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OBLIVION SOCIETY

By

Marcus Alexander Hart

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The Oblivion Society

Marcus Alexander Hart

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- Marcus Alexander Hart

February 3, 2006

DEDICATION

For Amanda,
without whom I could not survive.

PROLOGUE

The summer sun rolled around the North Pole in a lazy circle, just as it had done through the countless summers of countless past millennia. There was no reason to expect this, at least, to change at the end of this particular millennium. After all, Earth's axial tilt would not be affected by the impending Y2K bug.

On the northern tip of Norway, just inside the Arctic Circle, a single rocket stood amid the bustle of a busy launch pad. Through an agreement with NATO, the

Fimbulvetr Astronomical Institute had obtained this obsolete *Wormwood-132* long-range missile from the U.S. military. Although it was originally designed to carry an atomic warhead, in the hands of researchers it had been retrofitted with a sophisticated array of daytime auroral imaging instruments to be launched deep into the heart of the northern lights.

This mission was an admirable use of wartime technology repurposed to deepen Man's understanding of his universe, and the nations of the world universally commended the institute on its noble endeavor.

Or rather, they would have commended the institute, had they bothered to read its launch announcement. But the world's leaders had much more important business to attend to than some insignificant Norwegian science experiment.

The president of the United States stuck his nose into his armpit and took an investigatory sniff. He recoiled with a pained wince and quickly re-buttoned his navy-blue suit jacket.

"Hoo-boy, Bubba," he thought, *"you smell like the McDonald's fryer at the end of a long day."*

He shrugged. "Well, the coat's not coming off tonight anyway."

He leaned against an ancient white oak and let his gaze drift through the heavy tree cover and into the hazy yellow glow of a Maryland sunset. For a so-called "presidential retreat," Camp Bravo afforded him precious little privacy. It had taken him an hour to lose his Secret Service escort, but now he was finally alone.

As he had promised the American people, the president had spent the afternoon trying to reconcile with his wife and daughter, but that wasn't really why he had come to Camp Bravo. The real reasons were these dense woods, this forgotten corner, and that collapsing perimeter fence.

The president smiled as his eyes scaled the twelve-foot fence that guarded the interior of the presidential retreat from the heathens of the outside world. This ever-vigilant sentry encircled the entire compound in an unbroken barrier of heavy-gauge chain link and razor wire. Unbroken, that is, except for one lapse of weathered steel that some force of nature or decay had broken through, slashing its mesh into a pair of rusty curtains.

The Secret Service didn't know about this place.

The first lady didn't know.

The Camp Bravo groundskeepers didn't even know.

Only one other person did.

The president pulled a cigar from his breast pocket. He put it in his mouth but didn't light it. He almost never smoked cigars, and when he did, he didn't inhale. The sun had now completely slipped below the horizon, and the president looked at his watch eagerly. He worried that perhaps his signal had been too subtle. No, it was fine. Unmistakable. He twirled the cigar in his fingers and daydreamed about what he

could do with it if he wasn't going to smoke it.

Just then he heard a rustling, snapping advance through the bushes on the other side of the fence. The president flicked his tongue over his dry lips and waited a long, tense moment. He could hear hard-soled shoes pounding through the loose brush, step by weighty step. Finally, when his sense of anticipation had fully filled out his trousers, he saw a jet-black mound of hair emerge from the foliage, followed by a round, female face.

The president's relationship with this particular White House intern had become somewhat sticky in recent days, literally before figuratively.

The intern walked up to the fence and peered through its corroded mesh coquettishly.

"Good evening, Mr. President," she purred. "Are you alone?"

The president grinned back at her from his side of the fence.

"It depends on how you define 'alone,'" he said flirtatiously. "I see you caught my speech this afternoon."

The intern blushed.

"I know you were addressing the entire nation, but I felt like you were speaking only to me," she cooed. "I especially liked the part about *breaching the walls* at the *darkest twilight* to meet between the *tall trees*."

The president's impossibly wide grin grew wider.

"Well, if you like trees, come on in and I'll show you the *executive branch*."

With an excited squeal the intern put her palms against the rusted scar in the fence and shoved her way through its ineffectual barrier. But while the ancient chain link of the perimeter fence slept on the job, its sharp young apprentice opened up one eager eye. Just as the intern's heaving bosom pushed through the fence, it also pushed through the beam of an invisible laser grid, shattering the air of Camp Bravo with an earsplitting security klaxon!

The air was calm in the People's National Strategic Control Centre just outside of Beijing, China. Chairman Qian leafed listlessly through the evening's state-sponsored newspaper. It was full of the same old propaganda touting China as the most powerful nation on Earth. He sighed and took a sip of his oolong tea.

If only it were true.

He looked around the room at the thirty sharply uniformed young men and women sitting at their computer terminals and tapping quietly at their keyboards. Actually, just young men. The chairman couldn't remember the last time he had actually seen a young woman. He sighed again.

One of the officers turned to him with an expression that completely failed to be surprise.

"Mr. Chairman," he said, "we've just received an urgent military communiqué

from one of our operatives in the field. There's been an international incident, sir."

The chairman stood up and smiled hungrily. It was about time. What good was being the leader of the largest standing army in the world if you never got to do anything with it? Finally, this old dragon was going to get a chance to roar! He put down his paper and teacup and issued a giddy order in his most restrained voice.

"Identify."

The young officer's short fingers clattered efficiently over his keyboard.

"It's from one of our agents in the United States, sir."

The smile dropped from the chairman's face, and he threw himself into his chair petulantly. Of *course* it was the Americans. It was *always* the Americans. He sulked. What good was being the leader of the largest standing army in the world if it was only the *second* most powerful? Contempt dripped from his voice as he issued a second terse command.

"Clarify."

"The personal fortress of their president has gone to a state of heightened alert, followed by several other military installations in the area. We do not know the reason."

"Classify," the chairman grumbled.

"There seems to be no specific threat, sir, but it would be prudent to raise our own alert level accordingly."

The chairman nodded his head. Sure. Raise the alert level. Just like always. He sighed heavily. He could already see that he was in for another long, dull night of playing follow the leader.

Two technicians waited out another long, dull shift in the dreary control room of a radar tracking station somewhere in northern Russia. A smattering of faded maps clung to the desolate walls, each depicting the former Soviet Union pierced with dozens of red pushpins that no longer signified anything at all. The station's gigantic radar dish still scanned the skies twenty-four hours a day, although exactly what it was looking for these days was something of a mystery.

Kurchatov leaned back in his chair and took a swig from a half-empty bottle of vodka. He was bored. Bored bored bored. He took another drink and glanced dully at his co-worker, Sakharov. In contrast to Kurchatov's own drooping countenance, Sakharov's face was tensed in concentration as he pounded the keyboard of the station's main computer bank. A bead of sweat welled on his forehead as he chattered to himself anxiously.

"No more of the stupid Zs!" he snarled. "Come on, you piece of junk! Give me the long one! The long one!"

Kurchatov stood and glanced over his comrade's shoulder just in time to see him lose his ten-thousandth game of *Tetris*. Sakharov smashed his fists into the splintering desk in frustration.

"*Govno na palochkee!*" he cried. "I hate this stupid game!"

He rammed two fingers into the keyboard, closing the game window and revealing a monochrome screen of green text. In all the years that the station had been in operation, the dish's readout had never changed:

Radar Tracking Station 99

0000 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles detected.

0000 Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles detected.

Kurchatov slouched back into his chair and scowled.

"If you hate that stupid game so much, why do you sit there and play it all day?"

Sakharov tapped his finger on the desk in an impatient fury for ten full seconds before reopening the *Tetris* window and starting another game.

"The high score is 200,000 points," he snarled. "I'm not quitting until I beat it!"

"Well, how close have you come?" Kurchatov asked.

"199,999.9999899."

"Well, why don't you just round off, you *dolboëb*?" Kurchatov snapped. "That's not even a real score! It's just a computer error!"

"*Nyet!* There's nothing wrong with the computer!" Sakharov said bitterly, tapping the sticker on the front of the computer's case. "Intel inside. American technology. No mistakes."

The deafening wail of Camp Bravo's mistaken sirens smashed against the American president's skull like a sledgehammer. Between the trees he could see a distant commotion of confused soldiers rushing between the buildings, trying to identify and neutralize a threat that did not exist.

He pulled his cellular phone from his pocket, punched a speed dial button, and clasped it to his head. Even with his palms crushing down on his ears, he could barely hear the voice on the other end of the line.

"Camp Bravo Command Center."

"Listen, kid! This is the president!"

"Mr. President?" the officer gasped. *"There's been a breach of the outer wall, sir! You may be in danger. What is your location?"*

"It's a false alarm!" the president screamed. "Turn off the klaxons!"

"Yes, sir! Er ... no, sir!" the officer stammered. *"I'm sorry, sir, but a trigger of the perimeter alarm automatically puts every base on the East Coast on precautionary alert. I can't just turn-*"

"What do you mean you *can't*? This is the president of the United States giving you a direct order, soldier! Pull whatever plug you have to pull to cut off these damn alarms!"

"B-but, there are procedures, sir," the officer stammered. "There's no way to just cut them off without completely resetting the emergency CommNet! It would be a huge breach of security, sir!"

"Lieutenant, I don't care if you have to shut down the whole North American power grid!" the president screamed. "I want those alarms off *now!* Understood?"

"Y-yes, sir!" the officer stuttered.

Against his better judgment, but on the direct orders of the commander in chief, the young officer hammered the appropriate security codes into his computer, gaining access to the nation's emergency communications systems. Within a few minutes, he had manually reset every circuit that carried some small part of the security network's data with a blatant and mandated disregard for any other traffic those nodes might have been carrying.

Somewhere deep beneath Cheyenne Mountain, every computer screen at NORAD went blank. The surprised officers tapped on their terminals with curiosity and, ultimately, confusion.

Admiral Jack Teller dropped his Big Mac and leapt to his feet.

"What in the corn hell just happened, boys?"

A husky slab of officer poked at his keyboard nervously.

"I don't know, sir. Every base on the East Coast went on alert, and before I could make an inquiry all communications were completely cut off."

"What do you mean 'cut off'?" the admiral yelled. "What in the name of Sam Hill is going on out there?"

The top-heavy switchboard operator tapped on her headset and looked at a panel of dark bulbs. She snapped her gum and twisted a bronze finger through her platinum hair.

"We've got like, nothing here, sir. No lines in or out," she reported. "Computers, phones, even the satellite links are all totally out."

"Impossible!" the admiral roared. "That's impossible! All this Captain Kirk crap down here is connected to the outside with redundancy out the ying-yang! The only way we've got nothing is if the whole damn comm network is down, and the only thing that could take down that network is a full-scale ..."

A troubled look rushed over the admiral's features.

"What was the last thing we got before we lost the world, boys?"

The husky officer reviewed his logs and answered numbly.

"Satellite intelligence shows that the Chinese military just went on heightened alert, sir."

The admiral glared into the screen for a long moment, angrily cracking his knuckles.

"Scramble my knights of the air," he said dramatically. "I want nukes in the bellies

of all my bombers, and I want those beautiful bastards ready to fly on my order. You got that?"

"Um, yes sir," the officer coughed, "but if you'll recall what Private Babs just said, we don't have any outgoing communications."

The admiral wrung his massive hands into fists.

"Why, those filthy yellow bastards ..."

Kurchatov picked irritably at the filthy yellow upholstery foam crumbling from the worn arm of his desk chair. The clucking digital melody from Sakharov's never-ending game of *Tetris* cut through his sanity like a bandsaw. He wrapped his fingers around the neck of his vodka bottle and, just for a second, imagined smashing it over the edge of the desk and letting fate take its course.

His homicidal fantasy was interrupted by a crackling voice.

"Radar Tracking Station 99, come in! Come in, Station 99! This is Moscow!"

Kurchatov's heart thumped against his ribcage as he leapt to his feet.

"What the hell was that?!"

Sakharov didn't look up from his frenzied game. "The radio. Pick it up."

Kurchatov looked at the buzzing two-way radio set and felt very stupid. Right. The radio. It had been a while. He picked up the dusty microphone and wiped it on his shirt.

"This is Station 99," he said. "Go ahead, Moscow."

"We're receiving reports that the Americans and Chinese are rattling their sabers. Are you picking up anything unusual up there?"

Kurchatov glanced at his comrade, and Sakharov reluctantly minimized his game window to take a glance at the dish output. The screen flickered its usual, burned-in announcement.

Radar Tracking Station 99

0000 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles detected.

0000.899 Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles detected.

Sakharov drew a sharp breath.

"What is it, Station 99? What are you reading?"

Kurchatov shook his head dismissively.

"Nothing," he said. "It's just another computer error."

"It's not a computer error!" Sakharov gasped, grabbing the microphone. "It's a nuclear attack!"

The radio crackled tensely.

"An attack?! Are you sure?! How many missiles?!"

"Almost one!" Sakharov yelled.

Kurchatov snatched the microphone from his panicked associate.

"Disregard that, Moscow. It's just an error with the-

"Thank you, Station 99. We'll take it from here."

With that, the radio went dead.

"But it's a false alarm!" Kurchatov repeated. "Moscow? Do you read me? Hello?"

He pounded the heavy microphone on the top of the computer bank in frustration. The threatening digits on the screen flickered and blinked before finally resolving themselves back into four harmless zeros. He crossed his arms and looked at Sakharov as his face burned red with unabashed contempt.

Chairman Qian lowered his teacup as the standing yellow alert level suddenly raised itself to red. His gaze snapped to his second-in-command as if to ask the question his mouth couldn't be bothered to form.

"Russian high command has just armed their nuclear missiles, sir. There have been no launches, and no warplanes have taken flight."

The chairman rubbed his hands together hungrily. Russia. Now that was more like it! These days China could occupy Russia without even waking up the reserves. The junior officer continued.

"Sir, all available intelligence suggests a unified Russo-American attack."

The chairman cringed. The Americans. It was *always* the Americans.

"Put the nuclear deterrence on standby alert," he grumbled. "Remind them both that they're not dealing with terra cotta warriors over here."

As the circuits of the American armed forces' communications network cleared their alerts and completed their reset sequences, computer screens and telephone consoles rapidly blinked back to life under Cheyenne Mountain. Admiral Teller broke from his frantic pacing and mental wargaming and rushed to a bank of reawakened monitors.

"What's happening?" he barked.

"Everything just came back up, sir," the husky officer said. "We've got phones, radar, satellite, everything! It must have been some kind of network glitch."

The admiral breathed a sigh of relief and gave the officer a hearty clap on the back.

"Whew!" he laughed. "That was brown-trouser time for a second there, huh boys? Ha ha ha! Somebody get my wife on the phone-tell her it's a real slow day at the office and I'm coming home early!"

The younger officer didn't return his superior's joviality.

"Um, sir. I think you should see this."

"What's that, Junior?" the admiral chuckled.

"While we were offline the Soviets and the Chinese both armed their warheads, sir."

The smile whipped from the admiral's face like a window shade, revealing a countenance of betrayed rage.

"Those Sun-Tzu-reading savages," he seethed. "They knocked out our communications long enough to catch us with our pants down, and now those commie bastards are double-teaming us!"

"Actually, sir," the officer noted, "the Russians aren't commies anymore."

The admiral scowled.

"Dust off the missiles. Go to DEFCON 1," he growled. "Oh, and somebody get the president on the line."

The wailing alarms fell silent over Camp Bravo, and the president and the intern slowly peeled their sweaty palms from their ears. The only sound that still hung in the air was the quiet, tinny chirp of a patriotic ringtone coming from the president's pants. The intern clapped her hands to her face and started to cry.

"I'm sorry, Mr. President, I'm sorry!" she squealed. "I never should have come! You shouldn't have either!"

She turned to dart for the fence, but the president grabbed the back of her blue dress.

"Wait! Don't leave!" he shouted.

His cell phone screeched for attention from his front pocket, vibrating provocatively against his already agitated manhood. He yanked the device from his pants and pitched it into the woods before turning back to the intern.

"It's alright, it's okay, hon," he continued. "Don't you worry about anything. It was just a little alarm. Absolutely no harm done. You didn't even blow our cover."

This reassurance downgraded the intern's crying situation to a snuffle.

"Well, sir, to be honest," she said impishly, " *our cover* is not what I came here to blow."

The president closed his eyes and grinned smugly as the intern lowered herself to her carpet-burned knees in the wet grass.

"Hail to the chief, baby."

With a great, heaving surge of hot, explosive force, the long, white shaft of a single science rocket slipped from its pad at the Fimbulvetr Astronomical Institute and sailed harmlessly into the stratosphere.

"Radar Station 99! Confirm your report! Are we under attack or not?"

Kurchatov stared at the computer screen in a wide-eyed panic, his skepticism replaced with outright terror. The number of missiles detected was suddenly a solid *0001*, and no amount of pounding on the computer would make it change its mind.

"Station 99! Come in! What do you read?"

"I ... I think it's a Chinese missile, sir! It's headed straight for Moscow!"

"It appears to be an American missile, sir. It's headed straight for Beijing."

"It's definitely a Russian missile, sir. It's headed straight for Walt Disney World."

"Dear, sweet *Jesus*. "

Admiral Teller marched up to the command center's enormous digital world map and watched the smooth arc of a missile slowly advancing into the sky. As the harsh light of the red alert sirens flashed across his stony features, he took off his hat and saluted the American flag with a broad grin.

"This is what we've waited for. This is it, boys. This is *war!* "

Shortly thereafter, the world came to an abrupt end.

CHAPTER ONE

EARLIER THAT DAY...

The morning was hot, and moist, and thick, and it smelled like a foot. The sun's brutal rays scorched through the hazy atmosphere like a blowtorch, scalding the earth and boiling translucent ripples into the heavy air. This weather was beyond oppressive. It was outright *combative*.

In short, it was a typical summer day in Stillwater, Florida.

Somewhere on Bayshore Boulevard, lost within a creeping armada of tourists' rental cars and retirees' French-vanilla land yachts, was a rattling '83 Volkswagen Rabbit convertible. Years of exposure to the salty seaside air had turned its formerly gray paint job into a Jackson Pollock of flaking orange rust. Age and ultraviolet radiation had reduced the vehicle's convertible top to a useless, tattered mass of sun-bleached canvas and crumbling duct tape hanging mournfully over its trunk. The Rabbit's radio droned cheerily through tinny speakers as its sombrero-clad driver melted into the upholstery.

We've got two thousand films in each store, guaranteed in stock, all the time!

So Blockbuster's gonna party like it's nineteen ninety-nine!

