle girth. She steadied by grasping the pommel as she searched the saddle bags that lay on either side.

It was true; Isabelle Harp kept the mule and its tack ready for cases such as this. Most of her dancing girls had histories that might travel after them. They were all under her care, no matter what their past, and she guaranteed their safeties.

Perhaps Isabelle believed only short journeys would be completed if one of the dancers needed to escape in a hurry. Or her up-keep of the emergency supplies grew lax with security. Searching through the saddle bags, Delilah found few assets to aid her survival if she had to spend too many more nights away from civilization. A palm-sized serving of salt pork, half a loaf of partially molded bread, a canteen sloshing about with some unknown liquid, a full flask of brandy, and a few loose bullets.

Memory half-cocked at the sight of the bullets. The revolver changed holsters from the garter to the side of the saddle as soon as Delilah mounted the mule. In the ride, it was buried beneath the folds of her dress. Out of sight, but not out of mind.

In the saloon, she never kept the gun fully loaded. Usually, there were one or two bullets in the barrel and one in the chamber. The revolver never was a pressing matter in

her mind, though while she danced it pressed against her thighs. Until Sylvester walked back in, she hadn't a true need for it, except for show. It was easy to forget how loaded it was.

There was one bullet in the chamber, as always. She eyes the butt of it, where a spark would ignite the powder within. In one hand, she held the bullets from the saddle bags. Their similarities weren't enough that she would risk wrong ammunition. More than once she'd seen men victims of misfires.

One shot. That was it. None in the spinning chamber. Delilah couldn't gather how good her aim was. A little bit of target practice and shooting a man from two feet didn't guarantee accuracy. The food she found in the saddle bags wouldn't last for long. It was a risk to chance a bullet on a moving target when she was a fugitive, possibly with the law after her. Worse yet, Sylvester looking for vengeance if she hadn't killed him. Without food, she'd run out of strength. Then where would she be? What would all this struggle've been for?

It went against all of Delilah's propriety to be unaccompanied with a man. Earlier, in the saloon, the other patrons were around. *Dame Harp* was around. Fanny did similarly nearly every day and Isabelle never let harm come to her. There was nothing wrong with going to thank Sylvester. All it represented was her moral driving. A favor was done on her behalf. The right thing would be to express her gratitude. If she kept up that rhetoric, she would convince herself that's all it was.

Downhill was a fast and unpredictable ride. The first step on the incline was entering the saloon. The second step was informing Sylvester of her interest in his gun. In the third step, she tripped and tumbled out of control. Now she was far afield of safety. Hundreds of yards and a river separated her from home. All for a little demonstration of marksmanship.

Sylvester didn't ask of Delilah's keenness to firearms. Or of her assertion it was kept quiet. Both worked in his favor. He insisted upon shooting lessons, but was dismissed. The next best, he told Delilah, was an exhibition of his skills. At first she was reluctant, but with persuasion of *maybe one day you'll learn to shoot*, she yielded. If she wanted quiet, there was only one way. It championed his cause, no matter her reasons for desired silence. The only way a gun could be quiet was if it was far from the ears of civilization and its judgments.

Water of the North Platte passed beneath their feet. Crossing the river was at Delilah's persisting comments. The small ferry made it easy to go from shore to shore, but most residents of Red Butte stayed on their own side. Rarely anyone was seen on the far shore, so there was hardly reason to be searching for movement there. It was another world existing beyond a barrier. Delilah and Sylvester would go unnoticed.

Delilah kept an eye on the other shore, although she never was permitted to cross the river before. The ferryman, a strong acquaintance of her father, always deterred her. When stress from Fanny and her father built up, she longed to float across the water, by ferry or by swimming. Fear of being caught stayed her. On this day, the regular ferryman was gone and the replacement concerned himself only with acceptable fare.

Once the river was to their back, Delilah urged them to walk further, and to hurry. She wanted civilization far behind them, just at the edge of sight.

So close to the river, the ground was lush with grasses. A few desert flowers spotted the expanse, contrasting simple yellow flowers to the dark green. The further the pair marched from the North Platte, the sparser the vegetation became. Grass lost its luster and the flowers all but disappeared. There was still beauty, but lacking a feminine touch. It was territory for men. The ground changed from soft, to packed and hard, only exposed ground. Individually, the grains of sand meant nothing. Together, they built up, changing from brown to red and stood resolute above the settlement of Red Butte. Larger mountains met blue sky further away.

