

Chapter One

I don't believe I ever really had a proper name, a real name, like others do, stamped in ink on a birth certificate; but folks, that is some of the hoboes and the homeless I tramp around with and hop trains with, started calling me Sidney, which rhymes with kidney, an apt name for me, since like the function of that particular organ, I am a vessel which filters out the poison all around me.

Around my neck, burnt the color of brick from baking in the sun, hangs on a shoe-string, a chunk of iron, an old railroad spike I found, in the shape of an elongated teardrop. Sometimes I wear a bandanna, too, for protecting my mouth and nose from dust, coal silt, pollen, and fumes.

Frequently, traveling through America, from the West Coast of California to the East Coast of Maine, and visiting numerous states in between, riding in boxcars, I fall into trances where the grit and mud and dirt and body odor and aching gnaw of hunger in my mostly empty belly, the reality of my present world, falls away, and I am swaddled in euphoria, nearly catatonic with bliss, heralded with the singing of angels or celestials, I'm never sure which. Conversely, with my eyes rolling back and flickering wildly in my head, I see the apocalypse, mass human destruction, tidal waves, earthquakes, famine, and war. But my body glows with an unquenchable fervor, knowing that I was sent to this troubled world to help, to change things for the better. Voices whisper the names of the next city and state where my presence is most needed. And immediately I hop the earliest train headed there. I am sixteen years old.

I am an average boy with an average build and an average face. Easily I blend into a crowd. I possess no ID, no cell phone, no address. I have a bad cough.

Sometimes, head hanging from an open boxcar, I vomit phlegm and bile. (Because even a pure body can only hold so many toxins). In a bookbag I scavenged from a dumpster in Corpus Christi, Texas, I carry two blankets, a toothbrush, a pair of worn dungarees and a plaid shirt. Also I have a jug of water, several pieces of fruit, some packets of almonds, and a sleeve of crackers. These I purchased in Kearney, New Jersey, earning a couple of bucks helping some senior citizens carry their grocery bags from Walmart to their government funded high-rise six blocks away. And always I lug three books around with me: a King James version of the Holy Bible which a missionary palmed me one snowy night in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Don Quixote by Cervantes which I received free of charge from a book mobile in stifling Atlanta, Georgia; and the Bhagavad Gita thrust upon me by a smiling Hari Krishna in New York City's bustling Grand Central Station.

Riding the rails makes my blood sing and my spirit soar, it fulfills my wanderlust, floods my eyes and senses with constant new images. Dusty cows and horses grazing alongside of sun dappled corn fields. Hawks wheeling through a cobalt sky in the Badlands. Colorful clothes flapping on clotheslines in the ghettos. Pierced and tattooed teenagers rumbling across sidewalks on their skateboards in the suburbs. All manna for my soul. For the most part, I make friends everywhere I go, sharing food and water, blankets and stories. But I am no fool. When traveling alone in a darkened box-car, I sleep with one eye open at night, watching out for the occasional vagabond pervert or for the junkie thief (always stronger than they look!) who will roll you for the lone quarter in your pocket the minute you drop your defenses.

Right now I'm riding solo in a cargo train full of used tires, headed to Baltimore's Penn Station. I got used to the strong bitter smell of the rubber hours ago. A plum-tinted twilight zebras the box-car's floor, shining through some slats nearby. Warm Spring air wafts inside. And contently I munch an apple (plucked from a tree in Kentucky) while sitting in a corner, watching the graffitied tunnels pass by. The train trundles down the track

with a soothing rhythm. And soon the familiar tingle in my left hand begins. The sensation travels up my arm, like a line of buzzing bees. My scalp thrums. My head crawls with electricity. Colors pop. Sounds are magnified. A line of red ants I tossed a chunk of my apple to now twitter and rasp, discussing the logistics of carrying the gifted food most efficiently. My wrists and ankles begin to pulse, channeling waves of bliss so intense that I am rendered nearly catatonic. My body explodes with ecstasy. A choir (maybe angels?!) fills my ears. Tears of joy drizzle my temples. The operatic music reaches a magnificent crescendo, and then rears up, a wave of searing pleasure which buckles through my chest, igniting into a flame.

The ribbon of fire twirls before my eyes, like a music box ballerina. And then the flame fans out, mushrooming into a window above me. Curiously I peer inside. I see many white boats docked in a modern harbor. Happy tourists in bright t-shirts and shorts stroll about. Jutting above the water is a glass encased restaurant. Large letters spell out: RUSTY SKUPPER. A banner of red, white, and blue triangles reads, "Welcome To Baltimore's Inner Harbor! Join us on July 4th for our Fireworks celebration!"

And then suddenly I am jerked back to reality by a vicious kick. A bloated, crimson face looms above me. It is the train's uniformed guard, a "bull" we call him, a middle-aged man with spit frothed teeth bared. His mouth spews words: "NO FREE RIDES, BOY! WAKE UP! WAKE UP NOW!!!"

I try to move my limbs for him, but I am too far gone, sucked down down the rabbit hole. Gibberish burbles from my lips. "Skupper...B-Baltimore...please...-"

"ARE YOU HIGH ON MY TRAIN, BOY???" He kicks me again. "YOU ON PCP, ACID, WHAT???"

A new wave of euphoria, like a swell of ocean wiping out a puny surfer, renders me completely speechless now. Yet somehow I am able to lift my hand a fraction, and reach out to the bull.

The train lurches to a stop then, a horrible screech, and the bull rolls me off,

discards me like trash, over the metal edge, a three feet drop.

“Worthless bum-“ he yells after me.

Tumbling, skidding, thumping, I roll across a pebbled embankment whose sharp rocks and jagged shells scrape my elbows and knees raw. My body stops by a stagnant stream of water. My stomach contracts and I vomit.

Later, I wake in the night surrounded by strangers whose pants legs flap in the wind.

“A storm’s coming, buddy. You all right?”

When I try to loosen my tongue in my parched mouth, a fit of coughing ensues, and I wretch again. I hack until my ribs feel like they might crack.

“Easy. Easy-“ Somebody presses a bottle of water to my lips, and I drink. A concrete bridge towers above us, cars roll across it, loosening some dirt which floats in a halo of light from a nearby light pole. The particles dip and spin, imitating the cosmos.

“What’s your name?” A woman’s gruff voice asks.

“Sidney-“ I sputter.

“Well, Sid-ney, where you headed?”

“Baltimore-“

“Well this is Woodberry, a neighborhood in Baltimore-“

Her words hearten me. Because I am close to where my vision directed me.

As soon as possible I will find my way to the Inner Harbor to find the Rusty Skupper Restaurant.

“You drunk, Sid?”

“No-“

“You sick?”

“Maybe-“

Some lightning zips across the sky now, illuminating the curious faces which encircle me, a bunch of scarlet faced alcoholics and some scabby junkies.

Fat raindrops begin to plink our faces, and a peal of thunder pounds our

ears. My adrenalin flares. Should I make a run for it? I haven't got a thing to steal, but sometimes a crew like this will turn on you and kick the crap out of you just for the thrill of it.

"Come with us, Sidney, we got a dry tent nearby--"

I look up and realize the raspy voiced woman is just an over-sized teenaged girl, wearing pajamas and bedroom slippers. Her nose ring glints in the moonlight.

Before I can stop them, some hands help me to my feet, and they haul me and my sprained ankle to their tent which is tucked behind a pillar about a hundred feet away. Their tent is approximately six feet tall, and inside it's cozy, carpeted with blankets and pillows. They help lower me into a corner. My ankle throbs viciously.

A hulk of a man with a bulbous, pitted nose and a belly pregnant with cirrhosis offers me a bottle of MadDog 20/20.

"No thank you, sir...I don't drink--"

He drains the bottle himself. "You got any money, Sidney? We're trying to buy another pint--"

"My pockets are empty, but my heart is full--"

He scoffs, surveys my shabby clothes. "You a runaway? Your parents know where you are, kid?"

"The Lord God Almighty up in heaven is my father, and Shiva, the Goddess of Destruction, is my mother--"

"So you wanna love everybody, but you wanna kick some ass, too. Huh?"

The man's stomach rocks with laughter. Unlike his time ravaged face, his sharp green eyes are still lit with a child's pure spirit, they shine with amusement. "Quit calling me sir, all right? Everybody calls me Iron Pete. I worked at Bethlehem Steel for twenty years until they shut it down. Fought for my country in Vietnam. I'm the Bossman around here--"

“God is a God of love, but he is also a god of war-“ I insist. “Like Shiva, he periodically destroys the world so he can create it again-“

“You don’t know jack about war, kid, trust me, and I doubt you know a thing about love either. And as far as religion’s concerned, I believe you either shit or get off the pot. It’s Jesus *or* Buddha. Not both-“

“Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds-“

“You taking any medication, kid?”

“No, sir-“

“Besides meditating ain’t gonna help you in a fox hole with grenades whizzing and exploding all around your head. At least if you repent before you bite the bullet, Jesus might save your soul-“

“The Bhagavad Gita is a Hindu text about the art of war....Buddhists aren’t always pacifists....they can be fierce fighters-“ I add.

“Read All Quiet On The Western Front by Erich Marie Remarque if you really wanna read a book about war-“ Iron Pete yawns then. “You hungry, kid?”

My backpack with all my food and books is still on the train, long gone now, so I nod, and he presses a half loaf of white bread and several tins of potted meat from his army-green duffle bag into my hands.

“Thank you kindly, Iron Pete....but I’m a strict vegetarian-“

Huffing, he roots through his bag again and produces a slightly bruised pear and a bag of trail mix.

“Thank you-“ I bite into the pear first, the sweet juice flooding my mouth.

Intently Iron Pete watches me devour the fruit, as he scoops potted meat onto a heel of bread with the tip of a pocketknife. “What you weigh, kid? A buck twenty? A buck thirty, tops?”

“I’m not sure-“

“Christ, even with your t-shirt on, I can count every rib you got. We need to fatten you up-“ He drops a full package of Fig Newtons into my lap, and I dispatch the cookies into my mouth, savoring the treats one by one.

“What you doing in Baltimore?” Iron Pete puffs on a Newport.

“I’m needed here-“

“What for?”

“God’s work-“

“What sort of God’s work?”

“I’m not sure yet-“

“Well you ain’t helping nobody in this run down condition-“

I have no reply for him.

“You ain’t a faggot, are you, Sidney?”

“No, sir-“ But I’m a bit nonplussed by his question. “Why do you ask?”

“Don’t worry. My oldest boy is as queer as a three dollar bill. I’m just making conversation is all...You got a girlfriend somewhere?”

“No-“ Never would have been a more accurate response. Girls don’t get me. They think I’m a little weird.

“You a virgin, kid?”

I nearly choke on my mouthful of cakey fig. Snorts of laughter from Iron Pete’s crew ignite my cheeks (still baby smooth, not a single whisker yet) “Sir, I am God’s chosen vessel. I am his candle in the darkness. I carry his light-“

“Well you ain’t a bad looking kid, so I tell you what, I know a few gals I could hook you up with...that’s if you decide you wanna get your wick wet-“

More cackling and laughter ensues, cut short by a sudden squall of rain which drills our tent mercilessly and more deafening booms of thunder and the howl of a wind so fierce it practically lifts the tent from its shoddy foundation. The walls of the tent suck

inward, like an offended librarian's cheeks when you make too much noise, and in minutes the blankets beneath our feet squelch with water.

"Shit-" Iron Pete intones solemnly, lifting his feet up and back down.

The walls of the tent quiver so violently now, that we all huddle in the center.

"If the tent goes, we make a run for it-" Iron Pete decrees. "My son's got a place a few blocks from here-"

Another roar of wind and rain assails us then, whipping our tent from the ground, as easily as a hat from an old man's head. So, blindly following Iron Pete, we make a run for it, charging down a muddy embankment. Sheets of rain sting our cheeks and gusts of wind chill us to the bone (the temperature's dropped drastically). Two junkies hook me under the armpits. My feet skid through the mud. Asphalt streets shimmer with moonlight. Rainwater shushes through gutters. Puddles flicker like the surface of mini lakes running with fish. The night is a blur of smeary colors. And next, hail, the size of quarters, begins to pummel us, scattering the street like albino marbles, and Iron Pete begins to laugh like a mad man, and soon we all start to laugh, forging through the storm until we reach Iron Pete's son's place.

2362 Hickory Avenue is a small house standing on a quarter acre of land, hard packed dirt with a fire pit covered by a grate in the backyard, surrounded by mismatched lawn chairs. A soggy American flag droops from a flag-pole. Some flamingoes and aluminum pinwheels tilt in the waterlogged dirt. Breathless and shivering, we gather on the porch, as Iron Pete pounds the front door. He hammers away, but there is no answer. We listen for the creak of a floor or the hum of a TV inside, but all we hear are the raindrops pelting and cratering and churning the earth into a muddy paste. It's got to be after midnight. Silently we all pray for somebody to open up and let us in, out of the cold.

Chapter Two

Our sorry bunch is about to give up when the door finally opens a fraction, and a sour, acne blemished face appears. "Pop, what you doing here?" A meaty, balding guy with pale green eyes and a tiny silver hoop piercing each ear scowls, scrutinizing us. He smells pleasantly of scented soap or fabric softener.

"Tent got blown away-" Iron Pete shrugs.

The guy's brow buckles with exasperation. "You can come in, Pop. But just you. I ain't running no flop-house-"

"Albert, listen, I can't leave my buddies. Countless times they've helped me-"

"Your debts ain't my problem. So you coming in or what, Pop?"

Iron Pete clucks with disappointment and then he turns away from his son.

"Thank you anyway-"

Quietly we all follow him down the deluged street, frigid brown water gushing the curbs and drenching our shoes.

"Really, Pop?" Albert brays after us. "It's gonna be like that?"

Without turning his head, Iron Pete whispers, "Keep walking-" And we obey. He nearly coughs his brains out, while holding himself up by clutching a nearby fence. Unsteadily he sways.

"All right, you win, Robert Fucking Deniro-" Albert calls up the street to his hacking father. "But just for the night-"

Iron Pete ceases coughing, and we all trudge back, file up onto the porch. But Albert blocks his doorway. "Wait-" he disappears inside and returns with a jumbo cellophane pack of spanking new white socks. "No dirty shoes or socks allowed inside. Leave your wet shit out on the front porch. Everybody wears clean socks in my house-"

Everybody complies, eager to get inside where it's warm and dry. (Besides the soft clean socks feel heavenly on our freezing feet!)

Once inside, our misfit crew just stands uncomfortably around the modest (but spotless!) livingroom: a mauve sofa, two shellacked coffee tables with cork drink coasters, and an E-Z Boy recliner. We're unsure what to do next. Rain water drips from our hair, tickles our ears, slides down our noses. When Iron Pete plops down into the recliner, we all follow his lead, squeezing onto the sofa and some nearby chairs.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Albert squawks, returning with an armful of bathroom towels.
"Everybody up! I don't want my shit all wet-"

So we all jack-knife to our feet and scrub ourselves with the towels. Then Albert lines the furniture with more dry towels and we are allowed to sit.

A Glade plug-in (cinnamon apple) sweetens the air. Albert perches now on a nearby weight lifting bench, eyeing us suspiciously.

"So what's new, boy?" Iron Pete's booming voice fills the crowded room.
"Still ironing and starching your tea towels?"

"Very funny, Pop-"

"How any kid of mine could have turned out so anal retentive is beyond me-"

"*You're welcome-*" Albert mimics what he thinks should be his father's gratitude for taking us all in. His pale chunky arms are dotted with the same angry-looking acne which dapples his face.

"Don't get your panties twisted in a bunch, sonny boy-" Iron Pete jokes.
"Thank you very much for rescuing us-"

We all chime in with our heartfelt thanks, too.

One of our bunch, an old timer with a caved in face and very few teeth, pipes up,
"Can I please light up a smoke?"

“Outside-“ Albert says.

So the guy hustles out with his pack of Mavericks and his plastic lighter.

“How about some hot coffee to warm our bones, huh, cheapskate?” Iron Pete blows on his fingers to warm them.

“Vel-vet!” Albert hollers out to the kitchen which emanates a square of butter yellow light down the hall. “Bring us a pot of coffee, will you please?”

“You still stocking nights at the Giant?” Iron Pete asks his son.

“Yep-“

“You been at the Giant, what, going on thirteen years now?”

“Fourteen. Started when I was just sixteen-“

“Albert’s the guy who puts your cereal boxes up on the shelf, lined up all perfect and shit. He’s got pins of recognition, too-“ Iron Pete informs us, without an ounce of sarcasm. Clearly he’s proud of his son’s work ethic.

“I just won Employee of the Month for May-“ Albert adds.

But all the conversation careens to a halt when Velvet appears with the coffee pot and some mugs on a TV tray. Somehow she manages to keep her cell-phone plastered to her ear, sandwiched between her tilted head and shoulder. Usually girls’ looks don’t impress me much. It’s what’s inside that counts. But this girl, maybe 15 or 16 years old, is spectacular. A green-eyed, dark haired beauty with a cameo perfect face whose glossy hair actually glows, trailing an intoxicating scent, like backyard honey suckles. She has a slight build, all except for her voluptuous breasts which lightly bounce and strain her tiny t-shirt. Every pair of male eyes in the room drop simultaneously to the floor, including mine, not wanting to be caught gawking as she juggles her tray and the phone, attempting to deliver our coffee. Velvet does not smile. A cloak of melancholy surrounds her. Her lovely eyes are calloused, distant.

“Put your damn cell phone away for once-“ Albert advises her. “You can’t

serve coffee like that. You're gonna burn somebody-" He slides the phone from where she has it crooked beneath her lovely chin.

"Hey!" she protests. "I was talking to somebody!"

"Lucas can wait-" Albert says, snapping the phone shut and pocketing it.

"You can have this back when you're finished-"

"You're an asshole, Albert-" Robotically she serves us. She doesn't seem surprised or rattled by the presence of our grubby group. My cheeks flame. The closer she gets to my turn, my breath actually hitches and my palms begin to perspire. I pray I won't drop the coffee, that my cup won't just slide from my hand and thunk right against the floor. It takes all my concentration to clasp the mug when she offers it to me. I want to thank her, but my mouth is so dry I can't speak. To my mortification, she lingers before me, eyes my abraded knees and eggplant ankle, and blurts, "So what the hell happened to you?"

"He got chucked off a train-" somebody pipes up for me.

"You got an Ace bandage and some antiseptic for the kid?" Iron Pete asks Albert.

Albert just rolls his eyes.

"Hi, Daddy-" Velvet hugs Iron Pete's bear-like frame.

"Hey, Baby-" His voice is as rough and gravelly as hers is soft and melodic.

"Tell your dorky son to hand my phone back-"

At first I'm flabbergasted. How can they actually be father and daughter? An ogre and a princess. But I can see now that the color of their sharp green eyes is identical. The world is indeed a crux and a riddle.

"Give me my phone, Albert!"

"Can't. Gotta get that first aid kit-" Albert ducks to avoid a wild slap from Velvet, and then he swivels safely off into the kitchen.

"Hey, settle down, Hothead-" Iron Pete decrees, "We got company-"

"Daddy, I'm so sick of Albert bossing me around. I don't wanna live here with him

anymore. He won't let me do anything -"

"Oh, you poor thing. You got it so bad here. Your own room and computer and color tv and a canopy bed, quick somebody call Child Protective Services--"

Some of our group chuckle then.

And Velvet whirls around to face the offenders. "Shut up, you lousy Ragpickers!"

"Velvet, your brother's got a point. You spend way too much time on your cell-phone, glued to that frigging Face-plant--"

"It's Face-*book*, Daddy. And if your son would let me go out once in a while with my friends and have a *life*, I wouldn't have to be on line all day--"

"Aren't you still on punishment anyway for sneaking out and getting caught with a forty of malt liquor?" Iron Pete reminds her.

"No! My punishment was up three days ago--"

When Albert returns with the first aid stuff, he ferries it to Velvet. "You used to wanna be a nurse, so do your Florence Nightingale shit and fix him up, then I'll give your phone back, okay?"

But Velvet just glares at him, rolls her eyes, hefting the common items- band aids, peroxide, and gauze- like they have suddenly been transformed into foreign objects, incomprehensible to her.

"That's okay--" I insist, finally able to speak a little now. "My ankle's f-fine...--"

"Humor my daughter, Sid. It's been a while since she volunteered at the hospital, so she could use the practice--"

"You can practice on me anytime, Velvet--" A ghoulish-looking junkie pipes up, cackling. His sunken cheeks are two grotesque cavities. "I'll definitely volunteer for a sponge bath--"

Like a cobra striking, Iron Pete leaps to his feet then. He karate chops the junkie in his jugular, and the junkie just gasps, slides off the sofa, and flops to the floor, unconscious.

“Oh shit-“ Albert shrills, jumping away from the body sprawled at his feet.