The driver pulled off her thick, Buddy-Holly-style eyeglasses and ineffectually mopped her perspiring face with her perspiring palms. This girl was not unattractive, but at the same time she was not remarkable for her looks. Her face still retained the aura of youth, yet cosmetics companies had recently begun targeting her with

"rejuvenating" formulas. If she had been a Hollywood actress, Vivian Gray would have been crossing the threshold between being typecast as "the nerdy eighteen-year-old high school student" and "the bitter thirty-two-year-old high-school teacher."

She shook her head and punched one of the factory radio's dated push-buttons, yanking its tuning needle to the next station with an analog squeal.

Hey, lose ten pounds in zero-zero-learn to help control when you dine!

With Dexatrim you're gonna party like it's nineteen ninety-nine!

Vivian scowled irritably. Enough already. This deluge of commercial parodies of The Artist Formerly Known as Prince's "1999" had begun the moment Dick Clark dropped the ball in Times Square, and it hadn't let up in the seven and a half months since. The ad executives of America had no doubt been salivating over this year's arrival for their entire careers, and now they were joyfully blowing their collective, uninspired marketing wad.

She punched the next preset button.

So Kotex goes in your panties like it's nineteen ninety-nine!

Vivian winced, but before she could change the channel the offending commercial was stomped out of existence by a cacophony of brass and slide-whistles.

"We're back and you're in the middle of another Wacky Wednesday with the Mooker and the Foz Morning Zoo!"

A doorbell rang, followed by the sound of a bugle, two gunshots, and a mewling cat.

"Whoops! Bad news for Fluffy, but good news for you! That sound means we're going to be kicking off another twelve-in-a-row megamix ..."

(The word "megamix" echoed a dozen times, each iteration deeper and slower than the last.)

"... of good-time oldies for the Gulf Coast! But first let's check in with Art Anderson over in the WOSU News Center. Hey Artie boy, what's big news in Stillwater?"

"An oxymoron," Vivian muttered.

She scratched at the prickly contact rash that had developed across the center of her forehead. Her fair skin was no match for the coarse straw of the chain-restaurant novelty sombrero that was perched upon her head. But given the choice of spending her morning commute in a state of minor irritation or fatal sunstroke, Vivian reluctantly chose the lesser of two evils.

A different voice chirped from the radio, speaking in a calm, rehearsed monotone that sounded uneasily out of place among its jabbering companions.

"State health officials continue to urge those suffering from respiratory illness to avoid the beaches due to an unusually strong bloom of red tide. Researchers

warn that this unknown algae produces a strain of potentially toxic bacteria. A temporary fishing ban has been instated in all Stillwater coastal areas until authorities can determine whether or not this bacteria poses a health threat."

With a struggle against the steering wheel that seemed more psychological than physical, Vivian eased her vehicle out of the creeping traffic and slowly crunched her way into a smoldering parking lot. As usual, the lot was populated with an assortment of barge-like seniormobiles, but today there was something different. A collection of tall, impossibly orange bottles lay scattered between the white and chrome street mausoleums like colored eggs on Easter Sunday. Some of them stood upright, and others rolled in slow, meandering arcs toward the storm drains. A few less-fortunate specimens had been reduced to nothing more than shards of glinting glass lying in pools of sticky orange nectar.

Vivian rattled her car into the first available space, ground the shifter into first gear, and turned off the ignition. She didn't bother to set the parking brake. Much like its roof, the Rabbit's brake had long since rotted into uselessness. As soon as the roar of the motor fell away, Vivian's ears were pummeled with an all-too-familiar melody. She instinctively punched at the radio, but it had silenced itself along with the engine.

*I keep dreamin' of a beverage, forgive me if I go astray,
but your body needs a boost, and your cells are all in disarray ...*

Vivian cracked open the rusted door and stepped out of her car. As her sneakers touched the scorching pavement, she could almost feel their rubber soles liquefying like sticks of butter being shoved into a hot skillet. In the lapping flow of heat pouring off the blacktop, the rippling silhouette of her body looked elongated and distorted.

In reality, the heat waves had nothing to do with it.

Although Vivian was decently proportioned, she somehow appeared just slightly taller than she should have reasonably been. Her slender build could accurately be described as "reedy," but it edged as close to "gangly" as it could possibly get without actually getting there.

*Your body needs a tune-up, vitamins are runnin' everywhere.
Time to maximize absorption, and make your food do its share ...*

The blacktop seemed to throb beneath Vivian's narrow feet, sending bass waves of vibration up her legs and into her chest cavity. She slammed the car door and turned to face her destination with a sense of stomach-knotting dread. She knew there was no turning back now. She had arrived.

And she had a job to do.

With a slouch of defeat, Vivian pulled on a powder-blue uniform vest and adjusted her nametag.

My name is VIVIAN - How may I serve you?

At the end of the parking lot sat a long, dreary fortress of weathered blue cement blocks that looked like a defunct prison, but without the charm. Across the front of the building, a series of pigeon-infested block letters spelled out the words "Boltzmann's Market."

They say two thousand calories a day is plenty for a slammin' time!

So Fusion Fuel will load and lock you like it's nineteen ninety-nine!

Vivian covered her ears as the booming jingle continued to thunder remorselessly through her skull. It was "1999" again, but this time rendered in a palette of rough guitar and angsty vocals. The music was almost grunge, but grunge reduced to a sterile, soulless formula.

This was marketing grunge.

"Oh no," Vivian groaned. "Not another one of these."

She peered through the lapping heat of the parking lot toward the store's front entrance. Flanking the doors were two huge stacks of speakers, and between them sat a highly detailed AM General Hummer. The glossy military vehicle had an aggressively promotional orange-and-black custom paint job, making it look like a jack-o'-lantern designed for a combat air drop. Vivian hadn't seen this particular setup before, but she knew exactly why it was there. If she was lucky, maybe she could make it to the front door before ...

" *Hola, pretty señorita!* Is it Cinco de Mayo already?!"

The voice was deep and booming, and the force of it hitting her square in the back almost knocked the sombrero clean off of Vivian's head. Her suddenly tensed shoulders drooped back to her sides as she turned and faced the orange-and-black-clad source of the thunderous voice.

"It's *August eighteenth*, " she muttered indignantly.

"So it *is* Cinco de Mayo!" the stranger grinned, breaking into song. "So we're gonna have a *fiesta* like it's nineteen ninety-nine!"

Vivian groaned. This happened every time the soft-drink companies introduced some all-new variety of liquid sugar to push down the nation's insatiable gullet. The beverage industry's marketing departments assumed that Americans would unquestioningly drink whatever a pair of pretty faces standing next to an expensive car and an overblown sound system told them to.

Unfortunately, they were absolutely right.

Today's mouthpiece for Big Beverage was fairly typical of the genre. He was a glimmering Adonis of a man, standing about six feet tall, with a leanly masculine, muscular build and unnaturally pure, spiky blond hair. He wore a complete "extreme sports" ensemble that was to extreme sports what his theme music was to grunge. All of the elements of his outfit were empirically "extreme," but with a thick coating of corporate polish that negated the impact of the whole. Although he talked the talk of extreme sports, the salesmodel looked about as hardcore as a spa treatment.

"So where's the other one?" Vivian asked him.

"The other what?"

Vivian glanced around the empty parking lot.

"Usually your kind comes in two-packs," she shrugged. "You know, Ken *and* Barbie."

She tossed her sweaty sombrero into the back seat of her car, revealing a shock of fiercely red hair. Two ponytails the shape of cooking whisks dropped limply to the nape of her neck, and a curtain of long, uneven bangs cascaded over her glasses as if to say, "Closed. Please use next window."

"Whoa! Nice mane, Red!" the salesmodel beamed. "I think you're just the kind of grrrrl I've been looking for!"

Vivian looked into the model's flawless, powdery complexion as a drop of sweat fell from the tip of her freckled nose.

" *I'm* the kind of girl *you're* looking for?"

"You know it!" the salesmodel boomed. "Look at you-you're dead on your feet! Luckily for you, I'm here to kick a full-throttle recharge into your tired body battery with a hardcore blast of Fusion Fuel!"

Vivian pushed her glasses up her nose and frowned.

"Ah. I see. Well, I'm here to work a meaningless minimum-wage job in order to feed the hungry little mouth back home."

The model blinked in surprise.

"Whoa! You have a *kid*? "

"I don't," Vivian sighed, "and that just makes the situation all the more pathetic, doesn't it?"

Without further explanation, she stepped around the salesmodel and made her way across the steaming parking lot toward the front entrance of the store. A quick series of gazelle-like leaps landed the model in front of his Hummer five steps ahead of Vivian. She tried to keep her head down and steamroll past him, but he was too quick for that. This was, after all, his job.

Vivian dodged right, then left, but the salesmodel had become an unyielding orange-and-black barrier.

"Look, Heathcliff, I'm late for work," she said.

"That's cool; that's cool," he smiled, raising his hands in a show of innocence. "But I wouldn't be doing my job if I let a superheated little fox like you into my store without passing off an ice-cold free sample of Fusion Fuel! Load and lock, baby!"

He pulled a bottle out of a cooler next to the Hummer and tossed it straight up into the air like a spinning juggling pin. With a well-rehearsed swing of his arm, he caught the bottle by the neck and pitched it under his knee, tossing it in a slow, easy arc at Vivian's chest. She instinctively caught it. It was a tall and slender club of

orange glass with a graphic of a spongy sort of molecule branded in bas relief on its face, identical to the dozens that littered the parking lot. She took the bottle by its neck and held it out toward the model.

"I don't drink energy drinks."

"*Energy drink?*" the salesmodel said with disgust. "It's not an *energy drink!* It's so much *more* than that!"

He put his large, square hand on the butt of the bottle and gently pushed it back toward Vivian before continuing.

"Fusion Fuel is a diet enhancer that makes your food work harder for *you!* It uses the hidden power of lignite and sulfated castor oil to increase absorption of nutrients by up to 110% for maximum power and stamina on and off the field!"

Vivian smirked.

"I don't drink snake oil either."

An overheated and red-faced old woman shuffled past the Hummer. The salesmodel rushed to her side, multitasking marks without missing a beat.

"Stop staring-they're free! Haha! Just kidding with ya! Fusion Fuel piledrives vitamins into your hard-working muscles with an intense super-reactive catalyst-altered power punch!"

The way he said "catalyst-altered power punch" seemed to hang a tiny superscripted "TM" in the air.

He shoved a bottle of the citrus beverage in the woman's direction. She took a quick, panicked step backward and bumped against the Hummer's gleaming chrome grille. His prey cornered, the salesmodel shoved the bottle into her trembling hands, then reached into the cooler for a six-pack.

"Take a sixer to pound down with your whole team! It's an energy absorption explosion!"

Vivian took advantage of the model's temporary distraction to attempt escape into the store, but before she had taken two steps he was done with the flustered oldster and back on her again.

"Seriously though, Red," he said with a rich, velvety smoothness, "why don't you take this bottle of Fusion Fuel now, and I'll take you out for proper drinks when you get off work. I really think we ought to get to know each other better. Whaddya say?"

Vivian's cheeks flushed as red as her hair.

"If I say I'll think about it, will you get out of my way?"

"Now that wasn't so hard, was it, Red?" the salesmodel grinned, stepping aside with an overblown sense of chivalry. "The name's Nick, and I'll be out here all day. Promise you'll come back out and see me later, okay?"

Vivian opened her mouth to make an excuse, but before any words came out,

another customer caught the attention of the ever-vigilant Nick. He pounced on the wrinkled old man like a cheetah taking down a Shih-Tzu.

"Fusion Fuel loads up on nutrients and locks them into your hard-working body cells! Load and lock, baby!"

Vivian was a quick study, and this time she didn't waste a second leaping over the red-faced woman's already discarded six-pack and bolting to the entrance. Her feet squeaked onto the worn rubber pad that opened the automatic doors, blasting her with a gale of industrial-grade air conditioning. No matter how fetid the hot, humid sponge of the outside air became, the interior of Boltzmann's Market remained cool, dry, and filled with the sweet scent of dead fish.

Vivian sniffed curiously. *"Dead fish?"*

Adjacent to the front entrance was a display that had not been there the day before, composed of a pile of soggy wooden crates filled with ice. She stepped up to the crate and looked inside, and a foul smell seared through her sinuses. The beds of ice were populated with the corpses of the most pathetic selection of fish that she had ever seen. There was not a matching set of species-mates to be found among the ranks of intact bodies, and the remainder of the lot was little more than hastily butchered chunks of pale, sickly meat oozing a pink, briny gravy that reeked of rotting cabbage. Vivian covered her nose and looked at the chalkboard sign that hung over the massacre.

Today's fresh catch - Any 2 for \$5!

"Fresh catch, my foot," she muttered. "There are parts of the fossil record that are fresher than this."

She closed the first crate's waterlogged lid, sealing off the heap of marine compost with a wet *slap*. She then closed the second. Before she could close the third, a squeal of audio feedback preceded a growling voice from the store's public address system.

"Vivian, please come to the office. Vivian, to the office immediately."

Vivian grimaced as she cast her eyes skyward. From the ceiling, a pair of motorized security cameras shook their heads at her disapprovingly. She looked past them and into the dark windows of the enclosed loft that loomed over the store like an Alcatraz watchtower. The management office of Boltzmann's Market didn't seem designed for clerical work as much as total, unblinking surveillance.

She dragged herself up the narrow stairway to the office and pushed open its heavy steel door, which in turn banged into a large wooden desk, settling into the gouge that it had formed from years of inadequate opening space. The boxcar-sized piece of furniture was covered in a thick, tattered layer of multicolored carbon copy forms and free promotional mugs, full of free promotional pens and tchotchkes. To its side sat a bank of mismatched black and white security monitors, each snitching on some tiny corner of the store below. The air of the claustrophobic office hung heavy with the stench of body odor and failure.

Behind the desk sat the store's owner and general manager, Verman Boltzmann. Boltzmann was grotesquely, morbidly obese, and to see his enormous girth packed behind his desk was like looking at a water balloon pinched under a brick.

"God damn it, Vivian! What the hell are you doing to my seafood display?! You come waltzing in here *four minutes late*, and the first thing you do is start vandalizing the place!"

"More like *sterilizing* the place," Vivian said. "I think you're going to have to send that shipment of fish back to the supplier. It spoiled in transit."

"Ha!" Boltzmann barked dismissively. "Spoiled in transit my ass! Those fish came straight off the beach this morning!"

Vivian raised an eyebrow.

"Off the beach, sir?"

"*From* the beach! Off the *docks!*" Boltzmann blustered guiltily. "For Christ's sakes, it's not like I hired some goddamn wetbacks to pick the carcasses out of the sand! Those fish are fresh out of the bay!"

Vivian shook her head knowingly.

"Of course I wouldn't *think* to doubt you, Mr. Boltzmann," she said condescendingly, "but you *do* know that there's a fishing ban in effect. Even if these fish came out of the bay, which they *certainly* did, you couldn't legally-"

"Who the hell do you think you are, coming in here and telling me what I can and can't do in my own goddamn store?!" Boltzmann wailed. "Don't forget, *you* work for *me*, missy!"

Vivian rolled her eyes. "Only until the county health inspector comes and locks you up."

Boltzmann waved his hand dismissively.

"Don't you worry your pretty little head about him. That guy'll approve a dogshit casserole for a hundred bucks and a bottle of gin."

Vivian slipped her fingers under her glasses and rubbed her eyes.

"You are a shining paradigm of business ethics, boss."

Boltzmann leaned forward in his chair with a movement like tectonic plates grinding together, shoving a yellow carbon-copy invoice across the desk at Vivian. She pulled her hands from her face, picked up the paper, and squinted at its blurry dot-matrix print.

"Listen up, smart-ass," Boltzmann growled. "We just got in another shipment of those bodybuilder vitamins. The Beta Burns. Tag 'em \$10.99 and get 'em stocked as fast as your dainty little hands can. For some reason that shit is selling like hotcakes. We can't keep it on the shelves!"

Vivian pointed to a row of smudged numerals on the invoice.

"Well, here's why," she explained. "That's a six, not a zero. Retail price is

supposed to be \$16.99. "

Boltzmann ripped the paper from Vivian's hands and slapped it face-down on the desk without a glance.

"Look missy, I've been running this store since before your mommy bought you your first bra," he snarled. "There's a pecking order to this business. I'm at the top because I know what the hell I'm doing. You're at the bottom because you don't know doodly *squat*. Somebody like you couldn't make a management decision to save her life."

Just hearing the words "your" and "bra" coming out of Boltzmann's mouth made Vivian feel somehow dirty, and she crossed her arms over her chest defensively.

"Well?" Boltzmann snapped.

Vivian blinked.

"Well, *what?* "

"Oh for Christ's sake, Vivian! Get your head out of your ass! I asked you a direct question! If you think it's so goddamn easy, then make a management decision!" Boltzmann barked. "This is just what I was saying! You're all talk and no walk!"

Vivian scowled.

"Okay, fine. How about this price-tag situation. The checkouts were updated to bar code scanners years ago, yet your store policy still requires that each individual item be marked with a price tag. It's a pointless relic of a bygone era. It would make more sense to post a single sign on the front of each shelf clearly displaying the price. That way your stock people could get a lot more work done in a day, plus the larger numbers would be easier for the retirees to read. Everybody wins."

Boltzmann's loose, jowly face quivered, turned red, and knitted itself into a laugh of the purest, unadulterated condescension.

"Har har har hardee har har!" he laughed. "Listen to cute little Vivian pretending she's a goddamn businessman! I bet you think if you had a dick you'd be running the place!"

Vivian's face blossomed a prickly red as she spoke through a clenched jaw.

"Sir, you just *asked me* to suggest-"

"Haaaaar har har har!" Boltzmann wheezed. "Just get out there and tag all those new pills \$10.99 before I shove a pink slip up your sweet little ass."

With an understated scowl, Vivian stepped out of the office and quietly closed the door. Years ago she probably would have slammed it in rage, but she had grown beyond such theatrics. An overextended stay in the realm of meaningless retail jobs had worn the sharp edges off of Vivian's spirit like a river smoothes a jagged rock. She was just happy to have been pardoned from Boltzmann's office, no matter how the pardon had been issued.

As Vivian quietly padded down the stairs she could hear an altercation brewing at

checkstand two.

"Back when I was your age," a dried-out old voice crackled, "potted meat used to cost ten cents a tin! And the tins were bigger back then!"

"Gee, history is really swell," a sardonic voice answered. "Today it costs \$2.99. Same as your suit."