Delilah stopped without warning when she was as far as she pleased to be from the river. Any further and she would no longer be able to see the safety of home. A couple more steps, or a leap, and freedom would taunt her reaching hands.

She looked at Sylvester expectantly. It seemed as though he hadn't noticed her cessation. Eyes searching, leading, and body following afterward. The Andalusian picked up one foot after the other, shifting weight. She drew her shoulders back and straightened her neck to attempt a better view of the situation. Still in her dress, the fabric folds tightened around her legs in the wind.

When the Pony Express rider finally found what he was looking for, he turned his head with an uneven smile that beckoned for Delilah. Curiosity was a horse reaching its nose to some new phenomena. Cautious, but all too tempted. One foot followed the other. The heel of her shoe leaving marks in the sand. A welcoming trail for any wishing to follow.

Sylvester held the revolver out as temptation. An introduction to deviation. She didn't have to take it. He wasn't about to force her hand. That wasn't a part of the show. Then the revolver was in her grasp.

Surroundings blurred in Delilah's periphery and all focus centered on the heft of the metal resting in her hand. She'd carried baskets of food stores heavier than that handgun. Perhaps it was the power the revolver represented. The damage it could do weighed in her mind. The path to independence it offered increased its worth.

The kick-back jolted her without the gun ever firing. It was a different source of alarm. The world rushed its return around her senses.

"Delilah Martha Abbott, explain yourself immediately."

Despite an attempt to hide, they were found by the person Delilah least wanted to track her down. She half expected Fanny to trail after. Her younger sister was always looking to try something new. Fanny would have been a slight bother. Their father, Harold Abbott, was supposed to be busy at work, sorting money at the newly established bank.

The older man strode forward, authority radiating behind him. Straight lines of his path directed toward Delilah. Sylvester reacted on instinct. Hands raised to the level of his chin, he took a couple steps back, almost tripping on a loose rock. At the last minute, he caught himself in a scramble to his feet. For once, though, it seemed he wasn't the target of fury.

Nostrils flared, Delilah met her father's charge. Head held high.

"Daddy, I am twenty years old. I don't need to explain myself to you," she said through teeth that didn't open.

“You are my daughter and you live in my house,” Harold Abbott pointed a finger, “Which I might mention, has a lack of proper up-keep. You have been slacking. Also, do you even know where your sister is?”

Staying out of someplace where he didn't belong was the best chance of any survival for Sylvester. That gun was still in Delilah's hand and she hadn't been told against being careless when raged. Mistakes happened. Courage, or stupidity, of some sort took over.

“If I may, sir,” Sylvester looked toward Harold for approval, “If I'm not mistaken, your eldest daughter here was searching after your other one. Fanny, you said? I saw Delilah running off toward this direction and knew a lady of her position might find trouble or get herself hurt. That just wouldn't do in my mind.”

For a moment it appeared the banker was about to turn his wrath upon the Pony Express rider. Harold Abbott's face creased with lines of hardened emotion. His expression didn't soften, but it changed. He surveyed Sylvester.

“If what you say is true,” Harold paused briefly to look from Sylvester, back to Delilah, “Then why is my daughter in possession of a gun?”

Again, Sylvester spoke on Delilah's behalf when she was unacquainted with receiving help of any kind. The high horse she was riding stumbled and longed to settle in its stall. Pining for individual, independent strength made it difficult for her to accept anything from other. A majority of a lifetime had been built on solid solitariness. Her heart tightened and her voice quaked.

“I – I started Daddy. This is Sylvester Clairbourne. He was right. This wilderness doesn't—It just doesn't suit me. I saw something move in the corner of my eye as

Sylvester, in his kindness, was convincing me to return to town and he would search for Fanny,” Delilah explained with lies, “I grabbed his gun in haste. I don’t quite know what I planned to do with it.”

