



IMPRINT

DEVON GREY

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

IMPRINT

By Devon Grey

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two men embrace against a chain-link fence. The taller man, his back to us, wears a black tank top and a heavy necklace. His head is shaved and a light stubble dusts his jawline. He cradles his partner's head gently as he embraces him, pinning him to the fence. The second man looks into our eyes, his gaze full of secret knowledge, as he brings his strong, work-roughened hand up to rest upon his partner's shoulder.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He holds me as though I am precious. As though he can protect me.

He's wrong on both counts. The only thing I understand is survival.

Please help me to find happiness.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Sofia

Story Info

Genre: paranormal, horror

Tags: police, homophobia, psychic abilities, abuse, HFN

Content Warnings: rape, non-consensual, off-page implied rape and/or abuse of minors, violence to people and (off-page) animals, homicide and other crimes, torture

Word Count: 26,136

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By Devon Grey

I was born in the sun-soaked hills of North Carolina. Okay—you caught me. I don't know where I was born, really. I don't know *if* I was born, for that matter. Oh, I'm sure I was. I have two arms, two legs, ten fingers and toes for that matter. But sometimes... sometimes I wonder.

I'm different. I don't mean that in the "I don't have any friends, I'm a strange bird" way, although, well—that's true too. But... I see things in a different way from other people. I learned that the hard way, in high school.

I didn't used to be able to hide things about myself back then. I used to let it all hang out. I mean, if I like sucking cock it ain't nobody's business but my own. Well, me and maybe the guy whose cock I'm sucking. But back in high school, I learned that other people make it their business. Right about the time I felt the first rib crack, I learned that lesson. They weren't all bad boys after all. Straight A students, football players. In the end, I reckon they were just afraid of someone who wasn't much like them. That's not to say they didn't get what was coming to them.

Anyway, after that I learned to keep things to myself a lot more. I figure it wasn't that long ago they were hangin' Negroes just for the color of their skin. I don't think people are that far from it today, regardless of what they like to think about themselves. We're all still scared of things that ain't like us, and if they found out about me, I'd probably be on the wrong side of a modern-day lynch mob.

I don't use that word lightly, but rather in the historical context of the time. Negro. It don't much matter to me what you are—black, white, brown, yellow, gay, or straight—I'll take your money just the same. I'm an equal opportunist.

So, yeah, I learned to keep quiet about myself back in high school, and just in time—that's when things really started going wonky. I spent two weeks in the hospital; no one much came to see me. I didn't blame the mister and missus. They were fairly good people. They fed me, didn't touch my "special places"—didn't really pay much attention to me. I figure they was just in it for the foster care money, but that's alright. I was fed, clothed, and got an education. Not that it did me much good.

Anyway, it was in the hospital that things started to get strange. Apparently, I'd hit my head, or someone had kicked it, or something. There was some pretty major brain swelling. I'm not real sure 'cause I was in a coma, but that's what the doctors told me later. Anyhow, I don't remember much before that, and mister and missus weren't much for sitting down for story time.

Like I said, *after*, I saw things a lot different from what I remember of before. Although, well you caught me—I didn't really *see* different, but things *was* different. I don't always tell the truth—you should know that about me. Although it's more like I leave some stuff out. I guess mostly I reckon people don't care to hear the whole story.

But I woke up finally, and after sorting out all kinds of painful things (I ain't never getting that cathy thing done again. I'll piss the bed, thank-you-very-much), I noticed something. Nurse Lawson—at least I think that was her name—looked like a big, gummy blob. I'd seen that stuff out floating on top of the little pond out in the mister and missus's pasture. No fresh water ever flowed to it so it just got greener and murkier and fuzzier every year. Couldn't get me to go in that water for nothin'. Nurse Lawson looked like that, but she also didn't. I mean, I still saw her brown hair with spikes of gray, the crackle of lines creeping from her eyes, and her tobacco-stained teeth. But the blob was there all the same, a haze over the features of her face.

“Shit, my head hurts.” I raised my fingers to gently map my temple, where an icy knife radiated pain, tendrils trailing down my cheek, which was large and distended.

Nurse Lawson put her hand lightly on my forehead. She might look like a Nurse Ratchet, but she was always gentle with me. “I just gave you some more painkillers; it should ease in a bit.”

“Umm... Nurse Lawson?”

She glanced at me, before continuing to check my wounds. “Yes, hon?”

“I'm not seein' right. Things are fuzzy green around you and I don't—I said seein' 'cause I didn't know how to say feelin'/seein'/thinkin'. Didn't much matter. I couldn't tell her that she looked like a quaggy pus sack, an etching of disease coating her skin.

Nurse Lawson got a little wrinkle between her brows, but she gave a small smile and patted my forearm. “Give your brain a few days to heal; it should go away. But let me know if you're still seeing things after that.”

I frowned. “Just a few days and I’ll be back to normal?”

“It’ll take you a few weeks to really start to feel like your same old self and maybe a bit after that until you can be running around.”

I groaned. Shit, I was going to miss out on the rest of track season. Turned out that was the least of my worries though. A few days later, I was still seein’ that thing over Nurse Lawson. The doctor’d get all frowny and concerned and tell me that if it didn’t improve he’d call another doctor in to help. By then I was thinkin’ well enough to know that sayin’ more was a one-way ticket to the crazy house. I didn’t want to meet the *real* Nurse Ratchet—that shit was scary. People don’t care much where a brained up teen with no real family ends up. So yeah, I kept my mouth shut after that. ’Sides, it ain’t like I was always seein’ things, just sometimes. I don’t know what made it happen with some people and not others.

It was hard. One thing I’m no good at is tellin’ people things that aren’t so just to make them feel good. The truth slips out whether I want it to or not. Like that one time I told Missy Arnold at Junior prom that her dress looked like Pepto Bismol, ’cept instead of making me better it was making me wanna puke. The pointy end of her shoe in my shin done told me she didn’t much like hearin’ that. My tongue does what it wants—my brain ain’t got much say about it sometimes.

When I went back to school again, I saw those boys different. They was like the insides of a piano. All different strings, but interconnected—sometimes snarled up, sometimes frayed. I knew it weren’t real, so I fancied myself the repairman, straightening out and cutting strained lines. I don’t know nothin’ about instruments or music, or fixin’ stuff for that matter. I shoulda remembered that, even in my own head. Things don’t go right when you go stickin’ your nose in somethin’ you don’t know nothin’ about. Anyhow, after what happened, nobody much bothered me no more. They’d just scurry away every time I came near. Didn’t much matter. I was used to bein’ left out.

When I graduated high school and turned eighteen, I was let loose from the system without so much as a “have a nice life.” At least, I suppose I was eighteen. I never really knew when my birthday was. I asked the missus once, but she just grunted and turned to put the dishes away. I knew better than to ask a stupid question twice. I mean, the mister never hit me, but he had ways of making you listen. The one time I asked about my momma he made me dig a hole for his new septic tank out in the backyard. I mean, that don’t sound that

bad, but he left me out there for three days 'til I was done. The missus brought me some water and a few bites to eat sometimes, but that was 'bout it. And it gets damn cold outside at night in the middle of October.

Anyhow, I came home one day about a week after school was over, and there was a cupcake on the counter with a big eighteen on the top. I guessed it was my birthday. Mister and missus must have gone out, 'cause the house was dead quiet. There was a big box next to the cupcake with my name on it. Inside was a big backpack—not like my little one for school, but like is seen on the Discovery Channel when people was hiking. Inside was all my stuff. I mean, I didn't have much—just a few changes of clothes and my spare shoes. And the worn book of *Call of the Wild* I'd had stashed between the mattresses. Didn't even fill up the bag. I tried to go up to my room to make sure they have missed nothin', but they must've changed the locks or something 'cause I couldn't get in. I found my old guitar leaning against the wall though, so it was worth it. I caressed the worn spot below the strings before turning to look at the hallway, empty of decoration and devoid of sound except the soft shuffle of my feet. I wouldn't miss this place. I grabbed my guitar and my bag and that damned cupcake and headed out, closing the door on an empty house.

I didn't know why mister and missus were throwin' me out, but I could guess. Maybe they heard about what happened with those boys. It was a small town—rumors traveled quick, and mister and missus didn't much like things that was different. Or maybe they just weren't gettin' no more money from the government to keep me. Didn't much matter, I didn't have a home neither way.

I didn't need an engraved invitation or nothin' so I headed off to town. It wasn't that close and it must've been a hundred degrees out, 'cause by the time I reached town, my shirt was near plastered to my chest. I went to Sal's convenience store on Maple Street to grab a drink, and it was there I ran into Mary from the post office. She was a real nice woman. She had always offered me lemonade or cookies when I walked by her house after school. I didn't accept much, though—her son James was a mean sonofabitch. Made me eat deodorant once in gym class; I was tasting dry-cottony-babypowder for weeks. I figured he accounted for all the grooves etched on her face.

“Hey, hon. What are you doing here? Don't you have track practice today?” Mary's floral dress was almost as bright and shapeless as her coral lips.

I shook my head slowly. The diner was slow today, with only one couple laughing in the corner and Mary. The stale greasy-burger smell, mixed with ammonia and bleach, singed my nostrils. I slid onto the hard plastic booth across from her, my jeans catching on a large split in the seat.

“Naw, school’s done. Just thought I’d get a root beer float and head out.”

Mary’s head cocked slightly in attention. “Head out?”

I forced a wide grin; my cheeks were flush and stiff from the heat. “Yeah, figured it’s time to try my own luck in the big city. Not much left here for me.”

“Do your... parents know?” I knew Mary didn’t think much of mister and missus, ever since that time mister had slapped her son for running into him on his skateboard a few summers ago. That had caused a row half the town had gotten involved in. Mister and missus still sent me into the post office whenever they needed somethin’. Didn’t know what they’d do now.

The waitress approached, teased blonde bouffant ’bout twenty years and eight states outta style. I’d seen her in here before, lotsa times, but damned if I could ever remember her name. I gave her my order, then turned back to Mary. “Sure, they gave me this backpack and some startin’ off money when I turned eighteen.” I didn’t mention that was two hours ago.

Mary didn’t say much for a minute, looking at me like she was trying to read my future in my eyes. I wished she’d tell me what it was, because all I saw was a Greyhound bus. Finally, she nodded decisively, and went back to drinking her coffee, downing it like a shot of whiskey. I’m not sure how she didn’t scald her tongue right out of her mouth, but she just set the mug down firmly and asked, “How you getting to the ‘big city’ honey?”

Planning ahead had never been my strength. Not that I’d had time to plan. I shrugged and palmed the tall glass mug the waitress brought over. The liquid inside was murky brown, tendrils of vanilla cream reaching down into the soda. I gulped the sweet liquid through the bendy straw, sugar and carbonation exploding on my tongue. I lifted the glass to press against the side of my cheek, the bite of cold a delicious contrast to my overheated face.

“Figured I’d check with Billy at the lumber yard. He goes up there a few times a week to see his girl.” There weren’t many people in town that would be willing to do more than spit on me, but Billy was cool.

Mary was already shaking her head. “Billy’s laid up with a broken arm—did something foolish with his truck, or so I heard. I have to head into Charlotte, so I can give you a ride. The front of the cab’s all full up, so you’ll have to sit in the bed. That OK?” The thought of the rough wind against my face after my long walk sounded like heaven, and I nodded.

Angels. I figure when they named the city, it was someone with some fierce wishful thinking. It was a mix of heaven and hell on earth. Too bad I was on the hell side. If I ever got to thinking it wasn't so bad, the occasional spires of smoke in the hills reminded me that the burnin' wasn't far away.

I probably should've studied harder in school, but... well, I'd found out a few years back just how much fun my dick was and spent too much time studying all the ways and people that could bring me pleasure. Probably not the best use of my time, now that I think about it. When I got to Los Angeles, there wasn't much in the way of work, and the money mister and missus had given me had only lasted a few days once I got to the city, even in the pay-by-the-week motel off the highway with shiny, skittering cockroaches as my roommates. Nobody wanted a kid that hadn't worked before and had no schooling. I mean, I'd worked in Mrs. Johnson's orchard back home, but that didn't count for much out here.

I tried stealin' a bite to eat here and there, but I wasn't no good at it, and all I walked away with was a black eye. When I got hungry enough, I figured I'd try my hand at playin' my guitar in on the Third Street Promenade. I'd seen some of the performers my first day in the city; seemed they did all right. People gave them money, at least.

First time I showed up, people were everywhere, and anytime I got near another performer I got the stink eye. I found a spot a ways off the main walk, and took out my guitar. No one really stopped to listen to me, but that's OK. I earned enough to buy a quarter pounder. They must do something different with those burgers out in California because I swear that was the best one I'd ever had.

I learned my lesson after the first day, and after that went to the pier in the morning to find a spot. Other performers didn't take too kindly to me bein' there, and if I was near their real estate, they'd let me know it. I'd learned to fight by then, so sometimes I'd win.

Anyhow, the Third Street Promenade was where I first saw Brambly. That wasn't his real name, of course, but I didn't know his name and that's how I saw him—all prickly-like, but squishy inside. He was like that blackberry bush out back of the farmhouse—it would scratch you to hell when you was trying to get some of the fruit, but in the end it was worth it. Some of the berries were extra tart—made you pucker up and screw your mouth sideways—but some were sweet and would explode on your tongue. Both kinds were just as good, in

their own way. He was like that. I wanted to smooth down those thorns—not all of them, just a few—to be able to roll that fruit across my tongue; to taste each berry like it was a fine vintage of wine.

His body was like that of a lumberjack, not that I'd ever seen one. But he was tall, like I'd imagined a lumberjack would be. He had sturdy, muscled arms that you knew would wrap around you and form an impenetrable barrier—all the bad shit would just bounce off him. And that chest—he wasn't a bear or nothin'—not that big and not *that* hairy, but if I was Goldilocks I'd say he was "just right." In contrast to his chest, his head was shaved, the same light stubble that covered his head also dusted his chin.

When I finally took a break, he pulled me off to the side. "You're not supposed to be here, kid."

I just looked, eyes wide, lips turned up in a slight pout. "I know." Maybe he'd let it go, just this once.

He shook his head, then pulled a badge out of his pocket. I'd never have known he was a cop given his worn jeans and T-shirt, but then, I hadn't had much chance to run into coppers yet. I squinted at the badge—it looked all shiny and official, even had grime stuck in some of the cracks, but then hell if I'd have known a fake one. His name was listed on an identification card on the other side of the wallet. Liam Henderson. He didn't look like a Liam. Maybe a Lars or an Olaf or a Paul. He just needed an axe and an ox and he was all set.