“I *knew* this was a bad fucking idea-“

Iron Pete lumbers over, checks to see if the guy’s still breathing. “He ain’t dead, just passed out-“

Nobody but Albert seems concerned, as if this type of thing occurs all the time. In about ten seconds, the junkie sputters back to life. But he doesn’t even have a chance to sit up and rub his bloodshot eyes, before Iron Pete straddles him, clenching his mitt around the guy’s scrawny neck, and squeezing until the junkie’s eyes just about pop out. “Nobody disrespects my daughter-“ Iron Pete rants. “You hear me, Tully?”

“Sorry, Bossman-“ Tully croaks. “I was just kidding-“ He wheezes until Iron Pete releases his grip.

“Apologize to Velvet-“

“Sorry, Velvet-“

“I can take care of myself, Daddy-“ Velvet protests. Then she swishes by me, snatches her phone from Albert’s shirt pocket and races to the top of the second floor stairs with it. She hollers down, “And I don’t need a bodyguard who acts like a gorilla!” The small house resounds with the angry slam of her bedroom door.

“All right. Enough drama for one night-“ Albert barks. “Everybody’s going to bed right now, or you can all just get the hell out-“

Iron Pete yawns elaborately, something he does frequently I’ve noticed. “Okay, lights out, fellas-“ he commands. “And I want everybody on their best behavior in my son’s house tonight. No funny business-“

I end up bunked with Iron Pete in an attic we can barely stand up in, sleeping on some scratchy carpet with balled up laundry for pillows. It's stifling hot, our one window, paint sealed shut. My bandage wrapped ankle (Iron Pete's handiwork) throbs miserably. Yet still I am grateful for this dry shelter.

"You sleeping, kid?"

"No, sir--"

"Me neither. Christ it's hot as balls up here....I ain't sweated this much since fucking Vietnam--"

"What did you do over there?"

"Battalion 173. Paratroopers. I was a demolition expert--"

"How long were you in for?"

"Got drafted at 18. Served four years. Honorable discharge. PTSD--"

"What's PTSD?"

"Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. You know, nightmares, flashbacks, panic attacks, the works--"

"Are you better now?"

"More or less. I still see a guy at the VA hospital sometimes--"

For a bit, we lay in silence, listening to a lone cricket chirping.

"Why's your daughter so unhappy?" I venture, then quickly tack on, "-if you don't mind me asking--"

A long sigh puffs from Iron Pete's generous mouth. His bottom lip is as plump and moist as a snail. "Her mother died in a car crash last year--" he admits softly.

"I'm sorry--"

"Velvet used to be such a happy kid...a straight A student....always wanted to be a nurse just like her mom....but after her mother died....Velvet quit school...now she's a

goddamn fry girl at McDonald's with a mechanic boyfriend who treats her like a doormat--

"And you're okay with that?" I'm a bit incredulous, since him choking Tully nearly to death for insulting his daughter is still fresh in my mind.

"What can I do? She thinks she loves the bozo...I can't take everything away from her..."

Quietly I ponder his point.

"What about your folks, Sidney? Where are you from?"

"I have no parents. I am time grown old--"

"You are full of baloney, that's what you are...Goodnight, kid--"

After five or six hours of fitful sleep (enduring Iron Pete's dreadful snores), I wake sore, with grizzled hair and a hunger plagued belly. I have a pounding headache, too.

Downstairs in the kitchen, there is oatmeal and cantaloupe for breakfast and more coffee. Hungrily, we chow, ignoring a grim faced Albert who steeps a teabag. His Giant uniform is immaculate, pressed, and starched. "I sent your amigos packing first thing this morning. You and the kid can crash for another night or two. Just cause the kid looks like death warmed over, and I don't want it on my conscience if I set him out on the streets and he croaks--"

Iron Pete chuckles, nods, slurping black coffee.

"I'm headed to work. Giant called. They need me to fill in for somebody--"

"Where's my daughter?"

"Outside, at the Pit with Lucas--"

"Doing what?"

"I think Lucas has some cans of spray paint. He wants to "tag some shit"--"

Albert rolls his eyes.

"Like what shit?"

"Who knows with that asshole?"

“Come on, Sid, let’s check it out-” Munching a Pop Tart, Iron Pete leads me outside. The air is clean and fresh, purged by last night’s rain. Leisurely we walk (with me hobbling some) across to the metal grate covering the firepit which we passed by yesterday. The mud sucks at our tennis shoes.

A group of teenagers with backpacks, including Velvet, the only girl, has congregated. A sharp scent of unripe mulberries assails my nose, as I watch the teens chatter and goof off.

A lean, but muscular boy with car grease stained hands separates from the pack, greets Iron Pete with a hearty backslap. This boy’s eyes are an unearthly clear-aqua, like a TV vampire or a serial killer. “What’s up, Mad Dog?”

Iron Pete just glares at him, his own green eyes flashing. “You know I don’t go by that nickname anymore. Not for over 40 damn years-“

“But it’s so cool. My Dad told me all the stories about you and him in Vietnam. Blowing up Gooks and shit. My Dad says you were some bad ass-“ The boy has two sleeves of tattoos (including grenades, skulls, and tombstones) covering his arms, showcased by a white wife beater. His perfect biceps bunch and roll as he moves. His thick hair is fashionably messy, and his arresting eyes are rimmed with lashes as pretty as any girl’s. Clearly he is the neighborhood heart throb.

“That’s ancient history, Lucas-“ Iron Pete tells him.

Lucas. It figures. Velvet’s boyfriend is as robust and handsome as I am sickly and plain. My stomach drops and a jet of acid unfurls in my chest, nearly reaches my throat.

Lucas turns his attention to me then. He winces. “You got AIDS or what, man?”

Iron Pete snaps, “Shut it, Lucas. Sidney’s a friend of mine, and you will treat him with respect-“

“Daddy, can I go for a walk with Lucas down to the train tracks?”

“You know painting graffiti on public property is against the law-“ her father

reminds her.

“We’re not touching public property. We found some old cement walls down by the tracks, and we’re gonna tag those. Please-“

“Only If I go with you to keep my eye on you delinquents-“

“We don’t need a chaperone, Daddy-“

“I’m going...end of story-“

Velvet huffs. “You always ruin everything-“ But his daughter’s insult pings off Iron Pete’s back like a toothpick off a suit of armor.

“Come along, Sid-“ Iron Pete invites me.

“I can’t, sir....I need to find the Inner Harbor...I’m looking for this restaurant called the Rusty Skupper....Have you heard of it?”

“Yeah....the lightrail will take you there....But what’s your hurry?”

“It’s where God needs me-“ I whisper to him to avoid the teenagers’ ridicule.

“Listen, kid, you need to rest for a few days...I can’t just let you wander off in this rundown state-“ Firmly he palms my shoulder blade, propelling me in the direction of the others.

Battling knee high weeds, prickly burrs, fussy bumble bees, and manic grasshoppers, we finally arrive safely at our destination. The cement wall is about ten feet high and thirty feet long. Lucas rips at a tangle of dried vines which cling to it.

Awkwardly I stand off to the side, watching everybody unload their bookbags.

“Time for street bombing!” Lucas pumps up his group.

But when Velvet picks up a paint can, Lucas snatches it away. “No girls allowed in G Crew, you know the rules, baby-“

“But I wanna paint, too-“ Velvet protests.

“What’s G Crew?” I ask.

“Geffen Crew. It means Fighting Crew-“ Lucas informs me. “I’m Mask-“

Then he points out some other members. "And that's Raven, Daver, Sinister, and Jam 1-"

"G Crew ready?" Lucas goads.

Simultaneously the boys stack their hands in a pile, like a totem pole. They holler, "G Crew! DST!!" Then they set to work.

"What's DST?" I somehow work up enough spit in my mouth to ask Velvet.

"Don't Sweat The Technique. It's their stupid motto. It means they have no clue what they're doing-" She snags a few cans of paint again. "Come on, Sidney, we'll paint the other side-"

"Only two cans each-" Lucas humors her now. Intently he is spraying his own tag name: MASK across the wall.

I choose one bright red paint and one gold with glitter particles. Velvet has chosen royal purple and turquoise blue. Plus she sneaks a can of black. Iron Pete follows us to the other side. We all stand staring at the blank space.

"Any ideas?" Iron Pete scratches his head.

"A rainbow?" Velvet volunteers.

"How about a unicorn, too, Strawberry Shortcake?" Iron Pete teases.

"Shut up, Daddy-"

"How about Krishna in all his glory riding an elephant and flying above them a man-faced bird with multi-colored wings?" I offer.

Iron Pete sucks in a laugh. "Sure...Get to it, Picasso-"

"Okay, Velvet?" Her opinion counts, too.

"I don't care...your idea sounds kind of cool...But first lemme show you the basics-" Velvet plucks some small plastic objects from her short's pocket. "This little baby is called a "fat cat jammie". You replace the original paint cap with it, and it'll let you release all the paint at once in about 30 seconds-"

"Okay-"

“And this one is a “male” cap....and this is a “female” cap....you fit the two together and you get a more even paint flow-“

“Got it. Thank you-“

As I set to work, they watch. I let the soft breath of the day’s Summer breeze, the whisper of the universe, guide me. For over an hour I work. Several times I offer to let Velvet join in, but she just shakes her head. “No....you’re doing great...keep going-“ Her kind words crackle like electricity through my fingertips, steadily pumping paint.

Iron Pete finds me a discarded milk crate to stand on so I can reach the entire wall. Lastly I highlight my work, embellishing it with the gold glitter paint.

When I step away to get the full effect of my work, I bump into Iron Pete and Velvet, both gaping.

“Holy shit-“ Iron Pete’s coarse mug is lit up with excitement. He whistles with admiration. And for once, Velvet is speechless.

“Hey, shithead...I mean, Lucas-“ Iron Pete yells over the wall. “I think you need to see this!”

“See what?” Lucas hollers back.

“LUCAS!” Velvet calls.

When he rounds the corner, Lucas stops short and gawks. “What the fuck?” He mutters in disbelief, drawing closer and closer to my painting.

It covers the whole wall. A red-robed Krishna in all his splendor rides a blue elephant adorned with exotic purple flowers and shimmering gold bells. Krishna’s head is surrounded by a pulsing cosmos. A beak-faced man with a peacock’s body soars above them. And over it all arches a glorious rainbow.

“Sidney’s fucking crazy-“ Lucas says.

“I think it’s wonderful-“ Velvet asserts. She actually smiles then, the first smile I’ve seen from her. Her eye teeth protrude just a fraction. (Didn’t even the ancient Persian

rugmakers insert a single flaw into their perfect rugs so as not to offend the Gods?)

Lucas spears her with a dark look.

“You should let Sid join G-Crew, Lucas-“ Velvet suggests.

“We got enough members-“

“But first you need a tag, anything but boring old Sidney-“ Velvet rambles on excitedly.

“How about D.Q?” I speak up.

“What’s D.Q?” Somebody asks.

“For Don Quixote...he’s one of my heroes-“ I admit.

“Don’t you mean D.Q for Dairy *Queen*?” Lucas jibes.

Some of the teens snicker.

“Shut up, Lucas-“ Velvet says.

Now Lucas cuts me a dark look, too.

“I read some of Don Quixote last year when I was still in school-“ Velvet recalls. “Wasn’t he a knight or something?”

“Don Quixote dedicated his life to knight errantry, traveling the world destroying injustice wherever he found it, righting wrongs-“ I tell her.

“Yeah...but wasn’t he also delusional and mad as a hatter, too?” Lucas interjects.

“Crazy is a relative term-“ Iron Pete speaks up. “Because crazy will get you through the insanity of war-“

I agree with Velvet’s father. “Who can say for sure what is good and what is bad? In this world, there are no absolute truths-“

“Just ‘cause you’re paranoid, don’t mean they ain’t after you-“ Iron Pete chimes in.

“Screw this. You’re all fucking nuts-“ Lucas huffs. “Come on, Velvet. We’re outa here-“

Everybody watches to see if Velvet will leave with Lucas. I really hope she won’t.

“Daddy, I’ll be home for dinner-“

“You two help clean up all these empty paint cans before you go-“ Iron Pete insists. “And Velvet, I want you home by five o’clock sharp. Set your cell phone-“

“I left my cell phone home on my charger, Daddy-“ Velvet ferries some trash over to a mesh can bolted to a tree about 20 yards away.

“She’s got a watch-“ Lucas assures Iron Pete.

“You’ve been dating my daughter...what...six months now, bozo? And you *still* don’t know that her watch is broken?”

“How would I know?” Lucas complains.

“Because it was her *mother’s* watch....you know... her *mother who died* in a car crash last year....Jesus, Lucas-“

“She never told me about her mother’s watch-“

“The watch that stopped at precisely 8:31 PM....the moment her mother’s car flipped over the guard rail-“

“If it’s broken, then why’s she still wearing it?” Lucas asks, genuinely perplexed.

“Because it was her *mother’s*....Christ, you really are an asshole-“ Iron Pete walks away from Lucas.

As soon as Velvet returns, everybody clams up. “What’s wrong?” she asks, sensing the tension.

“When you gonna dump this jerk?” Iron Pete asks his daughter.

Angrily Lucas kicks an empty paint can which pings off a tree trunk, boomerangs back and clocks Iron Pete right in his forehead. For a moment, it stuns him. Just long enough for Lucas to jack rabbit away. And, of course, Velvet goes chasing right after her clueless boyfriend.

Iron Pete fingers the stripe of blood above his eye. “I’m gonna kill that little fuck up when I catch him-“He swears.

Chapter Four

Around here, Friday night is “Grill Night”. So an aproned Albert labors over some slabs of ribs, hamburgers, chicken, hotdogs, corn on the cob, and baked potatoes basting above his firepit. Apparently he gets a pretty good discount at the Giant. Some sandaled neighbors lug over coolers full of Budweiser bottles sunk in discs of ice. Every lawn chair is occupied. Some of Iron Pete’s buddies have returned, hoping I guess, like me, for some free grub.

In the grass nearby, Velvet and Lucas share a blanket. Earlier Lucas returned with a bottle of Strawberry Boonesfarm for Iron Pete and apologized to him for accidentally whacking him in the head with the paint can yesterday.

Wine cradled at his side, Iron Pete’s bulky frame strains a lawn chair which is latticed like an Easter basket. His rump nearly grazes the ground.

The sun is setting in a sherbet colored sky, and some fireflies sparkle randomly. Everybody sees Lucas slipping sips of his bumper of Colt 45 to Velvet, but nobody says anything to her father. Every time I catch Lucas tipping the bottle of malt liquor to Velvet’s teenaged lips, my blood boils. But snitching is a deal breaker around here. Snitches get stitches, I heard a boy parrot earlier. I want to jump up and knock that beer bottle right out of Lucas’ hand. But I bide my time.

Everybody tosses horseshoes until dinner is ready. I just sit and watch since nobody invites me to play. I notice Velvet is really giggly now and stumbling around. Iron Pete, too, is half lit, his eyes partially drooped as he gnaws at a slab of ribs. BBQ sauce rims his lips and spatters his t-shirt. Disinterestedly I pick at an ear of corn and a foil wrapped potato.

I’ve still got my eye on Velvet when a strange girl struts over and sits

right beside me. She wears too much make-up and her hair is as frazzled as an over-worked broom. A small sore crusts the inner corner of her lower lip.

“Hey, Sid-“ she purrs. “That’s your name, right?”

“It’s Sidney-“ I correct her.

“You having a good time, Sidney?”

I don’t answer her. I crane my neck to see Velvet.

“Where you from?” Why won’t this uninvited girl just go away?

“I am time grown old-“

“What?” she cocks her head with confusion.

I strain to see Velvet kissing Lucas.

“My name’s Cindy. Iron Pete told me you were looking for a date-“

Lucas’ hands are all over Velvet now.

“I’m broke-“ I mutter, hoping this will turn the hooker away.

“Iron Pete paid-“ she whispers hotly in my ear, rubbing my thigh now with her ragged fingernails.

Is that Lucas’ hand crawling up Velvet’s t-shirt?

I shove the hooker away and limp over there.

“Hey!” I shout. My nerves jangle, and my voice cracks. “Iron Pete said to knock it off-“

Simultaneously the mused lovebirds look over to where Iron Pete is snoring away, content as a sloth.

“He told me to look after Velvet while he naps-“ I improvise.

“Fuck off-“ Lucas snaps.

“I can wake him up and you can ask him for yourself-“ I challenge.

“Velvet’s none of your concern, Dairy Queen-“

“Such public vulgarity towards a lady is reprehensible-“ My body vibrates, every cell

at full alert, sensing the impending showdown. I'm no fighter, but when a lady's honor is at stake, I will not back down.

Lucas pops to his feet. Menacingly he stubs one finger into my chest. "You willing to fight for her "honor" then, you fucking freak?" The color in his cheeks spike, and his alcohol-fumed breath reeks.

My heart hammers, and my fists clench. Yet my head feels like a balloon, detached and lofted way up high, high above us all, watching curiously down, even with some amusement, at our puny teenaged antics. The sky is bruise colored now and darkening quickly to night. Fireflies dip and whirl and erupt.

Like a cabal of hungry wolves, G-crew cinches into a ring around Lucas and I.

Suddenly I laugh out loud which enrages Lucas further. (Sometimes laughing will deflate my fear).

Lucas shoves me, and I lurch, catch myself from falling, twist my injured ankle even worse and grimace from the pain. But I'm still laughing some, too.

"S-stop....Lucas...-" Velvet tries to get up from her blanket, but she just falls drunkenly back down.

"What's so fucking funny?" Lucas rages at me, his even features contorted now. Some droplets of his spit fleck my face, and his eyes nearly loom out of his head. "Take the first punch, bitch-"

"He really sees who sees the highest lord standing equal among all creatures, undecaying amid destruction. Seeing the lord standing the same everywhere, the self cannot injure itself and goes the highest way-"

A sea of puzzled faces surround me. "We are all the same-" I explain to them (just as Krishna counseled Arjuna). "So what's the point of hurting your own self?"

"Deck him, Lucas-" Somebody shouts.

Suddenly the ground tilts, and I find myself knocked off my feet, my mouth

filling with the taste of iron and salt. A trickle of blood slithers down my chin.

Velvet crawls to her passed out father, tries desperately to shake him awake.

Meanwhile, I curl up, shield my face and head, and brace myself for G-Crew's impending kicks and blows.

Then I hear a glorious sound. But it's not Iron Pete. It's Albert's high pitched voice, braying, "Break it up! Break it up! I want all you sorry mother fuckers off my property! RIGHT NOW!!!"

I look up to see Albert clutching a baseball bat. "The cops are on there way. So anybody holding drugs or underage who's been drinking needs to scam!"

Albert doesn't have to ask twice. G-crew disbands quickly, following Lucas, loping down back alleys, and the visiting neighbors grab up their coolers and disappear into their nearby rowhouses.

Panting with anger, Albert saunters over to Velvet who now clings to a mulberry tree. "Get in the house-" he commands.

Her head dips and lolls. "S-screw you...Fat Albert....you ain't n-nobody..." she hisses. From drinking, her face has a blurred and frightening look.

"Save your sass, Missy. You need to get your shit together or you can go live out on the streets with your bum father-" Albert hooks Velvet under one arm, manages to separate her from her tree, but she sags, flopping, swatting blindly at him now.

"Help me, Sidney-" Albert grunts, trying to avoid his sister's windmill of blows.

With some difficulty I struggle to my feet. I drape Velvet's arm around my neck, and we ferry her, like an injured war victim, back into the house.

"What about Iron Pete?" I ask Albert.

"Fuck him. Let him sleep it off-"

Awkwardly we drag Velvet up to her bedroom. It is a girly room with a canopy bed and a gaggle of stuffed animals scattered about. She is a dead weight now, passed out

cold, so we hoist her into her bed. Tears sop her ashen face, and her silky hair is a tangled mess.

“What’s wrong with her?” I ask Albert.

“She’s a wreck. But believe me there’s gonna be some major changes around here. And maybe you can help me-“

“How?”

“What do you think about this place, Sidney?”

“The “Pit” is a festering pod of iniquity-“ Without hesitation, I answer him.

“Exactly right-“ Albert concurs. “You’ve got more sense than most around here. You don’t curse, don’t smoke, don’t drink, don’t cause no trouble. You want a job?”

“At the Giant?”

“No.....watching Velvet-“

“What do you mean?”

“I’m putting her on lockdown and forbidding her to see Lucas....I’ll give you free room and board in exchange for making sure she doesn’t sneak out of the house to see him-“

“And what if she does?”

“You call me-“

“On what?”

“I’m confiscating her cell phone, too. You can use that-“

“She’s not gonna like it-“

“What choice does she have? Besides her homeless father, I’m the only family she’s got. I promised our mother-“ Albert’s chin buckles, showing a glimmer of raw emotion which breaks through his usual veneer of flippant sarcasm, “-if anything ever happened to her, I’d take care of my sister-“ He presses his eyes with his fingertips to squeegee away a few tears. Then he pinches the bridge of his nose like he’s getting a crushing migraine. “The court made me Velvet’s legal guardian a few months after our mom died. Our father was

found unfit....he's a bad influence on Velvet....I'm asking him to leave in the morning--"

"Where will he go?"