Deliberately, Delilah moved the gun to arm’s length from her body, barrel pointed toward the ground. Acting as though she wanted nothing more than to be rid of it. Sylvester took no time to retrieve it to its proper holster at his side. To convince the father of her obedience to him, she forced her body to relinquish its pride. Shoulders slouched forward beneath a head that look at the ground.

“I see,” Harold said, distrust still laced his voice, “I doubt Fanny would have crossed the river. I expect you’ll find her and report to me when you do.”

Paired behind their lead horse, Delilah and Sylvester followed closely behind.

“And after you find you sister, Delilah Martha, get out of that filthy dress and into something clean. I can’t believe how careless you are,” Harold said.

Sylvester didn’t think much of Harold Abbott. He was the type of man the Pony rider found himself thundering against regularly at each station he stopped at. All the more reason to pursue his daughter. If there was one sentence of sense Harold spoke, in Sylvester’s mind it was referring to Delilah changing out of her dress. In his preference, there wouldn’t be a clean one to replace it.

Chapter Six

Re-mounting the mule was too painful a task for Delilah to complete. One foot in the stirrup was as far as she could bring herself to do. It wasn't defeat, she told herself, when she resigned to walking. Even going without breakfast wasn't a loss. Her optimism got Delilah far enough to holdfast until the mule decided it had enough of the whole affair. Its life didn't consist of much, back at the saloon. Aside from eating and sleeping, once in a while the girls would braid its mane and tail. All the movement, not to mention *galloping* was too much for it. The human leading it might have been able to go without a morning meal, but the gelding wouldn't have any of that. The stubborn ass behaviors of its father kicked their way between its eyes. It snorted out a protest and dropped its hindquarters. Dust rose, either from the ground or off from the hair of mule.

No amount of tugging, or pulling, or pushing, could make the stubborn thing move. Sitting like a dog with front legs locked, dirt welled up around its hooves. Still, it wouldn't move.

Many attempts passed before Delilah ceded to the mule. The only want it could be thinking of was food. After all, it slept as long as she had and with a larger buffer against exhaustion. As a gelding, many of its animal inclinations were removed. It had to be food. Salt pork wouldn't do for the horse and brandy wouldn't satisfy. Not to mention,

Delilah had a mind to keep it stashed for emergencies. Gin was her preferred drink, but brandy would suffice. The bread, though it would have sustained her best, didn't look appealing with blue fuzz.

She didn't offer the bread to the mule outright. For all she knew of mule behaviors, the gelding would eat and remain where he sat. Delilah wasn't in the mood to be outwitted by an animal.

With the bread a foot in front, the mule was able to stretch its head just enough to lip it. Crumbs landed in the dirt. Delilah drew back further, just out of reach again. As the mule stretched its neck to its extents, the bread moved further and further until the mule could no longer do anything without getting up. Delilah tossed the little bit of nourishment feet away from the mule's head. The hybrid equine left a print in the ground when it lifted its rear and took a few steps forward. While it was distracted, Delilah forced every bit of strength she had into the simple motion of grabbing the pommel, with one foot in the stirrup and swung the other over the rump. Leading the mule hadn't gotten Delilah anywhere, so it seemed the only option was to ride.

"Come on, let's go," she said to the mule as she reined its head around.

Her voice was soft, no longer holding the severity of the day before when she fled. Something had taken her mind the prior day. All she truly knew about horses was what she learned sitting passenger of carriages. This was all too aware in her thoughts as she felt each bump of vertebrae shifting through the saddle. The way the back-end rose and fell, side-to-side, one hind leg than the other moved forward. It was going to be a long ride and Delilah didn't know where she was going, though the mist had risen and she could see clearly.

Delilah pressed that they return first to Dame Harp's to save a trip. Her suspicions whispered in her ears; her darling sister would be found there, at the saloon, chatting with visiting patrons. Sylvester accepted the idea with open arms. Let her reprimand her sister and have Fanny run off to the father. Get all the tangles straightened out. He could have a drink in the meantime.

No one, aside from Fanny, quite cared when Delilah entered the saloon with Sylvester a step behind. The younger Abbott excused herself from the aged, round table at which she sat with two men and one of the dancers on break. A breeze from the street ruffled the feathered boa. The haze of smoke from the old cigars parted and enveloped Fanny as she pranced.