"Kid, you gotta sign up for the lottery and win a performance spot if you want to play here. You can't just park your ass wherever you see fit. Pack it up and apply in the morning."

I gave him my best innocent look. It always worked. "I'm not a kid. And it's late—I could just finish..."

Or not.

His right eye began to twitch. "Pack. It. Up."

I gently laid my guitar in its case, shoulders slumped, and the energy from performing evaporated with the audience. I sighed in relief when I saw Brambly/Liam drop twenty dollars into my guitar case as he walked away. That was four times as much money as I usually made in a day; the cop's money would let me eat for a week. I'd just turned around to pick up my backpack, when I realized it was no longer there, but instead was bouncing away on some kid's shoulders.

“Hey! That’s my bag!” The kid turned at my voice and I glimpsed a small, dirty, round face with deep blue eyes before it disappeared into the crowd. *Fuck*. My whole life was in that bag and I knew—I just *knew* better than to take my eyes off it. I took off after the thief, trying to weave between the crowds, but bumping into people more often than not. Damn kid was fast. I could barely keep up with him, and I’d won third in the state hundred-meter dash.

I’d finally caught up to the brat and had just closed my hand around the top of the backpack when I suddenly found myself jarred back and wrapped in two steel bands that tightened around me as I struggled, until I could no longer breathe. Another man caught the thief by the collar. The kid struck out blindly, and a sharp kick to his captor’s knee earned his release. Before I could blink, he had scrambled up a fire escape on the side of the building and disappeared.

“Fuck!” The man who had grabbed the thief was wiry, his strength was evident in the lines of his arms, just as his nastiness was displayed by the jag of his features and the sneer marring his mouth. He turned to follow the kid, but apparently changed his mind and turned back to me, scratching at the dry, scabby skin that covered half his bald head. Looking up at him, I saw a narrow, sallow man, with cold, hard eyes. His skin almost looked like it was burbling, an imprint of wrongness; the inscription of infection running under the frail container of his body, seeking escape and finding none, diving deeper. Without warning, he jabbed me in the stomach, forcing any remaining air out of my body.

“Bitch!” he spat. “Where’s she going?” Oh. *Oh*. She! To be fair, I hadn’t seen much more than the back of a head, covered by thick, cropped brown hair.

“How the hell should I know? The little shit just stole my bag,” I said, once I could breathe again. The offending backpack still lay at my feet, forgotten when the behemoth behind me decided a vicious bear-hug was a great introduction.

His hand raised as he spoke, fingers scratching at his cheek, at a flaking red spot shaped like the state of Florida. “Bullshit. She was hanging by you half the day. Would have grabbed her then, if there weren’t so many damn people around.” The beast behind me never said a word, but dropped me to my feet and twisted my arm behind my back, causing a sharp, deep pang to pulse in my shoulder.

“Hey, I might need that arm some day,” I threw back over my shoulder, then let out a short bark of pain as he pulled harder. I coulda sworn my arm was

'bout pulled outta the socket. In retrospect, antagonizing them might not have been the best approach.

“Seriously. I don’t know who that is.” If she had been hanging around, I hadn’t noticed. Absorbed by the beauty of the music I was making. Uh huh. Or maybe by the lumberjack slash cop that had captured my attention.

The fist in my stomach told me he didn’t believe me. “Don’t fuck around, kid, I can do this all day.”

I believed him too. He looked like he could go fifteen rounds in lightweight boxing. My stomach ascending into my throat each time he hit me made me doubt I could do the same. The arm circling my chest continued to tighten, a boa constrictor toying with its meal.

“Fuck—I don’t—” Fireworks exploded in my head, yellow-purple-blue-red, as the man’s fist caught my temple, and I could say no more.

I woke up some time later, the smell of piss and fermenting trash letting me know I hadn’t ascended to the pearly gates as I expected. I should have known—one can’t escape hell just by dying.

“I thought you were a goner.”

I lifted my head, which throbbed in protest at the movement, to follow the high-pitched voice. The boy—no, girl—who’d stolen my backpack earlier was resting on the lowest level of the fire escapes, arms crossed on the railing and feet hanging loose over the platform. Flakes of reddish-orange rust escaped each time she swung her legs.

I tried to respond, but my vocal chords weren’t cooperating and I began to hack violently. I leaned over, grit digging into my palms, and tried to gain control of my lungs. When I could breathe again, I saw two small tennis shoes, perhaps once white but now painted in the mosaic of the streets, next to my hand.

“Me too. What... What happened?” I rasped.

I could almost hear her shrug. “Dunno. Just before you went down. Jimmy—he’s the skinny, scabby one—just started screaming and blood started coming out of his nose and ears. It was gross. Marco, the big guy, grabbed him and run off. Maybe he figured you was dead.”

Fuck. I knew what that meant. I had promised myself I wouldn’t—Christ, it was just wrong. I suppose if anyone deserved it, those two did, but I knew

better. I knew how easily it could get out of hand. I flashed back to another bloody face, a glimpse of bone and piano wires, before I dragged myself up and rested my forehead against the dumpster, stomach emptying on the ground before me, until all I could do is heave air. I swallowed down the sour-bitter-acid taste of bile and stumbled back, leaning against the cool brick of the building, closing my eyes as if I could block out the images that flashed through my mind. Until then, I had been able to tell myself I had misunderstood—that it hadn't really been my fault, even as I swore to myself I would never repeat it. Now I knew, now I was certain, that I had been wrong. Once again, I swore to myself that this was the last time. If I was going to survive, I would do it just like everyone else. It wasn't worth the cost.

I shook my head, doing my best to block out the past. My eyes found my backpack, sitting to the side of the alley, and glanced at the girl's face. The whites of her eyes and almost electric-blue irises were a beacon in the grime coating her face. "I figured you would have taken that and run..."

She shuffled her feet, avoiding my eyes. "Well. I shoulda. But... they was after me. I couldn't leave you when they hurt you for that."

"Whatever. You can go. I'm just gonna grab my shit and find some doorway to sleep in for about a year." I levered myself to my feet, my abdomen viciously protesting the movement, and walked over to get my backpack. She turned away, shuffling her feet toward the bright-white light at the entrance. I leaned against the dumpster, head spinning from the effort of walking those short five feet. I looked up at the sound of gravel skittering across the asphalt; the kid pacing back toward me.

"Did you mean it? About the doorway, I mean? What's your name, anyhow? I'm Andy."

"Yeah. I just... I just want to sleep. And my name is Shane." I didn't think she'd believe the "Jammin' James" I'd had propped up on the sign in my guitar case. "Shit! My guitar—" I looked around, frantically searching for it.

"It's gone."

Fuck. One more piece of myself that I'd lost since I'd arrived in the city. I swung my head to look at her again. "Uh huh. It just... disappeared, then?"

She glared at me. "Weren't my fault! You was the one that ran off without it! And you weren't movin' or nothin' so I went back to get it but it was already gone."

“Steal it, you mean?”

“Nu uh. I mean, it was pretty, but I dunno how to play. Not much use to me.” Her eyes peeked through stringy brunette bangs that almost reached the middle of her face.

I swayed on my feet, the weight of the backpack throwing off my balance. All I wanted to do was sit down again, close my eyes, and sink into the oblivion of sleep.

She grabbed my hand and started walking. I was too muddled to do anything but follow, though I had to stop and lean against the brick building for breath several times before we reached the alley’s exit. “You’re not supposed to sleep with a concussion, you know. Could go to sleep and never wake up. ’Sides, I know a better place to sleep. But you can’t tell no one, ’cause then all the streeters will want it and they won’t let me stay or they’ll want to make me stay with them and I don’t stay with nobody ’cause then they’d want me to do what they say and I do what I want. Did you know that—”

She continued chattering, her voice a soft, incessant buzz to my addled brain. After we had been walking what seemed like hours, each lift of my feet a trial, she stopped and looked up. “Well, this is it.”

“Er—this is what?”

“Where I stay,” she said.

I didn’t see anything but what looked like a large warehouse with most of the windows barred and boarded. We’d left people behind some time ago; all I heard was the distant screech of seagulls in search of their evening meal.

“Uhh... OK.” It wasn’t until she approached a small pit in the ground, about two feet deep and three feet wide, lined with small stones, that I saw what she meant. Within that ditch, and extending above the level of the alley floor, was a large square shape, with heavy wood blocking what appeared to be a window. Andy lifted one of the large wooden planks and I realized it wasn’t bolted down, despite the myriad of nail heads decorating the wood. In the gap that remained, I could see that one of the bars covering the once window—the glass was long gone—had been pried away, leaving just enough room for a kid to climb through. Or a small, wiry man. For the first time, I didn’t curse the genes that made me the shortest boy in my high school class.

When I’d squeezed my way through the gap—and let me tell you my ribs were screaming that they’d much preferred I found a doorway to sleep in—I

found myself in a dark, wide-open space. The rustle of wings drew my gaze up to the shadow of two birds, chasing each other, almost colliding, before racing off to a dark corner of the warehouse. Dust angels floated down, highlighted by intermittent beams of sunlight from half-broken skylights. Looking down again, I saw tall, rusty-brown steel pillars, wider than a broad man, interspersed throughout the giant space. Against the back wall, a large hole gaped at the joint where wall met ceiling; a pile of broken stone and debris below was a testament to the fact this place could fall apart around us at any moment. I inhaled, and the green mineral bloom of mildew, dust and age clung to my tongue. As I walked, I could hear the crunch of glass and rubble beneath my feet.

“Nice place,” I said drily.

She looked around, her hand raised to her shoulder, picking at a hole in the seam of her threadbare T-shirt. I wasn’t sure what she saw, but her chest puffed out and her chin rose. The ghost of a smile flitted across her face. “It’s quiet. No needles layin’ around to prick yourself on or freaks feeling you up while you sleep.”

There was that.

“Here, you can lay down over here as long as you keep to yourself.” Andy pointed to a corner of the large warehouse where large cardboard pieces made a luxurious bed compared to the cement bunk I’d been considering earlier. A few ratty blankets were scattered across the flattened boxes; it looked like heaven. I walked over and took a sweatshirt out of my backpack to use as a pillow. “I’m so screwed. That guitar was the only way I ate in the past three months.”

Andy snorted. “Must not have eaten well.”

It didn’t matter. Food was food.

“Maybe you can do something else?”

The only other thing I could do didn’t sound very appealing. Sure, I’d given in on occasion, when the clamoring of my stomach outpaced whatever puritan sensibilities I’d learned living with the mister and missus, but it wasn’t something I wanted to make a habit of. I’d seen how long those boys lasted on the streets.

I shook my head “I don’t know nothin’ else.”

I reached the platform of flattened boxes and sat down on the near edge, setting my balled-up sweatshirt at the head of the “bed” and my worn copy of

Call of the Wild beside that. As soon as I'd settled, a ball of fur jumped enthusiastically on my lap, trying to bless my face with wet kisses. "What the—"

Andy approached my side and sat cross-legged on the cardboard, facing me, and the fur ball ran to give her a tongue bath as well. She sat far enough away I couldn't reach her without moving, even with my arms extended. "This is Dog."

"Dog? That's a rat!" I eyed the thin, almost hairless tail that was practically vibrating it was moving so fast.

"Nah, he just eats them. Sometimes he brings me one, but I haven't gotten that desperate. Yet."

I wiped as much of the slobber-slime off my face as I could and tried to suppress a gag at the rancid-death dog-breath smell. I faced her and rested my forearms on the platform of my knees as she shooed 'Dog' away. She pulled some cards from her pocket and began to shuffle them like a Vegas dealer. It was an unsettling sight; the miniature, but experienced, hands cradling the deck, shadowed by a sprite-like face.

"Anyhow, if you can't do nothin' else I can teach you some tricks. People don't care; they're there for the sights and aren't really paying much attention. Half of them are drunk anyway."

I shook my head. "I'm not so good with stuff like that."

Her hands paused and she looked at me. "You've got plenty of time."

"Why are you doin' this? Helping me, I mean." I didn't get it. One thing I'd learned, both from the farm and on the streets, was that people didn't do somethin' for nothin'.

Andy's lips quirked. "I always wanted a big brother."

"Really?" We did kinda look alike. And she had my mettle.

"No," Andy snorted.

"Oh. You're a right smart-ass, aren't you?"

It was almost refreshing. Back at home, mister and missus only spoke to me to tell me what to do and, well, school. At school I was either avoided or jibed at. Or hit, I supposed. On the streets it weren't so hard to find someone to talk to, but they were usually tryin' to find a way at your stuff, in your pants or

preachin' about the end of days or some shit like that. No just talkin' for the sake of it, though. No feelin' like you're a real person, rather than an ass, a mouth, or an outstretched hand. Hell, I hadn't heard my own name in months; the last use of it was gray-blue lettering on vanilla icing; an invitation to leave the safety of the only home I could remember.

"Better that than a dumbass." Andy's voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

I rolled my eyes. "Uh huh. So really—why are you doing this for me?"

Andy bit at the skin at the side of her thumb before responding. "I'm not really. Doing this for you, I mean." She was silent for a moment, as she dropped her hands and fiddled with a loose string that had escaped her threadbare T-shirt. "Besides, I saw you the other day. When you gave that legless vet the second half of your sub sandwich, sayin' you wasn't hungry—that was a lie. We're always hungry. 'Sides, I saw you wrap that half-sandwich up earlier on the Promenade, like it was a jewel or somethin'."

I looked away, cheeks burning. I hadn't been all that selfless. I'd passed the man day after day with barely a glance. Hell, like she said, we were all hungry. I'd just been lucky on the Promenade that day, and the guilt at passing him by, yet again, had roiled at my gut more than the hunger. "What—you been followin' me? And then, why'd you take my bag?"

I caught the tail end of a shrug when I looked back at her. "Dunno. Figured if you had a sandwich like that the other day, maybe you had one today." Her voice got quieter, so I could barely hear her. "I was hungry. And if there weren't food in there, figured you'd have somethin' else I could sell to get some." Her stomach growled in agreement, a loud roiling sound that almost echoed in the empty space. I looked down at my empty hands. As usual, I had nothin'. Andy stood and brushed the dust off of her jeans. She paced the length of the bed, clenching and releasing her fingers. "'Sides, as I said, I'm doin' this for me. I'm doing this against Corky. I hate him. He's the most evil person I know."