"Don't worry about him. Pop always lands on his feet...You in, Sid?"

"How can I refuse coming to the aid of a lady in need?"

Albert relocates me from the attic to the guestroom right next to Velvet's bedroom. My room is small but a lot more comfortable than my former quarters in the attic. There's a single bed with a chenille, lemon-hued blanket, wrinkle free and fabric softener fresh. Also I have a dresser whose top gleams, a perfectly shined mirror, and pristine hardwood floors, entirely dust bunny free. Some silver-framed family photos spread out on a lace doily: a hearty Iron Pete in a dress shirt, holding a prepubescent Velvet's hand in front of a church. Her beaming mother, a pretty brunette with the same slightly protruding eye teeth, holds Velvet's other hand. Her first communion, maybe? Velvet is solidly anchored between her two adoring parents, with the blissful expression of a well loved child, looking happier than I have ever seen her. Settling into bed, a luxury I have been without for countless months, I vow to help Albert return Velvet to this happy state.

That night I dream of droves of invading aliens with super-human strength, skin the color and texture of the human heart, veins pulsing along the surface of their bodies with the viscosity and glimmer of liquid mercury. Like a cancer, they infect the earth, cannibals feasting on human flesh, destroying our world. I buck awake, sob, and tremble. Warily I slog from my bed to the dresser to yank a Kleenex from a decorative box rimmed with raw macaroni painted copper (a craft project of Velvet's from elementary school?) I switch on a lamp covered with a tasseled lamp shade. In the mirror, I appear gaunt and deeply forlorn. I dab at my tear sluiced eyes with the tissue and a hunk of it adheres to one of my eyeballs. Blinking furiously just worsens the situation, trapping the kernel of paper beneath my eye-lid. The gummy Kleenex is like glue sealing my eye shut! It swells and burns. But I don't want to wake Albert and ask for his help, because I fear he might think me incompetent and revoke our deal. I'm not sure what to do, when a soft tap at my door arrests my attention.

"Who is it?" I whisper.

"It's Velvet. Let me in--"

So what can I do but open up the door for her?

“What’s wrong with you?” Her perfect green eyes, as hard and complex as emeralds, pin my deformed eye with scrutiny.

Exhausted, I just blurt out my dilemma and plead for her help.

“Why should I help my brother’s spy?”

“Albert told you?”

Velvet’s satiny skin is pearlescent. She is no less a goddess than a budding Venus or Aphrodite. Yet her lithe body emits an odor of cheap beer and cigarettes: a must of white trash ordinariness, a decline even into tawdriness, which lays heavily upon my soul. The untimely death of her mother droops Velvet’s young and fragile shoulders. And faint half moons, the color of aging piano keys, rim her eyes. With an alcoholic father and a peon for a boyfriend, Velvet is fate’s marionette, headed I believe for sheer disaster. “I don’t need no guard dog...Jesus, I mean you could be a freaking ax murderer for all my brother knows-“ she rants in her high fast girly voice.

Her rejection only fuels my desire to rescue her. “I just want to help you-“ I offer lamely.

“First of all, you don’t even know me. So stay out of my business...second, there’s no way I’m staying cooped up in this hell hole for an entire month...so let’s work out a deal-“

Eye throbbing, I listen.

“I’ll take care of your stupid eye if you bend some of my restrictions-“

“Bend or break?”

“Bend-“

“How far?”

“I just don’t want to be grounded all Summer-“

“What about Lucas?”

“I’m taking a break from Lucas. Not cause my busybody brother says so. It’s *my* choice. I’m sick and tired of Lucas acting like a clown and taking me for granted. He needs to grow up-“

“I agree-“ I say. My eye is now puffed up as a golf ball. Between my split lip from Lucas earlier and my Quasimodo eye, I imagine that I’m not exactly a pretty sight.

“Come with me, Sidney-“

Inside Velvet's bedroom, she sits me down on a wicker chair with a pink seat cushion. Her room smells citrus-y, some kind of lotion or perfume. From a nightstand, she pulls out a small blue bulb syringe, a pair of tweezers, some cotton balls, and Q-tips. "I clean the wax out of Albert's ears twice a week or else he'd be stone deaf-" she says.

Then she sets to work, hovering above me so that her breasts graze my nose. I close my one good eye, while she ministers to the bad one. Her small hands tilt my head back. Her touch flusters me. My ears burn and the tips of my fingers tingle. My heartbeat smashes my eardrums. I concentrate on breathing steadily, in and out. The cold tweezers nip the skin, and deftly she tugs, flipping my eyelid back. Gently pumping the syringe, she hoovers out the clot of tissue, bit by bit. And gradually my eye re-opens. I'm disappointed, crushed even, when she's done, when her soft hands leave my face. At precisely this moment, my life as a loner suddenly appears so paltry to me. It disheartens me to realize how touch deprived I am. Yes, I earn a hug now and again from those whose lives I touch with God's grace and wisdom, yet nothing compares with this sweet intimacy with Velvet, these shared moments with her which soothe and nourish my body. I soak up her touch like a dry sponge snatching water. "Thank you-" I mumble.

Then, just for something to do while my heartbeat returns to normal, I rise and study a portrait of Velvet's mother. Her hair is sunlit as she reclines on a porch swing. But her smile is a bit pinched, as if maybe she doesn't want her picture taken. Nonetheless her eyes sparkle with life, with true happiness, as she clasps a glass full of wine. This photo hangs front and center on a corkboard, adorned with some of Velvet's other cherished items, birthday cards, movie and concert ticket stubs, some dried flowers, etc...

"That's my Mom-" Velvet says.

"She's very pretty-"

“Her and my Dad met at the VA hospital where my mom worked-“

I don't push her for details, hoping she'll keep talking.

But she clams up, strolls over to a tiny stuffed tiger, wearing a diaper somebody fashioned from a napkin and scotch tape. “This is T-lip-“ she cuddles the baby tiger to her cheek. “Isn't he so cute?”

I just nod, as she introduces the rest of her menagerie, including a giant black panther she calls N-cat.

“Where'd you get all these?” I ask her.

“Lucas....He isn't always an asshole-“

My heart sinks some. “What's N-cat stand for?”

“When Lucas won him for me at the Timonium fair, he let me pick out whatever stuffed animal I wanted. When I picked this one, he said why you want this big nigger cat? He was just joking though...He ain't prejudice at all...some of his best friends are black...so we nicknamed him N-cat-“

“What about T-lip?”

“The card he came with said his name was Terrence, but see the stitching on his lip is kinda crooked, like maybe he's got a harelip, so Lucas started calling him T-lip-“

She pets and coos over her stuffed pets while I peruse a shelf full of small plastic bubbles filled with trinket prizes: mood rings, silly putty, green slime, and lollipops with bugs in them.

“Almost every day Lucas buys me a little present...even if it's just from the bubblegum machine at the Giant....he's not as bad as people think...-“

Quietly I digest this new information about Lucas.

“Sidney, when Albert leaves for work tomorrow, me and you are going out...I don't really care where...-“

“Can you please take me to the Inner Harbor? I'm looking for this restaurant called

the Rusty Skupper-“

“That’s a good idea. We could apply for jobs. I quit McDonalds yesterday. Threw those stinking uniforms in the garbage. Daddy’s right about one thing. I can do better with my life-“

“I have some dishwashing experience-“ I offer. “I think it would be fun to work together-“

Velvet doesn’t comment on my idea. In her palm, she holds a clear plastic egg half filled with potting soil. “There’s a tiny seed in here that you water every day and then it grows into a beautiful flower....Lucas got it for me at Walmart-“

“How long does it take to grow?” I ask her.

“I’m not sure-“

We stare down at the flesh colored root which is just starting to break the soil’s surface....a stubborn pearl.

The next morning, sunlit and perfect, Velvet and I sneak out after watching Albert putter around the kitchen for what seemed like an eternity, munching his coffee cake and sipping his orange spice tea. I feel kind of bad for betraying his trust, but my drive to find the Inner Harbor is stronger than my guilt. I pray that Jesus will forgive my transgression and that Krishna will guide my way. Five minutes after Albert sashays off to work, Velvet and I sally forth. (In the few days I've convalesced here, my ankle has healed nicely).

Velvet wears a tan skirt and white lace blouse, and I wear my plaid shirt and clean dungarees (washed with Velvet's help in Albert's stacked washer and dryer last night). We both want to make a good impression at the Rusty Skupper. It's a three mile hike down Old Falls Road, following some railroad tracks and listening to the burble of the Jones Falls, a shallow stream, glimmering with flickers of sunlight. The Jones Falls runs parallel to a bike path. We're so broke, we can't even afford a bus or the lightrail. But it's so gorgeous out, that meandering is a pure pleasure. Six feet tall sunflowers grow wild. And dandelion fluffs wheel through the air.

Halfway to the Inner Harbor we pass the Streetcar Museum.

I stop and stare through a wrought iron gate at some cool antique trolleys. "Wow-" I say. "Let's go in for a minute-"

"Not open on Mondays-" Velvet shakes her head.

"Have you ever been inside?"

"Sure....Daddy took me when I was little-"

I point out a faded yellow box car which has B and O emblazoned across its side.

"Do you know what B and O stands for?"

"I don't remember-" Velvet says breezily.

"B and O stands for Baltimore and Ohio...In the early 1800's Baltimore built the first train to join this city to the Ohio River to aid in commercial trade...But in 1680

it was Sir Isaac Newton who sketched the first plans for a steam engine designed to move on land-“

“How do you know so much about trains?”

“Hopping trains is my life...Plus I read a lot...the only thing I carry in my pockets is a collection of library cards-“ I feel much more comfortable talking to Velvet now. With her defenses down, she is actually a very pleasant and intelligent young lady. “What’s the Inner Harbor like?” I ask her.

“It’s a tourist trap...but Daddy says it brings in a lot of money to support our city-“

“What’s there?”

“Expensive souvenir and clothes stores, restaurants, ice cream and candy shops... The Rusty Skupper’s not far from the Science Center...I’ll show you-“

Abruptly Velvet’s cell phone shrills in my pocket. It startles me. And we both halt in place while I fish it out. We read the brightly lit surface. It’s a text message from Lucas.

“Give it here-“ Velvet insists.

“I don’t think...-“

Greedily she swipes the wafer thin phone from my palm. Her ravenous eyes scour the message.

“What’s Lucas want?” I venture.

“Nothing-“ She’s transfixed though, stares down at the illuminated rectangle.

So I just read over her shoulder. Lucas’ message is one word: “Mum?”

“What’s Mum?” I ask her, not really expecting an answer, but she surprises me.

“It’s T-lip’s first word-“

“T-lip speaks?” I’m confused.

“Yeah....when Lucas is drunk and goofing off, he speaks in this high little squeaky voice for T-lip...”Mum” is what T-lip calls me, his “mom”. Plus it’s sort of our code word,

like our SOS ...like call me right now I really need you...I'm worried...Lucas usually messes up really bad when we're broke up-" she chews her pretty bottom lip, rakes a hand back through her shimmering hair, releasing a halo of fragrance. I am so close to her, I can see some fine golden sunlit hairs along her perfect column of a throat and down further where her teenaged breasts start to swell. I could stand here forever. But she senses my closeness now and darts out of my reach, which stings.

"You know Albert doesn't want you seeing Lucas-" I sound peevish even to my own ears as I reclaim and pocket her phone. She doesn't fight me for it, which makes me feel a little better. But again Velvet's devotion to Lucas just amplifies my own loneliness, my solitary presence in the world. I have no family that I know of, and the friends I make travelling are never within easy reach. Each night that I lay my head down it is with the heavy knowledge that I am and probably always will be alone. But that is the sacrifice I have made to God, to carry out his will, to complete his vital missions. God has chosen me, and thus far I have accepted to follow his mysterious path. Yet sometimes now, having met Velvet, I, too, a boy without a real name or any known lineage, yearn for love, like most everyone else does. Doesn't even Don Quixote have his lady love, Dulcinea El Toboso? I can see now that my life is missing this crucial element. And what has Lucas done to deserve such a bounty as Velvet's love? Jealousy begins to bloom inside of me, like a time lapsed green rose sprouting. A surprise, and a reminder of how much closer to human I still am than to God.

For the next half hour, Velvet and I trek in silence. We follow Charles Street which is numerous blocks lined with fashionable bars and restaurants, coffee shops, banks, and law offices. A clear blue sky canopies us, and a soothing, warm breeze tugs at our hair. MTA buses and yellow taxis rumble by. Suited office workers troll for lunch. Some bedraggled homeless people clot doorways and alleys with their stacked and bulging grocery carts. I can already smell the briny Inner Harbor tanging the air.

Five minutes later, we arrive. The harbor is divided into two pavilions: Light

Street and Pratt Street. Numerous tourists clutching cameras and brochures amble about. Nearby in a cement amphitheater is a clown blowing up hotdog shaped balloons for a gaggle of children.

“Can we go to the Rusty Skupper first?” I ask Velvet.

“All right-“

I follow her around the red-bricked harbor. Some ducks with gleaming backs, the color of swirled petrol, paddle the perimeter of the gray-green water, and some crabs scuttle along, too. We walk until the path dead ends, and there is the Rusty Skupper Restaurant, just like in my vision. Even the fourth of July fireworks banner is hanging on the front door.

Inside the carpeted restaurant, the AC blasts, instantly drying the sheen of perspiration on our faces and backs. Momentarily my arms stipple with goosebumps. There is a piano and a fancy bar. A petite hostess, an exotic beauty (maybe Egyptian or Turkish), greets us with a dazzling smile. “Good afternoon.....Table for two?”

“We’d like two job applications please-“ I speak up, since Velvet doesn’t.

“Sure....Just fill these out, and when you’re finished I’ll see if our manager has time to speak with you-“

“Thank you-“ Pens in hand, we sit in the lounge area, decked out with numerous framed and autographed photos of the Orioles baseball players. I print just my first name, Sidney, then stare down at two long pages requesting personal information and job history. I scribble down two dish-washing positions, one in Virginia and one in North Carolina. Then I go back and stare at the blank personal information section. I jitter my foot, dither with the application. When Velvet finishes, she sees my confusion and takes pity on me. “Copy mine-“ she whispers.

Just as I finish, the manager, a handsome man, wearing an Oriole’s baseball cap, a stark contrast to his expensive suit and tie, arrives. “Hello, hello-“ Cordially

he shakes our hands, then skims our applications.

“Brother and sister?” he asks, staring curiously between us and seeing no resemblance.

“Cousins-“ Velvet says.

“Looking for summer jobs, I assume?”

“Yes, sir-“ Velvet again.

“But neither one of you is currently enrolled in school, I see-“ the manager’s brow ruffles with disapproval now. “Why’s that?”

Velvet’s face sinks, then she rallies remarkably, hushing, “Both our mothers are dead-“

The manager’s face pinkens, like a perfectly cooked shrimp.

“They died last year in a car crash. My Dad took us out of school early to give us some time to heal...But we’re going back next year-“ A single fat tear collects in her beautiful eye, trembles, poised to drop.

“I’m so sorry for your loss-“ the manager’s face pinkens even more, and his eyes water, too. “Are you getting any grief counseling?”

“Not yet, sir....money’s real tight since the funerals...” Velvet’s perfect tear drops then, clinching the deal.

The manager simply pats her shoulder and says, “Honey, when can you two start?”

Buoyantly, Velvet and I trek the three miles back home. A genuine smile lights up her face. Any guilt I felt betraying Albert has vanished, seeing Velvet so joyful for once. A daisy she plucked is tucked behind her ear. The sun dazzles her hair, strays glow like lightbulb filaments.

“We’ll tell Albert we got the jobs on line-“

“Okay-“ I hate to lie, but I truly believe I need to be at the Rusty Skupper to fulfill whatever mission God has planned for me.

Velvet and I skid into kitchen chairs, just as Albert returns from work. He is sweaty and smells like salami. “Somebody called out in the deli, so guess who got shanghaied into chipping Virginia baked ham for picky ass old ladies all day?” Before we can offer any commiseration, he blathers on, “I got stinking braunsweiger lodged under my fingernails and my feet are killing me because nobody was available to give me my 15 minute break which I am entitled to by *law*-“ Furiously he scrubs his hands with a sponge and some lemon scented dish liquid. “Wouldn’t it really get their goat if I put in my two weeks notice? Management would shit bricks. Because who else can they call in to work with no notice? Nobody, that’s who-“

When Albert pauses for breath, Velvet pipes up, “Well we got some good news that might cheer you up-“

“What’s that?” He dislodges lunchmeat from his fingernails using a nail file, as he eyes us suspiciously now.

“Sid and I got hired at the Rusty Skupper restaurant today-“ Without batting her eyes, she lies so smoothly, conveying our rehearsed story, that Albert actually believes her.

“Well congratulations, you two.....the Rusty Skupper’s fine dining, right?”

“Yes...I’m gonna be a hostess and Sid’s gonna be a dishwasher-“

“But how’d you get hired so quick?” Briefly Albert’s suspicions return. He flicks

tiny crescents of meat into a nearby trashcan.

“Like I said, we did everything on line-“ Velvet repeats.

Albert glances over at me for verification, and I nod my head. “We start training tomorrow. I asked the manager if I could have the same schedule as Velvet so I can make sure she gets home safe on the lightrail at night-“

“That’s all great...but Velvet, it doesn’t mean I’m dropping your punishment-“

“I know-“ Velvet actually dips her head contritely, an act I’m sure, but it has the desired effect on Albert.

“You know I don’t punish you because I enjoy it, Velvet. I just want to see you reach your full potential...and not ruin your life over some stupid boy-“

Some frantic scratching at the front door halts Albert’s speech. And we all look down to see a filthy string mop with eyes, meowing like crazy outside.

“It’s Patches!!” Velvet ricochets from her seat, yanks open the door. “Oh my God. Patches is back!!!” She scoops up the cat whose fur is matted with dried leaves, flakes of mud, and bits of twigs. Otherwise the cat appears relatively healthy.

“Don’t touch her, Velvet!” Albert admonishes. “She could have fleas, ticks, or the mange!”

“I don’t care-“ Velvet strokes the pathetic creature who purrs loudly with satisfaction. “My mom gave me this cat when I was 8 years old. It was a kitten somebody left to die on the side of the road-“ Tears of joy crest Velvet’s eyelashes, and her face buckles with unbridled emotion. Clearly the pet is a special link to her deceased mother which Velvet treasures.

Tugging on some plastic dishwashing gloves, Albert swings into action. He fills a plastic basin with warm water and some generous squirts of dish liquid. “She needs a bath ASAP before she infests my house-“

So we follow him outside.

Albert dunks the cat and sets to work, lathering and scrubbing the poor beast while

Velvet holds her firmly in the basin. "Easy, Patches....easy, girl-" A thick curd of mud and debris swirls off her pet. Then Albert uses a garden hose to rinse off the soap.

With its fur wet and clean, the cat is reduced to half its original size. Some gray and ginger patches dapple her fur, probably the source of her name. Its amber colored eyes dominate a skinny little triangle of a face. Patches accepts Albert's ministrations stoically.

Using a dry towel, Velvet tucks Patches in it. The cat reaches out her newly clean paws and pats Velvet's cheeks and chin. "Patches is a house cat. But somehow she got out three months ago...We put up fliers and checked the SPCA and Barcs, but we couldn't find her anywhere, could we Albert?"

"Nope-" Albert crooks two fingers, rubs beneath Patches' chin, until the cat trills with satisfaction.

"This is our lucky day. We got jobs, and Patches is back-" Velvet's excitement is cut short, seeing a drunken and wobbly Lucas stumbling across the yard with a cellophane wrapped bouquet of flowers.

"Hell, no.....you are not welcome here-" Albert steps between Velvet and Lucas who wears a work t-shirt which smells faintly of gasoline and sticks to his well developed upper body like a second skin. Lucas' knuckles are crusted with dried blood, as if he'd recently rammed his fists into concrete and then refused to bathe. His pretty boy eyes are bloodshot, with more forked red lines than a roadmap. His messy hair is magazine advertisement sexy, a dark slant of it dangling above his aqua-marine eyes. A pint of Seagram's Seven juts from his jeans pocket. His unsteady hand jerks the flowers in Velvet's direction. "I don't w-want no t-trouble-" he stammers. "Please take these Velvet-" Moonily he stares over at her.

Without hesitation, Albert whips the flowers from Lucas' hand and hurls them into a nearby trashcan. "Get in the house, Velvet-"

But Velvet is torn. Her eyes waver with tears, lock with Lucas' eyes. As if pinned,

she does not move, just clutches Patches closer.

Tears fizzle down Lucas' cheeks now, too. His lowered eyelids give him a haughty, hooded look, like a gangster right before he pulls the trigger, and his finger stabs at the air. "I w-would take a bullet for you, Velvet...you k-know that....I would d-die for you..." His face is contorted with emotion, and his voice is strangled with grief. He actually drops to his knees, "I c-can't live without you, baby-"

Albert just clamps a hand around Velvet's neck now and ushers her back into the house. So I follow right behind them.