"Are you okay?" she asked Delilah with faux-concern, "I saw you crossing the river with Sylvester."

A smile flickered the like flames in the kerosene lanterns on the walls. Daylight still blessed the earth, but inside the saloon was kept dim. Fanny took her sister's hands in her own and looked up at the face wearing features similar to her own. Once in a while, Frances didn't joke about everything that passed her way. Her words might have suggested merriment, but her actions told different. The appearance of an empty head remained, but in her eyes she concentrated.

"Just go tell Daddy, at the bank, you're safe and were in the saloon all along," Delilah relayed the planned cover-up, "Then go straight home. I'll be there shortly."

Sureness in Delilah's voice checked Fanny into place. Now was not the time. It was never appropriate to act sassy after their father was crossed. It meant ill for the pair of them, no matter who caused it. Fanny held onto her sister's hands for a few more brief moments, squeezed, and released them. Without another word, the younger Abbott girl darted through the double doors and left. In the split seconds the doors were open, the outside world flashed in Delilah's eyes. It was freedom, escape.

When the doors swung closed, Sylvester stepped in front of them, sunlight shining through the slats. The sight stunned Delilah like never before. A new realization. Something in her core tightened and the entirety of her torso seemed to drop. It was an unfamiliar feeling. Words escaped her ability to describe it. Was it simply a door opening for her escape? Or was there something more? Something she had rejected earlier? An unreasoned attraction to the man? The Pony Express rider adjusted the brim of his hat.

"Mentioning your father," Sylvester said, eyes narrowed, "You know your *daddy* also thought you should change out of those ruins you're calling clothes and into a new, pretty dress."

His tone of voice, something about it made her calm and on edge in the same time and space. It soothed her familial worries, but made her spine prick on each vertebrae. Just as when the revolver was in her hand, the surrounding area blurred black. Her breath became deep and quick without any reason she could gather, or wanted to admit.

"If you'd like to avoid running back into your sister or father, I'm sure Dame harp has a dress you could borrow. A little color would make you awful pretty," Sylvester suggested, taking a step closer to Delilah. She responded by taking her own backward, "I have a room upstairs you could use to change in."

Nothing in her good sense told her she should trust him. What reason was there for her to continue spending time with him? After all, there wasn't anything she could gain from him, except maybe a few more compliments and a trinket or two. The chance of a shooting lesson was out for the day. Wasn't that all she wanted of him? The best idea would be to return home.

But Fanny did this sort of behavior all the time. Shirk responsibilities, damn them. She ran wild over the hills like any mustang. Delilah remained fettered to the hitching posts, longing for the wind in her mane. No reason claimed the reins couldn't be loosened or cut.

Although Sylvester was standing just before her, she turned her head toward the floor, hoping to avoid his eyes. Dirt long ago roughed the shine from the boards. Varnish was replaced by the stains from tobacco spit. Particularly worn were the patches of floor in front of the door and the paths that sprouted from it and toward the bar. Stray cards, missing from their decks and throwing card games, scattered themselves under stables. Looking toward the ground was only buying her time to think, to avoid the skips in her heart. Preying they signified a heart attack and not developments of a romantic leaning.

“Which room is it?” Delilah asked.

She always admired the dressed Dame Harp fashioned herself and her dancers in. Such clothing wouldn't have been the finery her father would approve of, but she could distract herself for a moment. Put on a dress, appreciate her appearance in the mirror, and then head home. There was no harm. Her father would rant when they next saw each other, but she could revel in her secret betrayal.

“Three. Up the stairs and to the left,” Sylvester told her, “Here. Take this to wipe some of that dust off your face.”

In hand was a cloth napkin, a letter *S* embroidered into a corner in gold thread. White silk, or it once was pure white. It was aged, discolored, from a childhood to occur years before. A gentle hand creased it by forming it into a fist. Almost inaudible, Delilah whispered a word of thanks.

Sylvester watched Delilah carefully as she approached the bar to speak with Dame Harp. The bearing rein keeping Delilah in check, her head forced high, was cut. The previous day in the saloon, she was poised and stern. Hardly a smile changed the shape of her face. Now, she was a young filly again, or an old mare who remembered her youth, skipping and prancing. Finally, he saw her teeth. Not in a grimace or anger, but in a true smile. He could always take joy in watching a horse move freely.