"That's too much," the first voice replied shrilly. "I'll give you a dollar for it."

"Look, this is not Mexico. We do not haggle prices here."

The cynical voice belonged to Sherri Becquerel, the queen of friendly customer service. Slouched behind the register of checkstand two, Sherri looked about as out of place as a vampire at a beach party.

Although she couldn't have been long out of high school, Sherri's pale, translucent white skin was pulled tightly over her bony skull, making her look as if she had gone through one too many discount facelifts. She was short, flat-chested, and waiflike, and her gaunt figure made her average-sized head appear larger than it really was. Smudges of black eye shadow punched in her dramatically oversized eyes, and a smear of black lip gloss blotted out her small narrow mouth. Her appearance and demeanor had earned her the nickname "Scary Sherri" among her co-workers, though nobody dared say it to her face.

For that matter, her co-workers rarely dared to say *anything* to her face.

The enraged senior slowly counted change from his pocket onto the stained black rubber of the checkstand's conveyor belt.

"A dollar and fifty cents. A dollar and seventy-five cents. A dollar and seventy ... six cents."

Sherri idly brushed some lint from the front of her blood-red *Black Rain* concert tee. The under-laundered heavy-metal T-shirt was in blatant violation of the employee dress code, so she tried to emphasize its presence whenever possible. Where there should have been a powder-blue uniform vest, Sherri wore a black leather trench coat that was shaped more like a girl than she was.

"Two dollars and eighty-nine cents. Two dollars and ninety-nine cents. There."

The old man grasped the plastic bag in his desiccated fingers and pulled it off the counter.

"Whoa there, Gramps," Sherri said. "Where's the rest?"

The old man's face twisted into the look of distrust that all Stillwater wage slaves knew all too well. It was the look that said, "I know about your scam, you whipper-snapper. I saw it on 20/20, and I'm not giving you my Social Security checks."

"You said two dollars and ninety-nine cents!" the old man snapped. "That's two dollars and ninety-nine cents right there. Do you want me to count it again? I can count it again for-"

"Jesus H. Chri ... Sales tax," Sherri interrupted, rotating the register's display toward the man's thick bifocals. "It's this new thing you might not have heard of. It was introduced somewhere around the *dawn of time*. I need another twenty-eight cents, Methuselah."

The old man looked at the display, as if trying to resolve the discrepancy with his eyes and then with his mind. He looked up into Sherri's eyes, and his confusion seemed to melt away into troubled indifference. He reached into his heavy, jingling pocket in surrender.

"Three dollars and nine cents. Three dollars and *ten* cents ..."

Sherri slouched behind the counter and dropped her head into her hands. The dense spangle of metal bracelets and leather cuffs on her arms clinked pitifully, punctuating her motion and ensuring that it was not overlooked by anyone nearby.

When he had finally piled enough warm, dull coins on the belt to complete his purchase, the old man snapped up his bag of potted meat and turned on Sherri.

"This store is too expensive. I'm never coming here again."

Sherri rolled her eyes.

"Yeah. See you tomorrow, you senile old fart. If you don't die first."

The man looked into Sherri's eyes again, blinked, then shambled away in creaky, awkward steps.

Vivian watched with a jealous smile. She had spent long hours wondering what gave Sherri this license to speak her mind to the customers without consequence, and she had only been able to come up with one theory. It was because of her eyes. Her vast, expressionless eyes.

Sherri's eyes were a whispered shade of blue so pale and empty that she looked as if she could be an alien, or a heroin addict, or both. Something about them masked any hint of a living soul beyond their glassy surface, and when she insulted you, it felt like the television had just called you a crazy bastard, and to argue would only prove it right.

Sherri leaned back on her register and took a long, hard swig from a half-empty bottle of Fusion Fuel. She noticed Vivian looking at her and gave her a nod.

"I heard the Verminator taking a big hunk out of your ass up there, Powderpuff."

Vivian frowned. She hated it when Sherri called her "Powderpuff," but she had long since given up on trying to get her to stop. Even so, she still found Sherri to be the most pleasant of her co-workers, a fact that didn't speak well of Verman Boltzmann's hiring practices.

"Working here makes me want to slit my wrists," she moaned. "Sherri, you've been in here day in and day out longer than I have, yet you never go homicidal. How do you do it?"

Sherri reached into her coat and pulled out a flat silver hip flask. She unscrewed the skull-shaped stopper, held it up in silent toast to Vivian, and dumped the

remainder of its intoxicating contents into her already polluted energy drink. Vivian just rolled her eyes and gestured irritably at the leaking fish crates.

"I mean, can you believe that?" she continued. "He's trying to sell the maritime equivalent of roadkill."

Sherri nodded.

"This country is seriously messed up. You can *sell* toxic meat and nobody gives two shits, but you let someone *go down* on your toxic meat and you're public enemy number one."

Vivian opened her mouth, but no words came out. She closed it again and squinted at Sherri. Sherri gestured with her eyebrows at the wire rack behind Vivian.

"It's all over the tabloids."

Vivian turned to look at the newspaper rack that ran along the side of the checkstand. It was stuffed with an assortment of wilting tabloids, and each one featured its own grainy, blown-up telephoto picture of the president of the United States embracing a full-figured intern in the White House rose garden. The headlines screamed such off-color remarks as "Oval Office Becomes *Oral* Office! Nation Outraged!"

"Apparently the president has been shoving the little commander in chief into one of his favorite interns' pie holes," Sherri said. "They've got a dress covered in his man gravy and everything."

Vivian winced. "Sherri, have you no filters at all?"

"I can't believe this bullshit is supposed to be *news*," Sherri continued. "It's not like somebody sucking off the president could possibly have any effect on the rest of the world. But the sensationalist press jumps all over this irrelevant shit instead of telling us what a good job he's doing."

Vivian raised an eyebrow.

"So you actually think our president is doing a good job?" she asked.

Sherri paused.

"How the hell should I know? The only news I've heard this whole year has been Nostradamus-Y2K-End-of-the-World bullshit. So what'd you think of the Hummer?"

"The way you keep talking about it, I'm beginning to feel like I was there."

Sherri blinked.

"No, I mean the one in the parking lot," she said, tapping her bottle. "Fascist Fuel, or whatever."

"Oh, that guy," Vivian groaned. "I wouldn't take his stupid energy drink, and for some reason he took that as an invitation to ask me out."

Sherri looked out the window at Nick harassing an elderly passerby. "So what did you say?"

"Well, what do you think I said?" Vivian smirked. "I said no!"

Sherri drained the last of her spiked bottle and wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

"Well, if I were you, I'd fuck him."

"Hey! What's *that* supposed to mean?" Vivian scowled.

"You know. You with your cute little red Airwalk sneakers, and your cute little Old Navy capri pants. You two are so *Dharma and Greg*. You could have cute, capitalist children together and you could all sit at home and listen to Len CDs and watch *Third Rock from the Sun*. You're the American fuckin' dream."

A humiliated blush burned through Vivian's cheeks.

"If you like him so much, why don't *you* go have sex with him?"

Sherri recoiled as if she had been slapped.

"Oh, shit no. A pretty boy like him couldn't find my G-spot with a flashlight and a copy of *Gray's Anatomy*. "

A snarling voice crackled through an interruption in the Muzak.

"This is not a sewing circle, ladies. Quit yakking and get to work!"

Sherri's eyes darted back and forth between the camera enclosures in the ceiling. She spotted the one that was staring her down and extended a pair of bony middle fingers to the lens.

"I saw that, Becquerel! That's strike one!"

Sherri held up her hands and wiggled her fingers in the air as if to say, "Ooooh, I'm *shaking*. "

Vivian looked into the spying cameras with a dull sigh. She didn't know if there was a God, but she knew that there was always a colossal being watching her every move from on high.

Schlunk.

The glue-encrusted nose of a price gun scraped over the surface of the jar, depositing an orange sticker marked "\$10.99" in its wake. Vivian set the tagged product on the shelf. She reached into a large plastic-swaddled shipping crate and picked up another jar of Beta Burn capsules. She tagged it too with a *schlunk* and set it on the shelf. Then she repeated the process.

This is how Vivian had spent the bulk of her morning.

Her pace wasn't exactly slothful, but she didn't progress with any deliberate speed. Vivian knew that if she finished her work ahead of schedule, Boltzmann would accuse her of doing it wrong, but if she finished too late, she'd be chastised for being lazy. After years of trial and error, she had finally worked out the exact pace at which she had to work in order to keep him out of her hair.

The rhythmic *schlunk* of Vivian's price gun was interrupted by a high, sharp whistle that slashed at her eardrums. It was exactly the kind of whistle that you

would use to call your German Shepherd home from across the wide-open prairie, but Vivian knew it had been meant for her. She looked back up the aisle to find a square-faced old man in a sun-bleached United States Marines baseball cap. His faded pantsuit was easily older than Vivian, and his skin was as weathered and gray as the top of her old convertible.

"Hey princess," he barked. "Whatsa price on these Geritols?"

The old man picked up a tiny box from the shelf and held it in the air.

"I don't know, sir," Vivian replied dryly. "It should be marked on the box. On each and every ... stupid ... box."

The old man exhaled heavily and derisively.

"Well, I can see that, buttercup," he growled. "I forgot my eyeglasses out in the car. I swear to Christ you make the tags smaller on these sons of bitches every day. Whatsa price on that?"

The ex-Marine chucked the boxed jar of pills at Vivian. She made a clumsy grab to snatch it out of the air as it bounced off of her chest.

"Five dollars and ninety-nine cents," she said with commendable restraint. "Plus tax."

"Five dollars and ninety-nine cents. For the love a' Christ," the old man fumed. "When I was your age a fella could have a pretty good weekend in Vegas for five dollars and ninety-nine cents."

He picked up a second box from the shelf and wandered toward the front of the store, grumbling to himself.

"You're welcome," Vivian muttered. She watched the man march out of the aisle and up to checkstand two.

"Hey Morticia, Halloween is over," he heckled.

"Yeah, well so is the Taft administration."

"I heard that, Becquerel!" the overhead speakers crackled. *"That's strike two!"*

With a tiny smile, Vivian picked up her price gun and continued tagging the seemingly endless supply of bulk builders.

"Oooh, look out! Red's got a gun!" a deep voice boomed. "Put down the gun and step away from the shelf. Don't make me have to get physical, because you *know* I will. Hahaha!"

Vivian's shoulders leapt to her ears as she swiveled toward a perfectly cut statue of marketing-man-meat in the aisle behind her.

"Aren't you supposed to be bothering people *outside*?" she muttered.

"Oh, don't worry about it, lady," Nick smiled. "I get a ten-minute break every four hours. I just came inside to *feed the rush!*"

He held up a two-liter bottle of SURGE and smiled, and for just a moment he

looked exactly like a Coca-Cola-sponsored print ad, but with less personality.

"Listen, Red, on a day like today a girl as hot as you needs a dude who is cool to the core. How about when you get off work I take you for a ride in the HumVee? Give it a try and I think you'll get hooked on cruisin' in one of those bad boys."

Even though they were sheathed behind the reflective gold lenses of his wrap-around sunglasses, Vivian could tell that Nick's elevator eyes were stopped three-quarters of the way to her penthouse. She crossed her arms violently across her modest chest.

"Sorry, I can't tonight. Real busy. You know, washing my hair and whatnot. So ... bye."

She bent down and began collecting another armful of jars from the packing crate with a blunt shove of body language that said, "Move along, folks. Nothing left to see here." Nick caressed her chin in his broad, perfect hand and gently pulled her upright, turning her head until their eyes met.

"Washing that beautiful red hair, huh?" he smiled. "That's cool by me. After you're all clean and pretty, why don't you come out with me for dinner? I'm dying to know if you're a natural redhead."

Before Vivian's knee could appropriately respond to Nick's proposal, a barking voice boxed her ears.

"Vivian! What the hell are you doing?!"

A winded, panting Verman Boltzmann waddled heavily into the aisle. In a flash, Nick took his hand from Vivian's face, stuffed it in his pocket, and leaned raffishly against the shelves with an innocent grin. Vivian's eyes darted back and forth between the two men as her tongue tried to find its words.

"What am I -" Vivian snapped. "This guy keeps trying-"

"Shaddup, Vivian," Boltzmann sneered, waving his hand in her face. "Jesus Christ, I swear you just talk to hear the sound of your own voice."

Vivian's face screwed itself down against the front of her skull as Boltzmann put his beefy hand on Nick's broad shoulder.

"Is this girl bothering you, son?"

"No sir, not at all," Nick grinned. "I just came in to slam a SURGE. I always like to shop in the stores where I work. You know, give a little bit back to show my appreciation."

"That's great; that's really great," Boltzmann oozed. "That pop is on the house, just to thank you for coming over here today."

"Hey thanks, Mr. B!" Nick beamed. "Just another perk of being a promo model. I love going to new places and meeting new people like you and Red. And that's what makes me a champion!"

Without warning he balled his hand into a fist and threw it at Vivian's face!

"Bam!"

Vivian's shocked recoil was just a second too late, but it didn't matter. Nick's knuckles stopped six inches from the bridge of her glasses, proudly displaying a thick gold band wrapped around his ring finger.

"That's right, I'm solid gold, baby! There's only platinum level above me, and that dude is nailing the boss's daughter, so he doesn't count."

Boltzmann grabbed Nick's fist and pulled it toward his doughy face, squinting at the glimmering gold ring.

"*Gold Level Sales Champion 1998*," he read aloud. "That's pretty goddamn impressive! You should be proud of your achievement, son!"

"I am, sir!" Nick gloated, tapping his ring. "This little lady means the world to me. She's not coming off my finger till death do us part."

"Oh, give me a break," Vivian scowled. "That thing is just your manager's way of rewarding you without actually giving you anything worthwhile."

"You shut your mouth, Vivian," Boltzmann hissed. "Keep up that crap and I promise you you'll *never* be employee of the month!"

Vivian rolled her eyes.

"Whoa, no *way!*" Nick exclaimed, noticing the shelf for the first time. "You've got Beta Burn for \$10.99?! I'm totally stocking up here! They're charging seventeen bucks for it over at Publix. This stuff is incredible! Feel those guns."

Nick curled the bottle of SURGE as if it were a thirty-pound free weight. Boltzmann squeezed the bulging bicep and nodded enthusiastically, but Nick's self-assured gaze was fixed firmly on Vivian, who wasn't watching.

"No shit," Boltzmann said dreamily, not lifting his paw or his eyes from Nick's firmly flexed muscle. "Seventeen bucks, eh? Vivian, what are we charging for these things?"

"\$10.99," Vivian muttered indignantly.

Boltzmann's voice hardened.

"Speak up, missy."

Schlunk.

Vivian extended the price gun and tagged an adhesive "\$10.99" on the side of Nick's perfect arm in front of Boltzmann's nose. He turned on her with a low boil in his beady black eyes.

"Don't you get smart with me," he seethed.

His voice had a forced calmness to it, like a mother who didn't want to beat her own children in front of company. With a great, gasping effort he bent over, tore the packing slip from the side of the Beta Burn shipping crate, and gave it a wheezing once-over.

"God *damn* it, Vivian!" he roared, thrusting the paper in her face. "It says clear as day that the price on these things is supposed to be \$16.99! What the hell is wrong with you? Can't you follow simple directions?"

"I *can* follow simple directions," Vivian growled. "And apparently that *is* what's wrong with me."

Boltzmann leaned his stubbly, glistening face as close to Vivian as his prohibitive circumference would allow.

"Vivian, if you like your job, I suggest you quit your bitching and moaning and start taking a little responsibility for your own screw-ups."

Vivian raised an eyebrow.

"If I *like my job*? " she asked incredulously.

"Just shut up and retag the goddamn boxes \$16.99," Boltzmann snarled.

"Whoa, hey, you know what you oughta do?" Nick said.

"What's that?" Boltzmann asked.

In two tiny words his voice somehow did a cartwheel from brimstone to butterflies.

"Instead of putting new tags on every single box you oughta just put one big sign on the front of the shelf with the price on it. That would be *waaay* less work, you know?"

Boltzmann bared his tiny teeth and gave Nick a hearty slap on the back.

"Well, that's great-that's just a really great idea," he pandered, squeezing Nick's shoulder. "I like the way you think, son. We'll start doing that right away. Maybe then lazy little Vivian could actually get something done in a day! Har har haar!"

Vivian slid her fingers under her glasses and violently rubbed her eyes with her palms. This was a nervous habit that she'd acquired at Boltzmann's Market, and it manifested itself whenever she was especially grossly wronged.

"Rockin' cool," Nick said. "Rockin' cool. Well, I've gotta get back outside, so thanks for the SURGE, and-"

"Oh, it's no problem at all," Boltzmann interrupted. "Here, I'll walk you out to your Hummer."

"My *HumVee*, " Nick corrected proudly. "The civilian models are called Hummers."

"Oh, yeah yeah. Right, *HumVee*, " Boltzmann agreed obsequiously. "Vivian, quit tagging those jars and find some *real* work to do! I'm not paying you to loaf around here all day like a little princess!"

With that, Boltzmann clapped his porcine hand on Nick's back and escorted him to the end of the aisle and out of the store.

Vivian slowly raised the gun to her head and shot a price tag into her right temple.

The blade of Vivian's Swiss Army Knife snapped through the heavy plastic bands that bound together a stack of afternoon newspapers. She slipped the tool into her pocket, but before she could begin stocking the news rack she saw something troubling out of the corner of her eye. An old man was bent over the crate of decaying "fresh catch," sifting through the remains in search of a worthy supper. Vivian sighed impotently.

"Whatever," she thought. *"I tried. It's not my problem."*

She pulled a handful of newspapers from their binding and dropped them into the wire rack in front of her, thrusting the day's top story directly under her own nose.

Red tide superbug! State health officials now report that the mysterious red tide bacteria is not killed by cooking, freezing, or irradiation. Side effects from consuming contaminated seafood could be severe, especially in the elderly.

Vivian's gaze returned to the old man, who was now pulling fish after rancid fish out of the cloudy ice water and piling their remains into his shopping cart. She rolled her eyes in disbelief.

"Oh for the love of ..."

She marched up to the makeshift display case and put her slender palm on top of the old man's gnarled hand. The stink pouring off of the fish was incredible, like a rotten cabbage salad dressed with bilge-water vinaigrette.

"Excuse me, sir," Vivian gaged. "You don't want to buy this fish. It's spoiled."

The old man gingerly sniffed at a headless redfish and shook his head dismissively.