Inside we stand listening to Lucas bellow Velvet's name over and over, like a wounded child. "VELVET!!!!.....VELVET!!!!"

"Save the Stanley Kowalski bit! You're pathetic, Lucas! Go home and sober the fuck up!" Albert hollers back.

But a naïve and lovesick Velvet releases Patches and dashes for the door.

Albert and I block it, united to protect her.

"Don't fall for his crocodile tears, missy-" Albert hisses. "Lucas doesn't love anybody but Lucas-"

Velvet tussles with us. She claws us with her fingernails, yanks at our hair and clothes, to get to Lucas. But we hold fast.

"He's a loser, Velvet! A fucking bum! Let him go!" Albert pants.

When a brick crashes through the kitchen window, spraying glass, we all drop to the floor. Albert and I cover Velvet.

Lucas screams, "FUCK YOU ALL THEN!!!"

"How's that for a Romeo, huh, Velvet?" Albert screeches. "That boy's poison!"

Crouching, I creep to the window, lift my head just enough to see Lucas zigzagging away. "He's gone-" I report, standing now.

“Lucas needs me-“ Velvet blubbers. Even shaking splinters of glass from her hair, she defends him. Her nose is bright pink from sobbing.

“He needs a good shrink and so do you for falling for his charades. If I see that asshole around her again, there’s gonna be hell to pay-“ Albert rises, too, smudging away a few drops of ruby red blood flecking the underside of his hammocky upper arm which appears blue-gray, the color of skim milk, to me now. Suddenly every color I look at seems more vibrant. My wrists thrum. My temples buzz. The air crackles and snaps. And my limbs begin to pulse with that familiar intoxication. Waves of energy flow through me. My body is as taut as a tuning fork. I stand frozen in place, staring across at an eggshell white wall which now glows. My hands raise up, like an evangelist’s.

“What’s wrong with Sidney?” Velvet notices first.

I try to speak but only garbled sounds come out.

“What’s wrong with you, Sidney?” Albert speaks firmly, like adults do to teenagers in crisis.

On the wall, projected like a home movie, I see Lucas-his handsome face stamped with malice and his electric blue eyes amphibious slits. At first he is just standing in Velvet’s bedroom, brooding. But then my stomach drops as I watch him snatch up Velvet’s cat (her childhood pet!) and sling her out the window. A ripple of hatred passes over his face followed by a smirk of satisfaction just before he darts out of view.

My breath hitches. I don’t want to convey this ugly message to Velvet, to hurt her anymore than she’s already been hurt. But I know I must warn her. It is God’s will.

“It was Lucas-“ my voice quavers a bit. “It was Lucas who let Patches out three months ago-“

“What?” Velvet blinks with confusion.

“Sidney, what are you talking about?” Albert stares at the blank wall which has so captivated my attention.

“Lucas tossed Patches out your bedroom window, Velvet...I saw him-“

“Saw him where?” Albert again. “Maybe you *are* crazy-“

“Lucas is full of hate...please believe me....God has revealed it just now-“

Velvet’s face wilts. “But Lucas loves Patches-“ she insists. “He used to play with her just as much as me-“ Her pretty mouth cinches then. “You’re lying, Sidney...Albert probably paid you!...Besides doesn’t God have more important things to worry about then my cat?”

I curl and uncurl my fingers, as the bliss seeps out of me. “Devout Hindus will move the foundation of a house rather than uproot or injure a single earthworm-“ I explain to Velvet. And buoyed by God’s revelation, I actually muster the courage to reach out and clasp Velvet’s small hand. It is fever hot. My own pulse jumps in my fingertips. When she doesn’t recoil, I proceed. “Don’t trust Lucas-“ I plead. “If you turn your back on God’s wisdom, much heartache will follow-“

The next morning, exceptionally warm and gauzy with fog, Velvet and I hike, in silence, along Old Falls Road to work. It is our first day at the Rusty Skupper. Fog wraiths up from the asphalt bike path, swirls spookily through the surrounding trees, just like in a New Orleans bayou. Yesterday our path was happy and bright and clear; today we slog like Heathcliff and Cathy through a murky landscape, a gothic set complete with a heavy gray sky which presses down, like a weight, upon our heads.

But the closer we get to the harbor, the air begins to clear, and the sun blasts through the clouds. The employee entrance to the Rusty Skupper is around the back. We pass a stretch of dock where several yachts wait to gas up at a nearby pump. The air crinkles with heat, smelling faintly of gasoline. Our shirts are nearly shellacked to our backs.

Inside the restaurant, mercifully chilly as an icebox, we go our separate ways for training. A group of attractive girls dressed all in black chatter with Velvet at the hostess stand at “the front of the house” while I am lead to “the back of the house” to the kitchen.

The corner where I will wash dishes is engulfed in a cloud of swampy heat. Shaped like a train, a huge aluminum dishwasher with entrance and exit ramps, belches steam and sprays a mist of near scalding water. My trainer, named Emanuelle, a black guy with a mane of dreadlocks, wears a plastic trashbag like a poncho to protect his clothes. Cheerfully he fashions me one, and I tug it on. Emmanuelle is built like a boxer, all bulging gleaming muscles, and he is light on his toes, working circles around me. “Keep your cool and keep moving-“ he sing-songs. “No matter how high the dishes get stacked up, you just gotta keep hustling, keep humping...because without us, this place would fold up...we the gears that keep it running-“

“Yes, sir-“ I nod my head.

“We ain’t that formal in the kitchen, Sid...just call me Manny-“ He scarfs chicken tenders

and fries, the employee meal of the day, from a paper carton, while he loads and unloads racks of glasses and plates. Gnawing, he swivels to face me and gives me the once over. Some bits of chicken wedge his strong teeth, and pops of sweat wreath his plum black forehead, as he speaks. “No offense, Sid, my man...but you don’t look like no dishwasher...you look more like some college whiz kid or some shit...why the hell you want this hard ass job?” Ropes of jail scars, like brands, mark his powerful physique, and his inky, worldly eyes pin me with raw curiosity.

“I like the solitude-“ I begin shakily.

“Uh huh-“ Still he just stares me down, like I’m some exotic creature in a zoo.

“I like the rhythm of hard work-“ I plow on, the back of my neck prickling with perspiration, “Sweat purifies the soul...the American Indians held sweat lodges in covered teepees to release the toxins from their bodies and minds. Some even had visions. God blesses the working man who toils and suffers. ...Plus I’m only 16 and washing dishes in a fancy restaurant beats working in McDonalds for minimum wage. At least I can sleep at night knowing I’m not selling dairy free milkshakes and horsemeat hamburgers to an unsuspecting public-“

Emmanuelle laughs hardily from his gut now, claps me on my back, “You all right in my book, Sid....I think we gonna get along just fine-“

For the next six hours, we hump dirty dishes in and out of the mammoth dishwasher. We rub dry racks of wine glasses until our backs ache. But Manny is excellent company, weaving stories of his past, growing up in Southern Maryland, the ninth child of farm laborers. He started picking tobacco when he was just 8, dropped out of school in the 7th grade, got in trouble with the law for stealing a car trying to hustle up a few grand quick to save his parent’s home when the bank foreclosed, got married at 18, and now has four children he supports working two jobs, one at the Skupper and one at a carwash downtown.

Manny is jovial and hard working. But he is not Velvet. I sorely miss her. Even when

she's grumpy, I'd rather have her around than anybody else. I wonder if she's thinking about me right now the same way I'm thinking about her.

Over the past few days, I've come to the conclusion that I can be God's servant and still have a girlfriend. Who knows how long my work in Baltimore will take? Maybe eventually Velvet would consider traveling with me? But how do I go about winning her love?

"Manny, how long have you been married?" I venture, thinking maybe he can give me some tips on how to get Velvet to fall for me.

"Twenty-two years-" he whistles and shakes his head in disbelief. "Don't know where the time flies-" Then he cocks one hand backwards on his hip (the way Albert frequently does) and squints across at me. "Why you ask? You got lady troubles?"

My face pulses with heat, but I nod, impressed by his astuteness.

"What's she like?"

I contemplate Velvet a moment. "She's a mystifying combination of hard and soft, intelligent but naïve, fiery yet tender..."

Emmanuelle's eyebrow arches, "Do she got a nice rack?"

Nonplussed, I just gaze open mouthed at him, my cheeks flaring hotter.

"Because I tell you what....women will drive you nuts....but if she built like a brick shithouse, you can tolerate her craziness a whole lot better-" He bunches his plum black lips, nodding thoughtfully, "I done read my lady's Cosmo magazines about how men gotta listen better and treat our women like equals and all that crap-" he leans in closer, conspiratorily now, "But Sid, what I learned through years of trial and error and a whole lotta heartache is.....all that a woman really needs at the end of a hard day is a "Thank you, baby-" and a real good foot rub. Try it and see-"

Later that evening, Velvet and I join Albert for dinner at his kitchen table, whose formica top is patterned with purple and blue curlicues resembling sperm cells run amok. Albert has whipped up a delicious spinach and cheddar quiche served with a simple salad of iceberg lettuce and tomato wedges.

“How was work?” he asks us.

“Good-“ Velvet pipes up.

“What about your day, Sid?”

I’m about to reply when the back door whips open, and Iron Pete strides in.

He is sunburned. A flaky white crust rims his inflamed nose. His eyes are crepey and netted with wrinkles. His cheeks are cobbled with some fresh acne. And his thick arms (showing some loose slings of flab) are knotted with boils.

“You look like shit, Pop-“ Albert stops eating.

“I’m fine-“ Iron Pete sinks into a chair. He smells strongly of cheap wine and body odor. “But I got some bad news-“ He presses his fleshy mouth together. A small purplish lesion I never noticed before rims the corner of his bottom lip. “Lucas is in the hospital”

Velvet’s face blanches. Her lips nearly evaporate.

“What happened?” Albert asks blandly.

“The punk slit his wrists-“ Iron Pete chomps a hunk of drooping quiche. “Doctors put him in the Psych Ward-“

Velvet’s lovely mouth begins to quaver.

“Don’t worry, Sunshine-“ Iron Pete divulges. “He’s fine. His cuts are shallow. A cry for help the doc told Lucas’ mother-“ He dredges a tomato slice through a lake of ranch dressing on his plate and slurps it down.

Fresh tears glide down Velvet’s perfect cheekbones. Her head droops.

Albert wipes his mouth pointedly with a napkin. He flounces in front of his

sister, and lifts her head up. "Do not blame yourself for that boy's foolish actions. This is all a ruse to guilt you into taking him back. You won't wither away without that jack-ass. You'll be better off-"

"Albert, can you please drive me to the hospital?" Just like nothing her brother said registered one iota.

Albert huffs and crosses his doughy arms. "No chance-"

"I'll walk then-" Velvet scrapes her chair back and stands up.

"Suit yourself-" Albert continues eating, his face stamped with disgust.

"Daddy, will you walk with me?"

"Okay, baby-" Iron Pete smashes a last fistful of quiche into his oily mouth.

"Come on, Sid-" he says. "A damsel in distress needs us-"

In the hospital lobby, a senior citizen guard issues us paper badges, and then he leads us to a private elevator, away from the public ones. Our feet trod linoleum floors waxed to a shine, and our noses pinch from a medicinal odor which permeates the air.

After typing a secret four digit code, the guard informs us, “Everybody needs an escort on Ward Six...”

None of us has ever visited a psych ward, so we’re all a bit nervous. Velvet twines and untwines her mother’s wrist watch. Iron Pete yawns repeatedly. And my veins jangle with adrenalin. I imagine the worst: drooling zombies handcuffed to radiators; shrieking hysterics with tufts of yanked out hair; obese women with chin hairs, tiny wet eyes, and blanks stares. When the elevator finally lurches to a stop, we all disembark.

Instead of skidding through a blood smeared, urine soaked floor of concrete (I’ve definitely read way too many horror books!), our feet pad across a serene blue carpet, soothing to the eyes. A boarder of vines and flowers rims the walls, an attempt I guess to make the locked down ward more home-like to its disturbed patients. Some rows of chairs in a plexi-glass enclosed room are empty. Most of the patients, normal looking folks, an equal mix of blacks and whites, sit cafeteria style at tables and chairs, eating their nutritionally balanced dinners with plastic utensils and drinking their milk from paper cartons. One hefty black lady, tented in a food spattered hospital gown, belts out church hymns between bites.

At a desk, the guard signs us in. “Only one visitor is allowed in any patient’s room at a time...What’s the patient’s name?”

“Lucas Davis-“

“Room 45. He’s refused dinner, so he’s resting now. Who’s going in first?”

“Me-“ Velvet’s cheeks and neck are mottled with scarlet blotches as she squares her

shoulders.

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“Follow me then, Miss-“

Iron Pete and I sink into some plastic chairs to wait. We watch Velvet disappear into Lucas’ room. My heart pinches with love for her, for her loyalty to Lucas, misguided as it is. I can only hope and pray that someday somebody will care this much for me.

Walking home from the hospital in the dark, Velvet is mute. Her face is locked, an impenetrable fortress. Her eyes skim the ground. My mind whirls with questions about her visit with Lucas, but I follow Iron Pete's lead and keep my mouth shut. The night is as cool and crisp as Velvet's expression. The moon is enormous and extra bright. It renders the contour of things- the yellow B and O railroad car, the train tracks, even some roses growing wild with thorns as sharp as cactus needles threaded through a nearby fence- so vividly that looking nearly hurts my eyes.

Upon entering Albert's quiet house, a wall of fragrance assails me. Lavender and violets and rose petals. But Velvet and her father sniff the air curiously, too, so I know the overpowering scent must be real and not the precursor to one of my trances. Rounding the corner into the lighted kitchen, we find a goggled and gloved Albert mixing ingredients, like a mad scientist.

Iron Pete pipes up, "What you doing, Petunia?"

In stark contrast to his usual perfectly ironed work shirt, Albert wears a crinkled and withered bathrobe, trailing a frazzled belt. His normal pomaded hair is a cloud of snarls atop his head. His cheeks and nose are speckled with some new acne. His sleep battered face is squinched with concentration. Carefully he fills what looks like a meatloaf pan with a beaker of lavender swirled goop. "Saponification-" he intones solemnly.

"What in the hell?" Velvet surveys her brother's usually pristine kitchen with awe. It looks like a bomb exploded in here.

"Saponification-" he repeats. "I'm making soap-"

"Ivory is on sale. 99 cents a bar at the Rite Aid-" Iron Pete clucks.

"Drugstore soap is anonymous and characterless-" Albert decrees. "Homemade soap is comforting in ways manufactured soap can never be-"

"Oh yeah, Martha Stewart-" Iron Pete pokes his finger into some viscous liquid.

“Says who?”

“Don’t touch anything!” Albert snaps. “Ann Bramson, the pioneer of natural soap-making, that’s who-“

His kitchen table is loaded with containers: lard, coconut oil, sunflower oil, olive oil, lavender oil, and lye.

Velvet starts hefting and sniffing objects.

“Don’t touch the lye! It’s caustic-“ Albert moves the lye out of her reach.

“What’s lye?” Velvet wants to know. “What’s caustic?”

“Caustic means it’ll burn the shit out of your hands if not properly handled-“ Iron Pete informs his daughter.

“Lye is a strong chemical you can only get at the hardware store-“ Albert adds.

“Saponification is the primary reaction of soap making which occurs when you add your oils with lye. Then you mix in your fragrance, some flower petals, maybe some colorant, pour it into molds like I’m doing now, and voila, 24 hours later you’ve got beautiful bars of soap-“

“Guess I know what we’re all getting for Christmas-“ Iron Pete cracks.

“Making soap soothes my nerves. Especially when I can’t sleep-“ Albert rubs his bleary eyes. “So how’s the Dirtbag?”

Velvet cuts her brother a sharp look. But Iron Pete just shrugs. “Lucas is fine...he’ll live-“

“Lucas said to tell you he was sorry about breaking your window, Albert-“ Velvet’s voice is contrite. “He meant to just hit the wall. He’ll pay for the damages-“

“Tell that Jackass to keep his money-“

“Lucas wants to come over and fix the window himself....he’s promised me he’s gonna quit drinking and fighting...come on, Albert-“ Velvet pleads, “Everybody deserves a second chance-“

“I’ll eat every bar of soap on this table if Lucas can stay straight for just one week-“

Albert lines a pantry shelf with tea towels, nestling his soap molds for the night.

“Okay-“ Velvet lifts her chin. “I’ll take that bet-“

“And what if Lucas loses?” Albert squares off with his sister now. They are eye to eye. “What do I get?”

“What do you want?”

“If Lucas fucks up in any way in the seven days following his release- drinking, drugs, fighting, breaking any laws-then you have to go back to high school in September, finish the year, and graduate-“

Velvet’s expression waffles. “Then I want more from you if I win then you just eating some stupid bars of soap-“

“Name it-“ Albert peels trickles of dried soap wax from his fingers.

“If Lucas makes good all week, you have to accept him as my boyfriend-“

Albert’s tongue lolls in his mouth for a long minute and then he acquiesces.

“Okay....But only because I know he’ll never pull it off-“

They shake hands on it.

“Sidney, Pop, you two are my witnesses-“ Albert decrees. “If you see Lucas fuck up in any way in the next week, you are obligated to let me know-“

At the Rusty Skupper the following day, Manny gets a good look at Velvet for the first time, and he sucks in a breath, “She a stone cold fox-“ he whispers to me, as we pass by the hostess stand. “Boy, you got your work cut out for you-“

Back in the kitchen, while scouring pots and pans, I fill him in on the Lucas situation. Kneading a hunk of food clogged steel wool between his thick wet fingers, Manny advises me, “Sid, man, you gotta move fast. Get to Velvet while she’s vulnerable.. while her ex is still out the picture-“

“But Lucas’ll be home in just two days-“ I lament.

“You try the foot rub?”

“Not yet-“

“What you waiting for?” Manny’s nostrils flare with exasperation.

“I’m waiting for the right moment....but in the meantime, what else can I do?”

“Do little things for her. Open her door. Fix her a cold drink.....I bet she and them hostesses are starving right about now...sneak her a plate of chicken tenders and fries and watch her face light up-“

“Now?” My voice rises a notch.

“Fuck, yeah. Right now-“ Manny loads up a paper box of food for me. (Only back of the house-dishwashers, cooks, and prep guys- are entitled to the daily free meal. Front of the house-servers and hostesses- are exempt because they make daily cash tips.)

The box of food is a lead weight in my hands. I can’t move. It’s like my feet have suddenly taken root in the floor.

“What you waiting for?” Manny eyes me hard.

“But what should I say?”

“Do it just like this-“ Manny moistens his burgundy lips, lowers his voice to an Al Green vibrato. His eyes soften, limpid pools of sexy tranquility, “Hey, baby, just thought

you and your girls might be hungry-“ Then he gives me a sharp push in the right direction.

“Now get your bony white ass moving-“

It’s like I forgot how to walk. I feel light-headed and tremulous. It’s a slow night. I pass only a few tables where couples or families are dining. When I finally arrive at the hostess stand, all the pretty hostesses and Velvet cease their gabbing and turn to stare at me.

I try to moisten my lips like Manny instructed, but my tongue is like sandpaper. The girls all giggle. So I just thrust my box of food forward and pop the lid. Squealing with glee, the girls descend on my offering, like starving pigeons on a hunk of bread. They nearly topple the box out of my hands. Then Velvet kisses my cheek, and my blood zings, my body lights up like a pinball machine racking up bonus points. “Thanks, Sid!” she shrills. “How did you know we were all dying of hunger?”

I simply smile and shrug as the other girls hug and air kiss me. Then I pivot and head back towards the kitchen (before I can say or do anything to screw this up) and to savor this glorious moment with Manny. And that’s when the ten feet tall diningroom window which encircles the restaurant just blows apart, explodes with a blast of hot air which lifts me off my feet, sending me hurtling through the air for horrifying seconds (which seem to last an eternity!), until I land with a thump, carpet shredding my knees, and my head colliding with some chair legs. Fearing a terrorist attack, I guess, everybody sprints for the nearest exits. Legs clamor past me, leaving half eaten seafood dinners and drinks behind. Valiantly one man tries to drag me out with him. But no way am I leaving without Velvet! So I just thrust him off. “Stupid kid-“ he snarls at me before bolting. I stumble to my feet, weave closer to the huge gutted window, gawking out at the wide open blue sky which is now festooned with swags and tatters of black ash and debris. Tanged with gasoline, the evening air puffs my hair back. My fingers zing with energy and my heart hammers. What is happening here? I walk to the edge of the blasted out window and peer down into the Chesapeake bay. A yacht is engulfed in flames. Black smoke billows upward, stings my eyes, nose, and throat. Just to the side of the boat, a

woman flails in the water, churning it white.

From an exit door, I hear Velvet scream for me. "Come on, Sid! We gotta get out of here!" as some hostesses push her out, to safety.