Sounds from the patrons and the bar prevented Sylvester from hearing what exchange occurred between the two women. Or what explanation Delilah gave to the dancing girl that emerged from behind the velvet curtain. He could only guess at the outline of the conversation, but the point must've gotten across. The dancer slid an arm around Delilah's waist with a smile, drawing the proper lady in close. Bounding up onto the stage like desert deer, the dancer pulled her. Back hallways of the establishment secured a way for her to reach the upstairs without being seen. He might as well take a seat up at the bar and wait with a drink, like planned.

The best rotgut from the bar could do the work of three glasses of lower quality liquor. With what Sylvester won in the cards the prior day, he could afford to pay for such a beverage. No way simple Pony wages could cover it. The drink went down hard,

burning his throat until it settled in his stomach, churning and dissipating into his blood. The warmth in his throat spread to the rest of his body.

Rustling curtains to his left drew his attention from his empty glass. Like a horse that's heard something in the bushes, his head darted around to see what might come forward. The dancer who earlier assisted Delilah, pranced ahead on her own. He shifted his focus back to his drink, which in his distraction was refilled without notice. It was near sin for a man to sip at a drink, so Sylvester made sure to keep his reputation solid.

Failed attempts at conversing with fellow drinkers made Sylvester realize his mind was far too distracted. His thoughts drifted back to images of Delilah. Riding a fast-paced animal across the dangerous mid-west meant Sylvester always had to think quickly and rely on instinct. Any obstacle could fall in the way of the roads. The options were to overtake or avoid it. What was the option here and how should he confront it? Instinct told him evading the hurdle wouldn't work, which left him with one choice.

Delilah's back was to the door, the cloth napkin from Sylvester held tightly in her hand. She tossed the fabric onto the vanity. Again, kindness. Third time's the charm. Isn't that what was always said? Hadn't *she* said that to Fanny during her studies? Verbalized gratitude went a far distance, but it stopped to a point. She was being washed over in a dirt storm. No telling where she might end up.

She shimmied the waist band of her dirtied skirt down over her hips. So this was the backroom reserved especially for the dancers? It was early enough in the day that they dancers hadn't yet strewn their dresses across the furniture. Shows were reserved for

the evening. The only dress off a hanger was the one intended for Delilah. The Pony rider watched her shoulders as she shrugged off the linens under her blouse.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Sylvester said, his voice low.

She scrambled to cover herself with anything within hand’s reach. Her boundaries of propriety were constantly being pushed since meeting Sylvester. Half wanted to recoil, and the other half wanted to push further. To be caught wearing almost nothing by a man was far beyond inappropriate. The startle left her breathless.

“What are you doing back here?” she asked between breaths.

Lurching forward, Sylvester grabbed a hold of the door frame to steady himself once more. The fabric Delilah used to attempt to hide her skin was doing an insufficient job. The top hem fell lower than any dress cut would have, and revealed much more flesh. She was not accustomed to such a circumstance. Balance returned to Sylvester. He took a couple steps toward Delilah.

“I’ve been thinking about you, you know? So many thoughts,” he said, “I thought by giving you my kerchief, you might think about me as well.”

Silence. Stock-still, Delilah remained standing rigid from shock. The slip for the dress was only feet away, resting on a chaise-lounge. It would take a second to snatch it and another to slide it on to cover her lower half. She would be partial-decent then. Anything to hide from the leer of a man, especially Sylvester’s. There was nothing to disguise it. No facial hair, no hat brim to form shadows. Her strong will disappeared when she realized what the Pony rider’s look meant. When she understood what she had been denying to herself since that morning.

Fanny may have run free, but not this loose, had she? It was doubtful, but maybe. Why shouldn't Delilah do the same? Wasn't that the freedom she was looking for? Knees buckled beneath her, preventing her leaving.

At once, Delilah was pulled by two horses, each in opposite directions. Nothing was proper about the stirring below her abdomen. For her entire life, she had been taught to follow a strict moral code. An entire life of repression and cages. She never questioned it until recently. All she was looking for was a way out of the snares. Sylvester could be that escape. Not normally one for romanticizing, he could unlock the cage.