"And you being almost twelve years old must know a lot of evil people."

"Shut up. I'm fourteen. And yeah, I know lots of evil people. You don't grow up on the streets here without learning fast how to hurt people. If you want to survive, that is. If you don't hurt other people you're not doing anything right."

"Good thing you've been so mean to me."

She thought for a moment, then responded. “Yes, well, but helping you, I hurt Corky even more. So it works for me. Don’t be thinking of messin’ with me tho’. I ain’t made it this long on the streets by bein’ dumb. Sides, I can take care of myself, and if you get thinkin’ wrong things, I got other friends, and they’s bigger than you.” She eyed me, squinting as if she could read my intentions in the set of my shoulders.

I believed her. She had a bloodthirsty look about her. “So, who’s this Corky? How does helping me hurt him? And what did he ever do to you?”

“He’s the boss of those men on the street. They’ve been looking for me for a while. And what hasn’t he done? And if not to me, to others of us? Corky’s not just mean. He enjoys hurting people.”

I was surprised I hadn’t run into him before. But then, I guessed I had today. His men, at least. I didn’t think they’d let this go. Crap, I seemed to find trouble no matter what I did. “How do you know this?”

“Everyone knows. Everyone on the streets more’n six months, that is. If you haven’t had a run-in with Corky, you know someone who has. Although most that have gotten on his bad side don’t stay around too long.”

“What do you mean they don’t stay around too long? They run off?”

“Who knows? People come and go. It’s just... people who piss off Corky seem to go a lot faster than others. Once in a while, one might show up later. Not alive, that is. Usually in the Sun Valley Dump—that seems to be his favorite place. I mean, I don’t know for sure it’s him, but it’s always people that pissed him off that show up there. But mostly they just disappear.”

I shook my head. I wasn’t sure I believed her imaginings. “I’m sure some of them just run off for safer pastures. That’s what I’d do.”

Andy sighed impatiently, then sat beside me again, her voice steady and patient, like a grade school teacher. With a street accent. “Uh huh. Because so many of us have the options to run off. And the money. I’d much rather be here in this rat-hole than sitting on the beach in Santa Barbara.”

“Anyway, he can’t be all that bad. There’s a Corky in every city. You can’t get away from them, you just learn to work around them.”

“Yeah. Before Corky there was Grazco. And before him, Lincoln. But they didn’t enjoy pain and games as much as Corky does.”

“What do you mean?”

Andy looked down at her thumbs and didn't say anything for a while. When she did speak, it all came out in a rush. "You know... Corky had this girl—he called her his whore. His favorite whore, he said. One day she made the mistake of complaining how she was bored because he never let her leave her room. He kept her locked up in there, you know, for years... He called his men in to 'entertain' her. When they were done, he took the fireplace poker, shoved it into the fireplace, and waited until it was glowing red with heat. Then, as his men held her down, he burned four lines across her stomach in a crosshatch. As she lay there screaming in pain, he masturbated over the burn... 'Look,' he said 'Three O's—I win.' He laughed and gestured toward his friends. 'At least you'll never get bored—and if you're bored with me, you can always play with my men. Though, I'm not sure how to play tic-tac-toe with more than two people... perhaps we can think of another game next time.'"

"Well, shit," I said, when I could force my lips to move again.

"Yeah."

"And the cops couldn't do anything with that?"

"The cops can't do anything with Corky. His brother is the advisor to the mayor or something like that. And people say he's connected, outside the city I mean. Besides, most of the cops, especially the 'portant ones, are paid off."

I shook my head and my mouth opened to respond, but no words came.

She looked back up at me, big eyes wide. "Everybody knows it. Maybe not who, 'xactly, but it ain't no secret out here. You cross Corky, ain't nothin' good gonna happen to you."

I nodded, not knowing what to think. My eyes drooped, despite the grim topic. I'd woken up early to find a good spot at the pier. The sun—and the beating—had taken a lot out of me. I leaned back and rested my head against the soft fabric of my sweatshirt, closing my eyes. I sighed as the muscles in my neck released the weight of the day. "Go on," I said. "I'm still listening."

"So yeah, I'm helping you to get back at Corky. I may not be able to cut him, but I'll be a thorn in his side. Until the day he removes me. With pliers."

"If that's what you think, why don't you run away? Sure, you don't have money, but you could hitchhike... you could get outta here somehow."

Andy sighed, sounding much older than her fourteen years. "Maybe, but at this point... Well, this is home. And really, I don't see much purpose in it."

“Much purpose in being safe?”

“There’s no such thing as safe. Here or there, it don’t much matter. No family left anymore. I just want to get what’s mine.”

“And what’s yours?”

“Payback.”

My eyes opened at that. “You’re quite young for being such a bloodthirsty little sucker.”

“Young in years, old in pain.”

I turned my head and studied her, searching for an image, a vision imprinted over her round face, pug nose scattered with freckles, and brown eyes. If I could see, maybe—but there was nothing. “So you’re helping me so you can get back at him. I’m not so sure that’s the best idea. I’m kinda small fish, kiddo. Hell, he doesn’t even know who I am.”

“Oh, he knows now. His men are bigger whiners than a kindergartner that got his Legos stolen. Besides, this is kind of fun too.”

I paused, thinkin’ ’bout all we’d talked about. “You don’t seem like a kid to me.”

I barely heard her respond when she muttered, “Me neither.”

The days passed quickly for having so little to do. I was always hungry, my stomach constantly roiling, a never-ending reminder of my place. Andy was much better than I at stealing, so I even got to eat an orange or apple on occasion. Most of my day was spent working the cards, trying three-card monte or other tricks. On occasion I’d get bored and play poker with Andy. She was a really good poker player. She’d always end up with a big pile of gravel “coins” in front of her while I tried to hold onto mine as long as possible. It was a good thing I didn’t have money to play with. Sometimes, when we was lucky, we bet with food, but Andy always won. Didn’t much matter, I’d have let her win anyhow. It weren’t right, you could practically see her ribs through the thin T-shirt that was a size too small.

“How’d you learn?” I asked once, shuffling the cards in my hand.

“My dad. He was a hustler. He liked it when I could help.” She paused, before she set her cards down. “I don’t wanna play no more.” She turned toward the bed, calling Dog to her. Andy just sat there, petting his head for hours, not talkin’ to me, not doin’ nothin’.

I didn't ask her 'bout her past after that.

The nights, well they was longer. I'd had nightmares after I'd got home from the hospital. I'd woken up to my own hoarse screams and shivered at the cold sweat that coated my body. They'd gotten worse after what I'd—well, they just got worse. It wasn't until after the mister'd gotten sick of being woken up each night and stuck me in the shed that I'd learned to control it. Mister let me sleep back in the house after that. I'd still had nightmares, but by then the screams were silent; my body clenched tight, frozen in the agony of my terrors.

After a while the dreams had tapered off, 'til I could get a good night's sleep most days. After the attack in the alley, though, they returned, more vicious than ever. Images of blood and viscera twisted through my dreams, ravaging my mind while I slept. I was tormented by images of Jimmy, his face a grisly mosaic of blood and skin and bones, maggots eating his flesh, as he purposefully advanced with a jagged, curved blade in hand. In the background, I saw the boys from high school, faces grimacing a twisted fascination. Piano wires erupted from their skin, a parody of masterless puppets. The wires that bound their bodies twanged in protest each time the boys brought their hands together in applause. A faceless mountain of flesh held Andy and me locked in place, unable to escape, as Andy writhed and trilled a short, shrill scream before the blade cut her cries off abruptly. I woke with a start to a sharp pain in my arm and a scream that mirrored my dream, echoing in the rafters. The sound was followed with a scuffling sound and a soft whimper.

I searched the darkness, unable to see anything but the pitch black of the warehouse. Breath coming in short gasps, I extended my arms, groping the floor beside me, searching for Andy. There was nothing. I held my breath, straining to hear the shuffle of an intruder, but all I heard were the short pants of her breath.

“Andy?”

A pause, then she responded in a thin voice. “Stay away.”

“Andy? Hon'? C'mon, talk to me, what happened. Did I—” I cut off with a choke, reaching frantically for the matches I kept in my bag beside the makeshift bed. My hands shook as I set matchhead to the strike strip; burn of sulfur searing my nose. My eyes struggled to focus, the small light blinding me after the pitch-black of night, before I saw the outline of Andy's body, hunched down and pressed against the corner. Her arm was extended and she pointed the small pocketknife she always carried at me. The blade glistened black at the tip,

smearred with blood. The image faded to black as the match singed my fingers before going out, and I lit another. I looked down at my arm, where a small cut marred the smooth skin of my arm and a trickle of blood made a path down my arm. Black fell over us once again as the match blinked out.

I blinked rapidly as my eyes burned and my throat tightened. “Fuck, Andy, what did I do?” No response. I babbled, continuing to fill the silence. “I’m—I’m sorry, I was sleeping and I thought—he was coming at us. I didn’t—I would never hurt you. I wouldn’t—not on purpose.” I abruptly stopped babbling when she launched herself into my arms. Her trembling arms wrapped tightly around my neck and silent sobs racked her small body. I wrapped one arm around her and stroked her hair with the other while I rocked us both. God, I couldn’t believe I’d almost hurt her. She was the only thing I had anymore. The only person who gave two shits if I still breathed. The fear in her eyes almost tore my heart out, and I blinked at the stinging in my eyes.

When she’d calmed, her breath coming in slow, even draws, she lifted her head. “I know, Shane. You didn’t hurt me you just grabbed my throat and just—Your hand was burning, like you was on fire. You really scared me.” Her voice was still thick with tears as she burrowed her face into my chest.

“Fuck, Andy, I’d never hurt you. I will never hurt you. I’m so sorry!” I felt her nod against my chest. “I swear, I’ll never hurt you. Never.” I chanted in her ear until her breathing slowly evened out and her muscles became lax as she dozed off. I set her down gently, cushioning her head with my spare shirt, and moved away to the other corner of the warehouse.

The cement floor of the warehouse was glacial against my back, ice seeping into my bones, but at least this way I could keep my promise.

I continued to search for work, but with little success. I tried to clean myself up when I could, but, well, that wasn’t often, and people don’t much want to keep someone around who smells of sweat, street, and desperation. Once I was passable with the cards, I’d set up around town, wherever I could find a flat, smooth surface. I made do, but earned less than I did playing guitar, which wasn’t saying much. Sometimes I’d do better than alright. One afternoon a man approached with a bright smile and watched me play, designer jeans and polo shirt tight against his fit body. I ignored him at first, mostly. The fancy types always held onto their money the tightest. But when I glanced up, the impression of a donkey’s head peekin’ up outta his collar flashed across my

vision. I taunted him until he stepped forward, chest puffed up and a sly grin spread across his face, laying a fifty down on the surface before me. Andy and I ate well that week, and I started paying more attention to what I saw after that.

After a few weeks practicing my new trade, I saw Brambly—er—Liam, in Hollywood. He must not have worked Vice, because he didn't drive a squad car and he didn't arrest me. Yeah, sometimes when I was especially hungry I'd still earn twenty bucks in the alley for a quick five minutes on my knees. I didn't do it much, but some shit is more important than worrying about a random prick in your mouth for a few minutes. If he was Vice, I woulda known.

I saw him coming out of Mellie's Diner, across the street where I was working. I was praying he was one of those cops that would require a "street tax" in the form of a blow job in the back of the squad car. Not really—the cops who did that were really bad apples. The missus used to go on and on about how one bad apple would ruin the whole barrel. It ain't a saying for nothin' I suppose, 'cause those cops was like that. You'd see the new ones come in still shiny and crisp, but not too long and the rot would be eating away under the skin.

I'm no Brad Pitt, but plenty of guys want a piece of my ass and will do a lot to get some. Not that I spread that shit around, though. It only took one over-enthusiastic battering ram at my back end to make sure it was closed for business. Which is too bad really, because when done right, there's nothin' I like more than a hard cock...

I diverge—err... digress. The point is, if I were in a real relationship, I'd be all about cock meets ass. But I wasn't really the relationship type.

"Hey, kid, you can't be doing that here." He was beginning to sound like a broken record.

"Doin' what? I'm just playin' cards."

Brambly wasn't biting. Again. Usually I have more of an effect on those of the masculine persuasion. "Do those big round eyes work on the other cops?"

I smirked. "Yup. That and my big round mouth."

His eyes flickered down to glance at my mouth and his frown deepened. "I'm sure. What are you doing down here anyhow? Last I saw you were down by the pier, which has much better pickin's."

"Pier is busy. Besides, I'm keeping my eye on someone." And trying to stay away from Corky's men.

Brambly—Liam—took a slow look around. The street was mostly empty, except for the random car ambling down the street and Letisha, picking at her four-inch, hot pink nails while waiting for her next john, her pendulous tits so heavy they were resting on her forearm. Besides her, the only other being on the street was Dog, who had taken to chewing my pants leg. Bastard. Business was slow today, and Andy had gone to try to hunt down some food.

“Uh huh.” I didn’t need to look up at his face again to see his disbelief. He looked down at the cards. “I see you’ve taken up a new hobby. I hope you’re better at this one.”

I tried not to look hurt. I still missed that damn guitar. “Not really. Care to try your hand?”

He looked down at the cards in my hand, before slowly moving his eyes up my chest, to lock onto my eyes again. “You’ve lost weight.”

I had, but damned if I’d agree. And how did he remember? “Nah, new clothes.” Of course, the holes in them gave the lie away.

“Right, kid.” Liam pulled out his wallet and set a twenty on the stone between us. “Gambling is illegal here, you know?”

I looked at him, and then down at the twenty. He hadn’t taken his hand off of the cash. His hand was square, slightly roughed, and had a light dusting of hair across the fingers. I imagined what it would feel like grasping my cock. Firm and sure, I supposed. I shook myself and looked back up at him. This wasn’t the place to get a hard-on.

“Good thing you’re just paying for entertainment, then.”

His cheeks flushed slightly as I realized what I said.

“Er—I mean... Here, the queen’s in the middle; follow the queen.” I showed him the card, suppressing a blush myself, then placed it down with the other two cards before quickly shuffling them, hands too fast to follow. Hours of practice had paid off. Somewhat. I didn’t dare swap out the queen with him; I had no desire to end up down at the station. I’d only done that one night, and it wasn’t an experience I’d like to repeat. Although it did have a bed. And a toilet.

Brambly didn’t take his eyes off my face as I slowed my hands. “Pick your card.”

Still staring at me, he pointed at the one on the left as I flipped it over. “Damn, how did you know which one?”