"I think *you're* the one who's spoiled, young lady," he grunted, dropping the fish into his cart. "Nothing is ever good enough for you kids today, is it? You've never had to live with hardship!"

Vivian numbly adjusted her uniform vest.

"I beg to differ," she muttered.

The old man reached into the crate for another fish, but Vivian threw out a defensive arm.

"Sir, please. These fish are infected with some kind of bacteria from the red tide. Eating them could be lethal."

The man pushed Vivian's hand away and grabbed a seaweed-entangled grouper.

"Get away from me, kid. I lived through the Depression-I can certainly live through a little bit of gamey seafood!"

Vivian's eyebrows knitted in disbelief. Had the whole world gone mad, or just this store? It was time to turn to Plan B. If the old man didn't care about his own health, she knew what he *would* care about.

"All right, sir. I see you've made up your mind," she said cheerily. "I do have to make one small correction, though."

She rubbed the butt of her fist over the chalkboard, erasing the "\$5" and replacing it with "\$7."

"Hey!" the man snarled. "What's the big idea?!"

"Sorry," Vivian said sweetly. "Nemo tariff. The state makes us apply it to anything that comes from under the sea."

The old man looked at the pile of ex-ocean-dwellers in his cart and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Eh, it's still a bargain," he shrugged.

Vivian wiped out the "7" and replaced it with a "12." The old man's bushy brow furrowed.

"Now what in the-"

"Ahab tax," Vivian said sympathetically. "I know, it's completely insane."

The old man's lower jaw quivered as he looked at Vivian, then at the inflated price, then back at Vivian. Finally he turned and stomped away from his cart, cursing under his breath.

"Damn bureaucrats," he muttered. "They never could have got away with this when FDR was in office!"

Vivian smiled and exhaled a long, relieved breath. She watched the old man as he resumed his hunt for culinary bargains, shuffling past checkstand two and a wall of giggling, jiggling, yellow and purple uniforms.

The register was packed four deep with pretty, blond, dangerously popular-looking Stillwater High School cheerleaders. Sherri was price scanning a seemingly endless cluster of nail polish bottles with an overstated boredom. Each bottle had the name of a different shade printed on its cap, but to the layman they were all indistinguishably "pink."

"Oh my *Gaaaaaawd*, " one of the girls mewled. "So, I was talking to Kevin in homeroom, and he was all 'Do you want to go to senior class beach party this weekend?' and I was all like, with *you? As if!* "

For reasons that were not readily apparent, all of the girls ripped into a peal of screaming laughter. Sherri didn't give them the courtesy of a sour look. She just kept scanning the bottles and staring blankly into the burning red lasers of her checkstand.

"He's just so *wrong*. Like, *really*, " one of the other girls agreed. "Like he's really cute enough for you to like, go swim in the red tide and get like, a bacteria infection or whatever. I'm so sure. But it's not like it would be the first time he ever gave a girl an infection."

The girls burst into laughter again, this time so high-pitched that there were parts only very small dogs could hear. Sherri scanned the final bottle and held out her hand, and one of the girls deposited a wad of perfumed bills in it.

"Oh my *Gaawd!* " the blondest of the girls gasped, pointing to Sherri's

outstretched arm. "I *luuuuuve* that bracelet! The plastic one with the barbed wire stuck in it, right? I have one *exactly* like that!"

Without lifting her eyes from the conveyor belt, Sherri pulled the bracelet from her arm, held it at arm's length between two fingers like a sitcom bachelor holds a dirty diaper, and dropped it with a heavy plastic *clunk* in the garbage can.

"Ugh, speaking of 'red tide' ..." the cheerleader smirked bitterly. "God, why do goths always have to be such bitches?"

Sherri's empty eyes snapped up from the belt, locking on to the giggling girls with a glare like a thousand death threats.

"I am not a goth," she said coldly. "I am an individual."

The cheerleaders were all suddenly, and perhaps for the first time in their lives, completely silent. After a long moment, one of them finally mumbled a numb rebuttal.

"Well, you're still a bitch."

Sherri handed the girl her change with an unfazed shrug.

"At least my biggest accomplishment in life won't be getting date raped under the bleachers at the homecoming game."

The cheerleaders released a chorus of incensed gasps.

"You ... you *bitch!*" the leader squeaked. "We're like, *never* shopping here again!"

The infuriated cheerleaders rushed out the front door in a clucking mass of fair hair and pleats. Sherri smiled wryly and looked at her watch.

"Three ... two ... one."

"God damn it, Becquerel! What the hell was that?!"

Boltzmann waddled up to the front of checkstand two like an obese penguin, his jowls slapping furiously against his neck.

"What's the matter with you?!" he bellowed. "That's no way to treat a goddamn customer! That's strike *two*, missy!"

Sherri blinked. "You already *did* strike two, fat-ass."

Boltzmann leaned forward and spoke with a dark, seething menace.

"What did you just say to me?"

Sherri's words came in slow, staccato syllables as her fingers flexed in a parody of sign language.

"I saaaaaaid, '*You ... already ... did ... strike-*'"

Boltzmann pounded his blubbery fists on the checkout counter.

"That's it! I'm not taking any more shit out of you!" he wailed. "You're *fired*, Becquerel! Get out of my goddamn store!"

With an overstated disinterest, Sherri pulled a cigarette out of her coat pocket, lit it up, and stuffed it into the corner of her mouth.

"Well, it's about time," she said coolly, throwing out a sarcastic salute. "See you in Hell, motherfuckers."

Without another word she exhaled a long yellow blast of smoke and walked out the exit for the last time. A fat purple vein throbbed in Boltzmann's forehead as Sherri's unscheduled exodus led his attention directly to the pile of fish crates near the front door. There he found Vivian nauseously returning the decomposing bodies from the old man's cart to their wooden sarcophagus.

"Vivian!" he barked. "Quit screwing around with those goddamn fish and come work the register!"

An unrecognizable tube of scaly meat slipped from Vivian's fingers and splashed down in the crate. She looked at her oil-smothered hands in disgust.

"Hold on," she choked. "Let me wash my hands first."

"When I tell you to do something, I mean *now*, missy!" Boltzmann screamed. "Are you trying to get your ass shitcanned too?"

A thousand sardonic one-liners flashed through Vivian's mind, any one of which would have ensured her permanent liberation from Boltzmann's Market. A series of words clinked together like train cars in her mind, racing down the tracks of her central nervous system, through her voice box, and out of her mouth.

"No, sir. I'll be right there, sir."

With a shameful bow of her head, Vivian wiped her hands on her vest and took her place at the register of checkstand two. She needed this job and she knew it. Unfortunately, Boltzmann knew it too.

"That's what I thought," he said dominantly. "Now if you think you can keep your head screwed on straight for five minutes, I'm going back up to the office. *Somebody's* got to actually get some work done around here today."

With that, he executed a turn like the *Queen Elizabeth 2* coming into port and squeezed himself up the creaking staircase to his office. Vivian leaned back against the register, closed her eyes, and thought for a long, hard moment about where exactly she had gone wrong in life.

There was no doubt that she was too good for this job. Too smart for it. She knew that there was a whole world out there just waiting for her. But she also knew that at the end of the day she'd go home, collapse into bed, and ignore her problems until they came back the next morning.

Just like she always did.

"Are these the right kind of plugs for this?" an ancient voice croaked.

Vivian blinked twice and tipped her head downward. A dusty, hunched old woman barely taller than the checkstand counter was piling D-cell batteries on its belt with shaky, arthritic hands.

"Plugs, ma'am?" Vivian asked.

"For this machine. Are these the right plugs?"

Vivian looked at the large box perched at an awkward angle across the top of the woman's shopping cart. Judging by the diagram on the side, the box contained some sort of hideous cyclopic robot head. She scanned the single row of English text adrift in a sea of foreign characters.

Hibakusha Electronics 5-in-1 Camping Lantern

Vivian was hesitant to believe this claim. It didn't look like any lantern she had ever seen. Whatever it was, she knew that this wouldn't be the last time that she saw it.

Every so often, Boltzmann's grocery suppliers would give him a good deal on some shoddy, off-brand electronics. As a general rule, about ninety-eight percent of the items sold at Boltzmann's Market that required batteries would be returned by naïve, elderly purchasers within a week. This rule had held true through all of his previous experiments in electronic gadgetry, from portable CD players ("I don't understand where the tape goes"), to VHS tape rewinders shaped like sports cars ("I can't make it hook up to the television set"), to Windows 95 compatible flatbed scanners ("I thought this was a toaster oven").

"It's for my grandson," the old woman said slowly. "He said he can hook it to his satellite machine and watch the ball games when he's on his class trip."

Vivian felt the need to intervene. She wanted to save everybody the trouble of a return visit.

"Ma'am, I don't think you can watch a ball game on a lantern. Maybe he was talking about something else. In fact, I'm pretty sure he was talking about something else. Do you want me to put this back for you?"

The old woman raised a brittle, shaky hand and looked at a crumpled note.

"Five to one camping lantern," she said, holding the note out for Vivian to see. "That's what he wants. You kids, you all think that all us retired people are all stupid, right?"

"No, ma'am," Vivian said. "I was just trying to-"

The woman looked at her note again. "Five to one camping lantern. It says so right here!"

Vivian sighed. There were some battles that weren't worth fighting.

"All right. Whatever."

She leaned awkwardly over the checkstand and grabbed the heavy box by its corners. With a wrenching of her lower back muscles, she hauled it over the side of the counter and across the price scanner.

BLEEP!

Vivian turned to put down the box, but her fish-oil-slicked hands slipped against

the smooth cardboard, dropping the heavy load on the price scanner and jamming its corner harshly into her left breast.

BLEEP!

"Ow! Son of a ..." Vivian grumbled, subtly rubbing away the dull pain of her injury with the back of her fist. "Here, let me take care of that."

She punched the key on the register that would negate the next entry and ran the box over the scanner a third time, neutralizing the effect of the errant scan.

BLEEP!

"You did that three times," the old lady said. "Are you trying to rip me off?"

"Not at all, ma'am," Vivian said. "I just made a mistake. I fixed it. It's okay."

The old woman shrugged disapprovingly.

Vivian scanned all of the batteries. "Your total is \$98.73, please."

The woman looked skeptical but quietly pawed through her purse and exhumed a musty one-hundred-dollar bill. When the transaction was completed, the old woman rolled away with an unspoken sense of quiet, uncertain dissatisfaction.

Vivian wiped the last residual fish funk on her pants as she glanced at the large analog wall clock clicking away all too slowly on the wall above the entrance. There were only fifteen minutes left in her shift. She was in the home stretch now.

She lowered her eyes and peered dreamily through the glass doors and into the outside world.

An elderly woman with a permed puff of snowy white hair drove a gigantic and equally white Buick into the blazing parking lot. She scrutinized the aggressive orange Hummer nervously before turning her attention to Nick and his one-man party.

Sensing the fresh meat, Nick bounced up to the side of the Buick and began rocking out to the corporate grunge music, pointing rhythmically to himself with the index and pinky fingers of both hands and wagging his tongue like a lunatic.

Smoke poured off of the Buick's whitewalls as the terrified woman peeled out of the parking lot and onto Bayshore Boulevard, fleeing for her life in a squealing reverse.

Vivian smiled.

"Well, at least that's one less for me to deal with," she thought.

"Vivian!" Boltzmann barked.

Vivian jumped out of her skin. How could he always sneak up on her? It was like being snuck up on by a dump truck full of barking dogs.

"Vivian, could you please explain why you charged this nice young woman three times for this camping lantern?"

Behind the enormous bulk of the manager, Vivian could see the old lady with all

the batteries glowering with disapproval.

"I didn't," Vivian explained. "I made an accidental scan, then I took one off."

"I can see that," Boltzmann said, waving the receipt in her face. "But there's *three* charges here, each for \$79.99. You need to refund her money *twice*. She only bought *one* lantern."

Vivian puzzled.

"No, I'll show you," she said, reaching for the slip. "One is a *negative* scan of \$79.99; it's all taken care-"

"Oh no you don't," Boltzmann said, pulling back his doughy hand. "Don't try to confuse this nice lady by talking nonsense. Just open your drawer and give her back the \$159.98 that you ripped off from her. Or should I say, open your *purse*."

"But it's not ... I mean, there's the two *positive* scans, and one *negative*. One plus one minus one equals one. It's all taken care of."

"Vivian," Boltzmann seethed, "I'm going to count to ten, and if you don't ..."

"Fine," Vivian boiled, opening her register drawer, "here's the hundred dollars back that she gave me, and here's another sixty just for being so good at math."

"That's more like it," Boltzmann nodded. "You're lucky she's such a good sport." He snatched the bills from Vivian's hand and gave them to the old woman. "There you go, ma'am. Keep the change. I hope we'll see you in here again real soon."

He turned with a knifelike glare at Vivian.

"I'll be watching you, missy. You watch yourself."

With a humanity that he reserved only for customers, Boltzmann escorted the old woman to the front door before shoehorning himself back into his office.

Vivian slipped her fingers under her glasses and rubbed her tired eyes.

There were only four minutes left in her shift.

Nothing else could possibly happen to her in only four minutes.

"Ripping off old ladies. Ouch, that's a real hit on your karma points, Red."

Vivian pulled her hands from under her glasses to see Nick leaning rakishly on the end of her checkstand next to four jars of Beta Burn.

"This lane is closed," she said.

Nick's eyes floated to the illuminated sign above the register. Vivian clicked it off.

"Aw, come on now. You know I'm just kidding around. I saw that whole thing go down," Nick confided. "Don't sweat it. That fat bastard just ripped off his own store, you know? No skin off your ass."

"There's not a lot left to take," Vivian sighed. She ran the first jar of Beta Burn over the scanner.

BLEEP!

"Whoa whoa," Nick said, pointing to the register display. "Those boxes are tagged \$10.99. Why are they ringing up as \$16.99?"

"I'd tell you," Vivian sighed, "but then I'd have to kill myself."

"Okay, so you've had a rough day working point of sale," Nick laughed. "I can definitely help with that. You know what you need to pick you up and get you back to the top of your game?"

"Oh, let me think," Vivian said airily. "Could it possibly, *possibly* be an ice-cold bottle of Fusion Fuel?"

"Is that what you think of me?" Nick grinned. He grabbed her sticky hand off the countertop and cupped it between his own smooth, hairless fingers. "You think I'm all work and no play, huh? Well, you've only seen the parts of me that come out when I'm on the job. Let me take you out tonight and show you my private parts."

Vivian blinked. "I'd rather have the Fusion Fuel."

"You got it, Red!"

With a slight bend of his knees, Nick plucked a hidden six-pack of Fusion Fuel from the floor at his feet and hung the cardboard handle over Vivian's outstretched fingers.

"Why don't you slam a coupla bottles of Fusion Fuel and then tell me what you think of its extreme blast of citrus flavor over dinner tonight," Nick smiled. "How about we grab some chow around nine? I know a place up in Port Manatee that you'll go totally mental over."

Vivian blew a long breath through her bangs.

"Okay. Nick. Listen. Let me put this into phrases small enough that they can be absorbed through the dense filtration of your frighteningly minute attention span. You are not my type. I am not going out with you tonight. I am not going out with you *ever*. I would not go out with you *if you were the last living man on the planet Earth*. Do you understand?"

Nick nodded.

"So would ten o'clock be better for you? Because I'm totally flexible."

Vivian's throat caught a scream and hammered it back down into her lungs as the long minute hand of the store's clock finally pointed to freedom.

"My shift is over," she said calmly. "Goodbye, Nick."

Without another word Vivian turned, exited the checkout lane, and stormed out the front door.

Once outside, she was relieved to see that the blistering sun had disappeared behind a cover of thick black clouds. She kicked her way through the debris field of shattered Fusion Fuel samples only to find her tired old Rabbit sagging against the pavement. Sticking out from the flaccid heap of a flat driver's-side tire was a jagged shard of orange glass branded with the image of a spongy sort of molecule.

"Well, *that's it then*," Vivian thought. "*Today officially can't get any worse.*"

At that precise moment, the storm clouds overhead tore themselves open, letting fly the kind of Florida thunderstorm that makes God Himself unplug His electronics from the wall socket. The rain was thick and sticky, and it gave off a faint odor of evaporated salt and stale cabbage as it saturated Vivian's clothes.

She pulled her cheap sombrero onto her head and slouched in utter defeat.

"Correction: Things can *always* get worse."

CHAPTER TWO

"Do you think that Obi-Wan Kenobi changed his name to Ben Kenobi just out of convenience?" Bobby asked.

"Convenience?" Erik replied.

"Yeah, like can you picture him on the phone trying to order a new droid from QVC or something? He'd be all 'Send that to Obi-Wan Kenobi. No, I'm sorry, not *Joey* Kenobi, *Obi*. Obi-Wan Kenobi. No! Not *Juan* Kenobi! Do I sound Colombian to you? Look, just send it to *Ben*, okay? Ben Kenobi.'"

Erik shook his head.

"Come on. Everyone knows that Obi-Wan changed his name to Ben when he went into hiding after the Clone Wars. It had nothing to do with convenience; it was for security."

"Security?" Bobby laughed. "The man is trying to lay low from the most powerful evil empire the universe has ever known, and he doesn't even bother to *change his last name*?"

"Well, maybe 'Kenobi' was a common last name in their universe," Erik shrugged. "I mean, there's a Captain Antilles and a Wedge Antilles who aren't related, right? Obi-Wan probably didn't change his last name because he knew the rebels would come looking for him someday. Luke would have never told R2-D2 about him if he was 'Old Clark Kent who lives out beyond the Dune Sea.'"

"Wait-so let me get this straight," Bobby argued. "Because he only changed his *first* name, Darth Vader-the meanest, most powerful, most dark-side-of-the-Force-havin' bad-ass in the galaxy-can't find him for twenty years, yet it takes only five seconds for a dumb-ass, desert-dwelling teenager to get from 'You belong to Obi-Wan Kenobi?' to 'Oh, you must mean Old Ben?'"

"Uh ... yeah," Erik nodded. "Pretty much."

"Okay then," Bobby said. "That's officially the most retarded thing that I've ever

heard."

Although they'd had their share of differences over the years, there was one thing that Bobby and Erik had always had in common.

They were geeks.

Geekhood surrounded them and penetrated them. It bound their galaxy together.

As was typical for a weekday afternoon, the two friends were making themselves at home: lounging on Bobby's couch and watching Bobby's TV in a tiny living room that was not, in fact, Bobby's.

This living room was part of a simple one-bedroom apartment that was typical of Stillwater's unfashionable inland neighborhoods. The building was little more than a few barely habitable cubes of thin drywall bound together with a coat of crumbling pink stucco and capped with mossy Spanish tile.