"Th – thinking about me?" Delilah's words hesitated, "What do you mean?"

Words served no purpose here. He could explain everything, detail by detail, but she might flight and flee if he verbalized his thoughts. One more unbalanced step ahead. She was young, but back east, where there were suitable prospects, she would have been married off in a loveless marriage by now. No hope for a proper husband out here. All this meant was she was inexperienced. If Sylvester had gotten a chance earlier to teach Delilah about the revolver, he would have taken it slow. Ran her through the parts of the gun, told her how the powders stored in the bullet ignited with the hammer click and exploded. Slide his body around hers to adjust to a proper stance for firing. The current situation wasn't any different than that, so the same concepts could be applied.

There wasn't any room for steps backward. Sylvester and Delilah remained a constant distance apart until Delilah's back was to the wall. Then the space closed in. It wasn't a clock on the wall keeping a rhythmic beat in Delilah's ears. The walls of the dressing room were bare save the hooks and hangers. The Andalusian's discarded harness hung loosely around her frame, all in disarray. Not at all serving its true purposes. A

simple cut in the leather would let it drop and free the horse. Knives tended to cause fright, though.

With no more distance between them, Delilah pulled at the rein connecting good sense and urges. If it caused a stop, momentum would keep her going. Sylvester ran a tanned hand from her shoulder, up to her neck. It was smooth and hairless, unlike the horses he was used to. The reins stretched. His fingers lingered beneath her jaw, running in circular motions, turning on their haunches like a horse. His other hand loosed the pins from her hair. The tiny sticks of metal jumped and *tinged* as they hit the floor, then scattered under benches. With one hand on her neck and the other entwined in her mane, Sylvester directed her face toward his. He found no resistance. The reins had yielded.

“I think you know,” he said.

A quick jerk tightened the leather. The reins snapped, severing all ties with good sense.

After some time, the veins of old worn paths surfaced from the dirt. Within the first hour of setting out, Delilah had the suspicion she was traveling further from civilization with each step. The drive in her mind reeled against this, wanting only the soft comforts she had grown accustomed to in the first twenty years of her life. She prayed the years to the end would know those luxuries, too.

Grasping the error of her direction, she rode to the top of a knoll. Wind twisted its way through her hair, tangles around her shoulders Delilah hadn't cared enough to set

it straight. There was no way of telling how far she traveled in that hour, but the close radius she could see around the embankment was sparse of vegetation. As the distance between her and the river increased, so did the flat, featureless plains.

From atop the knoll, she could see the river off in the distance. It snaked its way through the land, dividing communities on each of its sides. Up close, the North Platte appeared straight as a shot. From the distance, Delilah could easily see how the large, easy bends changed the direction of the river, diverting it to someplace new.

As an educated woman, Delilah knew, if she was looking for civilization, which she was, it would likely be found at the banks of the North Platte. River transport, in addition to the added fertility of the soil, made river-side living ideal. While it was possible Delilah could find a settlement further from the river, it would be dry and dusty, and she had no notion of telling which direction she might find one. If she followed the river for long enough, she would stumble upon somewhere. All she had to do first was head back toward the flowing body of water.

By this time, it had drawn closer to noon. Nothing yet in her stomach, her hunger weakened her. Hand clenched, knuckles white, around the pommel was the only means preventing her from tasting the dirt. There was no way to discern how long it would take to find sustenance, so Delilah withheld eating what the saddle bags held. It was best to save the pork and brandy for more desperate times.

At the start of her leaving the knoll, she was pitched forward on the mule as she descended the hill. The decline was bare of grass and any other manner of flora. The sun high in the sky, casting forceful heat and no shadows. It was stark and grim. No sign of life for miles left Delilah questioning every decision that led her to this point.

Halfway to the river, the small shrubs that could subsist on the smallest amount of nutrients returned. They scattered the land, dotting it like the dapples on a pain horse. Far out of Delilah's sight, a small herd of antelope stepped their way through the underbrush. When seeing Delilah, they paused for a moment, their color camouflaged them. After noting she was of no real harm, they moved on. The escaped lady never noticed. Although this portion was more vegetated, dirt widely covered the ground. She would not fall again.