He finally looked away. “Your eyes.”

I spluttered, and he continued. “Look kid, you haven’t been around that long... this place—it does things to you. Tumbles kids around like the professional dry cycle, only to leave them a shrunk version of their former selves. You need to get out of here while you can.”

Right. Because it was that easy. “I’m fine. And I told you, I’m not a kid.”

His eyes returned to mine. “I can help you, if you need it. And I doubt you’re a day over sixteen.”

My damned face had never lost baby fat, despite the lack of food over the last few months, and there wasn’t much I could do about my five foot seven frame, no matter how much I may have wished otherwise. My looks may help when targeting unsuspecting tourists, but not when facing a cop. “Psht, I’m eighteen. And I’m not a kid.”

He searched my eyes, before nodding. “What’s your name then, kid?”

“James.” My chin jutted out as I gave him the name I’d used on the pier.

He snorted. “Right. And what’s your real name?” He saw my startled expression and tapped his temple. “Your eyes. Give it away.”

I sighed, shoulders slumping. “It’s Shane.”

He looked at me a moment longer and gave one brisk nod. “Let me know if you need help, and take care of yourself, Shane.” And with that, he went back to his car. Dog whined as he walked away.

I looked down at the mutt, my lip curling. “Oh shut up, you. You don’t know what’s good for you.” Gathering my cards, ready to call it a day, I noticed Liam had left his card. He hadn’t taken his twenty bucks back, either.

I found a job after another six months or so. Bussing tables at Millie’s Diner. I’m not sure why they hired me, I musta been looking rough by that point, but then, it wasn’t anyplace special neither. The vinyl seats were worn and torn up, and the speckled, once-teal laminate tables were now a pale aqua, dull and scratched from sliding plate after countless plate across their surfaces. But the place paid cash... Even better, if there was leftover or rejected food, the staff could eat it at the end of the night. Whenever Tom left for the night, I’d sneak whatever food was leftover back to Andy, even if swallowing down cold rubbery eggs wasn’t anyone’s idea of a five-star meal. Sometimes there was

enough for both of us, sometimes all that was left to eat were the leftover coffee grains bound for the trash. Kept me going, at least.

But the best thing was that Tom, the head cook, didn't do shit. I mean, he'd cook, but soon as it came time to clean and close the place up, he'd preset the locks and be on his way. He was supposed to stay to scrub down the grill, but after the first knock upside the head, I learned that'd be my job now. It was good though, I could scrub down quick in the sink after everyone was gone. Plus, the booths, although squeaky, were a lot softer than the cardboard boxes lining the bed in the warehouse. As long as I was out by four in the morning, I could crash in one of the booths without anyone being the wiser. I figured I was lucky.

I saw Liam at the diner on occasion, sometimes solo, sometimes with other cops. They weren't in uniform, but I could spot them now, the swagger when they walked and their shrewd eyes. Liam didn't say much, but he'd watch me, and I'd always put an extra swish in my hips when I carried the dishes away. He'd always bury a tip for me under a cup or extra dish so the waitress wouldn't snag it.

I'd settled in pretty well—had enough to store a small stash of money in the warehouse within one of the mugs I'd nicked from the diner. Figured maybe I could buy me and Andy a new set of clothes soon. And when I wasn't workin', Andy and me, we did our best to make Corky and his gang as miserable as possible. Even Dog helped out. Most of what we did wasn't nothin' big, but it sure pissed them off.

We called the cops once when Corky—Andy'd pointed him out to me one day—was out causin' trouble, but that didn't work out. The one time we done that, a squad car pulled up outside of Able's Electronics as Corky's men were loadin' up a whole bunch of flat-screen TVs. One of the cops laughed and slapped Corky on the back. "I hope you remember me and my wife come Christmas," the cop laughed. We didn't call the them no more after that. Damn Pigs.

One afternoon, I found myself layin' on my stomach on the searing metal roof of a warehouse, the hot summer sun beating down on Andy and me as we watched the large three-story brick house across the way. Andy had tol' me that's where Corky lived. She knew on account of her bein' on the streets so long, I guessed. Anyhow, once we didn't see anyone at the house no more, we threw down bags of dog shit over the front of the house. That musta been a bitch to clean.

“Boy!” From the booth in the back, the shout of a customer grabbed my attention. I was the only “boy” that worked at the diner. Tom jabbed me in the side and I almost dropped the tub of dishes. A line of sweat from the heat of the grill dripped off his nose onto one of the sandwiches he’d just flipped.

“Best get out there, *boy*.” His upper lip curled, in what may have been a smile. A sneer.

Sighing, I set the tub of dishes next to the sink and turned, walking back out to the main section of the diner. And froze. In the corner were three men.

“Boy, come here!” The man in the middle bellowed again once he saw me. He had sallow skin, with a five o’clock shadow just breaking through, but in a double exposure, I could also see him as a macabre painting, waxy, pale skin covered with a wet sheen. As I watched, an insect crawled out of his ear, sliding down his cheekbone and dripping onto his companion’s hand, where it squirmed and writhed before burrowing into the man’s skin, leaving behind a trace of gray slime. I closed my eyes against nausea and when I opened them again all I could see was three dangerous-looking men in a diner booth.

Once the image had faded, I saw that the thin man sitting closest to the window was the one that had attacked me in the alley. Jimmy, I recalled. He was still rubbing at the roughened red skin on his face, a patch of dry, scabby flesh that now consumed half of his cheek. I could only assume the giant lump of flesh next to him was the one that had held me as he beat on me. The man in the middle was the infamous Corky.

My knees locked as time froze. I watched the kid in the third booth drop his spoon, watched it leisurely spin in the air before clanging to the floor, splattering small drops of strawberry ice cream against the surface. The fluorescent lights flickered on the sickly green wall. I didn’t know much, but the one thing I’d learned since I’d arrived in LA was when it was time to pull up tail and run.

Time rushed back to me as I quickly spun on my heel, retreating into the relative safety of the kitchen. My feet directed me straight to the closet, where I grabbed my backpack of meager belongings before heading toward the rear exit. The door crashed into the wall as I shoved it open and raised my hand to shield my eyes from the glaring sun. Just as I stepped out and spun on my heel to take off, I was grabbed and I was pushed face-first into the side of the building. I could smell the damp cement of the brick as the salty tang of blood began to seep into my mouth from where I’d cut my cheek.

“Where do you think you’re going, booyyyyyy?” Corky’s voice slithered in my ear. His face was pushed up against the side of mine, the wiry hair scratching my cheek and I shuddered. His breath carried the sickly sweet smell of cough syrup mixed with the acid tang of old coffee. “We was just gonna get to know you better.” I couldn’t see his two companions, but could hear the scuffling of shoes against the loose rock in the alleyway. I could feel the iron bar of Corky’s erection as he ground into me while I struggled to get free, to climb into the wall and away from him.

“And here I was thinking you would just provide some light entertainment. Seems you had an entirely different diversion in mind.”

“Fuck you—get off of me.”

“Language, language.” His fetid breath filled my senses until I was swimming in nausea. “Besides, I plan to get off *on* you. My boys tell me you helped my Andrea leave me.” He petted my cheek almost gently. “I’ll find her, you know. But you’ll do in the meantime.”

His friends laughed in the background, a grating sound combined with a high nasal whine, an orchestra of dissonant chords. Corky reached around me, hand pressed between my body and the brick wall, and viciously pinched my left nipple as it tried to crawl back into my chest to escape his vicious grasp. His groping hand ran down my body, around my hip, and forced its way down the back of my pants. He shoved a thick, rough finger up my asshole and I cried out in pain. The ragged corners of his fingernail tore into the tender skin of my anus, like tiny pieces of barbed wire snagging on my insides. I wasn’t innocent; no one who’d spent several months on the streets of LA could be, but the pain and violation of just his finger caused bile to rise in my throat.

“I’m going to stuff you with my cock, and I’m going to squeeze the breath out of you as I come. Did you know that feeling someone contract around you while trying to steal their last breath is one of the greatest pleasures a man can experience?”

I laughed hysterically as he pulled his hand from me, the sound devolving into tortured sobs as I heard the jangle of his belt. His paw quickly returned to jam his palm against my mouth, muffling my cries. I wondered if taking his cock would be easier than his finger, eased in some way by the slimy pus I’d seen in the vision I’d had in the diner. Would the phantom plasma leak from all of his orifices? Could it become something tangible?

He continued as if I'd responded. "Well, of course you don't. But you will. Although—perhaps not from the perspective you'd wished. Then again... they say restricted breathing leads to some of the most intense orgasms someone can have. So, I'm actually doing you a favor."

The sound of sirens rang in the background as his men shuffled nervously. I couldn't fight back, couldn't move, couldn't see him to fight back the only other way I knew how, as the tang of stomach acid filled my mouth. It didn't matter, I knew any police would be too late.

"Dammit, Corky, they're getting closer—we gotta go!" A high, nasal voice.

The sirens were indeed closer, clamoring through the streets. I prayed to their high-pitched song, in vain, as his cock burrowed between my cheeks, the cold metal of his belt buckle an icy brand against the soft flesh of my ass. He thrust against my hole, before he abruptly forced his way into me with a tearing shove. He was barely in me, and he was ripping me apart.

I screamed at the spike of searing heat that centered around my anus, before arrowing up through my body until my chest burned nearly as fiercely as where he was violating me. And then, with the sound of sirens almost on top of us, he gave a final vicious, dry thrust, then grabbed my hair and slammed my head into the wall.

I must not have been out long; the sun was still high in the afternoon sky. Christ, every time I ran into these guys I ended up unconscious, and worse. I scrambled to pull my pants over my hips, watching the back door to the restaurant start to swing open.

"Shane?"

Fuck. Of all the times. How did he even find me? The squad car hadn't been for me; there was none blocking the edge of the alley, so I had just gotten lucky. Well, not lucky enough. The trio must have kicked me when I was out because my ribs were screaming. A mat of blood glued my right eye shut.

"Liam," I grunted, unable to do more, dizzy from my scramble to hide the crime.

I felt his palm against my neck briefly, hotter than the burning of my ribs. Christ, I hoped I hadn't broken anything. I'd wanted him to touch me, but now I cringed from the ghost of his fingers on my skin.

"Listen, kid, we gotta get you to the hospital."

“Nuh uh.” I couldn’t breathe well with my nose all swollen and blood running down my lips, but I’d been hit before. I’d survive. I started to sit up, only to fall back abruptly when the carousel in my head started running on maximum speed.

“Shhh... relax. Just... stay here. I’ll be right back.” His hand brushed lightly over my forehead, chasing the dizzying lights in my brain away for a second. I grabbed his palm before he drew away.

“Nnnng... Where?” My tongue filled my mouth and throat, consuming my words; I couldn’t do much more than mumble.

“I gotta get you help, kid. Gotta get you to a hospital. You’re a mess.”

I shook my head, and a cacophony of hammers pounded at the base of my skull. “Can’t. He watches it.” I cracked my eyes open, staring at the planes of his face.

“Who? I didn’t see—”

“Doesn’t matter.” My brain was still rattling, but I had to get up. They could come back. I gingerly rolled to my side, then slowly pushed myself up. I could breathe. Sure I could. Liam placed his hand on my side, holding me up.

He sighed, exasperated, although I can’t have been the only guttersnipe to refuse his help. “What am I supposed to do, leave you here?”

I nodded slowly, wary of restarting the percussion band in my head. “Exactly. Leave me here. I’m fine.” And I was. I could breathe without a knife stabbing into my side. No broken ribs. Awesome.

“Sorry, kid—I’ve got to call this in. Who knows what else your attacker is going to do.”

I couldn’t breathe again; my last breath lodged in my throat, choking, trying to escape. I grabbed at his arm, frantic. “You can’t! If Corky—”

He froze, turning back to me, the hard line of his mouth telling me how much I’d screwed up. Shit. I never could keep my mouth shut. I had no way of knowing if he was on Corky’s payroll too. If so, I wasn’t going to be leaving the alley tonight. Or ever.

“Christ, what did you do to get on his bad side?”

“I... lived?”

Liam grabbed my arm and pulled me up slowly, guiding me down the alley toward his car. I didn’t care anymore. I was limping, but that could be

attributed to the many bruises he could see. My jeans were dark enough to hide any blood. I hoped. As I sat gingerly in his passenger seat, grateful I wasn't in the cage, I asked, "What now?"

"Well, I could either take you to the hospital—"

Fuck. I should have known. He didn't understand that would be the first place they'd look.

"—or to wherever you're staying." As an afterthought, he added, "Or to a shelter, if that's preferable. Though they'll likely insist upon the hospital."

"No, home is better." Home? A falling down building barred to the world and devoid of any memories but Andy and Dog. Nothin' better to call it.

I guided him down the streets until we were a few blocks away. "Here's good."

He slowed, looking around, eyes disbelieving. There was no place that even looked like a place to squat. He shook his head. "I'll take you all the way."

I gritted my teeth. "Here's fine. I'll walk the rest of the way."

Liam's hands tightened on the steering wheel and his jaw clenched. "Dammit, Shane! You could barely walk down the alley. Tell me where to go."

I stared ahead, undecided. The warehouse was our sanctuary; no one knew about it. And it wasn't just mine. Any decision I made would affect Andy too. I thought back, remembering Liam's hands supporting me as I limped down the alley, each step a piercing pain through the core of me. I sighed, slumping, and directed him the additional four blocks to our safe house. I paused, a hand clasped on the car door, and looked back at him. "Thanks. I appreciate the help." I opened the door and loped toward the entrance of the warehouse.

I heard the other car door open, his footsteps on gravel behind me as he stubbornly followed. I lifted the board that disguised the entrance to the warehouse and turned my head toward him when he spoke, his voice thick with doubt. "There? How do you fit?"

Painfully, I thought. Today, it would be painful. I brushed that thought from my mind, pasting my best smile on my face, wincing when it reopened a cut in my lip. "Benefits of being small." Which he wasn't. "Thanks again—I'm going to go lay down and pretend I'm Paris Hilton or something."

"Wait." He approached and placed his hand on my shoulder briefly, the warmth spreading through me, battling with the clammy chill of my skin. He turned, and a few moments later, he returned with a huge set of bolt cutters. He

pried the wood off with his hands, grunting at the effort, before setting to work on the remaining bar. His arms bulged, straining to cut through the remaining iron rebar blocking the entrance to the window. A few loud cracks and the bar was gone, and he had already shimmied through the hole.