The claustrophobic atmosphere of the room was exaggerated by a clutter of secondhand furniture shoved into its fringes. In one corner of the room, a battered coffee table sat upended with a sweaty *Microsucks* T-shirt and a *Free Kevin* baseball cap hanging flaccidly from one of its outstretched legs. In another, a small white TV/VCR combo sat neglected, unplugged, and nearly hidden under a dog-eared stack of *Wired* magazines. As if to highlight its plight, somebody had drawn a "sad Mac" face on its dusty screen.

While these simple furnishings cowered in the corners, a gigantic titanium-colored wide-screen television asserted its total dominance over the space, extending out from the living room and penetrating the hallway by a good seven inches. The booming bass of its surround-sound speakers drowned out the whine of an air conditioner struggling to cool the room as fast as the behemoth picture tube could heat it.

In front of the television was a makeshift coffee table composed of a life-sized resin cast of Han Solo frozen in carbonite lying down across four chipped cinder blocks. Although it had once been a valuable collector's item, the battered sculpture's nooks and crannies were now filled with crumbled bits of Texas Grill Fritos. In the flat space between Han's feet sat a few incongruous documents in cheap wooden frames. One was a membership certificate to MENSA, the other an award reading "Perfect Attendance 1997 - Boltzmann's Market."

Both were inscribed with the name "Vivian Gray."

Bobby Gray drained the last foamy remains from his warm bottle of Dos Equis and set the empty vessel on Han's forehead. He slowly rolled back his head, tipped open his mouth, and released a low, thundering belch from the deepest regions of his gut.

"BrrrrrAAAAaaaAaaAaaaAaaaaawwwp!"

"Jeez, Bobby," Erik sighed.

"There is no Bobby, only Zuul," Bobby belched.

Bobby was Vivian's fraternal twin brother, but he had definitely received the short end of the genetic stick. In stark contrast to Vivian's tall, slender body, Bobby's physique was short and pudgy, and it appeared overfed and underutilized far beyond its years. He made no effort to make up for his physical shortcomings through wardrobe, rarely wearing more than a pair of unlaundered cargo shorts, a guacamole-stained T-shirt, and a pair of disintegrating Teva sandals.

Bobby's facial features bore a passing family resemblance to those of his sister. He had the same pointy nose and the same freckled cheeks. He also shared his twin's fiercely red hair, although his was long, stringy, and perpetually pulled back into a straight, limp ponytail. A matching orange goatee hung from his chin, looking as if it may have evolved purely to hide the telltale stain of Cheeto consumption. Although they were technically twins, the one thing that made Bobby and Vivian look most alike were the thick black frames of their identical Buddy-Holly-style eyeglasses.

Bobby's beady green eyes blinked at the TV as gently spiraling broadcast graphics swooped around Christina Applegate and Dave Foley dancing like idiots in a featureless white void.

NewsRadio is on the air and Jesse 's looking really fine!

This summer NBC is gonna party like it's nineteen ninety-nine!

The boys both groaned.

"When will this godforsaken year of marketing be *over*?" Erik whined. "Y2K can't be worse than hearing that song massacred fifty times a day."

Bobby shook his head.

"At least we'll have a year to recuperate before they dust off the theme to *2001: A Space Odyssey*. "

He separated his massive backside from the crater it had formed in the overused couch.

"I'm getting another beer. You want one?"

"Boy howdy," Erik replied. "Thanks."

"You want a real beer, or another queer beer?"

Erik smirked and clutched his half-finished bottle of lime-flavored Tequila.

"Shut up. It's real beer," he muttered. "Plus they say it tastes just like going down on a beautiful Mexican *señorita*. "

Bobby paused.

"Okay, you know what? Now *that's* officially the most retarded thing I've ever heard."

Erik pouted as Bobby lumbered into the tiny kitchen.

Erik Sievert was Bobby's best friend and, not surprisingly, was also bestowed with a less than ideal physique. He was tall and skinny, but his average weight

seemed unevenly distributed over his frail skeleton. His appendages were fragile-looking stalks of skin and bone accented with awkward, bulbous knobs of knee, elbow, and Adam's apple. A clean, sea-foam blue, Atari-branded polo shirt masked both the humiliating xylophone of a visible ribcage and the doughy pouch of a sedentary midsection.

Erik's hairless face was long and soft, and his troubled blue eyes always made him look as if somebody was laughing at him and he had no idea why. From the top of his head sprouted a flyaway mass of brown hair so thick and wavy that it would have impressed the Greatest American Hero's hairdresser.

He finished his Tequiza and leaned back on the couch, lethargically watching the endless parade of commercials. A disquieting, rapid-fire disclaimer concluded an ad for menopause drugs, quickly dissolving the scene to that of a living room decorated in football paraphernalia. A dumpy character actor in a backward-turned baseball cap sat behind a coffee table full of large, empty bowls. Hungry-looking muscleheads closed in all around him, pounding their meaty fists together in a crude caricature of intimidation.

"It's five ... minutes ... to the Super Bowl, and all you've ... got ... is empty bowls!"

The scene cut to an exterior ambulance bay and onto the lumpy countenance of an extremely poor William Shatner impersonator.

"This ... is ... a Grocery911!"

Erik threw a nervous glance at the kitchen and began a frenzied search for the remote control.

On the screen, the unconvincingly infuriated jocks backed their host into a corner and up against a computer. With something vaguely akin to terror in his eyes, he sat down and began clicking away at a conveniently pre-loaded website on the screen.

"When you have ... a grocery ... emergency, log on to Grocery911.com!"

Erik spotted the oversized remote control and yanked it free of the couch cushions. It was an intimidating rectangle of titanium with a hundred electro-luminescent buttons and a small LCD screen staring unblinkingly from its face. He stabbed it toward the television and pushed the "channel up" button. The tiny digital screen scrolled the words "INSUFFICIENT ARGUMENTS." He pushed the "channel down" button. The screen replied, "SYNTAX ERROR."

The staccato voice-over continued prattling from the television as the visuals cut to an ambulance squealing away from a grocery store.

"Just place your order on the World ... Wide ... Web ... and our Emergency Meal Technicians will ... deliver ... in thirty minutes or ... less! Guaranteed!"

Bobby came back from the kitchen empty-handed.

"We're all out of-

His sentence was cut short by the guillotine of his falling eyebrows.

"Change it!" he barked.

"I'm trying!" Erik squeaked.

On the TV, the ambulance screeched to a stop in front of a suburban house. The driver kicked open the car door, leapt from the vehicle with two full paper bags of groceries, and bolted for the front porch.

"Oh, now look at that," Bobby smirked, pointing at the screen. "I had to go through five levels of firewall to log in, and that idiot just leaves the door open and the keys in the ignition. Talk about a security breach."

Erik sighed.

"Bobby, you *do* realize that this is all staged, right?" he asked. "That guy is just an actor."

"Whatever," Bobby grumbled. "The drivers really do that shit. They're that stupid."

He snatched the remote control away from Erik and continued resentfully.

"The only people stupider than the drivers at that company are the suits."

Bobby glared at the televised deliveryman distributing sodas and snack chips to the hungry jocks, rescuing the hapless host from a parody of a beat-down. He changed the channel, erasing the commercial from the screen but leaving a palpable bitterness in the air. Erik tried to change the subject.

"Hey, where's the beer?"

"We're all out of beer," Bobby snapped. "*We're having a Grocery911!*"

Before Erik could offer his shopworn consolations, the front door swung open, throwing a hot, moist gust of air swirling through the chilly living room. Vivian stood pathetically in the open doorway, a handful of soggy mail in one hand, a six-pack of Fusion Fuel in the other, and a drooping sombrero on her head. She was soaked to the skin with rainwater, and her face and arms were streaked with black grease and rusty grime.

"Damn, Viv," Bobby muttered. "You look like you've been making out with the thing that killed Tasha Yar."

"I had a flat tire," Vivian sighed. "Thanks for asking."

Her wet skin immediately erupted into goose bumps as she entered the frosty air of the apartment. Erik launched from the couch and leapt to her side.

"Let me take that off your hands for you, Viv."

He pulled the six-pack from Vivian's dripping fist.

"Thanks, Erik. That's very consider-"

"Hey, what's this stuff?" Erik whined. "I thought you brought us some beer!"

A drop of cold, dirty water fell from the tip of Vivian's nose.

"Go home, Erik."

Countless repetitions had turned this phrase purely rhetorical to Erik's ears. He slumped back down on the couch and popped open a bottle of the orange energy drink. Vivian dropped her mail on Han Solo's groin and did a lap around the room, collecting an assortment of fast-food containers and dirty dishes along the way.

"Oh, come on, you guys," she moaned. "Look at this place! It's a dump!"

"What do you want me to do about it?" Bobby shrugged. "It's *your* apartment."

Vivian stumbled over a stack of Nintendo 64 cartridges and unlabeled VHS tapes that had accumulated next to the television, sending a horde of startled roaches fleeing for cover. She turned to Bobby with a fire in her eyes.

"Bobby, there are roaches in *my* apartment," she said icily. "There were never roaches in *my* apartment when *I* lived *alone*. "

"What, you think the roaches are *my* fault?" Bobby said defensively. "They just showed up! What am I supposed to do? Reason with them?"

"They showed up because you *keep feeding them!* " Vivian snapped, holding up the dirty dishes. "Their instincts are not exactly a great scientific mystery! All they do is look for free food and a dark place to sleep. Come on, Bobby, you should be able to relate to them!"

"Oh, *buuurn!* " Erik grinned. "Good one, Viv."

"Go home, Erik," Vivian repeated.

She deposited her armload of crusty dishes in the kitchen before retreating to her bedroom. The boys continued watching TV as if their encounter with Vivian had been nothing more than another surfed channel. Bobby lifted a casual eyebrow toward Erik's drink.

"That stuff any good?" he asked.

"No, not at all," Erik replied. "It tastes like Ecto Cooler mixed with turpentine."

Bobby nodded.

"Gimme one."

Somewhere the Spirit of Marketing smiled as Erik and Bobby contentedly watched television commercials and drank free promotional beverages. Images of Matt LeBlanc, Heather Graham, and a giant plastic robot flashed aggressively across the screen to the strains of a driving techno theme.

"*Next on WGON,*" the TV announcer enthused, "*the network television premiere of Lost in Space.* "

"Oh, *sweet,* " Bobby smiled, cranking up the surround sound to an earsplitting level. "This movie *rules!* "

"No, oh no. No, no, no," Erik said, wrinkling his nose. "We are *not* watching this. As a fan of the real *Lost in Space*, the television show *Lost in Space*, I call foul on this blasphemy. *Lost in Space* was finished in 1968. This ... *thing* does not exist.

End of story."

"Oh, keep your pants on," Bobby said. "The movie has got so much more going for it than the TV show ever did."

"Name one thing."

"First of all, it's got color."

"Oh *please*, the show had color after the first season!" Erik interrupted.

"And the new robot is not only bad-ass," Bobby continued, "but it is actually a *real* robot, not some freaky midget in a suit made out of Christmas lights and dryer hose."

"You can't be serious," Erik whined. "The original Robot B-9 was a work of art designed by Robert Kinoshita! The *real* B-9 had a distinctive retro-futuristic atomic-age styling. This new one looks like the bastard love child of ED-209 and Number 5 from *Short Circuit*."

"And last but certainly not least," Bobby persevered, "the movie is unquestionably the superior incarnation due to its outstanding achievements in visual effects. This isn't some chintzy crap with plywood spaceships and the same three rubber monster suits in every episode."

"Oh, don't even get me started on monsters," Erik seethed. "The whole thing with Dr. Smith mutating into a giant killer spider monster at the end is completely ludicrous. A spider bites him and it makes him transform into one of them? Last time I checked, that was the *vampire's* shtick. Not the *spider's*."

"It doesn't bite him," Bobby noted. "It scratches him and infects his DNA."

"Oh yeah, that's *much* more believable," Erik scowled. "All I'm saying is, it's stupid because spiders don't spread their traits by infecting others like they're the freakin' Wolfman or something. I defy you to name *one* other time *ever* when somebody was stung by a spider and then suddenly evolved into some sort of superhuman mutant. It just never happe-"

"Peter Parker."

Erik quietly took a sip of his drink and fumed.

A towed-off and pajama-clad Vivian returned and dropped with exhaustion into the only available seat. It was a small, uncomfortable wicker lawn chair that creaked and pinched at her skin. She leaned forward between Han Solo's boots and retrieved the mail from his lap. It was all junk and bills. She dropped it sleepily in her own lap.

"Oh, man," she yawned. "I am definitely quitting my job. For real this time. You guys don't even want to hear about the day I had today."

Bobby and Erik didn't look away from the epic opening space battle on the television.

"Nope," Bobby agreed. "We don't."

Vivian blinked and stared at Bobby for a long, empty minute before returning her

tired eyes to the mail. She opened the moist newspaper to the classifieds and smoothed it out over the bills in her lap.

"So, Bob, did you find a job today?" she asked pointedly.

Bobby rolled his eyes.

"Man, it's never 'Hey, Bobby, how are you doing?' or 'Did anything interesting happen to you today?' It's always 'Did you find a job today?' Am I right, Erik?"

"Don't look at me," Erik said defensively. "I *have* a job."

Vivian blew a long breath into her damp bangs.

"Hey, Bobby, how are you doing?"

"Can't complain."

"Did anything interesting happen to you today?"

"Not really."

"So did you find a job?"

"Hey, Chatty Patty, can we do this later?" Bobby bristled. "We're trying to watch a movie here."

Somewhere deep in her subconscious, Vivian punched Bobby in the mouth. In reality, she flicked through the stack of bills in her lap, found the one she was looking for, and stuffed it between Han Solo's outstretched fingers between Bobby and the television.

"Well, enjoy it while it lasts, sofa spud, because I can't afford to pay your cable bill this month. I'm sorry, but the electricity bill is just too high from you running the AC full-tilt all day, and with your beer tab added in on top of that, I just don't have the money to-"

Bobby grimaced.

"Jeez, Viv, let's stay civilized, alright? You know that it won't be long until I'm payin' the bills with my mad programmin' skills. I mean, this is a wonderful age we're living in. This is 1999. We're almost exactly halfway between *Back to the Future* and *Back to the Future Part II*. The dot-com economy can only get stronger from here."

"Bobby, you've been saying that since last fall!" Vivian snapped. "I thought we had an unspoken agreement since birth that we'd never share a living space that cramped again!"

Bobby picked up the translucent keyboard of a Bondi Blue iMac sitting on a narrow end table to the side of the couch.

"Relax, Viv. The offers should be pouring in," he said, patting the top of the eggshell lovingly. "I posted my résumé online."

"Oh joy," Vivian deadpanned. "Our troubles are over."

In Bobby's mind, any career worth having could only be found, and executed, via

the World Wide Web. His last, and best, job had been in online database management for a little upstart company by the name of Grocery911.com.

The concept behind the business wasn't terribly original. At its core it was little more than another grocery delivery service that had been branded with an "emergency" theme and an ad campaign directly ripped off from *Rescue 911*. The thing that made Grocery911's system unique was the fact that it was only accessible via the Internet. There were no telephone numbers, no switchboards, and no operators. Just a low-overhead digital network transmitting orders directly from the fingertips of agoraphobic computer nerds to the teamsters at the warehouse.

As the popularity of the website spread like digital wildfire, new distribution centers began springing up all along the East Coast. Government auctions were soon saturated with young entrepreneurs buying up obsolete ambulances and pressing their disintegrating hulks into service as delivery trucks.

When Grocery911.com came knocking on the door of Stillwater, Florida, Bobby Gray was there to answer.

After being hired as the chief e-commerce guru of the local distribution "hospital," Bobby soon found himself pulling down an annual paycheck with more trailing zeros than a securely wiped hard drive. He was making big bucks doing a job that he loved in an environment that offered all the free snack food that he could pilfer. On top of all that, he didn't even have to wear a tie. It was the perfect job.

Then came the memo.

The memo came down all the way from the CEO, the twenty-two-year-old college dropout who had conceptualized the business while watching reruns of *E/R* and jonesing for munchies at four o'clock one fateful Thursday morning. In the memo, he called the Stillwater office a "financial burnout," noting that it was the only Grocery911 distribution center in the country that was not turning a profit and suggesting that the local team "couldn't sell a dime bag to Tommy Chong at Woodstock."

The executive board launched an extensive demographic research study in the Stillwater area, leading to the shocking discovery that the town contained more collapsible walkers than home computers at a ratio of almost ten to one. Further inquiry showed that eighty-seven percent of the local retirees harbored a fanatical devotion to the local grocery store, which was peculiar, given that ninety-eight percent found the salespeople there to be "inexplicably rude."

It didn't take long before Stillwater's Grocery911.com distribution center became a brick-and-mortar 404 error.

The concept of "savings" was completely foreign to Bobby, and soon after the "hospital" had cut off his life support, he and his overpriced, bleeding-edge electronics were evicted from his cluttered beachside bungalow. With nowhere else to turn, he found himself at the door of his sister's unfashionable inland apartment, begging for a place to crash until he could get another job.

Vivian reluctantly agreed to the temporary arrangement.

That was nine months ago.

Bobby pushed the hockey-puck mouse across the table and clicked open his email.

"Let's see ... spam, spam, crap, spam, crap, spam. Ah, here we go. I got an email from a guy I used to work with at 911. 'Subject: FW: Y2K programmers.' I'll bet that's a job lead right there. See, no need to get your panties all in a bunch."

Vivian looked up from her paper.

"Can you *do* Y2K programming?"

"Sure, how hard can it be," Bobby said. "All you've got to do is look through a bunch of code and find a date."

"Ha!" Erik laughed. "You haven't found a date since the junior prom."

Vivian rolled her eyes.

"Oh, man, this isn't about a job at all. It's just a list of crappy Y2K jokes," Bobby moaned. "Yeah, this is a hoot. Listen: 'Microsoft announced today that the official release date for the new operating system Windows 2000 will be delayed until the second quarter of 1901. '"

"Oh, that's a *burn!* Bill Gates is gonna be feeling *that* one in the morning," Erik mocked. "Hey, is that by any chance from the same loser who had that bumper sticker on his car that said 'At Intel, quality is job .999999998'?"

"Yep," Bobby said. "Same loser."

Erik leaned over to Vivian.