When Delilah finally reached sight of the river, lush grasses cropped up from the soul. Trees, albeit small ones, grew on the banks with roots innervating the water. Minutes before, when she was still distanced from the North Platte River, it appeared a curving line of solid color. Now she was feet away, the edges of the line were ridged, like the edge of a serrated knife, the way they jutted out into the water. Colors that were once a true, deep blue blurred and separated in the greens and yellows, browns, and all the shades of blue.

The beauty of the sight was lost on Delilah. She leaped off the mule without a second thought. Her only focus was on the water and how it would quench her thirst. The first sip was bitter, but Delilah's desperation forced her to ignore it. Parched as her throat was, it felt as though the lining burned with each swallow.

After her own needs were met, Delilah reached for the reins of the mule so it might take its turn. She was surprised it hadn't helped itself. As the saying goes, she led the mule, which she often mistook for a horse, to water, but nothing she did could make it drink. The tip of its nose wouldn't even draw near to the surface of the moving river.

Several minutes passed before the reins dropped and Delilah gave up. She set the mule to wandering the area for grass.

It was well past noon and Delilah decided, for her health, she needed to rest. All factions of her mind begged her to continue on, to get as far as she could from Red Butte. Enduring through the pains of the journey and all her sores would drive her beyond her limits. If one aspect overrode the rest, it was her set desire to survive. Before too long, she would finally have what she wanted.

Chapter Seven

Sun filtered through the window slats into the dim room. Lines of shadow and light alternated across the disarrayed bed sheets. The room was relatively bare of most decoration, as was most of the entirety of the saloon. A small mirror hung over a desk; nothing else adorned the paneled walls. Next to the desk, Sylvester sat in a cracked-seat chair, waiting and watching.

The Pony Express rider rose with the sun an hour before. Awake, and without the hindrance of exhaustion any longer, the post office was the first place he visited. Plans were made for him to leave later that morning, just as the eleven o'clock post arrived. Jump onto a horse and leave town. Once those arrangements were made, he returned to the saloon room, where he and Delilah spent the previous night.

When the blockades were down, the pair quickly removed themselves to the privacy of Sylvester's room. The saloon had been busy enough that the patrons were all focused on each other or their card games or who had the most impressive story of a heroic feat. Delilah and Sylvester slipped by and up the stairs unnoticed, except by the eyes of Dame Harp. She looked toward the ceiling. Although she prayed for the best, she knew the worst would happen.

The night passed with exchanges of intimate details. Carnal secrets were shared and realized. Delilah found the escape and freedom she had been yearning for. A new courage had been awakened. And a new design for her desires.

Sylvester stood from his chair. The legs scraped across the floor with a pitched sound. On the bed, the noise stirred Delilah awake. She stretched her arms far over her head, not considering what transpired the night before. The covering sheet exposed her naked body and she became all too aware.

In an instant, Sylvester noticed the panic welling up in Delilah's eyes, the whites showing. His intentions with her may not have been pure or sincere, but alarm would cause a bad end. Self-preservation, at least, was his goal. He went and sat next to her on the bed.

"Morning, sweetheart," he said.

The fluidity of his voice calmed her and the slight wildness of it reminded her of her desires. A moral discrepancy in place of a cage.

"Delilah, I know you won't want to hear this," Sylvester said, putting every ounce of feigned regret he could summon into his words, "But I'm gonna have to take my leave of you."

Delilah sat up in bed and looked searchingly at the Express rider's face. He was going to be her ride out. He'd already set her on the first steps of her own path.

"Take me with you," she whispered.

Her slight hands reached for his. When Sylvester made no reaction, she let one hand wander to his face. Her finger tips slowly ran over his cheekbones. Sylvester pulled Delilah's hand away.

“It’s not that simple, Delilah. There’s only room for one on a horse. And you don’t have enough experience to take one of your own,” he told her, “Sides, I can’t have your father angry with me. Stealing away his eldest daughter and all. It’s best for you to just stay here.”