Panicked cries from the drowning woman jerk me into action. My temples bang with blood. I jack knife off the side of the restaurant, plunge into the water. My shirt shoots up, rucks around my neck, as I race to her, my hands trawling through the bay. She is Asian, moon-faced, bleating helplessly, dipping under the water and then clawing her way back up again. She chokes and sputters. Her cheeks are raw and blistered from the explosion. When she sees me, her wild eyes pin mine. She doggie paddles over and latches on to me. Ponderously I swim with her in tow, back to the wooden dock. She is quite a hefty woman. I fear we'll both drown when her thick limbs begin squeezing me like boa constrictor. "Kick your feet!" I shout. "You've got to help me!" My sheer panic must register to her, because she starts kicking now, and I am able to guide her safely to the dry pier.

Some tourists help haul us out of the water. We are both exhausted and drenched. The Asian lady squalls like a baby. "He save me....the boy save me--"

"What happened?" A tanned guy in golf attire asks.

"Her boat exploded when she was gassing up--" a security guard tells us. "She must not have opened the proper vents...and the fumes just built up--"

"Wow....she's lucky the boy saw her in the water--" somebody adds.

A channel 45 helicopter whirs above our heads now. "I have to go--" I unclasp my hand from the Asian lady's.

"You need to stay put, son--" the guard advises me. "at least until the paramedics can check you over--"

Some bystanders start snapping photos of me on their cell phones, and my heart thuds wildly. "Take care of her--" I say. "I need to go find my girlfriend now--"

Then I sprint away from the cameras and the crowd, knowing somehow

that my freedom depends on my escaping, and not having the faintest clue why.

Chapter 14

Flying, I race away from the harbor. My knees piston and burn. I sail past boarded up and graffitied rowhouses, liquor stores, chicken and fish joints. The ghetto pimps and drug dealers eyeball me languidly. Stocky Mexicans and hard faced black folks glance behind me to see who is chasing me, the cops or maybe the devil himself. After 20 minutes of furious running, I find myself lost. Breathing feels like inhaling fire. I massage a stitch in my side. A mural on the side of a Salvadoran church says that I am in Fells Point. I have no money for a bus or a cab. But I do have Velvet's cell phone. Why am I always asking for her to rescue me when I believe it's my job to be rescuing her?? I could head to the nearest train station, say goodbye to Baltimore, since the Asian lady's life has been saved already. I assume she's the reason God directed me to the Rusty Skupper in the first place. But truthfully I don't want to leave Velvet and my new job. I'm happy here. And part of me feels like maybe my mission isn't entirely finished. So I call Velvet.

"Where are you, Sidney?" she shrills into the phone.

"Fells Point, I think-" I wheeze some, winded from running and dizzy with fear, although I'm not exactly sure what I'm afraid of.

"Catch the nearest cab home...Albert will pay-"

"Okay. I'm coming home-" Home. The word sticks in my throat, a physical thing, big as an egg. I can't ever recall having a real home, a safe place, a sanctuary. Right away I hail a cab. And I sit on the edge of my seat until we reach 2362 Hickory Avenue. Home.

Velvet explodes out the front door, stuffing money into the taxi driver's brown hand. "Oh my God, Sid....Thank God you're okay!"

"And you're okay, too?" I climb out of the taxi, and she jumps into my arms just like star-crossed lovers do in the movies.

But her body pressed to mine is a short lived paradise, because she soon pulls away.

“God, what happened today?” Her face is a pale white oval; clearly she is scared half to death.

“A boat exploded, I think-“ She must have left too soon to see me rescue the lady.

Inside the house is as quiet as a church on Tuesday. “Albert home?”

“Work-“ Velvet replies.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I ask again, because her teeth are chattering some and she hugs herself unconsciously.

“Let’s see if the restaurant made the news-“ she fetches the remote, but I swoop it from her.

“No...the TV will just upset us more...seeing the same gruesome images over and over...what we need to do right now is to relax-“ In case they mention me, I don’t want Velvet to make a big deal of it.

“But I want to see the news-“

“No....I’ve got a much better idea....come with me-“ I grab her hand and pull her upstairs into her bedroom.

“Sidney, what are you doing?” My uncharacteristic aggressiveness is freaking her out a little bit I think. But she’s curious, too.

“Wait here-“

She waits, relieved I guess, that I haven’t pounced on her or anything, but I can see her craning her neck trying to see what I’m collecting in the bathroom.

When I return, she shoots me an uneasy look. “What is this?”

I kneel at her feet with a basin of warm water. “Take your shoes off please-“

“What?”

“Trust me-“

Reluctantly she removes her sandals.

“Now put your feet in the water-“

“Why?”

“Stop talking and I’ll show you why-“

She sits on the bed now and allows me to gently guide her feet into the warm water.

“How’s that feel?”

She drops her head back and sighs. (I expected her to fuss or maybe even laugh at me).

I think Manny might be onto something here.

I use a puffy body scrub thing, fluorescent as a sea urchin, to soap and wash her feet with slow strokes. I nabbed one of Albert’s pretty soaps from the bathroom soap dish, too. The lavender scent floats in the room, relaxing Velvet further. Me, too. My heartbeat is almost normal now, my breathing even, my fingers no longer trembling. She sighs some more. Her feet are slender, delicate, with high arches and toenails painted pink. Then I slip her feet from the water and dry them with a fluffy towel. I can feel her staring down at me working now. But I don’t look up, just pray I’m doing this right. I warm some lotion in my hands like Manny instructed me to do and begin to massage her feet. I kneed the heels, caress the arches, pull at the toes.

“Oh. My. God-“ she mumbles.

I start on the second foot, keeping a steady rhythm. But when Iron Pete rounds the corner, stops dead, gawking at me holding his daughter’s naked foot, I just drop it. It splashes in the water, and Velvet’s head jerks up.

“What is going on *here*?” Iron Pete’s voice booms. He is perplexed, amazed, amused, and angry all in the same instant.

I am speechless.

“Nothing, Daddy-“ Velvet stammers. “There was an explosion at work today and me and Sid had to run out of there and I broke my sandal and my feet got all dirty and Sid was helping me wash up and-“

We follow Iron Pete's gaze to where Velvet's unbroken sandals sprawl by the water basin.

"He fixed my sandals already and-" Velvet's cheeks flame.

"I heard about the explosion-" Iron Pete stares curiously at me now. And I think I actually see some grudging respect in his expression. "That's why I stopped by... to check on you two-"

"We're fine, Daddy-"

Iron Pete sits heavily on the bed. His eyes sweep the room, looking for any evidence of misconduct I imagine. A joint. A condom. A bra. A beer bottle. But he relaxes when the rooms comes up clean.

I dry my hands quickly on my towel. I feel light headed. My body buzzes with adrenalin. The room becomes fuzzy, glowy white around the edges. I peer around, waiting for God to reveal himself. I see Iron Pete's lips moving but I can not hear him now. My towel simply drops from my fingers to the floor.

"Sid, Daddy was talking to you-"

I ignore her, shuffle over to the photograph of Velvet's mother hanging there. I gaze into it. A tiny glow flickers and darts. It grows to a smear of light which looms up at me, a small hologram, a perfect replica of Velvet's mother. I rear back.

"Sid-ney!" Distantly I can hear Velvet's voice.

"Okay. What's going on here? What are you two on?" Iron Pete's voice sounds far off, too.

Velvet's mother waves to me. "Hello-" she says.

"Hi, I'm Sidney-" I talk to the photograph.

Iron Pete watches me keenly now, tutts. "Yeah. Right...Did you two get ahold of some bad pot?"

An astonished Velvet pads over, also peering into the picture now. Her voice falters.

“Daddy.....something’s going on....something’s happening....I can feel something...-“ Her hand reaches out, skims the air in front of her mother’s image.

“Bullshit-“ Iron Pete’s voice is harsh. He grabs my arm, yanks me away. “Her mother is *gone*. I don’t know what you’re up to, but you knock it off right now. Don’t you give my daughter any false hope-“

“She says she named you Velvet because when you were born and she first held you, your skin was the softest thing she ever touched-“

Abruptly Iron Pete releases me and I walk back and stand beside Velvet whose face is now laced with tears. “Is that true, Daddy?”

“I don’t know.....I think so-“ Iron Pete seems deflated now, unsure. “It was a long time ago-“

“You never told me that-“ Velvet says.

“I guess maybe I forgot....it might be true-“ Iron Pete’s voice is now a whisper.

I stare back into the photo, listening to Velvet’s mother. “She says to tell you both she is so sorry she left you-“

Velvet’s face flies open. She shrieks, a strangled sob. “It is Mommy!”

“KNOCK IT OFF, SIDNEY-“ But Iron Pete does not move.

“She says don’t do what she did, Velvet...if she hadn’t been drinking so much wine at the bar that night before driving home, she might still be here-“

“Is....that...true....Daddy?” Velvet’s voice is all over the place.

We look over to him and his expression is gutted.

“Was Mommy drunk that night?”

Iron Pete’s eyes mist and his chin buckles some.

“Daddy?”

“She says to tell her “Lovebug” that she loves you very much-“

“It *is* Mommy! That’s what she used to call me!”

“And she says to tell Velvet’s Daddy it was not his fault....that you two argued that night but it was her choice to drink and then drive...not yours-“

“DON’T YOU FUCKING DO THIS TO ME, SIDNEY!” Iron Pete clenches my arm, shaking me like a ragdoll.

“DADDY, STOP, OR MOMMY MIGHT LEAVE!” Velvet is hysterical.

So Iron Pete shoves me away, and I dash back over to the photo, to catch any last parting words, don’t want to miss any other messages for Velvet. But the small hologram of her mother is nearly gone, leaving only a filmy remainder which gradually fades away. “Goodbye-“ I whisper.

Velvet dashes over and velcroes herself to her Daddy’s side. They both weep openly.

“This better not be some kind of sick joke you’re playing, Sid-“ Iron Pete’s voice is hoarse, broken.

“I promise you it’s not-“

“Mommy used to call me her “Lovebug” all the time, don’t you remember, Daddy?”

“I don’t know-“ He rubs Velvet’s hair, soothing her until the livingroom doorbell blasts, jarring us into action. Hastily Velvet and her father brush aside their tears.

When we tramp downstairs and open up the door, we find two strangers, an anxious man and a woman stand before us.

“Can I help you?” Iron Pete inquires.

“We’re the boy’s parents-“

Chapter 15

The man who calls himself my father has gray poodle-permed hair which girdles his bland, apple cheeked face. The woman is mousy. They both wear dark blue uniforms with red epaulets embroidered with the letter S. They are Captains in the Salvation Army church. Howard and Agnes Pearce. I look nothing like either of them which Iron Pete and Velvet notice right away, staring back and forth at us like their heads are on hinges.

“He’s adopted-“ the woman chirps, her eyes welling up some, “- and we love him and miss him so much-“

“Is that true, Sidney?” Iron Pete asks.

“No-“ I insist. Not one thing about them is familiar to me.

“Come on now, George-“ The man has an even and a patient tone. “Don’t upset your mother any more then she is already-“

“How did you find him? Nobody knows he was here but us-“ Velvet speaks up for me, protective.

The man removes his spectacles, polishes them slowly with a clean handkerchief. “Why on the TV, of course. Didn’t you see it? Our boy is a hero. He saved a drowning woman at the Inner Harbor today. It’s all over the news. We called the Rusty Skupper Restaurant, talked to the manager, told him we were the boy’s legal guardians, threatened legal action if he didn’t give us this address-“

Velvet and her father both squinch with confusion.

“Don’t be modest, George. Tell these folks what you did-“

“My name is Sidney-“

Captain Agnes Pearce pulls a few black and white baby photos from her plain black pocketbook. Confident, she fans them out like a deck of cards, like she has the winning hand, for us to see. “This is George as a baby, wasn’t he cute?”

We all look. The baby is generic looking, could be any baby.

“We love you, George-“ My alleged mother’s voice is breathy and small. “It’s time for you to come home now-“

“BUT I DON’T KNOW THESE PEOPLE-“ Panic beats in my throat.

“Do you have his adoption papers with you?” Iron Pete wants to know.

“We care about him, too, and we’re not about to hand him over to just anybody-“

Captain Howard pushes his glasses back up on his nose. “We’re God’s emissaries. We work for the Lord. Why would we lie?”

“You do talk like him-“ Iron Pete admits.

“Daddy, he could be a perverted serial killer in disguise for all we know-“

Captain Howard rustles through his pockets, produces a small white card.

“You can call the Salvation Army headquarters and verify our identities if you like-“

“Do you have his adoption papers with you or not?” Iron Pete repeats.

“Not with me, but I can get them-“

“Where are you folks from?” Iron Pete asks.

“Hagerstown, Maryland-“

Iron Pete gives me a sidelong look. “Is that true?”

“I have no address. I am time grown old-“

“What’s wrong with him?” Captain Agnes blurts. “Did you hit your head saving that lady today?”

“He’s been talking like this since we met him two weeks ago-“ Iron Pete speaks up.

“He’s been gone two years with no word from him. We called the police, even notified the newspapers and TV stations. We weren’t sure if he ran away or if he was kidnapped or murdered-“ Agnes Pearce snuffles. Captain Howard slips his handkerchief into his wife’s trembly fingers and she dabs at some tears rippling down her face. “George was always such a good boy-“ she adds.

"MY NAME IS SIDNEY-"

"I can't let you take the boy with no adoption papers-" Iron Pete decrees.

"Then we'll be back-" Captain Howard promises. And they leave with very little fuss.

"Christ, I need a drink-" Iron Pete exhales. "I'm going to the bar-"

"Okay, Daddy-" Velvet hugs him goodbye.

"Don't worry, kid. We got your back-" Then he lumbers purposefully out the front door. "If they come back here tonight, Velvet, you call me-"

Velvet flips on the TV and we nestle about a foot apart on the sofa watching the news. I could leave right now, flee before my “parents” returned. But all I want is to be with Velvet for a little while longer.

“Wow, Sid-“ she says, “What you did today for that lady is really amazing-“

“God leads me and I follow him-“ I answer softly.

I believe she’s a little unnerved by me saying that, she doesn’t really know how to reply. So when Patches twines herself between Velvet’s legs, she scoops her up and cradles her like a baby. “I’m so glad I got my Patches back-“ She nuzzles and coos over her pet.

“Did you have a pet at home?” she asks me.

“I don’t know...I don’t think so...-“

“Maybe those Salvation Army people really are your adoptive parents. And maybe they could help you find your real ones? I mean, somebody gave birth to you, right?”

“I don’t know-“

Velvet lets Patches slip away. “What are you saying?” She stares over at me now. “That you have no parents?”

“I don’t know-“

“Stop saying that. You’ve got to have parents. Everybody does. Everybody has family-“

Several warm tears slip down my cheeks. I bury my face into my hands and sob.

“Sid?” Velvet’s voice is small and soft. “What’s wrong?”

“Do you think I’m a freak?”

“No-“ her response is immediate and heartfelt which makes me feel a little better.

Gently she pulls my hands away from my face, “I think you have some kind of...gift...

something magical...special...you allowed me and Daddy to talk to my mom...how did you do that?"

"I don't know-"

She punches me in the shoulder. "I told you to quit saying that!", and we both laugh. Her face is close to mine now. "Could you do it again, Sid? Let me speak to my mom?"

"I'm sorry, Velvet..... I don't choose what comes to me and when...it just... happens-"

But her expression is not as disheartened as I expected it to be. "That's okay, Sid. Once was more than enough...Thank you so much-"

She leans in then and kisses me softly on the mouth. Her lips are indeed like velvet. I crush into them and she parts hers and her warm tongue dips into my mouth, lightly touching my tongue, caressing it with velvety licks. I groan into her mouth, nearly swoon with ecstasy. Our breaths quicken.

"Should I get my fire-hose?" Hearing Albert's harsh braying, Velvet bucks me off. Frozen we both watch him hang up his keys and his Giant's blazer. "You might like to know, Missy, that I just spoke to Lucas-" he adds airily. "He asked my permission to come over and fix the window he broke. So the asshole's on his way over here-"

Chapter 17

“Speak of the Devil-“ Albert prances to the door a moment later to let Lucas in.

Lucas looks fresher, sober, his hair shampooed and raffish. A tool belt is slung around his hips. His muscles are still hard and well defined, lean yet powerful. Two bandannas are twined around his wrists, like bracelets, to cover his bandages. Leave it to Lucas to make a suicide attempt look hip. Warily his marble eyes pan from me to Velvet, sitting side by side on the sofa, jab us with accusation. “What’s going on here?”

I rear up, and Velvet follows my lead. My face feels hot enough to burst into flames.

“We were just checking out the news. Did you hear? Our Sidney is a hero. He saved a drowning lady at work today-“ Velvet jabbars.

“Did he?” Lucas’ voice is tight.

“Well I think this calls for a little celebration then-“ Albert suggests. “For our golden boy-“ he rumples my hair with affection, and both Velvet and I know he’s working it, trying to get a rise out of Lucas, trying to get him to act out, trying to win the bet.

“I got that window to fix-“

“Let’s eat dinner out at a nice restaurant, kids. My treat-“ Albert won’t let up.

“I got that window to fix-“

“Then Velvet and Sid will come with me, come on guys. Acts of heroism don’t just come along every day. Our Sid should be rewarded-“

All of our eyes flicker back and forth from one to the other, like cowboys in a standoff, waiting to see who will act out first.

A firm rap at the front door is a welcome relief to all the tension.

That is until we see that it’s Captain Howard and his wife back, flanked by two grim police officers. I swallow down a lurch of sickness.

“Can I help you?” Albert blinks with confusion.

“We’re here for our boy, George Pearce-“

“What?”

“Albert, these people say they’re Sid’s parents-“ Velvet fills her brother in.

Howard Pearce thrusts a sheath of papers into Albert’s hands. “Here are his adoption papers, so you can see for yourself-“

Albert rifles through them.

Then one of the cops hands over another paper. “We’re taking the boy to the hospital for a psychiatric evaluation-“

“No, please!...I’m fine, tell them please-“ Words surge through my lips.

“Good...cause Sid’s crazy-“ Lucas blurts with supreme satisfaction.

Alberts says, “Shut up, Lucas...Officers, there’s nothing wrong with this boy-“

Agnes’ hand flutters in front of her nose, shiny red from crying earlier. “George doesn’t recognize his own parents, he speaks in riddles, he looks like death...he needs treatment-“

The cops give me a sweeping look from head to toe. One says, “George, have these people been holding you here against your will or abusing you?”

“NO!” I blurt.

“The boy could be brainwashed-“ Captain Howard alleges, cutting a knowing look at Albert.

“Now wait just a minute!” Albert’s nose flares with fury and his cheeks blaze. His hands flip backwards on his hips. “Just what are you implying?”

“Sir, you are obviously h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l-“ my supposed father lances Albert with a knowing glare. “Who knows what’s been going on here?”

Velvet’s eyes flash liquid fire. “My brother is not a pervert or a criminal! Tell them, Sidney!”

“I’m FINE! I’m HAPPY here!”

“Brainwashed-“ Agnes Pearce agrees with her husband.

“You’ll have to come with us, son-“ One of the officers clutch my arm. “His mother’s right. He’s just skin and bones-“ Both cops rake Albert now with icy stares.

“He was that way when he got here!” Albert insists.

“Help me! Don’t let them take me!” I reach for Velvet, but Lucas steps firmly in my way.

“DON’T TOUCH HER!” Lucas explodes.

Velvet’s lashes are tacky with tears, as I grasp for her, but the officers flank me now, hustling me easily, as if I was light as air, out the door and into their cop car waiting outside.

Everybody follows us out.

“We’ll meet you at the hospital, Sidney-“ Albert vows.

“No visitors but family where we’re taking him-“ a cop says automatically, stuffing me into the back seat like a criminal.

“Don’t worry, Sid-“ Velvet screams, as the cop car lurches off, “We’ll find a way to help you!”

In the emergency room, an ER doctor, a balding man from India, with a bright red dot between his eyes, the traditional Bindi, evaluates me. He asks questions, notes my responses on his clipboard. I ask him some questions, too.

“What is your full name?”

“Sidney... What level chakra does your bindi mark?”

“The third level...Last name?”

“I don’t have one....Does the Egyptian Eye of Horus represent that same third eye?”

“Some scholars believe so...Are Captain Howard and Agnes Pearce your parents?”

“No.... Does the center of the Eye of Horus symbolize the hypothalamus gland?”

“That’s debatable...You do realize they have valid adoption papers that prove you are their son-“

“I am the son of God. He is my light and my guide-“

“What is today’s date?”

“I’m not sure-“ I glance around but there’s no calendar anywhere.

“Who is president of the United States?”

“Is your third eye open?”

“Tell me your birthdate-“

My mind searches for a date, but finds none. So I just shrug.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” He shows me four.

“Four-“

“What is 3 plus 5?”

“Eight-“

“Count backwards by fives starting with a hundred-“

"100, 95, 90, 85, 80, 75, 70-"

"Okay. So tell me what you've been doing for the past two years, George-"

"I'm Sidney....Traveling. Hopping trains-"

"Do you hear voices?"

"God speaks to me, yes-"

"What does he say?"