"You see, a few years back, Intel had this defect in some of their chips that would cause rounding errors in their calculations, and so--"

"Oh, hey, Erik," Vivian interrupted. "I don't want to sound like I don't care, but ... I've got a headache like you wouldn't believe, and ... well, I don't care."

Erik slumped back into the couch and took a defeated swig from his bottle.

"I wonder whatever happened to all of those defective computers," he mused. "I hope they're not being used for anything important."

Bobby put down his keyboard and turned back to the television with annoyance.

"Who the hell *cares*, Erik? Could you please just pipe down and enjoy this amazing CG-enhanced big-screen adaptation of a substandard '60s sci-fi kiddie show that looked like it was shot in some guy's garage?"

Erik pointed an outraged finger and drew in a breath for a heated rebuttal, but he was cut short by a solemn voice on the television.

"We interrupt our regularly scheduled programming to bring you a WGON News special report. Live from the Oval Office, an address by the president of the United States."

"Thank God, " Erik said. "I'm glad somebody had the sense to cut off the movie

before they got to the stupid space monkey."

Bobby raised an eyebrow.

"They had a stupid space monkey on the TV show too, you know."

"Hey, they ditched the Bloop in the middle of the second season because they realized it was lame. Unlike this movie, which is completely oblivious to how much it *sucks*."

"Well, excuse me for inviting you to live in the now," Bobby grumbled.

"The now' is greatly overrated," Erik sighed.

The graphic of the presidential seal slid off the screen like a squeegee, wiping away swirls of patriotic graphics to reveal the commander in chief sitting at his desk in the Oval Office. He wore the sharp navy-blue suit and powerful red tie that were requisite for a serious televised address. Tonight, however, his face was not the flawless mask of Max Factor perfection that the American people demand of their leader and their sitcom stars. His tired-looking eyes expressed the kind of schoolyard guilt that comes not from breaking the rules, but from getting caught doing it.

"Good evening, my fellow Americans. This afternoon, in this room, in this chair, I stand before you accused of engaging in inappropriate relations with a certain White House intern. In response to these allegations, I issue this solemn promise to the American people: I did not make contact with that woman with the intent to arouse or gratify her sexually. Legally speaking, I did not have sex with that woman."

"So, to recap the conclusions of our nation's finest legal minds," Bobby noted, *"gaggin' ain't shaggin'."*

"Turn it off," Vivian groaned. "If I wanted to hear lame excuses for infidelity I'd get myself a boyfriend."

Erik picked up the remote control and clicked a button, but the TV failed to respond. He turned to Bobby with frustration.

"Your remote control sucks."

"Nope," Bobby said, "that remote is top of the line."

"Then why can't I work it?"

"Because *you* suck."

Erik sighed.

"That being said," the president continued, *"indeed, I did have a relationship with that woman that may not have been entirely appropriate. In fact, some of my critics have gone so far as to call it inappropriate. I am sorry that these people feel this way, and I vow to attempt to refrain from engaging in this behavior in the future."*

Bobby shook his head.

"I'll bet that intern is under the desk giving him oral sex right now."

"Cut it out," Vivian snapped. "I got enough of that today from Sherri."

"Oral sex?!" Erik choked.

Before Vivian could reply with her stock answer, the room was filled with a shrill, ululating battle call. It was the ring of Bobby's princess phone. His *Xena: Warrior Princess* phone.

The novelty appliance consisted of a plastic cliff face with a touch pad built into its side and the warrior princess herself standing heroically on its flattened top. A life-sized replica of Xena's chakram throwing disc was embedded in the stone, with a coil of cable attaching it to the base. Vivian grabbed the chakram, revealing half of its circumference to be the receiver.

"Hello? Oh, hey, Sherri. Speak of the devil, and she calls you. What? No, not tonight. After today I'm completely licked. Come on, you should know how bushed I am; you were there!"

Erik put his hand over his mouth and threw a scandalized glare at Vivian.

Vivian pointed at Erik, pointed to the door, and made a walking motion with her fingers.

"This matter is between me, the two people I love most-my wife and our daughter-and our God," the president continued. *"I must put it right, and I am prepared to do whatever it takes to do so. Tonight my family and I will retire to our private retreat at Camp Bravo to begin the process of healing as a family."*

With these words, the president's eyes almost seemed to grin to themselves. He blinked, and the brief sparkle was extinguished. He made a conspicuous adjustment of his necktie and continued.

"Together in this darkest twilight of our interpersonal lives, we will breach the walls of blame and meet one another between the tall trees of forgiveness and pity."

"Man, he gets caught committing adultery and all of the sudden he thinks he's a Successory," Erik quipped.

He pushed the remote control across the couch to Bobby and spoke in a high, crackly screech.

"Change it, Butt-head!"

"Sherri, I'd love to help you celebrate your liberation," Vivian moaned, "but nothing on Earth or in Heaven is keeping me from getting to bed early tonight. Why? Because *I* still have to get up and go to work in the morning!"

"I am honored to lead the American people in this time of great peace and security," the president said. *"And I ask you to turn away from this spectacle and return the nation's attention to the challenges and promises of the next millennium."*

"So help me," Bobby groaned, "if he says 'Because as a nation, we're gonna

party like it's nineteen ninety-nine ..."

He flicked a button and replaced the image of the Oval Office with the digital cable system's menu grid.

"I'm hanging up now, Sherri," Vivian said firmly. "I'm hanging up. I'll see you at wor ... uh ... I'll see you around."

Vivian hung up the phone and creaked back into her chair.

"What was that all about?" Erik asked.

"Sherri's going downtown to drink her last paycheck tonight," Vivian replied. "Hide your virgins."

She returned her sleepy gaze to the classifieds page and ran her finger down the runny columns.

"Hey, this one actually sounds good," she said. "'Bluestone Books is hiring full-time staff. Flexible hours. Competitive salary. Must be well read and knowledgeable about literature.' Hey, that's got 'me' written all over it."

She pulled a length of knotted phone cable from behind the couch, grabbed Xena around her waist, and headed for the kitchen.

"I'm going to call about this ad," she said sternly. "Bobby, turn off the TV and get a job."

"You got it, chief!" Bobby chirped, grabbing his keyboard eagerly.

As soon as Vivian had disappeared into the kitchen, Bobby dropped his keyboard and picked up the remote control. He whirled its clicking shuttle wheel with his thumb, sailing without pause through a deluge of channel previews.

"Crap, crap, commercial, crap, infomercial, crap," he rattled as the channels shuffled by. "Ah ha! Score!"

The cable menu flicked away, leaving the screen filled with Mel Gibson in *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*.

"Ah, nice," Erik grinned. "This is much better than that sacrilegious remake bullshit. *This* is a classic. I used to know it all by heart, but I haven't seen it in years."

"Bueno, dijiste una pelea limpia. ¿Qué propones?"

"Como manda la ley."

"El Thunderdome."

Erik blinked.

"Somehow it's not exactly how I remember it."

Bobby agreed with a slight nod.

"Spanish channel."

He took a long drink from his Fusion Fuel.

"It's still the best thing on."

"Dos hombres, mano a mano, sin jurado, sin apelar, sin escape. Entran dos pero sale uno."

"Haha! I got that!" Erik laughed. "'Two men enter, one man leaves.'"

Bobby chuckled.

"I wonder how you say 'Bust a deal and face the wheel.'"

"Bartertown has the most awesome constitution," Erik mused. "All of its laws are like bad song lyrics."

"Well, what do you expect when Tina Turner is your mayor?"

Erik nodded.

"She's cool in this movie, but I never understood her nickname. I mean, 'Master Blaster' I can wrap my head around. It sounds bad-ass, like the old Amiga game. But 'Aunty Entity' I just don't get. Is it supposed to be like 'anti-entity,' like she's *not* an entity? Or that she's *opposed* to entities? It's meaningless. The writers could have written something better. *I* could have written something better."

"You think so?" Bobby challenged. "Okay, Harlan Ellison, if you were living in post-apocalypse Australia, what would your clever nickname be?"

"Well, let's see," Erik thought. "It would have to be something that sounded tough, so that nobody would want to mess with me. Something like ... Erik the Barbaric."

"Ha!" Bobby snorted. "You're about as barbaric as Bob Saget."

Vivian returned from the kitchen with a gloomy expression hanging from her face. She set the phone down, picked her paper up, and came to rest again in the prickly grip of the wicker chair.

"No luck?" Erik asked.

"They said that I was under-qualified," she frowned. "Apparently their definition of 'knowledgeable about literature' is 'Can name the last ten books by Danielle Steel.'"

She noticed the TV.

"Are you two actually sitting here watching a movie that you've already seen a hundred times, in a language that you can't even understand? I wouldn't ordinarily make this kind of a demand, but seriously, you two, get a *life*."

"Ooh, you better watch yourself," Bobby said with mock fear. "You don't want to enrage *Erik the Barbaric!*"

"Alright, smart guy," Erik snapped. "If you're so clever, what's *your* post-apocalypse name?"

"Okay, brace yourself for this," Bobby grinned. "In the world of the post-nuclear holocaust ... I would be known as ... *Atomic Bob!*"

Erik shook his head.

"That is *so* lame. Did you actually *think* of that, or did it come *directly* out of your ass?"

Bobby smirked and turned to Vivian.

"What about you, Viv?" he asked. "After society has collapsed and humanity has been wiped off the face of the planet, what would they call you?"

Vivian rustled her paper with disinterest.

"Grateful."

"That's worse than Aunty Entity," Erik muttered.

"Oh, come on, you're not even trying," Bobby said. "You'll never survive unless you come up with a name that's scary enough to intimidate a horde of savage bikers. Think tough."

"Bobby, I'm busy!" Vivian roared, slamming down her paper. "I don't want to play this game! In fact, *you* don't want to play this game. You want to get off your lazy butt and find a job already!"

She yanked a page of damp classifieds out of her paper and thrust it at Bobby.

"Here, just find one that you like and call the number," she growled. "Thrilling career opportunities await."

"Bah," Bobby said, brushing her away. "You're so twentieth century."

He picked up his keyboard and toggled off his *Matrix* -inspired screen saver.

"How about this: If you can come up with an end-of-the-world nickname better than the ones we've come up with, I'll get on an online job board right now and apply for as many jobs as you do, one to one. Deal?"

Vivian rubbed her eyes with her palms and was silent for a long, surrendering moment.

"Do you *promise*? " she said coldly.

"Cross my heart," Bobby grinned.

Vivian looked at the ceiling and sighed.

"Okay, how about ... Vivian Oblivion?"

Bobby's eyes grew wide. Then he squinted.

"Not too shabby," he conceded.

"Not too shabby?!" Erik squeaked. "Oh, come *on!* 'Vivian Oblivion' kicks your sorry ass, *Atomic Bob*. "

"Alright, alright. Fine."

Bobby clicked defeatedly through the online job listings.

"Crap, crap, scam, crap. Okay, here we go. 'Major technology firm seeks

qualified candidate for chief executive officer. Minimum five years experience in a similar position.' There. Consider me applied."

"That's great," Vivian said dryly. "I think perhaps you are not taking this seriously."

"That's not true," Bobby said. "If we don't aim high, we'll never know what we're capable of achieving, right?"

"Very inspiring," Vivian muttered. "Would you mind aiming a little lower with your next application? You could try to aim for-oh, I don't know-a job that you could actually get on this plane of reality."

She picked up her newspaper and tapped her finger on the page.

"Like this one, for example. 'Waffle House seeks graveyard shift waitress. Competitive wages. Uniform provided.'"

"Wow, that sucks," Bobby said.

"Reality sucks," Vivian snapped.

She gathered up the phone and retreated to the kitchen.

"Why do you always do that to her?" Erik asked.

"Do what?"

"You do everything you can to avoid getting a job, and you don't show your sister any appreciation for what she's done for you."

"Oh, jeez," Bobby moaned. "When did you turn into our mom? Next you'll be telling me not to sit so close to the TV and to finish my peas."

Erik took a sip of his drink and pointed his bottle at Bobby.

"All I'm saying is I think this R2 unit has a bad motivator."

"Look, Erik, you've got it all wrong," Bobby sighed. "It's not that I'm lazy, or that I don't appreciate Vivian letting me crash here, or whatever. It's just that she's so ... I don't know, *inexperienced*."

Erik raised an eyebrow. Bobby continued.

"I mean, she's just gone from one meaningless, thankless job to another her whole life. She's been doing it so long that she forgets that there is actually something better out there. A career is like a parking garage with those 'severe tire damage' strips all through it. Once you advance up a level, you can never go back to a lower one again."

Erik squinted at Bobby and crossed his arms.

"Okay, look, it's like this," Bobby explained. "Remember the first time you used a 56K modem after years of using a 28.8? It seemed like Buckaroo Banzai's jet car by comparison. But now that we've got DSL, 56K is intolerably slow. Once you've tasted broadband, you can never be happy going back to your old modem. It's the same thing with jobs. I've had the T1 line of employment yanked away from me, and

now she expects me to just go back to 9600 baud. It's not that I don't want a job. As soon as I find the right one, I'll be on it like Pepé Le Pew on a striped cat, but in the meantime, I can't be expected to degrade myself by flipping burgers or pumping gas for tourists, right?"

Erik clapped quietly.

"Nice reading. Very spontaneous and non-rehearsed," he said sarcastically. "So what did Vivian say when you laid that on her?"

Bobby sighed.

"She said she wouldn't pay my Internet bill anymore."

Vivian shuffled back into the room and dropped the phone numbly on the floor, spilling its receiver across the carpet. She fell into her chair with a *crunch*.

"They said I was under-qualified when I admitted I didn't know what was meant by the phrase 'scattered, smothered, and covered,'" she said. "They actually told me that I was *under-qualified* to be a *Waffle House* waitress. That's like being under-qualified to be a car accident victim."

She shook her head and turned to Bobby as he clattered away at his keyboard.

"What did you find, Bob?"

"'Wanted: volunteer video game testers for new next-generation console,'" Bobby said. "That sounds awesome. I just sent in my résumé."

Vivian looked at her brother in disbelief.

"Bobby, you do realize that 'volunteer' means that you don't get paid, right?"

Bobby blinked and squinted at his screen.

"Hmm, well, it looks like the job was in Tokyo anyway."

Vivian shook her head.

"Okay, Bobby, how about a 'safety' application, just in case the CEO thing doesn't work out," she pleaded. "Could you apply for something lowly and *possible*, like janitorial or food service, please? Just to humor me?"

"Alright, alright," Bobby griped.

Vivian returned to her paper, scanning the columns with an increasing sense of gloom.

"This city is an employment wasteland," she moped. "There's not a single worthwhile job within twenty miles of here."

"Hey Viv," Erik offered helpfully, "if you're already resigned to working as a waitress anyway, you might as well apply at the Hooters out on Songbird Key. It's right on the other side of the bridge, and I've heard that those girls make tons of money in tips, plus they have full benefits."

"Oh, right," Vivian snorted. "Can you picture me in little orange hot pants with my breasts all bunched up in a tight tank top like some Lamborghini poster girl from

1985?"

Erik stared blankly through Vivian's abdomen as a smile spread dreamily across his face. Vivian scowled.

"Go home, Erik."

Erik's face flushed an embarrassed shade of red. Vivian crumpled her newspaper and threw it at him.

"All right, I give up. I'm just going to apply over at Publix," she said. "Sure, it's a lateral move into the same lousy job, but at least their seafood doesn't require a garnish of antibiotics."

She picked up Xena and shuffled off to the kitchen, dragging the beeping receiver across the carpet behind her. The boys turned their slothful attention back to the dubbed film on TV.

"You know, there's something that I've never understood about this movie," Bobby said. "If everybody in Bartertown is drinking water laced with radioactive fallout, how come they're not all zombies?"

"Well, that's because radiation doesn't cause zombies," Erik explained. "Zombies are always caused by toxic waste or some sinister biological agent that the military accidentally unleashes on the general public."

"I call bullshit on that," Bobby countered. "In *Night of the Living Dead* the zombies rose from the grave because of radiation coming off of a space probe."

"They *allegedly* rose from the dead because of radiation coming off of a space probe," Erik corrected. "They never give a definitive explanation for what happened. It's like the writer knew that his science was crap, so instead of giving concrete facts he just let the characters take batshit guesses as to what was going on."

Vivian came back into the room, set Xena on the coffee table, and languidly dropped into her chair. She slid her fingers under her glasses and irritably rubbed at her eyes.

"Well, what about *The Hills Have Eyes* then?" Bobby continued. "The radiation from a nuclear test site spawns a bunch of whacked-out cannibalistic mutants."

"Well sure. But that's *mutants*, not *zombies*," Erik said dismissively. "Apples and oranges. Zombies and mutants are completely different things."

"Oh, they are *not*," Bobby argued. "They're all the same genre of irradiated, flesh-eating freaks."

"No they're not!" Erik snapped. "There's a world of difference! Zombies are nothing but rotting, reanimated corpses! They have no thought processes! All they do is shamle through the night, infecting people and eating brains. They're *always* an evil menace and a threat to humanity. A mutant *can* be evil, but it doesn't *have* to be. Look at the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, or the X-Men, or the Fantastic Four, or even the Toxic Avenger! All mutants! All heroes!"

Vivian ground her palms into her throbbing forehead.

"God, Erik! Shut ... *up!* " she groaned. "You sit here blathering on and on in these endless tirades of B-movie nonsense as if anybody *cares!* None of that is real, Erik! It's just pointless fanboy gibberish!"

Erik's soft eyes took on an abused puppy-dog quality.

"Oh, come on, Vivian. We're talking about *mutants* and *zombies* here. Outside of 'fanboy gibberish,' what else is there to know?"

Vivian took a deep, annoyed breath.

"Well, Haitian legend says that a zombie is created when a *bokor* performs a voodoo ritual upon a person, turning him into a mindless slave. According to scientific studies, the 'zombie' trance is actually a psychological state caused by a combination of tetrodotoxin powder and various hallucinogens. Voodoo zombies do not eat human flesh. Mutants, on the other hand, come from damaged DNA strands improperly spreading their genetic code into newly forming cells. An extreme dose of radiation can cause grotesque mutation but, more often than not, it also causes early death. It *never* causes super powers. And for the record, mutants *also* do not eat human flesh."

Erik's lips pursed into a pout.

"Oh *yeah?* " he argued. "Well, what about mutant *sharks?* "

Vivian blinked.

"Go home, Erik."

Bobby nodded toward the phone.

"So I'm gonna guess by your showers of sunshine that you did *not* get the grocery job?"

Vivian sighed.

"After my years of tireless service at Boltzmann's Market, the good folks at Publix consider me vastly *over* -qualified for employment. Bobby, please tell me that you've applied for something reasonable."