The look in her eyes burned like a hearth. Determination was set foremost in her thoughts and she wanted nothing in her way to deter her. Tenseness in her shoulders, she turned away from Sylvester. On the floor, Delilah began sorting through the mixture of cloths to find what rightfully belonged on her body.

Realization of what Sylvester dreaded was coming true. Ladies of lesser virtue, one he met at other rely stations, didn’t care about such things. They had their romps at night and practically begged him to leave the next morning. Delilah was new to this sort of game. The more she looked him in the eye, the stronger his urge to flee. He had to find a means of escape.

“I don’t know what you want from me. I’m just a simple man with a dangerous job. Just this morning I was told a storm’s coming in and the Injuns are restless. I’ve gotta ride out at eleven anyway, he said through a mask of bitter desperation, “If you’re worried about getting left behind, maybe this will settle your nerves.”

From the holster at his side, Sylvester removed the revolver. He set it onto the foot of the bed, pointed toward the wall, away from their bodies. Next he placed a handful of bullets next to it.

“In a town like this, you’ll have no problem finding someone to teach you,” he explained, “This gun’s special to me. I might want it back someday.”

He got up from the edge of the bed, not giving Delilah a second to respond one way or another. There was no truth in his statement. Sure, the revolver held a special place in his heart, but a gun could be replaced as easy as any woman could. Sylvester walked out the door without any intention of ever returning.

A mile. That's all that stood between her and civilization, food, shelter. She was no longer concerned with the quality or the temperature of it, just that she had something. It was barely getting dark, the sky a blaze of fire near the horizon. Toward the cosmos, it was already a deep ocean of blue.

A hazard of a guess would suggest Willow Springs station was within her sight. She veered away from the river bank not long before to follow signs and trails that led her to the little settlement. In comparison to Red Butte, which was far from highly developed, Willow Springs was worse. Its main feature was the spring of its namesake, encircled by a ring of brush of a name unknown to Delilah. A few small buildings surrounded the spring beyond the brush. Not much promise held itself there.

After dismounting, Delilah twined her fingers around the bridle, onto the metal neat the bit. She could see horses and other mules lined up at the hitching post outside one of the buildings. Their tails switched back and forth, either with happiness or brushing off flies. The gelding that carried Delilah from Red Butte wasn't the only equine to travel a hard road. But what of the others' riders? Were they from the Pony Express?

Or perhaps they were lawmen. News of Delilah's crime had to have spread. She would be tried and found guilty. Proof was in the corpse. A risk hitch in her need of supplies.

She took a step forward. Although the ground was flat where she stood, Delilah almost stumbled. When her father brought herself and Fanny to Red Butte, they left the east behind. There were a few distant relatives, but no ties bound her. Then Delilah was disowned. Her dignity torn from her. Seen in mockery by all who laid eyes upon her. Nothing held her to Red Butte.

Looking over Willow Springs one last time, her thoughts collided into a realization. Society promised her nothing. She might yearn for its comforts, but those privileges trapped her. Sure, she could find a governess or a school teacher position, but what did that really give her? Delilah may have been walking toward the settlement, but she was turning her back without any intention of returning.

Finally.

Freedom.

Works Cited

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. Trans. William Weaver. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc, 1974.

Molles Jr., Manuel C. *Ecology: Concepts & Applications*. 4th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies Inc., 2008

Tompkins, Jane. *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Author Biography

Rachel A. Carter was born on October 25, 1989 in Norway, Maine. However, she frequently likes to confuse people by dropping the state and implying foreign birth. Her youngest years were spent ambling the fields and pastures of a farm in Richmond, Maine. Although locations changed to a different farm, she remained in Richmond until she graduated from Richmond High School in 2008.

At the University of Maine, Rachel majored in English, with a concentration in creative writing, and biology. As she likes to say, her education was the best of both worlds; creative and scientific. In 2011, Rachel received the Abby Sargent Neese Kelly Scholarship for fiction writing. And, from 2009 to 2011, she was awarded the Rural Rehabilitation Scholarship from the State of Maine. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and Sigma Tau Delta.

After graduation, Rachel plans to continue working on her creative writing endeavors in the hopes of being published. In the meantime, she plans to attain employment that utilizes her unique blend of skills in English and biology. Further in the future, she will earn a doctoral degree.