"It's different every time. He guides me to people in need and I help them-"

"How do you help them?"

"Like I said...it's different every time-"

"Are you homicidal?"

"No-"

"Suicidal?"

"No-"

"Do you have hallucinations?"

"Visions-"

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen-"

"When did the visions start?"

"I'm not sure-" I'm distracted by a box of gauze that levitates off its shelf and hangs in the air before me. My eyes follow it as it circles the room.

"Are you seeing something now?"

"A box of gauze is levitating...Can't you see it?"

"No-"

"It's right there in front of you...open your third eye...it's right *there*-"

"Okay, George. I think it's time I spoke with your parents now-"

The doctor calls the nurse, and she leads Captain Howard and Agnes Pearce

into the room. They are still wearing their Salvation Army uniforms which are crumpled and creased from waiting long hours in the Family Room. It is three in the morning.

“Mr and Mrs Pearce, you have a highly intelligent son here who seems to be suffering from some kind of amnesia. But he has no real cognitive problems, so I’m ruling out Temporal Global Amnesia at this point-“

Captain Howard drapes his arm around his wife’s doughy shoulders. “What’s wrong with him then?” She’s wan and wilted. She’s been crying some more. I feel for her, for her suffering. But she is not my mother.

“It may be a medical issue, like a virus causing brain swelling which is behind his hallucinations and religious ideation or it could be something psychiatric like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. I’ll have to keep him and run some tests to know for sure. I’ll start with an MRI and a catscan. I don’t want to medicate at this point because I’m not really sure what we’re dealing with-“

“I want to go home. I want to see my girlfriend-“ I plead with them.

“George, I can’t release you until I run some tests....but don’t you worry, we’re going to take great care of you here-“

“I’m Sidney-“ But nobody’s listening. While waiting for them to prepare a room for me, I settle back on this padded examination table. I watch some softball sized gold spheres gliding through the air. First just a few of them and then many. One of the gold orbs slows to a halt right in front of my face. I peer inside and see a curled human embryo, its chest gently rising and falling, lashless eyes closed, peacefully incubating.

“Welcome-“ I say softly.

I share a hospital room with an obese man suffering from clinical depression. He is sitting up reading a Steven King novel when the nurse escorts me in.

“Ring the buzzer if you need anything, George-“ the nurse says. She is middle aged, tan as leather, wearing a smock covered in Care Bears.

The man glances up at me as I sit on my bed. We wear matching flowing hospital gowns and plastic bracelets.

“Life sucks, huh?” he says to me. “You depressed, too?”

“No, I’m happy. I just miss my girlfriend-“

“You bi-polar, schizophrenic, delusional, what?”

“No-“

“Then why are you here?”

I shrug.

“De-ni-al ain’t just a river in Egypt-“ he remarks, shutting his book. “I’m gonna try and get some shut eye. You ain’t one of those psychotics who’s gonna start screaming bloody murder and carrying on soon, are you?”

“No-“

“Good. My last roommate was a real nutbag-“

I lay down, fiddle with my bed levers until I’m comfortable. I stare up at a swirled pane of glass covering the light tubes in my ceiling. A shrouded Jesus forms in the patterned glass. The image moves like smoke.

Anxiety knots my stomach. I miss Velvet, and I can’t sleep. Soon the Jesus image above me starts to morph. Hypnotized I watch it for a while. My limbs buzz away. An unclear image stretches and rolls, until finally I see The Rusty Skupper Restaurant, just like before. The 4th of July banner is still up. But this time I see massive crowds of people standing and

sitting on blankets all around Baltimore's Inner Harbor. Families and couples stare raptly up at the sky as a dazzling fireworks display explodes. Sparkling green and pink trees, canopies of fizzy lights, a perfect red white and blue flag. Excited children clutch their parents' hands. The next rocket shoots straight up. There is a ferocious bang but no fireworks, only some enormous rust colored clouds which filter down. A dud. So everybody waits for the next one. Some spectators begin to pinch their noses. Some clutch their throats and cough. Some drool. Many vomit or urinate. The children are the first to drop, sliding to the ground and twitching like epileptics. Parents cover their mouths and noses with the bottoms of their shirts or their American flags, then stoop to grab their unconscious children and run from the copper colored smoke. "Dirty bomb-" somebody screams, triggering a stampede. Trampled parents wail, cradling their dead children. Spasms seize their bodies, and they die, too, slumped over their babies. I struggle to get out of my hospital bed and warn anybody who will listen that soon the dead will pile high, thousands upon thousands, but I am catatonic, can't move. I can scream though, and I do. Agonized roars rip through my throat.

In minutes nurses and orderlies surround me, strapping me down even though I still can't move a muscle. "What's wrong, George?" A nurse clenches my face, looks deep into my fevered eyes. I try to flail, and I scream some more: "No!....dead babies....fireworks.... GOD PLEASE....NOOOO!!!!!"

"He's psychotic-" the nurse determines. I don't even feel the jab of her needle. "Calm down, George, you're gonna be okay-" A second younger nurse rubs my arm, trying to soothe me. Everybody else bustles off, but she sits with me awhile.

"Dirty...b-bomb....skupper...-" I babble when I can speak some more. "p-please.... Help me!...-"

"I know, George-" the nurse frets. "You'll feel better soon-"

The last words I hear before the Haldol kicks in and drags me under to oblivion is my roommate grumbling, "Jesus H. Christ, I got another fucking looney bird-"

Chapter 20

When I wake, still restrained to my hospital bed, I whimper and sob. Drool webs my chin. My “parents” and the Indian doctor stare down at me.

“You feel any better, George?” My doctor asks me blandly.

“Please....Doctor Teklay....I’ve got to get out of here....or thousands will die!”

“Nurse, give him another sedative-“

“No!....you’ve got to alert the FBI.... There’s gonna be a terrorist attack in Baltimore! It’s REAL!!!”

“Hush now, Georgie-“ My “mother” says, tucking in my blankets.

“His MRI and catscan scheduled for today should provide us some answers-“ my doctor assures them.

“Can I please just call my girlfriend?” I wail.

“Maybe later if you behave-“ the doctor replies vaguely before shuffling out to see his next patient.

Captain Pearce says, “Son, we’re going to the cafeteria. Would you like something?”

“I NEED TO GET OUT OF HERE!!!”

Captain Agnes leans down and kisses my cheek before they leave.

The obese depressed man is back in his chair, reading again.

“Excuse me, sir...I need your help-“ I whisper.

His tired eyes peer briefly above his glasses. “What? ...If you gotta pee, call the nurse-“

“No, sir....could you please just untie me?”

“The doctor says it’s for your own good-“

“No....see....terrible things are gonna happen if I don’t get out of here-“

I try my best to sound calm and uncrazy to convince him.

“You need help, son-“

“You don’t understand...I’m not crazy!”

“De-ni-al-“ he says patly,”-ain’t just a river in Egypt-“

A whistling orderly strides in and starts wheeling my bed out of the room.

“Time for your MRI, buddy-“

While my head is enclosed by what looks like a white coffin and loud piercing noises vibrate the machinery, I brainstorm. The lady I saved from drowning must have been just a coincidence. My real mission is to find and dismantle the dirty bomb before it’s detonated, leaving massive casualties. I need to get to a phone. I pray I can persuade Velvet and her father to help me in time.

The MRI and Cat-scan results come back normal. So Dr Teklay has a psychiatrist evaluate me. After 15 minutes, he decides that I am neither bi-polar nor schizophrenic. "You had a bad dream , George. A nightmare, that's all-"

"But sometimes my dreams come true-" I don't want to say vision or trance again or they'll never let me out of here.

"The paranormal is not my field of expertise-" the psychiatrist shrugs on his way out.

So a spinal lumbar puncture is ordered to test my brain fluid. The result is inconclusive. Not grossly abnormal. But not 100% normal either.

"Have you been bitten by a mosquito lately?" my doctor asks me.

"No-"

"West Nile can trigger brain swelling, hallucinations, and delusions-" he tells my "parents"

"What about a cold sore?"

"No-"

"Herpes can spread to the brain-" Dr Teklay says. "But in the absence of these factors, I believe George may have a very rare virus called the HERV-W virus. We doctors call it the "insanity" virus since it causes brain swelling which triggers a schizophrenic-like state in its victims-"

"Oh my-" Agnes says.

"How do you get this virus?" Howard asks.

"It's airborne, usually inhaled through the nose-"

"How do you treat it?"

"There is no treatment. The patient's natural antibodies must defeat the virus. Sometimes the patient recovers in a few months. Sometimes the patient never recovers-"

Both my “parents” appear even more deflated now.

Because I have been quiet, on my best behavior, my restraints have been removed.

“May I please make a phone call now, doctor?”

“The phone is out in the hallway-“

“Thank you-“ I shuffle out, make a bee-line for the pay phone. I dial Velvet and beg for her help.

“Hold tight, Sid, I’m gonna talk to Daddy and see if he’ll help me get you out-“

“Hurry. Please hurry-“ The nurse told me it was July the 2nd. I have only two more days left to find and destroy the dirty bomb, to save countless innocent Americans.

Later that afternoon, while I'm standing in line for my little plastic cup full of pills, I spy Velvet out of the corner of my eye. She is attired in hospital scrubs, I guess from when she used to volunteer. My heart squeezes with affection at the sight of her. She holds a chart. With professional aplomb she strolls over to me. "George Pearce, please come with me. The doctor would like to see you--"

I step out of line and follow her. Nobody really pays us any mind.

We hustle to the elevator. Feverishly she begins punching in numbers. "I remember the first three numbers of the code from when we came to see Lucas, but not the fourth number--" So she must try over and over until she gets the last number right. Her shaky fingers fly, until a massive black orderly strolls up behind us.

"What you all doing here?" he booms.

"I'm taking this patient down to the gift shop--" Velvet says in a high breathy voice. "He's earned enough good behavior points, so his doctor okayed it. I'm his chaperone--"

"Who his doctor?"

"Dr Tecklay--" I fill in quickly for Velvet.

"Yes, Dr Tecklay--" Velvet repeats.

The orderly studies Velvet's pretty face. "You new?"

"Yes--" she's a little flustered. "And I forgot the last number of this code here. I'd ask the head nurse but I don't wanna look stupid...--"

"I got you, baby girl--" the orderly smiles down at her and punches in the code for us.

"Thank you!" We hop on the elevator and start the descent.

On floor 3, Dr Tecklay steps inside. Velvet and I both suck in a breath. Slowly I turn away so he can't see my face. But he is busy talking into a small tape recorder about another patient.

Floor Two.

Floor One.

Dr Tecklay disembarks. Quickly we bolt the opposite way, sail down shiny, laminated hallways which are serpentine and confusing. We pass X-ray, a pharmacy, a coffee cart, a cafeteria, the hand clinic. OB-GYN, and then finally an exit. We throw open the door and find ourselves in a walled in courtyard with picnic tables where numerous doctors and nurses sit eating their lunches.

“Go back-“ Velvet warns softly. So we re-enter the hospital, tramp down more confusing corridors until we reach another exit. Outside we see discharged patients waiting for taxis and senior mobility buses. Velvet grabs a nearby wheelchair. “Get in-“ she commands.

I sit, and she rolls me outside. Then she calls her Dad. “We’re on the south side by the Johnston building on Calvert Street-“

Two minutes later a hack car pulls up. The driver is a senior black man with a golf cap pulled low over his shady eyes. “Get in-“ he says.

We stay put until we see Velvet’s father is in the back seat flagging us over, “Get in, you knuckleheads-“

“Where’s Albert?” Velvet wants to know.

“He got called into work-“

We clamor inside the hack car which smells of strawberry air freshener and menthol cigarettes.

“Where to, mister?” the driver wants to know.

“Hickory Avenue...in Woodberry-“

“You know we’re probably committing a felony breaking you out of a psych ward like this-“ Iron Pete tilts his head back, draining the remainder of a bottle of Maddog 20/20.

“Hey, no open containers of liquor, bub-“ The hack could care less about our breakout.

Iron Pete salutes our driver and pockets the empty bottle.

“Daddy, don’t you think the cops will come looking for Sidney at the house?”

Velvet whispers.

“Probably-“

“Then we can’t go there right now-“

“Sir, drop us off at the VFW down the street here-“ Iron Pete decides. He smells fermented and also tinny, like a hot dime.

When we arrive, Iron Pete stuffs some bills into the driver’s salmon-colored palm, and we all thank him. “Have a blessed day-“ the driver wishes us before pulling off.

Inside the VFW are some battered tables and chairs, some red upholstered booths repaired with duct tape, a pool table, a dart board, a jukebox, and a spattering of shriveled guys wearing caps embroidered with the American flag or Korea or Vietnam spelled out. Everybody drinks draft beer out of plastic cups.

Iron Pete hustles us over to one of the booths. “Wait here-“

Uneasily we sit.

“Are you all right, Sid? You look exhausted-“ Velvet says.

She looks wore out, too. Lavender crescents halo her eyes. And I notice that her eyelashes are clumped in wet points like she’s been crying.

“I’m fine...what about you?”

“I had to throw a fit or Daddy wasn’t gonna help you. Plus Lucas is mad at me now-“ Her voice trails off, as Iron Pete returns with two cans of Coke for us, and we drink thirstily.

“What’s the plan, Sidney?” Velvet’s father cuts right to the point. “You know everybody’s gonna be looking for you-“

I tell them about my newest vision. I have no choice. Because I'm really going to need their help.

"Dirty bomb?" Iron Pete is incredulous. "I think maybe we should have left you at the hospital-"

"He knows things, Daddy. He knew all about Mommy, didn't he?"

"You told me you were an explosive expert. Can you dismantle a dirty bomb?" I ask him.

"That was 50 years ago....I dismantled landmines and mine fields... crude bombs with wires...I don't know jackshit about any high tech dirty bomb-"

"I believe the dirty bomb will go off as part of the 4rth of July fireworks display downtown. A chemical rocket. If we locate it and sink it in the Chesapeake Bay, do you think that will render the bomb useless, sir?"

"How the hell should I know?" Iron Pete sucks in a laugh. "You really are a fruitcake, kid-" He starts to shamle away.

"No, Daddy! Wait! Please just listen to Sid for another minute!"

"If we don't act soon, thousands will die-" I plead with him.

"Okay, describe this explosion to me. What's it look like?" A disbelieving Iron Pete halts, folds his hefty arms.

"It looks like...nothing at first...a rocket goes off...there's a blast but no fireworks... just some rust colored clouds filtering down...then people start vomiting and drooling and coughing and convulsing...and everybody dies-"

Velvet looks up from her smartphone which she has consulted. "Daddy, listen to this. Sarin is a nerve gas used in dirty bombs which is odorless and tasteless. It causes suffocation due to muscle paralysis. Victims vomit, twitch and jerk, suffocating in a series of spasms. Death takes one to ten minutes-"

"Sid, I like you, kid, but you are seriously off your rocker if you think I'm gonna

get involved in any cockamamie scheme to find a weapon of mass destruction that may or may not exist. Terrorists spend years perfecting their attacks. Even if I did agree to help you, which I'm not, this is a job for trained experts, SWAT guys and Navy Seals, not *us*-"

"Daddy, it says here that we need a Field Deployable Hydrolysis System which will neutralize the poisonous substances and covert them to industrial waste-"

"Okay then. Let's just go to Walmart and get one-" Iron Pete cracks.

"Or you can bury the chemical rocket in a concrete fill or take it way out to sea and drop it in very deep water, like Sid said-"

"Did you even hear a word I just said, Velvet? NO WAY am I getting involved in this crock of shit. You kids are NUTS-" Iron Pete strides off to the bar, sits, and belts back a double shot of whiskey.

"Don't worry, Sidney. I believe you. Maybe we can get my brother Albert to help us?"

Velvet and I wait until dark, when the moon is just a rind of light up in the sky, to sneak home from the VFW. We hustle in the back door, and find Albert sitting at the kitchen table, eating a pan full of brownies. “The cops were here looking for you, Sidney-“

Velvet sits, so I follow her lead and sit, too.

“Are you mad at us?” Velvet asks.

“Not really. I saw “One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest”. I imagine a psych ward can be quite a scary place-“

“Looks like Lucas fixed the window-“ I remark, seeing the plywood is gone, replaced with a fresh pane of glass.

“Yeah-“ Albert nibbles brownies from his fingertips. “He left about an hour ago-“

“I don’t feel so good-“ Velvet rests her head on her folded arms.

“What hurts?” her brother asks.

“My stomach feels all queasy-“

“Running from the law will do that to you-“ Albert quips. “Take some Alka-seltzer-“

She doesn’t move.

“Did you even eat today?” Albert chugs from a tall glass of milk.

“Not really-“

“Then eat something-“

“I can’t. I feel like I might puke-“

He pours her a glass of ginger ale and hands her a sleeve of saltine crackers.

“Thanks, Albert-“

“Sid, you hungry?” Velvet asks me.

“No thank you, I don’t feel so great either-“

“You two know the cops will probably check back here at some point-“ Albert

pinches the remaining brownie bits from the pan. "What happened at the hospital? Did they find anything wrong with you?"

"The psychiatrist thought I had a medical problem, and the doctor thought I had a psychiatric problem-"

"Well what do you think?"

"I feel fine. Nothing's wrong with me-"

"Mm-hm-" But Albert sounds unconvinced. "You might want to sleep up in the attic just in case the cops do come back tonight-"

A breathless Iron Pete hustles in the back door then, snaps on a small tv set perched on a shelf nearby. "You guys need to see this-"

It's a Breaking News Special Report. A handsome anchorman speaks stoically, "The president is putting the country on a state of high alert for terrorist activity this 4rth of July weekend due to increased chatter on the internet about a suspected plot to kill US citizens on our Independence Day. Citizens are asked to be vigilant and to report any suspicious activity to the FBI hotline-"

My chest clenches and my face tingles. Two short days is all I have to fix things.

"See, Daddy-" Velvet pipes up.

"See what?" Albert cleans his sticky fingers with a Wet-nap.

So Velvet tells him about my vision.

"Good Lord-" Albert scoffs. "The president's issued a generic warning to the public at large. Not to Baltimore specifically-"

"Daddy, do you believe Sidney now?"

"I'm not sure....maybe-"

"You're too drunk to make any kind of a rational evaluation, Pop. I mean, come on-"

"When I first saw the warning on the tv, the hairs on the back of my neck stood

up, Albert....I don't know....I mean...I felt.....something...-“

“I felt the same way when we saw Mommy-“ Velvet chimes in.

“Saw Mommy?” Albert squawks. “What the hell are you two talking about?”

“Sidney saw her. And she spoke to him. Daddy was there-“

“ENOUGH-“ Albert erupts. “I don't want to hear another word of this foolishness.

I'm going to bed-“ He burps elaborately and retires for the evening.

“What would it hurt to check out the Inner Harbor tomorrow for anything suspicious?”

Velvet asks.

“Do you two have to work?”

“No, Daddy. They closed the restaurant down until the fourth for repairs-“

“Are you sure about this, Sidney?....I mean just exactly how sure are you?” His

forehead pinched with worry, Iron Pete searches my face.

“If we don't act soon, just as I saw it, the devastation will happen-“

The following morning, we're packing a bookbag with bottles of water, some sandwiches, and a pair of binoculars when Lucas taps at the back door.

Velvet peeks through the curtains. "Shit. It's Lucas--"

"Don't let him in--"

"I have to, Daddy--" Velvet swings open the door, and Lucas strolls in. He looks grim, agitated. His face is taut.

"What's up, Velvet? I called you three times and texted you and you never even called me back--" His translucent eyes actually tear up a bit.

"I'm sorry, Lucas. Daddy and I are busy helping Sid...with something important--"

"Like what?"

"Don't worry about it, bozo. Doesn't involve you--"

"Are we broke up, Velvet?" Lucas blusters. A single vein writhes in his forehead. Everybody looks at Velvet.

"We'll talk later, Lucas. We're in the middle of something very important here--"

"Oh, and I'm not important?" He stalks closer to her.

"I didn't say that... But I do have a life outside of our relationship...and you need to respect that--"

Lucas jabs a finger in her face, "Are you fucking that freak?" Redness creeps up his neck and the sides of his ears.

My mouth hinges open but no sound comes out.

Before she can reply, Iron Pete snatches Lucas up and drives him out the door, "Get lost, and don't come back until you can show my daughter some respect!"

"I love you, Velvet!" Lucas screams.

But she doesn't chase after him like we expect. She just settles the bookbag on her back. "We ready to go?"

Trekking down Old Falls Road with her father and I, Velvet frowns.

“Don’t let that asshole get you down-“Iron Pete swigs from a bottle of water.

It’s another broiling day. Our faces ripple with sweat.

“Daddy, Lucas isn’t all bad. Maybe I was too hard on him-“ Velvet whispers in a soft, regretful voice now.

Iron Pete snorts. “Oh so now you’re gonna take up for the punk?”