Squeezing through the window after Liam was much easier than usual, even with my muscles aching with every movement. He stood in the center of the room. “So this is where you stay,” he stated the obvious, slowly turning as he took in the room. The warehouse was silent; no Andy or Dog in sight.

“Luxury suite, 4,000 square feet. All that’s missing is the bath.” I barely looked at him, my feet dragging as I made my way to the pile of cardboard and blankets. My legs collapsed, drained from the weight of my body and the day. Liam quickly moved toward me, propping me against his side as we crossed the massive room. I couldn’t complain. I wasn’t sure I’d have made it without his help. When we reached the makeshift bed, I tried to burrow into the two threadbare blankets, but my arms refused to move. Liam watched me struggle before removing his sweatshirt, leaving only a black tank top. He placed the soft, folded fabric of his shirt under my head and smoothed the blankets over me. I thought I felt him lay his hand gently on my shoulder as I slipped into sleep.

“Thanks, mom,” I muttered, as my eyes fluttered close. I didn’t hear him respond.

I woke up to Dog licking my face enthusiastically. At least, I hoped it was Dog; there were no lights in the place and when it was night, it was pitch dark inside the warehouse. “Come here, Rat.”

“He’s not a rat.” I could hear Andy a few feet away, a smile coloring her voice.

I grunted. “Where you been?”

“Here. Around. Why did you bring someone here? You swore—”

“I needed help Andy. I—Corky found me. The guy you saw, he was a cop. He’s... nice. He’s helped me out a few times.”

“What? Here? Where? Are you okay?” I felt the flutter of soft hands against my face, mapping my features, searching for injury. “You brought a cop here? Was Corky here? Did he find us? I mean—I saw you earlier. You looked hurt but I just figured—what happened?” Her hand covered mine; I could feel her shaking. I knew why. It hadn’t been that long ago when I’d accidentally seen

her changing, a cross-hatch of scars marring her otherwise smooth abdomen. I hadn't been able to keep food down for days after that.

"I'm fine. They weren't here. Nowhere close to here. He came into the diner. His goons recognized me."

"What—what did they do?" Her hand moved to my forearm, stroking my skin lightly, her fingers painting comfort on my arm.

"Nothin'. I'm fine." I said again, willing myself to believe it. "He just—he just roughed me up a little bit. Then they heard a police siren and ran off."

"Okay," Andy said, then was quiet for some time. When she spoke again, her voice wavered uncertainly. "You were cryin' in your sleep."

I tensed. I didn't remember any nightmares, but that didn't mean I hadn't had them. "Did I... did I hurt you?"

"You didn't even move, just... cried."

Andy shifted closer. I sat up and grabbed my sweatshirt, ready to find a new place to sleep the rest of the night. I'd learned my lesson last time. There was a soft shuffle, and she lay down beside me, closer this time, her arm creeping around my waist.

"Stay," she said. "You won't hurt me. You didn't do nothin'."

I laid down again, uncertain, but terrified of being alone, of the hollow emptiness that had started to creep up on me. I lay there, tense, until Dog smushed between us, huffing as he got comfortable.

"He seemed nice," she whispered, just as I'd started to doze again. "The cop."

"I suppose."

"He stayed. After you fell asleep. He took a long while to leave, pettin' your hair like I pet Dog. My legs were getting stiff from sitting on the beam." Andy was a monkey—one of her favorite hiding spaces was climbing up to the large steel beams spanning the massive warehouse. Damned if I knew how she got up there, some of the old crates off to the side, I s'posed.

A small smile crept onto my face. I relaxed, comforted knowing that Liam hadn't left right away, and fell into a more natural sleep than before, my chest filled with warmth at the thought that he'd cared enough to make sure I was okay.

I didn't go back to the diner after that. Tom would have fired me anyhow, and I wanted no reminder of the rough brick abrading my cheek and Corky's pudgy body at my back. I wandered for a while, looked for another job, but there weren't anything. Nothin' that I could do with my body still healing. Nothin' I wanted to do. Better to stay at the warehouse, under the blanket of safety provided by the gray-blue dust motes that floated in patches of sun.

I sat on the makeshift bed, staring at the bright, fleshy orange Andy had stolen for me that morning, and my stomach turned. Maybe Dog would eat it. His furry body burrowed into my side as he sought affection, and I pushed him away gently. I couldn't stand the press of flesh against mine right then, even if it was just Dog. He loped off slowly, head hanging, and he paused to look back with a sorrowful glance, protesting his exile. I ignored him and pulled the deck of cards out of the cubbyhole I'd stashed them in. It could have been worse. It was fine. I was fine.

I didn't need much of anythin', and Andy pretty much left me alone, except for her worried looks. I did sleep across the warehouse after that night; even if I coulda been sure I wouldn't hurt Andy, the dark spots under her eyes tol' me I was keepin' her up anyhow.

I woulda gone on like that, sittin' on the cardboard bed, playing cards, or mappin' out each inch of the warehouse, if I hadn't been woke by Andy's stomach growlin' loud in the middle of the night. Weren't no time for bein' selfish, I shoulda known that. I wouldn't forget again.

After that, Andy usually went with me more when I returned to busking. Perhaps she figured two sets of eyes were better than one, or perhaps she'd grown lonely again with my long days at the diner. Maybe she figured what I never said. It didn't matter—I was happy for her and Dog's company. Didn't much want to work alone, even if my bodyguards were a four foot three waif and a terrier with patchy fur and an under bite. Andy often helped; she'd bet some of the prior day's take if there was a reluctant crowd, trying to get people to loosen their own pockets. I couldn't work down by the beach—that's where I'd first seen Corky's men—or down by the diner, anymore, so our take was even more meager than ever.

I didn't think we'd make it, even with Andy's light fingers, if it weren't for the small gifts that kept appearing outside the window into the warehouse. A bag of oranges one day, another day a box of granola bars. The first time it happened, Andy just "humphed" at me and flounced off into the warehouse. She didn't talk to me the rest of the night, and when she did, all she said was

you can't trust no one no how and a bag of oranges weren't gonna change that. She ate one though. The items were always carefully covered so a passerby wouldn't see them, not that there ever were any people wandering by, out our way. I could have cried the day I found a bar of soap and two jugs of water. I didn't think I'd ever feel clean again, but it helped. I even found dog food one day—I wasn't sure how he'd known we had a dog.

We saw Corky's men occasionally. I was a strong runner and Andy—well she could climb about anything. Fortunately for us, while Corky's men were built, they couldn't run worth shit. They usually gave up after a few blocks. It was worse when they'd find us and set up camp down the street, waiting for people to clear out so's they could get their chance with us. Andy and I made sure we was always in a busy place, but sometimes it got dicey. It's hard to play the cards when your hands are shaking so bad you can barely hold on without crushing 'em. We didn't get caught, but we was lucky.

There was one time when I was sure I was a goner. Andy'd stayed home that day, thank god. Dog had been lyin' around for two days, hardly movin', and she wanted to stay with him while he was sick, so I'd gone out on my own. 'Bout halfway through the day, two of Corky's men walked up to the electronics shop half a block away. I had frozen, hoping that if I didn't move they wouldn't see me. No such luck; one of them elbowed the other in the ribs and pointed at me. They both looked at me, taking in the small crowd, and headed back to a blue Suburban parked in front of the store. They just sat in the truck for hours, watching me, waiting for the people 'round me to leave.

Sweat beaded on my upper lip as the crowd dwindled, only two people left playin' in the heat of the afternoon. I was lettin' them win, just to keep them there, but my tiny stack of cash was all but gone. I started, nerves strung taut, as a black Buick stopped at the curb beside me. The tension that had been building up all afternoon slipped away when Liam stepped out of the car.

“Hey,” he said, swiping a hand across his brow. “Why you working today? Too damn hot.”

He didn't know the half of it. “Not much choice,” I muttered, as I jerked my head toward the blue Suburban. The last of my crowd dissipated as Liam sat on the concrete barrier where I'd set up shop for the day, setting a paper bag beside him.

Liam followed my gaze, lips thinning to a straight line as he saw my observers. “We've got to find a way for you to get a hold of me,” he ground out.

I glanced down, distracted, the rich smell of burnt grease and charcoal emanating from the bag and making my mouth water. I ignored Corky's men; the food was more important. I clenched my fingers on my legs, barely able to keep from tearing into the bag. "What you got there?"

Liam glanced at me. "Oh, some of the boys and I picked up burgers, but they got called off unexpectedly for a bust. I had the waitress wrap them up. Figured they shouldn't go to waste. I tried the pier and the warehouse, but didn't see you. Thought I'd check out here. Glad I did," he muttered, shooting a baleful glance at the Suburban.

Now that he'd admitted the food was for me, I dove into the bag, joyfully grabbing a handful of fries before shoving them into my mouth. "Fanks," I snuck out around a mouthful of fries. They were no longer hot, but I didn't care as I savored the taste of starchy goodness, grease coating the roof of my mouth before I gulped the fries down. I grabbed a foil-wrapped burger, eagerly freed it from its bindings, and bit into the meaty goodness, the salty tang exploding on my tongue and melding with the creaminess of mayo and tart tomato. I looked up and caught Liam staring at my lips as I chewed. I swallowed, then licked my lips.

"What?" I asked, self-consciously bringing my hand up to wipe away any remaining food.

Liam blushed and looked down at his hands, clasped around his own burger. "Nothing," he muttered and took a bite.

I shrugged, returning my attention to the feast before me. I demolished half the burger and looked at the remaining half mournfully. I sighed, then gingerly wrapped the remainder up in the foil and slipped it in my pocket. If Liam noticed, he didn't comment, his eyes flicking between his own meal and the Suburban up the street.

"Thanks. That was... really nice of you."

Liam looked back at me and, upon seeing my empty hands, grabbed the remaining burger and shoved it at me. "Here. I ate a late breakfast. I'm already stuffed." I didn't object.

I eyed Liam's car, bright sun reflecting off the paint. "What kind of car is that anyhow?"

"It's an '87 GNX. I ran into it at a junkyard when I was still in school. My dad—" Liam fell silent for a moment, gazing down the street. "My dad helped me fix it up and I've had it ever since. My mom ran off when I was still little,

so it was just him and me growing up. He died a few years later. Fucking cigarettes. I always told him to stop. I would hide them from him when I was younger. He'd get so pissed off his face would turn purple, but he'd never yell. He'd just take a deep breath, then head on out to buy another pack. He was a cop too; it's why I joined the force. Why I—why I never left when things got a bit rough.”

I studied his face, wondering what that would be like. Having someone who cared about you like that, so much they'd follow your path in life, carrying you with them every day. I'd never know. I grabbed the paper bag, now empty, and balled it up.

“Well, I should get going.” The Suburban had left some time ago; Corky's men had given up on their prey sometime during the meal.

Liam shook himself, then took the bag from me. “Get in the car, I'll give you a ride.” I did as he said. Who was I to argue?

I mostly stayed away from trouble, but trouble didn't stay away from me. There musta been slim pickin's on the streets, 'cause these two cops started harrassin' me every time I was in the Hollywood area. First, they were just tellin' me to get outta their zone, then throwing my cards everywhere. It's no fun crawling around after dark tryin' to find that last card, but I couldn't afford to buy no more. Later they'd rough me up a bit, and take me in for disturbin' the peace. I thought I'd been pretty peaceful 'til they showed up, but they didn't much like hearing that. I ended up in overnight lockup more than I'd like, but nothin' really took. One night, they got pretty nasty and shoved me into a small shadow between buildings. I tol' you most of the cops was bad apples.

“Aww, look. A little fuckface scrougin' up trouble.” The short cop with the pug nose sneered. I guessed they didn't call 'em pigs for nothin'.

The second cop was cleaner cut, nigh on a Disney prince, an impression that disappeared when he opened his mouth. “Brat doesn't know how to stay out of trouble. We gave you plenty of chances, freak. Now, if you'd wanted to suck some real dick rather than that rancid lockup meat, you should have just told us so. Could have saved us hours of paperwork.”

“Fuck off, pigs.” My mouth never did know when to keep itself shut.

A sharp jab to my left leg with a baton drove me to my knees, while a solid blow across my temple kept me from tryin' to escape. I shook my head, trying to focus my eyes, only to see the pig-faced cop reachin' for his belt.

“Ever had two cops at once? Your pretty red mouth is big enough; it can handle it.”

I gathered myself in defense, feeding the energy that was buzzing through me, and focused on the imprint of rot I saw superimposed over their bodies, ready to defend myself however I had to. Ready to attack. Fuck the promises I’d made to myself; the world didn’t deserve my promises. The last year or so had taught me that.

“Only ’cause your dicks are so small.” I braced myself for another blow and squinted when it never fell. Instead, I saw Liam standing behind them, a hand clamped on each of their shoulders, knuckles white as he restrained them. “Assholes. I told you two that if I ever caught you pullin’ this shit again I’d be reporting you to the Chief. Get the fuck out of here.” He shoved one of the men into the wall, the cop’s head hitting with an audible *thunk*, before the man fell to the ground. Liam spun the second cop and slammed a heavy fist into his stomach. The man doubled over, his chest heaving, a mixture of snot and tears clinging to his chin. Liam stumbled, losing his balance as the first cop issued a sharp kick to his ankle, from where he lay on the ground. Liam recovered, rolling as his leg collapsed beneath him, before he turned and launched himself at his attacker, pummeling the man repeatedly.

When Liam saw his attackers were in no shape to retaliate, he turned back to me, his eyes wild, chest heaving as he tried to recover his breath. After he had calmed himself, he came over and offered his hand. I grabbed it and hauled myself to my feet as my muscles twinged in protest.

“Shit, kid, why are you hurt every time I see you?” His thumb whispered across my temple, brushing my hair out of the way. “It’s already started swelling.”

Liam glanced back when he heard a shuffling sound behind him. The two cops were taking the opportunity to escape, one of the men lurching and banging into the brick wall, cursing at us as he escaped. The second man held his hand to his face, trying to staunch the flow of blood streaming from his nose, before racing after his partner and screaming that the Chief would hear about this. Liam ignored them and turned to me. I don’t believe in no angels, but I swear the light sneakin’ through the buildings put a halo ’round his head. Then again, I just took a helluva ringer to my own.

I leaned into his hand slightly. “It’ll be alright.”

“Kid, you gotta find a keeper. I’m not always going to be there to help you.” Liam shook his head slightly, his eyes searching mine.

I shrugged and puffed my chest out. “I was fine. They couldn’t take me. I was just about to flip it around on them.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’ll bet.”