"We're three for three," he said, pounding the Enter key. "I applied in food service, just like you asked."

"Thanks, Bob. I appreciate that. What's the job?"

"Waitress at the Hooters out on Songbird Key," he said. "I've heard I can make tons of money in tips, plus I'd get full benefits."

Vivian pulled off her glasses and pressed her palms over her eyes.

"I give up," she moaned. "I just give up."

She dropped her head into her lap and fell quiet. Erik scowled at Bobby, who was now clicking through online galleries of Hooters waitresses. He reached out consolingly for Vivian's knee, but when his hand was halfway there, he suddenly thought better of the idea and pulled it back.

"Hey, it's not all that bad, Viv. Seriously," he said, patting the prickly arm of her chair instead. "Listen, it's not the end of the world. Okay, so you've got a crappy job that you hate, but you've got a lot of good stuff going on in your life too, right? It's like I always say: Life is like a box of Smilex."

"Don't give me that *Up With People* crap," Vivian grumbled. "I'm not in the mood for smiling."

"No no," Erik said. "Not smiling, *Smilex*. You remember. The chemical from *Batman*."

Vivian looked up and glared at Erik in disbelief.

"Please tell me that you're not actually about to try to cheer me up with more of your bogus movie pseudo-science."

"Just listen," Erik said. "In that movie the Joker terrorized Gotham City by putting toxic Smilex into the city's cosmetics and toiletries."

"So nobody could wear eye shadow?" Vivian said sarcastically. "Oh, the humanity."

"No, you could wear eye shadow, if you were lucky," Erik corrected. "No single item contained the entire formula. There might be elements of Smilex in your eye shadow, and some in your lipstick, and some in your soap. If you used any single one of those you'd be fine, but use all three together and they form Smilex, and you become one very happy corpse."

"Erik, I'm begging you," Vivian moaned. "Either make a point or stop talking."

"My point is that life is like a box of Smilex," Erik repeated. "It'll only kill you if the right combination of your life's toiletries are bad. Your job? Infected deodorant. Your finances? Tainted mouthwash. But those two things can't take you down as long as you still have so much good stuff going for you."

"Such as?"

"Well, you've got your health."

Vivian rolled her eyes.

"No, seriously," Erik continued. "Half the people in this town couldn't walk up a flight of stairs to save their life. Don't take it for granted. You're young; you could still go anywhere and do anything. In the meantime, at least you've got a good, safe place to live and a kitchen full of food. Starving African kids would kill for what you have here. And when you come home at the end of a crappy day of work all dripping in partially formed Smilex, there's two great guys here who are always happy to see you. Friends are the only thing that really count, right Bobby?"

Erik glanced at Bobby. Bobby shrugged.

"Is this the part where I'm supposed to start humming 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic'?"

Erik shook his head and turned back to Vivian.

"Just don't give up, Vivian," he said. "You won't be working at Boltzmann's much longer, but for now that toxic job is keeping you safe from a bunch of other infected stuff. Without it you'd switch to 'Unemployed' brand toothpaste, 'Homeless' brand hairspray, and 'Starving' brand shampoo. Next thing you know Batman is finding your bloated, grinning corpse floating in the Gotham River."

Erik's densely knotted metaphor pulled itself through Vivian's mind, forcing a tiny, resigned smile across her lips. He may have been full of crap, but at least he was making an effort to help.

"You're right. You sure took the scenic route to get there, but you're right," she sighed. "It could be worse. I could have no job at all. I guess as long as I'm working, we'll be all right."

"That's right, stay positive," Erik beamed. "And hey, you never know when the phone is going to ring with a job offer."

As if on cue, the warrior princess erupted in her ululating ring. Vivian's hand shot out and grabbed the receiver.

"Hello. Vivian Gray speaking," she said hopefully.

"*Vivian!*" a guttural voice screamed. "*What are you trying to pull?*"

"Mr. Boltzmann?" Vivian blinked. "I-I don't know what you mean."

"*I don't know what you mean,*" Boltzmann squeaked in a mocking imitation of Vivian's voice. "*Don't try to play innocent with me, missy. You're not that good an actress.*"

Vivian didn't know where to go from there.

"I'm sorry?" she ventured.

"*You'd better be! Your drawer came up a hundred and sixty dollars short today. Did you think I wouldn't notice? Do you think I'm stupid?*"

Vivian suddenly understood.

"No, I don't think you're stupid," she lied. "Listen, there was a misunderstanding with the refund that I gave to that woman with the camping lantern. You see, it cost eighty dollars, but you made me refund money that she *never actually gave me* two times, so she got one hundred and sixty back. That's where the missing-

"*So what you're trying to tell me is that the woman paid you for the lantern three times, making a surplus of two hundred and forty dollars, and then somehow when you refunded one-sixty, your drawer came up one-sixty short?*"

Vivian put her hand on her pounding forehead.

"That's *not* what I'm saying at *all*. Listen to me-I'll go through it *very slowly* so you can understand."

"*Oh, I understand! I understand your little scheme just fine!*" Boltzmann screamed. "*You charged that woman for the lantern three times and pocketed the extra one-sixty for yourself. Then, when you got caught, you took another one-sixty*

from the register to cover what you had already stolen!"

Vivian's head spun with the pure mathematical illogic of it all.

"Listen, tomorrow when I come in I'll explain the whole thing, using diagrams," she said. "Puppets if necessary."

"Shaddup, Vivian!" Boltzmann wailed. "You're done explaining. And don't bother coming in tomorrow. You're fired! "

Vivian gasped as if the blow of the unexpected termination had knocked the wind out of her.

"W-what?!"

"And I'm taking the three hundred and twenty bucks that you stole out of your last paycheck, smart-ass!"

With a harsh *click*, the phone went dead. Vivian's mouth continued to work at forming words, but only a dial tone remained to hear whatever she would come up with.

"Is that so?!" she finally yelled. "Well, you can't fire me, because I *quit!* "

She slammed the phone down in its cradle. Bobby and Erik stared at her in quiet disbelief.

"Vivian, I'm all for telling the Man where to shove it," Bobby said with concern, "but didn't you just totally Smilex our asses?"

Vivian glared at Bobby.

"I hope you saved the box that television came in, because as of the end of the month, we're both going to be living in it."

A long, tense silence fell over the apartment. Even the TV seemed to quiet itself in appreciation of the situation's severity.

Erik looked at Bobby, then at Vivian. His eyes had a faint glimmer, as if his mind was pulling together the compassionate words of wisdom that would make everything all right.

Finally he broke the silence.

"Well," he announced, "I'm gonna go home."

With that he sprang off the couch and bolted for the door.

"Right behind you," Bobby agreed.

In the blink of an eye the two retreating boys had vanished, punctuating their disappearance with a slamming door.

Vivian sat alone in the filthy darkness of her apartment. The stack of unpaid bills on the table stared at her coldly. It somehow seemed taller than it had just a moment before. After fully considering all other possible courses of action, she grabbed a long loop of phone cable and considered wrapping it around her neck.

Before she could take action against her own windpipe, the phone released its warbling ring.

Vivian answered.

"Hello," she said meekly.

"Hiya, Red!" came the reply. *"It's me, Nick. We met here at the store today."*

Vivian closed her eyes tightly and started hammering her head with the earpiece.

"How did you get my phone number?" she croaked.

"Easy! I got it out of your employee file when ol' Verm pitched it in the trash. Man, you sure pissed him off something fierce. I'm not even going to tell you the things he said about you after he hung up! It was totally obscene! "

Vivian's hands rolled into fists, then slowly relaxed.

"Well, I'm glad you enjoyed the show. Now I have to hang up and see if I can find a job cleaning bedpans at some senior assisted-living home. Goodbye."

"Hoo, harsh," Nick laughed smoothly. *"Hey, before you do that, why don't we see if I can get Verm to give you your job back? I could totally do it. That guy loves me. Plus I saw the whole thing with the old lady go down. I'll explain it to him man-to-man."*

Vivian thought the proposition over. As sad and twisted as it was, it could actually work.

"That's ... well, that's very nice of you," she said. "I'd actually appreciate that a lot."

"It's no problem," Nick said. *"No problem at all."*

"Well, okay then," Vivian said, a relieved smile barely breaking across her face. "Thanks, Nick! Thanks a lot. I'll see you at the store tomorrow."

"Actually, I was thinking you'd see me tonight," Nick said. *"On that date that we talked about."*

A chill streaked down Vivian's spine.

"Oh ... I, um ... I'm really not available tonight for a date. I'm ... going out with a friend," she stammered.

"Aw, that's too bad," Nick said disappointedly. *"I was going to talk to Mr. B about all this in the morning, but it looks like I might be scheduled at a store over on Songbird Key tomorrow ..."*

Vivian frowned.

"I see-so this is about extortion," she said bluntly. "In that case, forget it. I'm not the kind of girl who trades evening companionship for career advancement."

"I know you're not," Nick said. *"You're the kind of girl who cleans bedpans in assisted-living homes. Come on, Red! Am I worse than that?"*

In her mind Vivian flicked through all of the cards in her hand, weighed her options, and decided to fold.

"Okay, okay, fine," she conceded angrily. "You know what? I'll go out with you tonight. *If*, and *only* if, you can get Boltzmann to give me my job back. Deal?"

"*You got it, lady,*" Nick said happily. "*I've already got us reservations at the Banyan Terrace for nine o'clock.*"

"And let me make this abundantly clear right now," Vivian quickly added. "I am only agreeing to dinner, and that's only for the sake of my job. This is not an all access pass. Understood?"

"*Don't worry, I won't hurt you,*" Nick laughed. "*I only want you to have some fun!*"

CHAPTER THREE

Missile after missile streaked through the sky in impossible numbers toward the oblivious cities below. In response, a single antiballistic Missile blazed up from the ground, intercepting three of the incoming warheads and vaporizing them in a ball of yellow light. Seconds later another ABM managed to eliminate two more attackers, but even with the missile defense operating at full speed, saving one city invariably meant sacrificing all the others.

"God damn it, there's just too many of them!"

"Make every shot count! Use some strategy!"

"I am! They're too fast! And this stupid joystick sucks ass!"

With the sound of a gravelly digital explosion, the dusty TV screen flashed through a cycle of apocalyptic 8-bit color. Bobby threw down the Atari 2600 joystick defeatedly.

"*Missile Command* sucks," he barked. "Frickin' Reagan-era, SDI bullshit."

He reached over the counter and turned off the console, erasing the game from the retro TV and replacing it with a poorly tuned broadcast of *Jeopardy!*

Erik was working his usual night shift at the Planet Packrat Collectibles Emporium, and Bobby had tagged along to keep him company in the sparsely trafficked junk shop. Planet Packrat was a crumbling storefront in downtown Stillwater, and, like most crumbling storefronts downtown, it had previously been an adult video store before the city council had forced the seedier businesses out of the "historic district" and away from the sensitive eyes of the tourists.

Within its cracked walls, Planet Packrat held the remains of a thousand forgotten

childhoods. From the floor to the water-stained ceiling, hanging on the walls and piled on mismatched display racks were hundreds of incongruous toys, knickknacks, and widgets of an age not long past. Old, worn *Star Wars* action figures long since relieved of their plastic accessories gathered in mismatched heaps in shallow plastic bins. Two Voltron robots looked down from a shelf behind the counter, one complete, one missing the yellow lion that would have formed its left leg. In the corner of the front window sat a stuffed Mogwi with a plastic knife and fork rubber-banded to his hands, propped up against a cardboard sign reading "Open Till Midnight."

Although the sign outside promised "collectibles," the reality was that Planet Packrat stocked any piece of junk that a ten-year-old would have wanted ten years ago. Yet despite the store's comprehensive inventory, there was one thing that you would never find in Planet Packrat.

Customers.

Erik sat on a stool behind the tall glass display case that doubled as the checkout counter. He was holding a ragged, butterscotch-colored alley cat tightly in his arms, stroking her matted fur as if he was a villain in a James Bond movie. The cat's mangy skin draped loosely over a pronounced spine, hanging in a sagging, long-since-postnatal paunch. She narrowed her eyes and thrashed her tail back and forth angrily.

"Who's the good kitty? I think you're the good kitty! Such a good kitty kitty," Erik cooed gently. " *Be-de-be-de-be-de!* How's it goin', Twiki?"

Erik's loving voice was nothing more than an irritating warble in Twiki's flea-bitten ears. Her attention was fixed on a tiny brown mouse that scurried toward a hole in the worm-eaten baseboard.

"You must get so lonely when I'm not working, don't you Twiki?" Erik continued. "You must love it when I come in here and give you some love. Don't you, kitty?"

"Erik, please," Bobby growled. "Just put down the cat before you get hurt."

"Aww, lil' Twiki wouldn't hurt me."

Bobby narrowed his eyes.

"What makes you think I was talking about Twiki?"

With her eyes still locked on her rodent prey, Twiki made a desperate leap for the floor. Erik caught the flailing feline in mid-leap, turned her over, and continued to hold her lovingly in his unwelcome embrace.

"Oh no you don't!" he scolded, raising a finger to the cat's defiant face. "No more killing mice! It's a filthy habit! And I'm sick of cleaning up the carcasses. Do you understand me?"

Twiki answered by hooking ten claws into Erik's skinny forearm. His grip loosened with a pained squeak, and a half-second later Twiki had disappeared under a dusty shelf of *Jem and the Holograms* dolls. Erik dabbed at his fresh scratches

and slumped against the counter.

"I don't see why you don't just let her go ahead and exterminate the place," Bobby said. "I wouldn't be surprised if there's worse things than mice living in the walls of this shitbox building."

Erik shook his head defensively.

"Don't you know how dangerous it is for cats to chase mice? Haven't you ever seen a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon?"

Their exchange was cut short by the roar of an ill-maintained engine. They turned and peered out the wide front window. A rusted-out Ford Aerostar pulled up outside, sporting a bumper sticker proclaiming, "I still miss my ex ... *but my aim is improving!*"

"Oh no. No no no," Erik stammered. "Not again. Not tonight."

In the passenger seat of the minivan was a woman oozing an aura of spent sexuality through a thick screen of exhaustion and ennui. She adjusted her sagging breasts in her worn halter-top and took a long, sultry-cum-suicidal drag on an unfiltered cigarette.

But Erik didn't notice her.

The driver of the Aerostar was a rugged, sun-beaten man whose hair seemed to be locked in a struggle between "Young Elvis" and "NASCAR enthusiast." The dried rawhide of his cheeks stretched tightly across his skull as his yellowed teeth worked over a mashed toothpick. He looked like a man with a short temper and the build to back it up when push came to shove.

Erik didn't notice him either.

No, Erik's trembling glare was focused on the minivan's rear door as it slid open to reveal two grimy, doe-eyed children.

"Well, gotta go," Bobby said suddenly, leaping from his stool. "It's beer o'clock!"

"No!" Erik chirped, clutching his friend's arm. "Come on, Bobby, don't leave me alone with them again!"

Bobby shook off Erik's bony-knuckled grip and raised a finger pointedly as he backed toward the door. "I live by the rules of Thunderdome," he said dramatically. "Two kids enter, one man leaves."

Erik scowled. Although he had never actually met Richard Stokes, he had become all too familiar with the children of his failed marriage. Stokes had no doubt been a patron of this decaying building in its previous incarnation, and when the sex shop closed down, he had clearly seen it as a sign that he needed to take his vices to the next level. These days, this sleepy collectibles store served as his primary child-care facility while he became intimately acquainted with every lady of the night south of the Mason-Dixon line.

"Don't go! Please, Bobby!" Erik implored. "I can't take another night alone with

the gruesome twosome! I'm begging you. As your best friend. *Please.* "

Bobby looked over his shoulder out the window, then back at Erik. Finally he let out a long sigh.

"Okay, I'll stay and help you," he said stoically. "After all, you *are* my best friend. I would never leave you when the goin' gets tough."

A relieved smile spread across Erik's face. "Really, Bobby?"

"Nah, I was just messin' with ya."

With that, Bobby yanked open the front door, allowing the two abandoned children to spill inside. He threw a final salute to Erik as he slid into the street.

"Catch you tomorrow, chump," he said. "Have fun baby-sitting."

Erik fumed as his alleged best friend bobbed past the front display window and off into the sunset. He was now completely alone.

Alone with Debbie and Harry.

As a connoisseur of '80s music, Erik had once found the Stokes siblings' names to be amusing. That was before he had discovered that one way or another they were going to get him. To get him, get him, get him, get him.

Harry Stokes was the younger of the pair, at five years of age. He was a pint-sized kleptomaniac, perpetually wrapped in an oversized Army jacket covered with greedy pockets. Erik always made a point to check Harry for merchandise before releasing him back into the wild, yet somehow things always seemed to go missing after he and his sister had been in the store.

Debbie Stokes was twelve. She was the kind of girl who said things like "girls are made of sugar and spice and everything nice" to cover up the fact that she was, in fact, completely horrid. To the untrained eye Debbie looked cute, if a bit dingy. Although she was not overweight, her body had a cherubic roundness of baby fat that had not yet burned away, and she wore nothing but shades of faded pink, from her canvas shoes to the barrettes holding her hair in darling little pigtails.

The two siblings strolled into the store and looked around as if casing the joint. Harry noticed an ALF doll perched on a high shelf, and he pushed a stream of drivel through the filter of his speech impediment.

"Ooooh! Cuuuuuw! I wan play widda Fuwby!" he jabbered. "My fwiend hadda Fuwby buh isa biwd anda Fuwby is weiwed I don' tink I wanda Fuwby fowkeeps bucan I pway widdit, Debbie pweeees?"

Calloused to her brother's prattle, Debbie scanned the floor intently with tiny blue eyes. She spotted what she was looking for between two rows of dusty shelves.

"The kitty!" she yelled happily. "I see you, kitty kitty! I'm gonna get you!"

Twiki was sitting, licking her matted fur. When she heard that voice she looked up with wide, golden eyes, sprang to her feet, and slowly backed away in dread.

Debbie looked at Erik, then at Harry. She put her hand on her brother's shoulder

and pointed toward a shelf of *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* paraphernalia.

"You go *play*, Harry," she said shiftily. "I'm gonna go get the kitty!"

With a giggling squeal, Debbie ran off after Twiki, and the two of them disappeared into the shadowy fringes of the store. Harry toddled over to the shelf and picked up a Batty Koda doll.

"Ooooo, cuuuuw! Lookada cwazy bat! I wanda keepa cwazy bat!"