“His dad committed suicide. His mom’s a junkie. He doesn’t exactly have an easy life-“

“Don’t make excuses for him, baby. He’s a class A jerk-“

“When he was six, his mom bought him a blue plane for Christmas. Then the next Christmas she painted that same plane green, just rewrapped it. Lucas cried and cried. She lied and said it was a different toy, but he knew. I mean the first plane was missing....even a little kid could figure that out-“

“Maybe she didn’t have any money-“ I offer.

“Yeah, cause she spends it all on crystal meth and crack-“ Velvet asserts.

“Okay. Poor misunderstood Lucas. Now can we move onto another topic?”

Iron Pete drags the back of his hand across his sweaty forehead. “What exactly should we be looking for at the Inner Harbor, huh, Sid?”

“Anything suspicious-“

“Like what?”

“I’m not sure-“

“What if we don’t find anything?” Velvet asks.

“Just pray we do. We haven’t got much time-“ I answer.

Once we arrive at the Pratt Street Pavilion, we rest on the warm concrete of the

amphitheater and guzzle more water. Around us, some pigeons bob and warble. Velvet skims our surroundings with the binoculars.

“See anything, baby?”

“Not a thing, Daddy. Just a bunch of sweaty tourists-“

“Can I try?” Velvet passes me the binoculars and I glass the far horizon of the Chesapeake Bay. Some seagulls burst into flight.

“See anything, Sid?”

“There’s a barge out there in the water. I bet that’s where they’re gonna set the fireworks off-“

“Let me see-“ Iron Pete looks. “Yeah, I see it, too-“

“We need to inspect that barge. Maybe the chemical rocket is attached to the underside in the water, hidden until tomorrow?” I surmise.

“Yeah. But how do we get there?” Velvet wants to know.

“The water taxi will take us close enough. It’s the third stop, I think. Right by the Domino Sugar sign-“ Iron Pete points.

“But the ferry is eight bucks a person, Daddy-“

“I got it. I hit on Keno yesterday. Come on-“

“Krishna provides-“ I say.

The blue and white ferry glides through the water, kicking up a nice breeze which slices through our hair. We disembark at the Domino Sugar factory. The air swells sweet, like brown sugar. From here we can see the barge much better.

Iron Pete adjusts the binoculars. “There’s nobody on it right now. I don’t see any fireworks yet either-“

Two security guards in neon vests approach us. “Excuse me, sir, I’ll need to check your bookbag-“ Both guards have nine millimeter pistols strapped to their hips, and a glaze of perspiration films their faces.

Iron Pete hands his bag over. They rustle through it.

“Okay. Thank you-“ They send it back.

“Extra security due to the terrorist threat, huh?” Iron Pete asks.

“Yes, sir-“

“Is that the barge the fireworks will be shot off?”

“I believe so-“

“Do you know what time the fireworks are scheduled to go off?” I ask them.

“Nine o’clock sharp...You all from here or out of towners?”

“Baltimore born and bred-“

“Let me give you some advice then. Stay home this year. Set off some sparklers from the safety of your own backyard....We’re expecting a quarter million people this year....and ain’t no way we can search or monitor all those folks-“ the guard swabs his face with a Subway napkin, bunching his lips with dismay.

“We might just do that-“ Velvet says.

“Be safe-“ The guards wave limply and straggle on.

While Velvet shoots some video footage of the barge and its surroundings on her cellphone, we sit on a wooden pier which edges the water.

“What are you doing, Sherlock Holmes?” Iron Pete kids her.

“I’m getting bored, Daddy-“

“I’m gonna swim over and inspect the barge-“ I tell them. “Look out for security-“

“Be careful, Sidney-“ Velvet perks up.

Swimming is the only athletic thing I was every any good at. So I plunge into the bay, careful not to make too big a splash. I burrow through the icky green water and make it safely to the barge. Then I circle it, skim my hand all along the bottom of the barge, feeling for anything that doesn’t belong there. But I find nothing. So I dive under, follow the

thick rope which I believe holds the anchor, but it's sunk too deep into the bay for me to reach it without oxygen. Chest burning, I bullet back to the surface, return to Velvet and Iron Pete.

As I hop out of the water onto the pier, a Latino cop, eyes me hard and strides over. He's a beast who looks like he does chin-ups and pushups for fun. Dread lurches through me. I pray the cops don't have an Amber Alert or an APB out on me. "No swimming, dummy. You didn't see the signs posted?" he says.

"No, sir--"

"Plus that water's nasty...so which are you, stupid or crazy...or both?"

"I'm sorry, sir--"

He whips out his ticket book and starts scribbling.

"Cut the kid a break....his girlfriend dropped her grandmother's heirloom ring into the water, and he was just trying to get it back for her--" Iron Pete lies for me.

"Is that true?" the cop asks Velvet who quickly nods.

"What's your name, kid?.....you look familiar to me for some reason--"

"I'm Sidney--"

Velvet says, "He's the boy that saved that lady's life last week when the Rusty Skupper restaurant blew up--"

The cop relaxes some and smiles now. "No kidding...That was you?"

"Yes, sir--"

He holsters his ticket book. "Did you find her ring?"

"No, sir--"

"Too bad....You know the world could use a few more kids like you...so I'm gonna let you slide on that ticket, all right?"

"Thank you--"

"You all gonna be here for the fireworks tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir--"

The cop reaches into an inside pocket of his jacket and pulls out some plastic cards attached to neon necklaces. "The mayor gave me these security passes for my family and I to join her right on the barge to watch the fireworks because I won ROOKIE of the Year. But I can't use them because I got to work. So you folks enjoy them--"

"Wow. Thank you so much--" I say.

When the cop is out of sight, we inspect the tickets excitedly.

"Krishna provides again--" Iron Pete jokes. "But if we're really gonna do this thing right, then we gotta make a special stop--"

"For what, Daddy?"

We trod up Howard Street, skipping under shop awnings so the sun won't fry our scalps. Iron Pete leads us into an outlet store called Sunny's Surplus. They sell slightly irregular military attire, shoes, belt buckles, bullets, etc... Iron Pete rummages through a bin, plucking out a sagging contraption made of black rubber with porthole eyes and a droopy snout that ends in a perforated canister. "Gas masks-" he says jovially.

A cold knot twists my insides as Velvet straps one onto her lovely face. "These things are very uncomfortable, Daddy-"

"It's not a fashion statement, Malibu Barbie. If it saves your life, who cares what it looks like?" He scratches up three of the best ones he can find.

"I don't think Velvet should come with us tomorrow. It's too dangerous-" I return her mask to the bin.

"Shut up, Sidney-" Velvet glowers. She snatches her mask back.

"He's right-" Iron Pete agrees.

"Don't forget who sprung you from the nuthouse, traitor-" Velvet fumes. "You wouldn't even BE on this mission if it wasn't for ME-"

"All right, shut up, big mouth-" Iron Pete bugs his eyes at her, cuts a look to some eavesdropping customers. He drops our three gas masks into a basket, adds a package of work gloves, three flashlights, some rope, a sharp knife, walkie talkies, a box of bullets, and a fistful of hand grenades.

Mine and Velvet's eyes open up wide.

"Quit shitting bricks-" Iron Pete shakes a grenade. "They're deactivated-"

"Then what do we need them for, Daddy?"

Iron Pete just smirks, "Hold your horses...I got a plan...we'll discuss it at home-"

After paying, we hike home, stick to the bike path, off the main road. Velvet answers her cellphone, then grimaces. "Lucas says the cops are parked in front of our house--"

"Where to then?" Iron Pete yawns.

"Lucas says we can hide out at his place--"

"Where is it?"

"Chestnut Avenue--"

"Anybody got a better idea?" Iron Pete balks. "Sidney?"

"No, sir--"

"Daddy, Lucas is trying his best to help us--"

"If he starts his shit again, I'm gonna nail him--"

We slog to Chestnut Avenue. Lucas' rowhouse is dingy formstone with a cracked marble stoop. Inside it smells like fried food and cigarette smoke.

"Come in--" Lucas says.

Sitting on a sagging sofa eating fried bologna sandwiches are his mother and her much younger boyfriend.

"Hi, I'm Rita--" Lucas' mother greets us around a mouthful of chewed bread. Her junkie face is a garish ruin framed by box-dyed fiery red hair. Her blue eyes, artichoke chips, are collared in gray circles, the color of old meat, and her face is stippled with scabs.

"And I'm Marcus--" Marcus has tight cornrows, a gold grill, and tattoos up to his jawline.

The couple are skeletal.

"Lucas, get off your ass and get these folks something to drink...we got Kool Aid, Mountain Dew, whatever--" Marcus offers.

"No thank you--" we all decline in unison.

On the dirty coffee table are some crude crack pipes made with Tylenol bottles

and the shells of plastic pens. Crumbled white powder on scraps of tin foil, too.

“Come out back, you guys-“ Lucas leads the way, and we follow.

The screened in porch has a few mildewed patio chairs.

We all stand.

“Maybe coming here wasn’t such a hot idea-“ Iron Pete grouses.

“My mom don’t care...And I’m sorry about earlier, Iron Pete...I didn’t mean to disrespect Velvet...Sometimes I just lose my temper-“

Why Velvet chooses this moment to slide her hand into mine, I’m not sure. My heart leaps in my chest. I fully expect Lucas to launch himself at me, but he doesn’t.

“Let’s go somewhere else-“ Velvet offers up.

Is she testing Lucas? Or does she really like me? My mind reels.

Lucas points to our Sunny’s Surplus stuff. “What’s in the bags?”

“Don’t worry about it-“ Iron Pete snaps.

“I want to help you guys. To prove to you all that I’m not a bad person. I love you, Velvet, with all my heart and soul...I started going to counseling...I got a therapist and everything...he tells me it’s not fair if I try and control everything you do....so it’s something I gotta work on...Velvet, if you wanna be with Sid then I gotta respect that....even though I hate it....But please let me help with this important thing you’re all doing...My Dad was a war hero just like Iron Pete...He got a silver star...Please just give me one chance-“

“No-“ Iron Pete is unmoved by Lucas’ impassioned plea.

“Talk to him, Sidney. He’ll listen to you. Please, Velvet. Let me help-“

“No chance-“ Iron Pete repeats. “Why should we trust you with something important when you fuck up the simplest thing? You’re a selfish little punk who’s always gotta have it your way...Well wake up, Sunshine, trust is *earned*, not handed out on silver platters...

Velvet, Sid, we're leaving--"

Velvet cinches my hand tighter, and we all clamor down the back stairs.

Is Lucas serious or just putting on a good show? I feel bad for him, but my heart sings when Velvet doesn't even glance back at him.

Chapter 28

We head to the VFW where Iron Pete has enlisted the help of some trustworthy friends. Because his plan for tomorrow requires a boat.

“You two kids have some fun while I work things out with my buddies-“

So Velvet and I play some pool, then shoot some darts. It’s nice to just be a kid for once. Even though Velvet murders me at both games, laughing and teasing me. She even plays the jukebox, and we share a pizza. She sits right beside me in the booth, not across, and I don’t ever remember being this happy.

But when I swivel some just so I can gaze at her beautiful face, I’m surprised to see she’s crying. Mascara tears streak down both of her cheeks.

“What’s wrong, Velvet?”

More tears roll.

I stuff some napkins into her hand and she delicately blots.

“Is it something I said or did wrong?” I’m mortified.

To my utter relief, she shakes her head.

“Is it something I can help you with? Are you upset about Lucas?”

Her mouth twists to speak but only gasping sobs come out. Her hand flutters in front of her face.

“Take your time. What’s wrong?”

“I’m pregnant-“ she blubbers, and then her face shatters. “Daddy’s gonna kill me-“

My face tingles and my hands go numb. I open and close them. “It’s Lucas’ baby?”

She nods, just as Iron Pete scoots into the other side of the booth. “Everything’s all set-“ he assures us, then pins Velvet with a suspicious look, “What now, crybaby?”

He clasps her hand, but she wriggles from his grip, whips past him, and seals herself in the ladies room.

“Sid, what’s wrong with my daughter?”

“She’s upset about Lucas-“

“Oh Christ, more of that nonsense?”

Approaching Albert's house, we hunker down and scuttle behind some hedges, craning our necks to see if the cops are still out front.

"They're gone-" Iron Pete groans as he straightens back up, and we dash inside.

"Anybody want a Dagwood sandwich?" he asks, as we hit the kitchen. But suddenly he bars our way. We stop dead, seeing an explosion of white powder silting every surface.

"What is it, Daddy?"

Iron Pete skims a finger through the white stuff and tastes a bit. Instantly he wretches and spits in the sink. He flushes his mouth with tap water. "Don't touch anything!... I think it's lye!"

Velvet gasps when she sees small paw prints in the powder. "Where's Patches?!"

I spy a lye container tilted over on the counter. "It is lye-" I warn them.

"Oh my God! Did Patches eat this shit?" Frantically Velvet starts searching for her pet, dragging away chairs. "Patches! Patches!"

Iron Pete follows some smeared paw prints on the linoleum floor which lead him to a broom closet. Now we can all hear the poor cat's distraught meows coming from inside. A hoarse scream erupts from Velvet's throat. She swings open the door, tries to grab Patches but her father blocks her path, "No, baby! Don't touch her! Sid, get me some plastic gloves and a towel-"

Quickly I retrieve the items, then ferry them to Iron Pete.

He yanks on the gloves and carefully hefts the cat into the towel.

"Oh Daddy!" Velvet screams some more when she sees her pet's face and paws are blistered, badly burned. Patches' tongue lolls out the side of her swollen mouth.

“Call the vet!” Velvet screeches.

“The number’s on the refrigerator, Sid. Dial it now-“ her father yells.

I hold the phone up to his ear so he can speak. “Doc, I think my cat ate some lye... Yeah...her tongue is blistered real bad-“

“Daddy!...Do something!”

I hold Velvet’s trembling body with my free arm, as she watches in horror as Patches gasps for air.

“Ok....ok....somebody find me a pen!” Iron Pete hollers. “We got to open her airway!”

I rumble through drawers until I find one and pass it to him. He dismantles the pen with one hand. Easily it springs apart. And using just the hollow plastic body, very carefully, he nudges it into the cat’s mouth, about four inches down her esophagus. She is breathing again, but just barely.

Thank God Albert returns home from work right in the midst of all this chaos.

“What the fuck?” he says.

Iron Pete wrenches his son’s shirt front. “You gotta drive us to the vet! Right now!”

“Hurry, Albert, or Patches is gonna die!” Velvet shrills. She grabs up his car keys and jams them into his hand.

“Okay! Okay! Let’s roll-“ Albert concurs.

Severely injured cat in tow, we pile into Albert’s sparkling Honda, and he guns it.

Sitting in the waiting room at the Falls Road Animal Hospital, Velvet rocks, like traumatized people sometimes do to self soothe. My plaid shirt is draped across her narrow shoulders. Outside Iron Pete and Albert chain smoke Newports. The waiting room is nearly full.

“Please stop crying, Velvet-“ I say.

But she can't. She trembles, sobs, and rocks. Her arms are banded across her chest.

“There is a path of liberation from this suffering-“ I whisper to her, because I can't think of anything else to say.

She doesn't tell me to shut up, so I press on. “The great cessation of sorrow is the ultimate peace...Buddhahood-“

She begins shredding the delicate skin rimming her thumbnail with her teeth.

“Life is just a dream...a mirage...-“ I hope my words will comfort her.

But she progresses to her fingers, gnawing steadily.

“All things are impermanent...including suffering...so we must free ourselves from our desires...-“

“Sidney, I want my fucking cat to live-“ she blurts.

“I know....but letting go of your desire is the only way to end your suffering-“

“So I shouldn't want anything ever?That's really stupid-“ Velvet sniffles.

She might not agree with me, but at least her mind is on something other than her dying cat.

From the back room, a vet comes out, peeling off his plastic gloves. He strides over. “Patches is gonna pull through, Velvet-“

She squeals with delight, “Oh my god, thank you so much, Doctor Baker!”

“I want to keep her overnight for observation though. I gave her an injection for pain,

so she's resting comfortably now-"

Then Velvet hugs me hard, too. "Patches is gonna make it! I gotta go tell Daddy!" she flies out the front door.

The Vet smiles at me. "Your girlfriend?"

"Yes, sir-"

"She's a cutie-"

"Smart, too-" I add proudly.

"Well take good care of her-" he advises before departing.

On the drive home, Albert mentions that Lucas had stopped by earlier to talk to Iron Pete when we were out.

"What for?" Iron Pete asks with suspicion.

"Something about wanting to go on the "Mission" with you-"

"Turn the car around, Albert-" Iron Pete demands.

"Why? We're almost home-"

"Lucas did this! He hurt Patches because I wouldn't let him come with us tomorrow!" Iron Pete seethes. "Drive me to Chestnut Avenue right now!"

"All right, Pop. Just calm down-"

"Was it Lucas again, Sid?" Velvet is distressed.

"I don't know-" But I can't stop myself from adding. "He did toss Patches out your bedroom window to punish you before though-"

"Same M.O....Drive faster-" Iron Pete cracks his knuckles.

"Hey, this means I won the bet, Velvet!" Albert crows suddenly. "Yeah, I won the bet!"

"Who cares?" Velvet shoots back. "I was gonna go back to finish school anyway-"

Albert careens to a halt right in front of Lucas' rowhouse.

"Call the fucker, Velvet. Tell him to get out here-"

"I'm texting him, Daddy, it's easier-"

We don't have to wait long.

"Here he comes--"

Surprisingly Velvet is the first to jump out of the car. Her face is smeared with tears. She gives Lucas a combative shove. "DID YOU HURT MY CAT!??"

"What?" Lucas rears back. "NO!!!"

Next Iron Pete lumbers out. His brawny hand lassoes Lucas around his neck, slamming him up against Albert's car.

"Watch my side mirror, Pop!"

"DID YOU TOUCH MY DAUGHTER'S CAT?" Iron Pete narrows his eyes. Spittle flies from his lips.

"No! I swear!"

"YOU ARE A SICK FUCK TO TORTURE A HELPLESS ANIMAL!"

"I DIDN'T!"

Iron Pete clocks Lucas, a right handed jab to the face which brings him down. Lucas rolls on the pavement, moaning, clutching his bloodied nose.

"Stay the fuck away from Velvet!" Iron Pete huffs. "If I see you near her ever again, I will kill you--"

Back home, Velvet curls up in her bed. I sit by her, stroking her hair, gently raking my fingers through the silky strands, listening to the shush of it, and praying she won't ask me to stop. If the cops show up, my plan is to flee to the attic. I want so bad to say "I love you, Velvet" but I don't want to push my luck, so instead I say "I'm so happy we met".

"Me, too, Sid-" she murmurs.

Then Iron Pete rolls in with our plans for tomorrow night written long hand on a yellow legal pad. He hands one copy to me and one to Velvet. "Study this. Then destroy it-"

My eyes skim the paper, and it is a good plan. But my gut wrenches worrying something bad will happen to Velvet or her unborn baby. "This really isn't a job for a lady. I still think Velvet should stay home-"

Velvet bolts upright. "I'm going, Sid!"

Iron Pete says, "Baby, I think Sid's right-"

Velvet's expression sours and she jerks away from me. "I'M GOING-"

"I got plenty guys. We really don't need you, Velvet-"

"Give me one good reason why I can't go, Daddy-"

Iron Pete stammers, "Because you're my daughter...and I love you...and I don't wanna see you get hurt-"

"There are women in the military who kick ass and get things done just as good as the men-"

"Right...but you're only 15 years old-"

"Sidney's only sixteen-"

"Sidney's special-"

"Oh...and I'm not?"

“You can’t go, Velvet-“ I speak up.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re pregnant-“ I blurt.

The room is suddenly sucked of air.

“Is that true, Velvet?” Iron Pete demands in a tense whisper.

Her head dips, and her lips quiver.

“IS THAT TRUE???”

“Yes....Daddy-“

“Jesus H. Christ...How far along are you?”

“Just two months-“

“Is Lucas the father?”

“Yes-“

“FUCK FUCK FUCK FUUUUUUUCK!!!”

“Sidney, get out of my room-“

My heart twists in my chest. “I’m sorry, Velvet...I told your father for your own good-“

“Both of you just get the hell out!”

Iron Pete grits his teeth. “You are an ungrateful selfish little baby sometimes. But it’s time to grow the hell up-“

“Like you’re some perfect parent who can give me advice?” Velvet snorts.

“Come on, Sid. And get comfortable, Velvet, because you are NOT leaving this house tomorrow...-“

Iron Pete recruits Tully to stand guard out on the front porch all night. A flat 20 dollar fee to watch for cops. Tully's walkie-talkie hisses and crackles. Also he has a police scanner which his wife lent him (she bought it to combat evening boredom), so he can keep track of the cops whereabouts.

My bed is comfortable, my sheets are clean, and my belly is full, but still I can't sleep, worrying about tomorrow. Who knows what will happen? We could be killed or gassed with sarin. We might have to kill men. I know that the world is an illusion, so being attached to it is pointless. The Avatar Krishna counseled the dejected soldier Arjuna that to fight the battle, to kill for a moral purpose, to eradicate evil, was necessary and good. Still I am scared to death. I Pray to Krishna and to Jesus for strength and guidance tomorrow.