“What? Don’t you believe me?” I pasted on my brightest smile. It never failed me. I’d won a week’s worth of meals off of that smile.

Liam snorted. “You’re one of the worst liars I know. For someone who makes a living conning others, you’re remarkably transparent.”

Or not. “I’m not a con man. I’m an entertainer.”

“I think you should entertain the notion of another profession.” He spoke jokingly, but his eyes were gentle as he looked at me.

“I did. I wasn’t very successful. What is it you do, anyhow? You’re always floating around, but never have a squad car or nothin’. I was figurin’ you might be Batman, ’cause every time I need help you’re there.” I felt the center of my forehead. “Do I have a bat signal comin’ outta there I can’t see? Or is it, like an alleyway alarm? ’Cause anytime I’m in one of those more’n five minutes you’re there. Maybe you’re like *Alleywayman*. Fighting crime in the alleys of Los Angeles, leaving life’s necessities in doorways, keeping the poor and destitute safe. ’Course, I shoulda figured out by now to stay far away from alleys. Never ends well.”

I would have shaken my head, but I could still feel my brains sloshin’ around after that hit to it. “Wait, do you have a superhero costume under that suit? Hold up, I gotta see this.” I reached for the buttons of his shirt, but he swatted my hands away. Damn.

“Very funny. I work in Major Crimes. It just seems you have a penchant for getting in trouble whenever I’m around.” He quirked an eyebrow at me. “Or perhaps you’re just constantly in trouble, and I just happen to intervene in a few instances.”

That sounded about right.

His hand had returned to my temple, fingers brushing my hairline. He looked at me like... like I was a person. I was used to bein’ a card shark, a bum, a rent boy, hell, even a brother. But never just another person. I wasn’t sure that made sense, even to myself, but there it was.

I looked into his brown eyes, gold flecks dancing in the diminishing sunlight. I knew I didn't deserve it, I knew he wouldn't accept it, but with a deep breath, I stepped into him until we touched. I tilted my head up, brushing my lips against his jaw, his stubble wiry against my lips. He froze, his breath harsh in my ear.

His head tilted slightly into me and his hand descended to cup the side of my neck, contradicting his words. "Shane, we can't—"

I breathed in the spicy musk of his cologne and wanted more. I wanted to taste the salt of his skin, to feel his pulse on my tongue, to roll the essence of his flavor in my mouth. It wasn't just lust, or love, just the desire, the need to take this one moment in hand; to shape it into what I wanted. To make it mine again. To drive this small sliver of life before the undertow swept me away once again.

I sunk to my knees, the small pebbles digging into my knees, as I quickly unbuckled his pants, parting the sides to reveal black briefs. I didn't bother pulling them down, just reached in to draw him out of the opening.

"Fuck, Shane, this isn't—" Liam's hand grasped my head as if to hold me off, before it fell to his side in surrender.

Liam groaned as I swallowed him whole, his cock already hardening. I wanted to bury my nose in the crevice of his hip, suck on his balls, toy with them, but had to content myself with swallowing his cock. He quickly became fully hard; a thick, solid bar of flesh that stretched my lips as his hands came up again and threaded through my hair, alternately pulling me away and pushing my mouth further down the length of his cock, until he bumped the back of my throat. Above me, he released short, breathy groans, trying to muffle the sounds of his pleasure. Lord, he was thick. I redoubled my efforts, hollowing my cheeks, twisting my tongue against the underside of his cock until I felt it jerk. His hips stuttered as I swallowed him all the way down, holding him in my throat as his flesh pulsed against my tongue.

"Fuck, ki—Shane. That was... I don't know what that was." He pulled out of my mouth, tucking himself away, avoiding my eyes. And then he turned and walked away.

A few weeks later, when hunger drove me to the local shelter, I saw a sign offerin' free haircuts on Sundays. I ran my hand through my hair, scraggly ends now past my nose after a year on the streets. There was more important things to spend my money on than haircuts, but I wasn't goin' to say no to free.

When I showed up on Sunday, there was almost a line out the door. I almost turned back around, but then I saw the Asian woman grinnin' in the makeshift barber's chair. I hadn't smiled that broad in a long time—maybe years. I stayed in line. It was almost dark by the time it was my turn.

The barber wasn't young or old, but had a plain brown face, void of expression. "What'll it be?"

I wasn't sure I wanted to trust no one that didn't even look bored, but I wanted my hair gone more. "Ummm... can you get rid of it all. Like, shave it or somethin'?" Couldn't screw that up.

"No problem." He put a wrap around my neck, just like I was in a fancy salon or somethin', and grabbed a pair of gloves. I was glad to see his combs and stuff in that blue disinfectant. I wasn't all that clean, but didn't much want whatever was crawlin' on all those other people's heads on my own. The barber's first few cuts were nerve-rackin'. I didn't much care about the hair, but I'd learned not to let sharp things come near me if I didn't want a new scar. He didn't stab me or nothin', though, so after a while I relaxed. Christ, that hair musta weighed ten tons or somethin' 'cause with each snip my head was easier an' easier to hold up, my shoulders able to relax. By the time he'd taken a buzzer to my head to get it all the way to the skin, I could feel the air caressin' my head and eleven months of worries scattered on the floor around me. I walked outta' there my head held higher than it'd been since I'd arrived in the city.

I'd taken to studyin' at night too. Not at school or nothin' but the shelter'd had a free class once a week and gave us some books for readin'. Figured I'd try to learn some skills other than suckin' and scammin'. Sheila, from the shelter, had given me some ideas for jobs; she was tryin' to help out, but I hadn't had no luck so far. She said maybe I'd consider takin' some computer classes 'til I found somethin'. Andy couldn't study much bein' on account of she was so young, but sometimes I'd read to her. She woulda loved to take one of them free classes at the shelter, but anyone that'd seen her woulda shipped her straight off to a home or somethin'. I didn't see how that was all that bad. Sure mister and missus weren't like the families on TV, but at least I ate every night. Well, most nights. Better than now, at least. I'd asked Andy once, but her body just shook and she said that people in houses and people on the street weren't much different; they was just more honest about their mean on the streets. I figured I couldn't argue that. When we went to bed that night she just plastered herself to my back, hidin' her head in my shoulder. She was still shakin' for a few nights after that, so I didn't bring it up no more.

Anyhow, we mighta gone goin' on that way—workin' the streets during the day, tryin' for somethin' more at night—for a while if it hadn't been for Dog. He was always followin' us around the town, but didn't much like sittin' around while we was working. He'd go off lookin' for some kid to play with or explorin' the nearest garbage piles, searchin' for the night's dinner, I suppose. But one night Dog didn't come back.

Andy and I walked the streets for hours that night, yelling Dog's name over and over again until her voice went hoarse, scream fading to whisper. I was constantly alert, waiting for an unwelcome, human response to her call, but all that answered was the passing of cars and the mocking repeat of another homeless man, lost in the honeycomb of his mind and drink.

“Dog! Dog?” Andy would scream, followed by a nasal, masculine “*Dog*, dog dog *dog!*” His cackle followed us down the street as we continued searching.

When Andy and I couldn't yell no more, we slunk back to our sanctuary of dust and shattered glass. Andy grabbed her blanket from within and returned to ascend the half-busted fire escape hugging the side of the building. I followed, reaching the roof slightly out of breath, to find her propped against one of the few intact skylights, staring at nothin'. I lay beside her, searching for the stars hidden in the gray haze and lights of the city, imagining a planet where dogs came when you called and weren't the victims of happenstance or malicious bastards. One where you owned your own skin. Andy didn't speak, and only the occasional soft hitch of her breath let me know she was still awake.

When the darkness started to recede, chased away by the soft creep of dawn, she finally broke the silence. “Shane?”

“Yeah, Andy.”

“I don't really want to stay here. I mean, it was fun making Corky mad for a while. But it's not fun anymore.”

I reached out, hand covering hers between us. “I know.”

“I just want to be somewhere safe. The white house and picket fence or somethin'. With a big pantry full of food. Especially mac and cheese. And Dog. I want Dog back.”

I closed my eyes, helpless against the break of day.

Andy disappeared frequently after that on her endless search for Dog. I figured he was the first being she'd run into in a long while that hadn't hurt her, and I let her go. I worried about her though.

I went back to busking—weren't much else I could do. Didn't make shit for money—maybe it was my long face, maybe it was just not havin' Andy around to get the people goin' but regardless, I found myself diggin' in garbage bins for food before the week was out. I was returning to the warehouse one night, as the sun descended behind the aging buildings. The streets were covered in shadows where I imagined I saw Corky's men following... waiting. Weren't never nothin' there when I turned around, but it was as if I could feel the glare of eyes boring into me. It took two hours to wend my way home through all the side-streets that night, tryin' to lose an invisible tail, but never really saw no one. Never felt safe, either. I had just crawled in through the window, barely able to see it in the dark of the street, when two hands grabbed my shoulders and pressed me back against the wall.

“Shane?” Coarse hands came up to skim my face, mapping my features in the imitation of the blind. I flinched, frozen at the strange touch, until Liam's scent filled my nostrils, the scent of wood and cloves and home.

“Liam? What are you doing here?”

Before the words escaped my lips he had hauled me up against his chest, broad and tense, his arms clasped tight around me. “Jesus Christ, I thought you were dead. Jesus. I... it's really you. I waited—Fuck.”

I didn't move, confused, but unwilling to cause the tight string of his body to snap. Taking a deep breath, he released me. “Get your stuff, we're leaving. Where's the girl? Did she come back with you?” He looked over my shoulder as if could see in the murky black behind me.

I was startled out of my silence. “What? How did you know? How did you find out about Andy?”

“Shane. I'm a cop.” His voice was dry. “I've seen a girl hanging around you on the streets once or twice. And that night—when I brought you back after... when I found you in the alley behind the diner. There was another change of clothes by the bed. Small clothes. A girl's clothes.

“Oh. But—I don't understand. Why did you think... why are you here?”

The silence was as thick as the dark. Liam's breath whispered against my ear as he spoke.

“They found a body. In the river. It, I mean he, looked like you. His shape, I mean. His clothes. I couldn’t see his face; it was... not recognizable. But god, when I saw that damned dog tied around his chest, I knew—I swore it was you. But I had to check. I had to—” He stopped with a choking sound.

I froze and forced my muscles to relax, one by one.

“Look Shane, it doesn’t get any clearer than that. I know you think you’re fine here, but you’ve gotta go. You’ve got to get out of here. They’re not playing around anymore.”

No, I could see that. I knew—I should have known after the first encounter, but I had thought I was strong. I wasn’t. I hung my head, shoulders slumped, and scuffed my foot against the floor without purpose. My voice was thick when I responded. “Andy’s not here. She’s—Christ, she’s still out looking for Dog. She doesn’t always sleep here anymore.” I worried at my lip and ran a jerky hand through my hair. I couldn’t leave her, but hell, she’d stay away for hours and hours sometimes.

Liam rubbed his hand down my back, a warm comfort. “Look, grab your things. We can leave her my cell phone and a note. When she returns, we’ll come back to get her. I can’t stand the thought of you, either of you, alone in this warehouse any longer. Not when they’re willing to kill someone else just to get the message across.”

I nodded numbly, before turning to gather my belongings. Liam used the blue glow from his phone and guided me toward my belongings, his hand never leaving the small of my back. When we stopped, he withdrew from me and quickly scrawled a note for Andy on the cardboard. He set the phone right next to his message, a beacon to grab Andy’s attention, and turned back to me. His hand returned to my shoulder, and we shuffled across the floor in the absence of light until we reached the wall. We felt along its surface until we found the window.

The ride was silent. I didn’t know where we were going, but I didn’t much care anymore. My mind was off wondering what the other boy—the one they’d killed—had done. Did he have a family? Did he—was he normal? Had he wondered why him, why these strangers targeted him, of all people? Or had he known them? Had he crossed them in some way, too?

I shook myself out of my thoughts when we pulled up in front of an apartment building. It was small, perhaps six units. Nondescript. Liam led me

into one of the apartments on the second floor and flicked on the light. The walls were blank, void of any decoration, and the furnishings were plain.

“Safe house?” I asked.

“Erm... no. My house. Apartment. Whatever.”

Oh. Upon second look I could see small personal touches. A handmade key holder. A subscription to *Tin House* magazine. A pair of slippers half-tucked under the sofa.

“Slippers?” I looked back at him, imagining him reclining in the armchair at the end of the day in a silk robe and slippers, cigar in hand.

“Shut up.”

I went to sit on the sofa when Liam grabbed my arm. His eyes pointed to the left. “Bathroom’s through there.”

“Oh.” Of course. I reeked and I knew it. The idea of a hot shower almost had me coming in my pants. I changed direction, pulling off my shirt as I went.

“And Shane?”

“Yeah?” I paused, looking back at him.

“Erm—you should shave. I don’t mean to be. I mean. There’s a—” He was looking everywhere but at me, his cheeks flushed.

“I just did. I mean, it’s been a week, but my hair has barely grown in.” I ran my free hand across my head, feeling the stubble catch on my calluses.

Liam cleared his throat. “I mean. Not. Not just your head.”

I looked down. I didn’t think he’d brought me here for that, but I was up for a few sacrifices if it meant I could get my hands on him. “Uhhh... okay.”

“Not just there either. Um... everywhere. Probably be best if you do your legs too.”

I shook my head and resumed my path to the bathroom. “I don’t know what kinky shit you’re into, but I like looking like a man, not a prepubescent boy.”

Liam’s voice followed me to the bathroom and I paused, hand on the doorknob. “Hey no! It’s not that. It’s just. I mean—you’ve been on the streets for a while. And in the shelter sometimes too, right? Those places... it’s not uncommon, I mean. I’m sorry, but... lice isn’t exactly uncommon there, you know?” I nodded curtly, before closing the door behind me.

When I exited the shower thirty minutes later, all smooth and shiny and clean, I saw Liam had taken my clothes and replaced them with soft sweatpants. The smell of tomato sauce drew me back out into the living room. “Damn, that smells like heaven.”

He nodded, returning to dish out spaghetti into two bowls. I salivated at the sight of the pasta drenched in thick marinara and chunks of beef, garnished with a thick slice of bread, smothered in butter. The scent of garlic wafted toward me and I snatched the bowl from his hand.

“It’s nothing special, but it’ll fill you up.” He turned back to me, his face serious. “I checked my voice mail while you were in the shower. No word yet. And I’m sorry about earlier.”

I paused, fork full of pasta already halfway to my mouth. The scent of garlic and tomato teased my nose and I replied quickly, before shoving the food in my mouth. “Don’t worry about it. Nothin’ but the truth.”

After dinner, I stretched out on the sofa to relieve the pressure in my over-full stomach, which was protesting from the three bowls of pasta I’d eaten. Liam set some sheets on the empty cushion by my feet, fiddling with the cotton fabric before turning to me. “Look, about what you said earlier—about the kink.” I smirked as he continued. “I’m... you’re not here for that. I know I took advantage of you last time, but I won’t let it happen again.”

I frowned and narrowed my eyes at him. “Took advantage of me?”

“Look, I know you haven’t had a lot of control over your things—your life—lately. It was reprehensible of me to let you... Look. I’m a cop. I shouldn’t have used my position to—It was a mistake.”

“Are you kidding me? Seriously? Where in me choosing to take your cock down my throat did you exercise your ‘power’ to force me into something I didn’t want?”

Liam got a stubborn look on your face. “Hey, I get it. You’re life’s been shit. And when someone does something nice for you, you feel you’ve got to recompense.”

“Jesus Christ, can you even hear yourself right now?” I advanced on him, invading his space. “You think that because I’m some poor, homeless street urchin, I don’t know what I want? That I think everything has to be quid pro quo, and I have to use my body to—to what, pay you back? You think I can’t know, and express, what I want? And don’t be tellin’ me that the last time I felt

human, not scrougin' for food on the streets like... like... like Dog was a mistake. If you didn't like it that's fine but you don't get to tell me my side. I know what I want."

Liam ran his hand through his hair, looking off to the side. "Dammit Shane, I'm not... I'm not a good man. You deserve better."

I gaped at him, incredulous. Better?

He sighed, before grabbing my hand, pulling me toward the couch. He sat, tugging me down beside him.

"Before I came here, I worked down in San Diego. I got booted from the force. Well, asked to resign, but it was the same thing. Excessive use of force. And believe me, they usually turned a blind eye if the perp accidentally 'tripped' and broke a few bones. It wasn't the most rigid of forces."

I studied him. "What happened?"

"We'd picked up this guy several times. He was a cop, but a real piece of shit. He liked slapping the old woman around. Same old story. But she'd never press charges and the boss would always smooth things over, saying it was an accident, a one-time slip. Some shit like that." He grunted. "Four times."

"Anyhow, we end up getting called out to his place for the fifth time. This time it was the old woman—drunk as hell and waving a knife around while her two daughters looked on from the corner where they stood, their arms around each other to hold the other up, eyes rimmed in red. We disarmed the old woman, and my partner cuffed her and took her out to the car. Trying to calm the family down, you know? Anyhow, this guy, he sat down on the couch, pulling his older daughter with him, setting her on his lap. She was upset, but... she was thirteen and pregnant. He had his hand on her knee, caressing on it while she tried to move away."

Liam paused, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. He held it a moment and then released it slowly. "I don't know anyone's thirteen-year-old daughter that still sits on Dad's lap, you know? His younger daughter stood across the room—Lisa was her name. 'They grow up so fast,' he'd said. Then the bastard tilted his head to point at the little girl, licking his lips. 'That one's almost nine. They're... so ripe at that age; so innocent.' Fucker was practically drooling." Liam clenched his hands. "He wasn't particularly subtle, but shit—"

Liam took a deep breath, composing himself. "When the older daughter escaped his paws, she grabbed the younger one and they disappeared into a

bedroom. And... I lost it.” He looked down at his hands, large and heavy. “It didn’t take much. I don’t really remember. A few swings maybe. At first, he was just standing there, smug look on his face. Then I was staring at the blood on my knuckles, wondering how it got there. He was in the hospital for weeks. He lived, though. I phoned in a tip about the girls; figured they might look into it, would run some blood tests.” Liam shook his head. “I should have done more, but I wasn’t real popular after that. So I moved to LA for a fresh start. No one knew, at first, because I had resigned, but word got around here quick enough. A few guys congratulated me, but most just steered clear. I haven’t been able to keep a partner for more than a few months. Everyone considered me a loose cannon. That’s how I ended up working undercover, though I haven’t been on a real assignment for a while.”

I covered his hands with mine, before turning, swinging my leg over his so I was straddling him, nose butting his. “That sounds like a good man to me. One that maybe... maybe could have chosen a different path, but a good man.” I eased forward, my lips barely touching his. Moving slowly, I traced my tongue on his lower lip, slowly teasing him, until his lips parted slightly and I slipped inside.

His hands were tight on my biceps, fingers flexing as if he was working up the courage to push me away, but his mouth accepted mine, tongue brushing against mine, before inviting me into his mouth. I took my time, exploring the shape of his mouth, his teeth, before biting on his lower lip. I wanted to etch his taste, his smell, the feel of his skin onto my soul. My hands snuck up the front of his shirt, nails rasping lightly against his nipple as he groaned into my mouth. As he picked me up, I trailed kisses down his chin, licking at the skin behind his ear, which was soft and fragile.

“Dammit, Shane.” He pulled back, searching my eyes briefly, before sighing and carrying me into his bedroom, my legs around his hips. I could feel him hard against me, the tip of his cock butting the base of mine as he walked. When he set me down before his bed, I pushed his shirt up and he lifted his arms to oblige. I wasn’t going slow; wasn’t allowing him time to think, to change his mind. His chest was covered in a light fur, dark hair contrasting on lighter skin and I twirled my fingers through it before sliding them down to tug at the trail of hair disappearing into his jeans.

I teased his nipple, biting it gently, while I moved my hands to push his pants down, drawing his briefs down with them. I stepped back, taking the chance to look at the cock I’d only had the chance to hold in my hand, my

mouth, before. I circled the deep red head before trailing my finger down the vein traversing the underside. He was thick. Remembering the weight of him on my tongue almost made me salivate. I'd only got a hint of his taste before, his cum sliding directly down the back of my throat. I touched a finger to the slick gloss of precum at the tip before raising it to my tongue. Salty tangy heaven.

Liam's hand circled the base of his cock, holding it tightly for a second, before he advanced on me. "Oh no. If we do this, it's not gonna be all about me." Before his comment could register, he efficiently stripped me of my clothing and laid me on the bed. His lips hovered over my cock, breath performing a teasing dance on the sensitive skin.

"Oh god, don't stop, don't stop." I pushed my hips up until the head butted his lips, which parted and granted me entry. Liam wrapped his hand around the base of my cock, moving his hand as his mouth slowly sank down, then withdrew with a light suction. I'd never felt a heat so soft, so exquisite... No one had ever—not on the streets, and it's not like there were a lot of options in the small town I'd lived in.

Liam drew back and looked up at me, his lips red and slick, and asked, "How do you want to come?" It almost became a non-issue as the words left his mouth.

I bit my lip. "Can I... I'd really like to fuck you."

He inhaled sharply and hurriedly reached over me to rummage in the nightstand, before withdrawing a condom and some slick. He tore into the condom wrapper, then slicked up his hand and firmly wrapped it around my cock, adding a slow glide down, before sliding the condom on. He covered his fingers with more lube, then turned his back to me, reaching behind himself and thrusting two fingers into his hole without hesitation. After only a few moments, he leaned forward on his elbows. "Fuck me. Now."

I placed my hand on his back and he spread his knees slightly, lowering himself. Placing my cock at his entrance, I slowly rocked forward, watching it disappear, consumed by his body. He didn't wait for me to set the rhythm, instead pulling forward before pushing back, fucking himself on my cock. He tilted his hips slightly, pushing back again and groaning as I hit his prostate. I continued watching, disappearing within him, his muscles contracting and releasing me as he moved. His pace quickened, accompanied by barely audible gasps each time he pushed back. As the tension built in me, thrumming throughout my body, I spit in my hand, reached around him, and wrapped my

fingers around his cock in a tight grasp, moving my hand in time with my thrusts. Impatient, he shoved himself back on me forcefully, and I erupted unexpectedly, tremors pulsing throughout, my fingers digging into his hip. He waited until I released my breath, the last pulse of pleasure running through me, before he batted my hand away from his cock. He pulled forward, flipping onto his back, and wrapped his own hand around himself until he came with three quick tugs, warm semen spreading across both of our stomachs.

I collapsed on him, uncaring of the cum spreading between us, as my breath began to even. I laid my head on his chest, his fur lightly tickling my nose as I inhaled. He rested his hands on my back, mapping soft patterns on my skin as I drifted into slumber.

I woke up screaming, visions of decapitated body parts dancing on piano wires, Andy's headless body following along behind the rest. Corky and his men, nude and erect, with monstrous cocks dripping disease. Liam lay behind me, claspng tight as I struggled to free myself from the remains of the nightmare. When I'd calmed somewhat, he asked, "Want to talk about it?"

"Not particularly." I rarely had nightmares anymore, but when I did, they were macabre. As they were tonight. He nodded, his calm acceptance loosening my tongue. "It was Andy. And... other things."

His hand moved up and down my arm, settling my nerves. "Other things?"

I'd almost forgotten about high school, about after the hospital. I'd tried to, at least. "When I was in school, some boys beat the shit out of me. Didn't like that I'd come out, that I was sharing the locker room with them at school. They—I was in the hospital for weeks. When I got out, I tried to forget about it all. I mean, I blamed them, of course I did, but shit, that was just how things were in that town. How their parents were."

"Very forgiving."

"Not really. I just wanted to move on. I tried to fix things, tried to... tune things to the right frequency. It didn't work."

"That's an odd way of saying it."

I nodded, but didn't explain it further. "Some were okay. Some things were better, but one... he just snapped. He—he drove his truck into the post office, screaming about how all the clowns was after him, chasing him everywhere. His parents had him committed. I don't think—I don't think he ever got out."

“Hey, if some kid went crazy after attacking you, that’s not your fault.”

I shuddered, remaining silent. He was wrong.

The next morning we still didn’t hear from Andy. The day was arid, the window air conditioning unit unable to keep up with the sweltering heat. And as the temperature rose, my patience frayed. I was staring out the window, afternoon sun beating down on the asphalt, as Liam stepped behind me, placing a firm hand on the back of my neck.

“If we haven’t heard from her by tomorrow, I’ll gather a few of my buddies and we’ll check things out,” he said.

“Fuck that. We should go check out the warehouse now. Something’s wrong. She may not come home every night, but she always checks in. Always.”

He sighed. “Shane, we can’t. If, god forbid, something has gone wrong, Corky’s men’ll be watching the place. I won’t put you in danger.”

I turned around, my color rising. “I’m not some wilted flower you have to protect all the time. I appreciate the help—I do—but I can take care of myself.”

His finger traced a fading bruise under my eye. “I can see that.”

I shoved him away from me. “Fuck you. You don’t know anything about me. I’m not who you think I am.”

“I’m sorry. I am, that was uncalled for. Dammit, I know you’re strong Shane. I know that you’re a good kid who got screwed over early in life. I know that you don’t think you deserve better. That book you carry around? I’m guessing you read how he tried to stay in the city, but abandoned it because it didn’t fit with his spiritual ideals. So it would be the perfect city for you, right?”

“Shut up.”

“Shane, there are few people that make it on the streets for as long as you have, as solid as you are. I’m betting that since you’ve been here, you’ve seen things that would make a cop queasy. But this is a whole other league. These guys kill for fun. You’re not prepared—not trained—for that.”

“Then call your friends now. Help now. Before it’s too late.”

“Shane, I can’t. I only have a few friends on the force, and if I call them to ask them to help me chase after a teen runaway who has been missing less than

a day, they'll laugh me off the phone. You also have to consider—she's young. They'll help, but they won't turn a blind eye to her age. She'll go into a home. I won't be able to stop them from calling DCFS.”

“Fine, then I'll go alone. I'll grab the phone from the warehouse and call you if things get bad.”

Liam approached me again and placed his hand on the back of my neck, tracing the fine hairs with this thumb. “Shane, I promise you, we'll do what's right. If Andy's in trouble, we'll help. All I'm asking is that you give it a little more time, to be sure. Let me help take care of you, this time.”

I didn't respond, but I leaned forward into his chest, trying to absorb some of his strength through the connection.

When Liam went to take a shower, I snuck out the door. His keys had been hanging on a rack by the door and I'd eyed them longingly, but I'd never learned to drive. I borrowed a few bucks for the bus, though. He was right; I'd been taking care of myself, and I'd keep on doing so. And taking care of Andy. I paused, taking in the small living room, the couch where we'd first kissed. Regret pinged in my chest, before I turned around, shutting the door softly behind me. There are no happy endings. Only endings.

I didn't go back to the warehouse though. Liam was right. If she'd gone back, she would have seen the note, and she would have called. No use risking it if they were looking for me. Instead, I made my way to Corky's house.

As the sun set on the evening, I stood behind the dumpster of a neighboring building, hidden from view. I was a hundred yards from Corky's property, a three-story brick house encircled by a chain-link fence. The yard wasn't big, but it was empty; there was no place to hide approaching the fence or the house. Corky thought he was big-time, but his house said otherwise. There weren't any guards, but the house was full, a small contingent of armed men passing by the windows. I couldn't make the front door, but I could try for the window in the darkened room. I might get in.

I wasn't even sure Andy was there. Sure, lots of people knew where Corky lived, but he was more secretive about where he conducted business. Maybe he'd taken her there. Or maybe she'd run into trouble from other quarters. I was betting on Corky, though. He wanted Andy back.

When the sky had darkened enough that the buildings were just shadows, I went for it. A hand grabbed onto my belt as I scrambled over the fence. I hadn't

even made it close to the building before I was caught. My throat caught, and I choked on air as darkness pressed in on me. I kicked back blindly, the hand on my pants loosening slightly as my foot connected with soft tissue. The metal of the fence bit into my fingers as I tried to pull myself up with the weight of another body dragging me down. I couldn't let her down. I couldn't. She'd counted on me, and I'd led them right to her. I'd seen the shadows the other night, and I'd thought I was smart. I'd thought I was safe.

I fell back onto a hard body, still scrambling, desperate to get free. I bit and scratched, but the arms around my waist kept me from anything but scrambling for purchase.

“God dammit, Shane. Stop!”

I froze as I heard a familiar voice in my ear. “Liam?” I turned around to see his familiar face; lips set in a hard line.

“What the fuck were you thinking? Jesus Christ, I told you I'd help.” His hand came up to cradle my chin, tilting my face up until I was forced to look at him.