Eventually sleep swallows me whole and I don't have a single dream that I can remember when Iron Pete rouses me with a tug. "Get dressed and come downstairs. We got plans to go over--"

I trip into my jeans, then yank on a t-shirt.

Downstairs I am greeted by three men who appear to be in their 60's or 70's. Randy is a small frail dude with a gray ponytail. He has a box implanted in his side which sends electrical impulses to his spinal cord to combat back pain. Bob is a massive man with an arm that curls inward from a stroke. Cheyenne is tall but cadaverous, with several lethal looking knives strapped to his belt and an Indian chief with an elaborate headdress inked on his stringy bicep. My heart sinks a little as I survey this straggly bunch.

"I would trust my life to any one of these men--" Iron Pete booms, like he could read my thoughts.

The men surround a map of the Inner harbor which Iron Pete has marked with x's here and there. He palms his neck, rubs it, before speaking, outlining our plan.

"But won't a grenade possibly kill some people?" I rattle off my first concern.

“Like I said, the grenades aren’t live, just rigged with a little gun powder and a simple trigger, so they will puff smoke and make a lot of noise without discharging any shrapnel-“
Iron Pete assures me.

“What if somebody can’t swim?” I rattle off my second concern.

“Bob will be standing by as a spectator, ready to throw in a life preserver if necessary-“

“Sounds good-“ Bob remarks.

“Randy, Sidney, and I will tow the barge way the fuck out into the bay and dump the dirty bomb into the deep water-“

“What about me? What’s my part?” Cheyenne asks. He is mahogany brown. Shirtless, he wears a Harley Davidson vest. (He moves furniture for a moving company, makes frequent trips to Florida). He wears black sunglasses day and night.

“You’ll be on standby if anything goes wrong-“

“Like what?”

“Like some FBI fuck or a SWAT douche tries to take us out-“

The room gets real quiet.

“So they really might start shooting at us?” My palms moisten instantly.

“Maybe-“ Iron Pete strokes his chin.

“Please tell me we’ll be packing heat-“ Bob interjects.

“Are guns really necessary?” I ask Iron Pete.

“Unless you wanna get your ass shot full of holes with no way to return fire-“

“I got guns, rifles, shotguns, even some machine guns-“ Randy volunteers.

Then Bob’s hand shoots up. “How do we know the dirty bomb will be disguised as fireworks?”

“We don’t. It just seems like the most logical way to hide them....but everybody keep your eyes and ears open because the plan could change at any time-“

“Are you sure that your source is accurate about this terror attack, Pete?”

“I am-“ Iron Pete assures his men.

“But why would they choose you to tell?”

“Because I was Special Ops in Vietnam...we never really retire-“ Iron Pete says.

With deep respect, everybody nods, mumbles their agreement.

“We’ll need to pick up some more gas masks. So let’s do that first. Then we’ll do some recon at the Harbor while it’s still light out. The mission is a go at twenty one hundred-“

It's a perfect Summer night at the Inner Harbor, and already the place is teeming with families carrying small American flags. A ton of National guardsmen patrol the area. Iron Pete, Bob, Cheyenne, and I lug our gear and guns in plastic grocery bags, not bookbags, to try and avoid security searches. Periodically Iron Pete sips from his bagged pint of Thunderbird. The burgundy colored liquid seeps from the corners of his mouth. Already he is starting to stumble a bit.

"Hey, take it easy on the Jekyll juice, Pete. We need you clear headed tonight-" Bob insists.

"I'm fucking this cat-" Iron Pete gripes-"you're just holding the tail-" But he does return the liquor to his back pocket.

I skid to a halt and everybody stops behind me. On a light pole posted as clear as day is a flier bearing my picture and the words MENTALLY ILL BOY LOST, POSSIBLY KIDNAPPED, REWARD IF FOUND.

"Oh shit-"Iron Pete snags Bob's sunglasses and shoves them on my face. His baseball cap, too.

"Let's move. Stick with the crowd-"

Blood thrums in my temples as we mesh into a sea of bobbing heads. Some police helicopters zoom above us.

We shoulder through the crowd. As the sky darkens to night, Iron Pete lifts his binoculars and glasses the empty barge which is now anchored nearby, about a hundred feet away. The bay surface, rippled with colors from the many restaurants and shop lights, is as smooth as slate. But then Iron Pete halts on something.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Take a look-"

Iron Pete relays the binoculars to me, and I see two men paddling a green plastic dragon towards the barge.

“What is that?” I’m flummoxed.

“It’s a kid’s ride, a paddle boat, but I don’t see no children-“

“What are they doing?”

“Pulling up to the barge-“ The barge has been moved from the Dominoes sugar stop to the Pratt street stop to pick up people with VIP passes like ours.

“A drop off?”

“I can’t really tell. It’s too dark-“

“Now they’re paddling away-“

“Could be the terrorists delivering the dirty bomb-“ Bob cranes his neck, watching the dragon cycling farther out into the bay now. The paddle boats aren’t even open for rides.

“Yeah. Something definitely ain’t right-“ Cheyenne adds.

“Let’s go check it out-“ Iron Pete says.

So we start threading our way to the barge, walking right at the edge of the water, when two security guards pivot in front of us. “Excuse us. We need to inspect your bags-“ Both guards are white, clean cut, red cheeked from the heat, and anxious.

We halt. Blood pumps hard in my ears and chest.

Cheyenne says calmly, “What for? You got a search warrant?”

The bigger guard’s chest swells up and he goes nose to nose with Cheyenne. “The terror level is at Red Alert, so I don’t need a warrant. You ever heard of the Patriot Act?”

“Yes, I have. And it’s a piece of crap. The government is taking away more and more of our citizen’s rights-“ Cheyenne doesn’t hesitate to speak up.

The guard sucks in a breath. “I’m not here to debate with you, Tonto, so just open the fucking bag-“ His face swells to match his chest.

They lock eyes.

Cheyenne says, “My people owned this land long before your white ass came along and fucked everything up-“

Perspiring, both guards glide their fingers across their gun butts now.

And then all hell breaks loose.

Cheyenne ferries his bag to Iron Pete, then barrels through the agitated guard, latching onto his belt and yanking him into the bay. Bob copies Cheyenne’s move, passing his bag to me, before tackling the second guard and driving him into the water, too. All of their fevered splashing draws a crowd, a perfect diversion. “Walk fast-“ Iron Pete instructs me.

“Are they gonna be okay?”

“I sure fucking hope so-“

Half running now, we swivel our heads back. “You see any cops?” Iron Pete is winded, moving faster than I have ever seen him.

“No-“

Approaching the barge now, we see yet another guard, checking bags.

“We gotta ditch some shit. Follow me, kid-“

We detour into the Light Street Pavilion, stride into the men’s restroom. Iron Pete unloads our pistols and gasmasks into a trash bin. Then he swipes my baseball cap, balances two grenades on the top of his head and tucks them under the cap.

We hustle back to the barge. There is now a small line of people with security passes waiting to board. We get in line. Peripherally we can see many frantic guards racing about, trying to locate us. And our line is not moving very quickly. The mayor, a pretty black lady in a pants suit, jabbars congenially with the lady guard collecting passes.

“Come on, come on-“ Iron Pete mutters.

We clamber up when it is our turn. Some more harried guards race past the barge.

We flash our VIP passes. “How you doing today?” Iron Pete asks the armed black woman with neat gray and black cornrows who is checking passes.

“Just fine, baby, just fine-“ Briskly she pats us down, her palms skimming us for weapons.

Finding us clean, she allows us to walk onto the barge. We join the mayor, the barge operator, and an Oriole’s baseball player, holding his little son’s hand.

“Come on, come on-“ Iron Pete mutters, perspiring, “Let’s roll, let’s move this thing-“

Finally the operator guy starts the motor and the barge lurches into action, wedging through the bay, trailing foamy water in our wake.

“Daddy, how far out are we going?” the kid, about ten, asks excitedly.

“Not too far, buddy-“

My throat and chest are tight. Because I’m worried about that kid. What if he can’t swim? What if he drowns because of us, because of our plan? My heart sinks. I cut a look to Iron Pete and then pointedly back to the boy.

Iron Pete clears his throat. “This your first time seeing the fireworks?” he asks the kid.

“No, Daddy and I go every year-“

“Wow, that’s cool...has your Daddy taught you how to swim yet?”

“Of course...I’m on my swim team at school-“

“That’s awesome...how about you, Ms Mayor, do you swim good?”

The mayor smiles brightly, showing her white teeth. “I’m not the greatest... But I can do a mean doggie paddle-“

“And you, sir?” Iron Pete asks the operator.

“It’s a job requirement-“ he concedes. Then he slows the barge, drops the anchor.

It’s time. Water laps the barge. The night breeze ruffles our hair. The Chesapeake Bay is splayed with a rainbow of lights. Iron Pete reaches under his hat, palms a grenade, and tosses it gently into the air. Like in slow motion, the grenade arcs then lands right in the middle of the barge with a dull thunk. But there is no explosion, just a tendril of white smoke which

wafts pitifully upward. All eyes drop to the floor.

“Is that a grenade?”

“Oh God. Don’t touch it!”

“Kick it off!”

Iron Pete tosses the second one, and this time it combusts with a loud KA-BOOM and an impressive cloud of gray smoke. Just like we planned it, everybody jumps overboard, swimming for nearby land and safety.

Next Iron Pete fumbles with his cell phone, chatters into it, “Bravo One, this is Mad Dog, the mission is a go. Repeat, phase one is complete and the mission is a go-“

Carefully he inspects the pile of fireworks rockets loaded in a box in the corner of the barge.

“Anything suspicious?” I help him look.

“No. They all look the same to me. But if you’re right, the dirty bombs gotta be here. Cut the anchor. My hands are too shaky-“ He unsheaths a knife attached to his ankle, passes it to me, and I set to work, sawing the thick rope. “Hurry up, Sid-“

As soon as the barge anchor drops away, Randy’s boat pulls up. It’s not big or fancy, but according to Randy it’s jack-rabbit fast, camouflaged with splotches of green and black paint.

I attach our line to Randy’s boat. Iron Pete inspects my knot, adjusts it, looping a tighter, more complicated version.

“Let’s go, boys! We gotta fly, Randy-“ Iron Pete and I hoist ourselves onto his boat.

Randy works some levers and his boat soars through the dark water, towing the barge. It is just as fast as he promised.

Hanging on, Iron Pete chugs from his pint, offers it around, but I decline.

Spray from the bay whips at our faces and hair. Stars riddle the night sky.

“How far out we gotta go before we dump this shit?” Randy asks. He sips from a Coors Lite bottle nestled in a Ravens koozie like he’s at a picnic.

“As far as we can get-“ Iron Pete wrestles a crushed map from his back pocket, studies it. “About 20 minutes more at top speed until we hit the really deep water-“

“How you holding up, Sidney?” Iron Pete asks me, smiling.

“Good, sir-“ But really I’m half scared to death.

An approaching helicopter makes my jaw drop. It buzzes past the boat. “STOP THE BOAT. THIS IS THE BALTIMORE CITY POLICE. I REPEAT STOP YOUR BOAT-“ A bullhorn booms.

“Don’t stop-“ Iron Pete barks. “Go faster!”

Randy works the levers, and we jet, barreling through the water. We all hold tight to the side of the boat now. It is a bone-jarring ride.

The helicopter swivels back around and somebody inside begins shooting at us. Bullets zing the air, pock the water, ping into the boat.

“Holy fuck. Take cover!“ Iron Pete drags my scrawny butt under a bench. Squatting we peer out. More bullets zig-zag, tear through metal. Iron Pete passes me his pint and this time I chug. Instant warmness floods my body. “We gotta dump the rockets now!”

“How?“ I squeak.

“When the helicopter circles away from us, we jump back onto the barge, and shove the box overboard-“

“But we can’t do it at this speed! He’s gotta slow the boat down!“

“He does that and we’re sitting ducks. Speed’s the only thing we got going for us right now, kid-“ Iron Pete grabs a coil of thick rope, hacks off two long pieces, and we tie them around our waists and to the boat in case we fall overboard. “Keep low. But move fast. Follow me. And stay close. Got me?”

We gulp the rest of the pint, and then move. “Hurry! Hurry!“ We monkey over the side of the boat, drop down onto the barge, tripping and falling because the barge is swaying so hard. Waves of water splash our faces and burn our eyes.

So we crawl to the box of rockets. The helicopter pivots back around and the whirring blades yank at our hair, agitating the water even more. Bullets zip all around us. Our clothes are drenched. But we push on. Heaving, side by side, we hoist the box of rockets overboard. And the bay swallows it whole.

“Geronimo!!” Iron Pete cackles, euphoric with adrenalin.

Blundering back, we duck walk as fast as possible across the barge to the boat, using our ropes to guide and steady us. Then we clamber up an attached ladder. My palms blister and my back muscles burn. Iron Pete almost falls off, but rallies at the last second. The sharp smell of metal stings our noses, as more bullets puncture the sides of the boat. Panting, we flop onto the deck. I dive under the bench for cover again but Iron Pete slips, hits his head and is splayed out now, unconscious, in the middle of the boat. An egg dripping blood forms on his forehead. The helicopter whirls back around. There is another rapid staccato of gunfire. I cradle my head, screaming. I want to save Iron Pete but I can't move. Fear has turned my body into cement. Another barrage of bullets commences, pinging all around Iron Pete's motionless carcass. Then, out of nowhere, a fierce figure in camouflage explodes out from under a tarp located in the back corner of our boat. Ninja-like it grabs a machine gun from Bob's pile of weapons, and fires wildly, like Rambo, up at the helicopter. As the helicopter spins away, the mysterious figure drags Iron Pete to safety, tucking him under another bench. The helicopter returns, spraying more bullets which the figure answers with the roar of his machine gun. Zags of fire explode and light up the night. The figure catches a bullet to the leg and drops, but still, flat on his back, he fires up at the copter. He hits the propeller and brings the copter down. We can see dark shadows abandoning their craft, hitting the water, inflating life vests.

Randy speeds his boat away from the wreckage. And I scramble out to help the man with the machine gun. He is writhing in pain, his blood mixed with water smearing the deck. Only when I get closer do I see a familiar face, lit up, etched with moonlight.

The mysterious figure is Lucas.

Iron Pete and I ferry Lucas through the front door of Albert's house, lower his soaking wet and bloody body onto the mauve sofa. Nobody bothers to grab a towel for Albert's benefit.

Sitting up, curled in the Lazyboy, watching the news and waiting for us, her face stamped with worry, Velvet leaps to her feet, "Oh my God, is Lucas SHOT???"

"I-I'm okay-" Lucas' face is flushed and he is trembling, his forehead wreathed with pops of sweat.

"We need to get him to a hospital!" Gingerly Velvet inspects his wounded leg, jagged flesh and rivulets of blood, hastily wrapped with a bandanna. Just looking at it makes my stomach flop.

"Can't-" Iron Pete dismisses the thought, "We take him to the hospital and they'll connect us with what happened tonight-" The bump on Pete's head is robin's egg blue and twice as swollen now, but he has yet to complain, "Velvet, get me some gauze, a lighter, scissors, some alcohol, and a knife-"

She hurries to collect the items, while Iron Pete inspects the wound and Lucas groans. "Christ you're shaking like a dog shitting razor blades-" Iron Pete laughs. "But it's just a flesh wound, so can it crybaby, the bullet went in and right out-"

I'm shaking some myself.

When Velvet returns with the first aid stuff on a TV tray, Lucas' eyes widen and he cringes, "Is this gonna hurt?"

"Stop whining and be a man-" Iron Pete goads, flooding the wound with alcohol and chuckling when Lucas hollers, "OOUUUUUUUU!!!!!"

"That was the easy part-" Iron Pete heats the tip of the knife with his lighter.

Lucas' eyes are glued to the molten knife. "Seriously, maybe Velvet's right..."

Maybe I should go to the hospital-“

“We need to cauterize the wound. No lie, this is gonna hurt. Just grit your teeth and count to ten-“

“No! Wait!

“HOLD HIM!!!”

Velvet and I jump into position, holding Lucas down as best we can, while Iron Pete seals the scalding knife against the wound, and Lucas bucks like a wild horse.

We all count, “ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR, FIVE, SIX, SEVEN, EIGHT, NINE, TEN!”, until Iron Pete jerks the knife away, and Lucas finally stops howling.

Iron Pete presses some clean gauze to the wound, as Velvet consoles Lucas, holding his hand.

“Where did you learn to do that? Vietnam?” Lucas asks, impressed.

“No. I saw it done in a John Wayne movie one time-“

Near hysterical, we all bust out laughing. From the TV news we learn that the fireworks have been canceled and not one soul (besides Lucas) was seriously hurt or killed. Our mission was a success. The dirty bomb was found, destroyed, and disaster averted.

“I guess my crazy daughter sent you to help us out, huh, Lucas?”

“Yeah. I called to check on Patches, and she told me everything-“

“Lucas rescued my ass tonight, Velvet. He took my bullet and saved the day-“ Iron Pete pats Lucas’ back, then ruffles his hair, “Good job, dummy-“

For once, Lucas’ face glows with happiness. His heroic actions today have made him worthy. Even redeemed him. And that’s when I realize for the first time what my true mission here in Baltimore actually is. It is to help Lucas. To present this abused and troubled boy with a second chance. To give him an opportunity to make good. Lucas has been my mission all along. My mind races with quicksilver confusion. So was saving the Asian lady merely a coincidence? And did the fourth of July fireworks really even contain a dirty bomb? Or was it all just a farce?

A fool's mission? A quest where no danger really existed except in our own minds? Just a vehicle to boost Lucas' self esteem and allow his heroism to emerge? I guess only God and Krishna know for sure.

Iron Pete embraces me next, "You did great, too, Sid-"

But instead of feeling elation, my heart squeezes with anxiety. I am heartsick. Will Velvet take the new heroic Lucas back, or will she give the loneliest boy in the world a chance at love?

After watching the news for many hours, we are assured that the cops and the FBI have no leads on our involvement in the events downtown, much to our relief, and that the Inner Harbor is safe with no signs of any terrorist attacks looming. As we eat cold cuts and vegetables from a tray Albert lugged home from the Giant, I watch Velvet carefully but she is showing no preference for either Lucas or me.

Curled up in my bed, I dream I am nestled in the kitchen closet, peering out, watching Patches jump from a chair to the cabinet, jostling the knob with her paw to open it, trying to smack down her liver flavored treats. But it is the lye bottle she topples with a crash. A cloud of white dust explodes, silts her nose and paws. She tries to smack it away as it burns her flesh. She hops and twirls around, panicked, spraying more lye everywhere. I see now that Patches getting burned was an accident. This time, Lucas is blameless.

When the sky lightens, I tiptoe to Velvet's door and tap softly. But there is no answer. So I tap again. Robed in a tiny t-shirt and boxer shorts, Velvet cracks her door, "What's up, Sid?"

"Can I please talk to you?"

"I've got company-" she hushes.

"Who's that?" It's Lucas' voice. So I take a step back. My heart sinks.

"It's Sidney-"

"Come on in, man-"

Velvet returns to Lucas. Seeing the two of them nestled in bed together, I realize she has made her choice. She has chosen her "baby Daddy", as they say around these parts. My heart scrambles, breaks. I feel light-headed, stunned, like a fragile bird that has just collided with a window pane. "I was just coming to say goodbye-" I mumble.

“No, Sid!” Velvet hops up again. “Daddy said you can stay here as long as you like. I told Lucas about the baby and we’re getting married and everything’s fine now and you gotta come to the wedding! Daddy said if your weird parents come back here we’ll just adopt you-“

“I need to move on....-“ A warm tear trickles down my cheek.

Velvet embraces me, crying too. “No. Tell him, Lucas. He can *stay*-“

Lucas says, “I’m fine with that, man. If you staying as a friend makes Velvet happy, I accept that. My jealousy days are over. And I’m sorry for treating you so bad. You’re cool-“

I whisper into Velvet’s ear, “Lucas didn’t hurt Patches this last time...it was an accident...so you two take care of each other-“

Velvet unclasps her mother’s watch from her slim wrist and slips it into my palm.

“Keep this-“ she insists.

But I hold the warm metal for only a moment before returning the precious keepsake.

“Oh my God, it’s ticking now -“ she shrieks, “My watch is *working*, Lucas!!”

Lucas listens. “Wow-“ he says.

“Oh please stay with us, Sid! Please stay!” Velvet begs, sobbing now. But she is holding onto Lucas, not me.

“Goodbye, Velvet. Goodbye, Lucas-“

Lucas clasps my hand, shakes it, then embraces me sincerely. “Thank you, Sidney. Thank you for everything-“

Aching, I stride out of Velvet’s bedroom, descending the steps two at a time, catapulting myself back into a future unknown.

I know that my desire, my love for Velvet is just an illusion. Briefly I found a girlfriend, and then I lost her. But I would swear to Krishna himself that my broken heart is real.