I cast my eyes down, evading his gaze. “You wanted to wait too long. Andy—” My voice cracked. “Andy could be dead by then.” And I could take care of myself. He didn't know that, but I did.

Liam sighed, pushing my head into his shoulder, his other arm wrapping around me, pulling into him. I closed my eyes, leaning into him, absorbing his strength, and we stood, frozen in time, neither of us willing to move, to face the night that waited before us.

And then, it didn't matter anymore; the night chased us. A brief scuffling sound and my head exploded in a burst of light and pain.

When I came to, Jimmy was standing over me, yellow teeth exposed, stale breath a suffocating blanket. His face glowed with a sheen of sweat, highlighted by the bare bulb glowing dimly above. The constant pulsing of his skin was even stronger, a mass of writhing infection overlaying his visage. I couldn't tell anymore what was real and what was an imprint.

“Miss me?”

I said nothin', gettin' my bearings. Liam was halfway across the room, hunched over himself, arms and legs tied tightly behind him, meeting in the

center of his back. Hogtied, propped up against the cement wall. There would be no help from that corner. At least only my arms were tied, although my legs were numb under me.

“Because I missed you,” Jimmy continued. “I’ve thought of you almost every day. Corky would talk and talk about how much he wanted to see you again, how much he regretted your interrupted time together. I thought, what if I could procure that sweet boy for Corky again. He loved how you struggled against him. He missed his happy ending, though. Or you missed yours. However you’d like to look at it.”

I was thankful that Liam was out; that he wasn’t hearin’ this. He may have suspected somethin’ about that day in the alley, but he didn’t know. I didn’t want him to.

Jimmy didn’t stop talkin’, his voice a sibilant monologue of the mad. As he spoke, he withdrew a knife from behind him and traced it through the air between us, watchin’ the play of light on the blade. “Corky won’t mind if I broke you in a bit. Of course, I can’t fuck you, but that’s not what I like anyhow.” He grabbed the front of my shirt, slicing through it easily as I tried to dodge him. I stilled as the point of the blade pricked my chest.

The knife went deeper, a sharp, searing pain circling my nipple, and I howled in agony. He circled half of my nipple with the blade, a fine, red line painting a grisly outline. Tears streamed down my cheeks as he pulled the blade back, then dug the knife under the skin and folded back the flap, exposing creamy fat and red flesh. I screamed, and he smiled and inhaled the scent of my blood, then let the flap fall back into place.

Jimmy tilted his head, studying me as sobs racked my body. “Hmmm. Not as fun as I expected. Maybe he’s the better choice.” He tilted the knife toward Liam. “I like them big. They scream longer, in the end.”

“Sure. Go for it—that’d be a brilliant move. Torture and maim a fine officer of the LAPD. I’m sure they’d just let that go,” I said, when I could breathe again.

Jimmy tsked. “No, no I don’t think so. A man in blue hanging out with a rent boy outside a crime boss’s residence? No. He’s no cop. And even if he were...” Jimmy tapped the knife against his chin, my blood a stain against his skin. “No one knows where he is. Which means, if he’s dead, no one will know who to retaliate against. Although, Andy’s blood, now that’s delicious, ruby red, and it flows so rapidly. Decisions, decisions.” He paused, raising his head, listening. “Marco, the big guy, he’s with her now. Can you hear them?”

I didn't know. The pounding pressure, the nightmare screams; they could have been circling my head or coming from within the house. It didn't matter, I heard it all the same.

This wouldn't happen. No more. My mind wrenched, reaching for the infection, and I wrested the foul corruption from him. First his capillaries exploded, the reaction accelerating as blood oozed from his skin, and flesh eroded before me. Jimmy fell on me, a twitching corpse, smothering me. I braced my bound feet against the wall for purchase and flipped us, until I was half lying on his remains, his blood soaking into my pores. I twisted until I could grab his knife and began sawing clumsily through the coarse rope that bound my hands.

I saw Liam stir in the corner and I paused, uncertain. He didn't need to see this—I didn't want him to see what I was capable of—what I could no longer stop as fear and hatred and anger roiled within me, struggling to escape the confines of my skin. When he didn't move again, I strode over to him, quickly releasing him from his bindings, before turning back to the door. I didn't know how many of Corky's men were in the house, and I couldn't leave him helpless. I moved quickly, determined to finish what I must before Liam woke.

The hallway was dark, a faint light from a bare bulb at the end of the hall illuminating three closed doors. I paused at the first, head cocked, ear toward the door. Hearing nothing, I wrapped my hand around the doorknob, but opened the door to an empty room. I tried the next two doors, both empty, before turning back down the hallway toward the stairs. I paused, grateful for my tattered shoes, too worn to squeak on the wooden steps.

As I descended, I could hear voices, almost gleeful in their spite.

“You should have seen him, creeping around the dumpster as if we didn't see him coming a mile away. All focused on the house; didn't even look around. Fuckin' ditchpig. Don't fucking take what's Corky's. I about put a bullet in him outside—this'll be more fun though.” The voice was coarse and grating and I bared my teeth into the darkness.

“Fuck yeah. I'm looking forward to taking a turn with him after the girl. I'll show him what it's like to be swimming in dog shit. Asshole got my car last time.” My skin grew tighter, hearing them talk about Andy. My rage was almost physical, threatening to erupt from me, and I took a deep breath. I had to stay rational. She was here. She had to be.

Their voices dropped to a low murmur, and I crept down the remainder of the stairs, eyes trained ahead. I reached the landing without seeing them and focused on the door to the right; the room from which the sound of gritty voices emerged. Only a few steps away from the entrance, I could see the back of a head, framed by the streetlight creeping in through the window in the back of the room. The scent of cigar smoke filled my nostrils as I slowly pushed the door open and saw five men, all of them large and burly, sitting at a table, cards in hand.

The man opposite the door noticed me first. He stood, pushed his chair back, and stared, mouth slack and eyes wide. The others turned to see what had attracted him, each of them gaping at me in turn, slow to react. Illness ate away at the skin of three of the men's skin, squirming larvae feeding on decayed skin. I blinked and flashed back to reality, their faces returning to normal once again.

The man closest to me, face marred by a patchwork of scars, was the first to react. His hand moved to his waist, reaching for his gun, and I let all my anger, the hatred that had been growing like a canker within me since I'd gotten to the city, release into the room. At first, there was no reaction, and I thought my anger had failed me, had been left strewn on the corpse upstairs. Then, pandemonium broke; one man's chest and belly exploded, blood and viscera rupturing from his body to cover his companions. Another simply fell to the ground, eyes glazed, blood dripping from his ears and nose.

I watched as a third man grabbed his throat, gasping for air. His throat bulged, the skin on his neck rippling and pulsing, as something crawled beneath his skin, searching for escape. He fell to the floor, silent, as a swarm of maggots erupted from his gaping mouth. I wasn't sure if they were only in my sight, or really there, but it hardly mattered; he wasn't breathing anymore. Acid bile rose as I watched, burning my throat. Revenge wasn't sweet at all.

The two men from whom I'd seen no imprint remained standing, frozen by the horror film manifested as reality before them. The taller one shook his head, gagging, before fixing a gaze of utter hatred upon me. He reached for his gun as I searched frantically for a weapon, anything, to defend myself with. There was nothing. A rough hand grasped my shoulder, pulling me back, and two shots rang out, the men before me falling to the ground. I gaped as Liam turned back to me, his eyes cold and face unreadable.

My whole body heavy, I staggered back, barely able to support myself. My body stiffened as energy flowed from me and I turned, staring with horror as cracks emanated from where my body touched the wall. Liam reached for me

and paused, his hand inches from my body. I shook my head, silently willing him not to touch me. I didn't know what would happen. Liam looked up at the crack quickly creeping up the wall and across the ceiling, before withdrawing his hand.

“I think we'd better get out of here. Fast.”

“Andy,” I said.

He nodded abruptly, then spun on his heel and walked briskly toward the doorway, stumbling slightly as the floor beneath us shook. We raced down the second stairway and searched each of the rooms on the ground floor, pausing only briefly as we entered the kitchen to see a woman, gray streaking her pitch-black hair. She cowered in the corner, bracing herself against the walls, as the house shook around her. A sharp barking from outside joined the chorus of her cries. Liam paused, hand on his gun as he looked around.

We had searched the whole house and my body collapsed in on itself as I despaired of finding Andy. Liam shook my shoulder, muttering my name, keeping his eyes trained on the woman sobbing in the corner.

“Shane, pull yourself together.” He grabbed my hand, pulling me behind him as he approached a doorway that framed another set of stairs that disappeared into darkness. The basement. I gathered myself, afraid to hope as he pulled me forward.

Liam's steps were cautious on the stairs before me and he tested each step before he put his full weight on it. As we approached the landing he paused, pulling his gun once again. He groped the wall, flicking the light switch up before swinging his body around the corner. The basement was empty but for a small pile on the opposite end of the room. As we approached, I could see Andy's pale face, her body buried in a swath of stale clothing and blankets; her eyes staring blankly at the room. I approached her quickly, running my hands along her thin limbs, checking for injury and finding nothing. Liam gently pushed me to the side, lifting Andy effortlessly into his arms, as chunks of rock and wood from the building fell around us.

Andy turned her head slightly, eyes focusing on me. Her voice was thin and thready as she asked, “Dog? Did you find him? I heard barking.” I shook my head, unable to respond. She read the answer on my face anyway and turned her head into Liam's chest without another word.

Liam had been talkin' on and off, sporadically, since I'd awoken in the car. His hand rested on my thigh as if to hold me down; as if I would float away. I don't know, maybe I would. A low thrum vibrated through my body, electricity, though drained. I didn't really hear him; watching the hazy gray of the city fade into olive and sand-brushed mountains, until there was nothin' before us but brown that faded into gray, then to black as the night arose. The constant flow of LA traffic had ebbed hours ago, until we only saw a car or two on occasion. I was OK with that. Andy... Andy hadn't moved since Liam had placed her in the backseat, wide eyes staring out the window, unseeing. She was tough though. She'd recovered once; with love, and care, she could again. And this time she wouldn't be alone. I'd be with her, long enough and close enough for her to know she could count on me. And just maybe Liam would be there with us too.

“What now?” I asked.

“I figured—I thought we'd head east for a few days, maybe head toward Iowa or something.”

“What's in Iowa?”

Liam was slow to respond. All I could hear was the quiet hum of the road as the car pushed more space between us and home. Us and Los Angeles.

“I don't know. Nothing, maybe. Perhaps safety. I have a friend there. He can help. Get us IDs. A place to hide. I'd like to get to Colorado Springs before we stop. It's not as much distance behind us as I'd like, but I can't go on much longer than that.”

My fingers curled, my left hand over his, afraid to let go. “He's not dead, is he?”

Liam knew who I meant. “Maybe. I hope so. But I didn't see him.”

No. I hadn't felt him either. If he was still alive, he wouldn't let this go. “IDs? You think that will do it?” It was easier to think of more mundane things.

“It'll have to. Besides, Brett, he'd do anything for me, legal or otherwise. He used to work in the Marshals Service. He can help us disappear.”

I searched his face, but couldn't see anything but his profile; a dark outline against the sky through the window of the car. “Couldn't you—couldn't you go back? He may not know about you.”

Liam shook his head. “He had cameras. If he's alive, he knows. If not, well, cops in prison don't do too well.”

“I’d like...” I could hear him swallow, but he didn’t continue. I turned back to the scenery outside my window. It didn’t matter anymore.

“When I saw... Every time you turned to another of them, they just... Fell. One choked. One’s skin just ruptured. And when you—your face. Then the walls, they just. The whole place just started... breaking,” said Liam.

I counted the bushes as they flew past, dark blobs in the night.

“But I couldn’t... What they did—I heard you screaming. Before. I think.” He shook his head. “I don’t know, I was out of it for a while.”

I hadn’t known I’d been screaming.

He pulled his hand from my thigh, the withdrawal a physical pain in my chest. “You killed them.” Liam’s voice was flat. “Like high school?”

“I didn’t—nobody died in high school. Not directly, at least. I didn’t know, then. Not really. That the *imprints* were real; that messing with them changed things. I even think that what I did helped one of ’em. He just lost all his mean. He’d been a right bastard before. No one ever proved nothin’, but pets didn’t last long on his block, if you know what I mean. Ended up in juvie for somethin’ or other.” I swallowed, my throat scratchy. “After I tried to... I don’t know, fix them; things was different. He ended up going to University, and no one thought he’d do that. Won some award or something. But the others?” I trailed off, unable to breathe for a moment, blinking a few times before continuing. “One killed himself a few weeks after I—” I paused, swallowing, unable to continue for a moment. “He hung himself with piano strings. It wasn’t pretty, I hear. That was their imprint, did I tell you that? A jumble of piano strings, mangled and frayed. Why would straightening them do that? Did he see it? Did he know?” I was silent a few minutes, eyes closed, as I played back the last few weeks of high school; a movie reel behind my eyes. “Another, well, I tol’ you what happened to him. I didn’t know what I could do then. I didn’t know what I *had* done.”

His voice was toneless when he spoke again. “But you knew last night. You had figured it out by then.”

I didn’t respond.

“Why didn’t you leave me?” I could barely make my mouth form the words.

“I almost did.”

Not what I expected to hear, but then... that was wrong too. I just hadn't expected him to admit it. The silence fell between us, a heavy blanket, only the low hum of the road echoing in the quiet.

My hands fluttered, unsure, before one settled on the seat between us, next to his. Liam took a deep breath, glancing at Andy in the rearview mirror before he released it. He kept his eyes trained ahead, and I stared out the side window, all my energy focused on the space between us. I sighed as I felt the soft touch of skin on skin as Liam curled his pinky around mine. My head fell back against the headrest as I my muscles loosened, no longer able to support the weight of it.

The headlights illuminated a short swath of road, intermittent streaks of paint guiding the way before disappearing behind us. It would have to do.

The End

Author Bio

Devon Grey is a part-time author with a passion for discovering new worlds, characters, and situations, when found between the pages of a book as well as between state or country borders. Devon loves stories that explore the complexities of the human spirit, whether they expose fantastic, underlying strength or reprehensible weaknesses. It's best when it's a bit of both.

Outside of reading and writing, Devon adores painting, people-watching, and playing with her dog. Devon is one-third of the team that comprises Tripoli, and is always happy to chat with readers regarding thoughts and/or criticisms.

Happy reading!

Contact & Media Info

[Website](#) | [Goodreads](#)