Erik watched Harry stuff the doll into his coat pocket without a second thought. He shook his head sadly and turned off the television set. He didn't need to be watching a snowy image of Alex Trebek. He needed to be watching Harry Stokes. It was the inventory of Planet Packrat that was now truly in jeopardy.

The monolithic screen of Bobby's TV quietly flickered the ongoing game of *Jeopardy!* in front of Vivian's half-lidded eyes. She sat in a deep slouch on the sofa with her feet on the makeshift coffee table, jabbing Han Solo in the gut with her bare heels. Her chin was pressed drowsily into her horizontal chest, and her limp arms sprawled out across the cushions to each side of her like empty sleeves. To look at her, one might imagine that Vivian had suddenly been relieved of her entire underlying bone structure.

Watching *Jeopardy!* was something of a guilty pleasure for Vivian, although she knew that she could never win the game if she was actually a contestant—not because she didn't know the answers but because, as a matter of principle, she refused to follow the pointless syntactical charade of phrasing them in the form of questions. After all, she reasoned, if you actually asked a guy, "What is green?" and he replied, "As high-energy particles collide with Earth's upper atmosphere, valence electrons bind to neutral atoms, releasing photons in wavelengths of *this* color, forming the polar auroras," you would punch him right in the mouth.

Although she had already cleared most of the board, Vivian's mind wasn't really in the game tonight. She couldn't stop thinking about Nick. Or rather, her date with Nick. Or more specifically, how to *get out of* her date with Nick.

"Instead of spark plugs," Alex Trebek droned, "a diesel engine ignites its fuel mechanically by using this to create heat through the properties of Charles's law."

Vivian wondered how she had gotten herself into this situation. All she had wanted to do was go to work, come home, and go to bed. She didn't need this kind of stress. She didn't need this kind of ...

"Pressure," she said aloud.

"What is pressure?" the television contestant answered properly.

"That is correct."

"I'll take 'To Your Health' for three hundred, Alex."

"As esophageal cancer cells multiply at an uncontrolled rate, they pose a threat to their host organism through this unrelated biological process."

Vivian couldn't stand the idea of being blackmailed by the likes of Nick. Maybe

she just wouldn't show up. After all, what was the worst that could happen to her if she lost her stupid job?

"Starvation," she grumbled.

"Starvation is correct," Alex Trebek confirmed. "Potentially leading to death."

Vivian crossed her arms and glowered as the game rolled on.

"Realizing that human muscle strength was insufficient to emulate the flight of birds, in 1480 Leonardo da Vinci designed a different kind of flying machine based around a rotating blade in this shape."

Vivian's sense of helplessness boiled into a sort of affronted anger. What made her so special anyway? Out of every girl that Nick saw today, why did he have to choose *her* to close in on for the kill? They obviously had nothing in common to talk about. What did he think they were going to do all night?

"Screw," Vivian smirked.

"Screw is correct," Alex Trebek agreed.

Vivian nodded at the TV and drew herself into a psychologically violated ball. As she clasped her knees to her chest, her stomach let out a low, rolling growl. She knew better than to check the kitchen for groceries. She hadn't brought any home, and the odds that Bobby had were just slightly lower than the odds that he would be hired as a waitress at the Hooters on Songbird Key. At the urging of her stomach's continued rumble, she reluctantly grabbed the only consumable in the apartment.

A warm bottle of Fusion Fuel.

She twisted off the cap and took a hesitant sip, and a sharp, dry tang of bitter carbonation seared across her tongue. She found the flavor to be completely overbearing and foul, which was poetic in a way, because she felt the same way about the person who had given it to her.

"I'll take 'Basic Instincts' for one hundred, Alex."

"Contrary to popular belief, this colorblind mammal is compelled to attack by erratic motion, not by crimson hues."

Vivian moaned in self-pity. Even if she *wanted* to go on this date, she couldn't. She was too tired to get off the couch, let alone drive all the way up to Port Manatee for dinner. Plus she didn't have the right kind of clothes for a fancy restaurant. And she hated wearing makeup.

"Bull," she sighed.

"Absolutely," Alex Trebek agreed. "It is 'bull.'"

Vivian raised an eyebrow at the screen, then shrugged. All right, she conceded this point: Her laundry list of excuses was complete bull. She just didn't want to go. That was that. She didn't need to justify herself to Alex Trebek. Yet there was a twinge of self-doubt in the back of her mind.

"I'll take 'Brain Bits' for five hundred, please."

"Buried deep within the cerebrum, the amygdala is the part of the limbic system that is chiefly responsible for behavior associated with this emotion."

Okay, sure, Nick was a shallow, spastic idiot, but she'd done far worse things for the sake of keeping her job than going out on a single date with a gorgeous model. Plus the price of a meal at the Banyan Terrace was roughly equivalent to her monthly rent. She'd be crazy to turn down the opportunity to go there for free. So why did she still feel so strongly about staying home?

"Fear," she said coldly.

"Fear is correct," Alex Trebek nodded. *"Pure, primal fear."*

"Oh shut up, you," Vivian grumbled.

She took a hardy swig of her Fusion Fuel and suddenly realized that she had already drunk half of the bottle. The inside of her mouth felt fresh and tingly, coated in a smooth, pleasant whisper of citrus flavor. She tipped back the bottle and took another sip, realizing that once she had gotten past the initial sting, she did, in fact, like Fusion Fuel after all. Her nose wrinkled irritably. Was this supposed to be symbolic or something? *"I spend the whole day resisting it and then finally take the plunge, only to find out that I actually like it once I give it a chance?"* she thought.

Nahh. It was just another stupid coincidence. She emptied the bottle and threw a glance at the TV.

"All right, Alex Trebek, you've got all the answers," she said sarcastically. "What do you think? Should I go on this stupid date or not?"

"This three-word slogan has been used by Nike since 1988."

Vivian poked a button on the remote control and the gigantic screen went black.

"Okay, okay, fine. I'll go on the date," she surrendered. "At least he's not taking me to one of those crummy tropical-themed places downtown."

The setting sun blazed in the shuttered shop windows of Main Street as Bobby made his way down the abandoned sidewalk. Unfortunately for the few local residents under retirement age, Stillwater's downtown community had found it economically prudent to structure its business hours around the "Early to bed, early to rise" sleep schedule of the elderly. The faint melody of a lousy reggae cover of "1999" led Bobby to the only business outside of Planet Packrat still open at this hour: the Bikini Martini.

The Bikini Martini was an overdone theme bar that was obviously designed to draw in the kind of tourist who was not aware that Florida was not a Polynesian island. The open-air structure of the building was made of wooden logs securely bolted together and cosmetically tied with coarse rope, creating the illusion of *Gilligan's Island* with a building safety code. The bar itself was a freestanding island of stout bamboo poles and thatched palm fronds, but the few surrounding tables were standard-issue white plastic patio furniture sprouting Budweiser umbrellas.

The enclosed area was small, however, as the main draw of this place was the "beach." Behind the wood-planked barroom was a large outdoor lot filled with white sand and errant cigarette butts. A crude mural of a sunset had been painted on the walls of the surrounding buildings. In the corner of the artificial beach were a small cabana stage where lousy bands played and more round plastic tables where people who hated themselves could sit to listen.

On the other side of the beach, a submarine the size of a short bus sat with its keel buried in the sand at the end of a splintery boardwalk. Unlike the rest of the bar's nautical novelties, the chunky vessel did not adhere to the appropriate laws of cliché. Its sides were not lined with round, bolt-studded portholes, there was no conning tower, and, perhaps most unforgivably, there was not even a hint of a periscope. As if to make up for these facts, the sub wore a peeling, sun-bleached coat of cheery yellow paint, complete with cartoonish blue waves permanently cresting along its sides. Large letters carved into a wooden plaque identified the vessel as the *Stillwater Sawfish*, but decades of weather had rendered the rest of its history unreadable. Not that anyone seemed to care.

Bobby walked across the plank floor and sat on a creaking bamboo barstool. A girl behind the bar noticed him and slid up to get him a drink.

"Heya, Bobby," she said warmly.

The girl was Sunny Sasaki, and she was the kind of bartender who knew every person on the continent on a first-name basis. She had a genuine, easy-going charm that was so sincere that it made you feel as if she was an old friend even upon first meeting. But her disarming personality was only half of the reason that she was the most highly tipped bartender in Stillwater County.

"I'm glad you came in here tonight, Bobby," she said silkily. "I've got something to show you that's going to get you all hot and bothered."

"You seem to think I haven't already noticed," Bobby grinned.

Sunny was, to put it mildly, an Asian goddess. Her broad, almond-shaped eyes sparkled as amber as the honey beers that she served with such smiling grace. A cascade of long, silky black hair poured down her back, glimmering in the dim light like a waterfall of liquid onyx. Her smooth caramel skin slid around a perfect hourglass of gentle feminine curves wrapped in nothing more than a green bikini top and a sarong slung low across her inviting hips. Regardless of one's gender or sexual preference, it was a challenge to look at a woman as flawless as Sunny and not immediately picture her naked.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful," Bobby swooned. "When did you get it?"

Sunny smiled into Bobby's captivated eyes, which were staring not at her but straight over her shoulder.

"We just got it installed this afternoon," she smiled. "It gets over three hundred channels-in perfect digital clarity."

Sunny pulled a remote control from beneath the bar and turned her gaze to match

Bobby's. Attached to the wooden corner pillar of the bar, above a TV that was showing some boring Norwegian rocket launch, a tiny gray satellite dish pointed into the clear night sky.

"What happened to the *big* dish?" Bobby asked.

"The big dish is yesterday's news. Analog. Crap," Sunny said authoritatively. "This one gets over a hundred more channels, and you don't ever have to rotate it to find different satellites."

"That's all true," Bobby said thoughtfully, "but the big dish isn't subscription based. It can pick up all the wild feeds of newscasters picking their noses and yelling at their cameramen. I mean, you just can't put a price on that kind of entertainment."

"Well, you've got me there," Sunny nodded, setting down a foamy mug of Bobby's favorite beer. "The big dish is in the Dumpster out back. You can always fish it out and take it home with you if you need to see newsies farming nose goblins."

"You know, I might just do that," Bobby pondered. "It looks like I'm about to get my cable cut off next month, and I'm sure as hell not using rabbit ears."

Sunny laughed and touched Bobby's hand.

"You've always got a scheme cooking, Bobby Gray," she said. "And that's why I love you."

Bobby knew that this profession of love was merely Sunny's routine chatter, but he blushed nonetheless. He made a mental note to leave her a big tip.

"Well, I've got to get back to work," Sunny continued, sticking out her pinky and her thumb. "Hang loose, channel surfer."

With that, she slid the remote across the bar to Bobby and disappeared toward the thirsty mouths and deep wallets on the other side of the bar.

As Bobby annoyed the other patrons with his incessant channel-flipping, a new face slipped in off the street through the thatched doorway behind him. The dark stranger pitched a set of rental-car keys to the valet and strutted toward the bar.

It would have been impossible for a casual observer to determine this man's ancestry. His skin was a nondescript shade of mocha, and his neutral features could have passed him off as a member of any race on the planet without taxing the imagination. With his greasy black hair, his sculptured sideburns, and a beaming smile of hubcap-sized teeth, the guy looked like the poor sap who didn't get the callback for a GAP commercial.

The stranger was fit, but not overwhelmingly so. His muscles were toned just well enough to make old acquaintances do a double take and inquire, "Say, have you been working out?" Over his broad chest he wore a classic wifebeater, covered with an unbuttoned silk rockabilly shirt-black with blue flames licking their way up its sides. His solid buttocks were showcased by his form-fitting khaki pants, and his feet were wrapped in a pair of black and white wingtips that looked fresh off a

member of Big Bad Voodoo Daddy.

Although he was so over-styled as to look like a caricature of himself, the stranger carried with him a tangible self-confidence. He swaggered up to the bar and leaned casually upon it in front of Bobby.

"Excuse me, miss?" he called to Sunny, whose back was turned at the moment.

One of the other bartenders, Mike, noticed the new guy and stepped forward to serve him.

"Hey buddy," Mike said cheerfully. "What can I getcha?"

The dark-skinned man's smile took on an awkward quality, as if trying to hide his annoyance within a fortress of teeth.

"I'm sorry, homeboy," he said dismissively. "I gotta get my drink on from that lovely oriental flower over there."

"Well, how 'bout I just take care of the first round for ya?" the bartender offered. "She's busy right now."

"Well, *I'm* not," the stranger said coldly. "And good things come for those who wait."

Mike shook his head and walked away.

"Another one of these assholes," he muttered. "How's a guy supposed to make a living?"

When Mike was gone, the stranger called out to Sunny once again. She turned, sending a wave through her hair that almost seemed to linger in a sensual slow motion. Her dazzling eyes slid over the new guy's face as her tiny, sandaled feet padded silently to his end of the bar.

"Heya, stranger," she said. "I don't think I've seen you around here before."

"You haven't," the newcomer smiled. "The good Lord only cast me in a cameo in this tiny town. I fly back to Los Angeles first thing in the a.m."

He said "Los Angeles" in the same tone of voice that someone might use to casually name-drop the Queen of England. To his obvious disappointment, neither Sunny nor Bobby looked the slightest bit impressed. He lowered his voice confidentially and continued.

"I'm just in town for a bit of *personal enhancement*. Tracked down the same guy who did Affleck. For real. I guess sometimes you gotta get down with the small town to get the job done right, you know?"

He waggled his eyebrows and gazed into Sunny's almond eyes with a grin as broad and toothy as that of a great white shark. Again, whatever impression of awe that he was trying to create completely failed to congeal.

"Well, good for you, tiger," Sunny said noncommittally. "What can I get you to drink tonight?"

The stranger leaned in farther and raised an eyebrow.

"Girl, if you'd get me some milk, I'd pour it over you and make you a part of my complete breakfast."

Bobby burst out laughing, spitting beer on the bar.

"Very subtle, Casanova," he said, wiping his chin.

"We don't serve milk here," Sunny noted coolly. "How about I get you a beer instead?"

"A beer would be the bomb," the stranger smiled. "Do you have anything English? I just spent some time in London and now I'm so spoiled I can't choke down domestic swill anymore. For real."

Sunny put her hands on her hips, cocked her pretty head to the side, and pretended to think about it. "English, English ..." she mullied. "I'd say our best English beer is Red Stripe."

"That's the stuff, girl!" the oily coifed man replied. "They brew that right in London, yo. One of the locals took me on a brewery tour when I was *across the pond*."

"The Red Stripe brewery?" Bobby asked skeptically.

"You know it, dawg," the man bragged, not turning away from Sunny. "Maybe some day you and I could go back there and I could show you where the trucks leave the factory loaded down with all those tall green bottles."

Sunny put a squat brown bottle of Jamaican Red Stripe on the bar with a knowing look that said as much to call the stranger's bluff as any words could. A normal person would have taken this hint that his farcical meanderings would not stand up to the scrutiny of this particular barmaid-but not this stranger.

"Oh, Red *Stripe*," he said. "I was thinking of Red *Dog*, yo. That's what they were brewing in London."

Sunny glanced at the brown bottle of domestic Red Dog among the beers lined up behind her, but didn't bother with it. The stranger continued.

"Girl, you got to tell me your name so I know what to write on the thank-you card I send to God."

Sunny rolled her eyes.

"It's Sun, but everybody calls me Sunny."

"And I can see why," the stranger nodded. "You light up this whole place with your radiance."

Bobby turned and drew an invisible line on an invisible tote board on the side of the bar.

"I can see why, you light up the place' gets another point," he said dully. "Now it's only three behind 'They must call you Sunny because you have a heavenly body.'"

"Damn, look at Mr. Smart Guy over here," the swarthy smooth talker said. "If he

was any more nosy, we'd have to call him Pinocchio. Why don't you keep it to yourself, homes?"

"I'm sorry, maestro," Bobby conceded. "Go on with your work."

"So what do they call you, slick?" Sunny asked, feigning interest for the sake of a bigger tip.

"The name is Terence Trent DeLaRosa, meaning 'of the rose,'" he said, rolling the R with a flourish. "My friends call me Trent, but you can call me whatever you like."

"How about Terence Trent DeLaMerde?" Bobby suggested. "Meaning 'of the bullshit.'"

Terence Trent DeLaRosa's eyes narrowed into frustrated slits as he turned on Bobby.

"Look, friend," he said, putting his hand on Bobby's ample shoulder in a gesture that was meant to be intimidating, "I don't need you making a running commentary over here and disturbing this lovely young lady."

Bobby stiffened and looked straight ahead as he spoke in a low, threatening voice.

"I think that you should take your hand off of me now."

"And why is that, dawg?" Trent said, puffing out his chest.

Bobby turned with a coy flutter of his lashes.

"Because it's really starting to turn me on."

Trent let go of Bobby with a shove and turned back to Sunny.

"What a comedian this guy is," he said to the empty air.

Sunny had long since left the two bickering egos in favor of a cuter guy on the other side of the bar.

"Keep it up, Romeo," Bobby said. "I think she really likes you."

Without a word, Trent sat down at the bar and stared at Sunny's perfect, apple-shaped bottom, imagining exactly what he would like to do to it.

The rigid hose slipped into the snug opening and began vigorously pumping away.

At a twilit gas station just off of Stillwater Bay, Vivian was filling her Rabbit's tank. Through the magic of a long shower and a short reconnaissance mission into the back of her closet, she had metamorphosed from a weary wage slave into a budding wallflower.

A black polyester cocktail dress hugged her long, minimal curves, terminating two conservative inches below her knees. At its other end, the gown's neckline hovered above her modest cleavage in a manner that would have been suitable for a funeral. She was waiting until she got to the restaurant to put on her high heels-the Rabbit's worn-out clutch was difficult enough to operate as it was. In the meantime, Vivian's

slender legs ended in her ragged, ruby-colored Airwalks. Her blazing red hair was pulled up in a frayed knot that was impaled with a crossed pair of disposable take-out chopsticks.

There were many things that Vivian Gray could do well. Dressing with flair was not among them.

She leaned on the fender and waited while the gas pump chugged away. The sun had finally disappeared behind the horizon, making the temperature balmy and comfortable for the first time that day. Vivian could see, between the towers of two high-rise hotels, the pounded coral pattern of the abandoned white sand beach beyond. As always, the tourists had ignorantly retreated to their hotels as soon as the blistering summer sun had been extinguished beneath the waves, leaving the beach's finest moments to the seagulls and sandpipers.

She had a secret place on the waterfront that she liked to go to be alone on nights like this. Unfortunately, on this particular night she would not have the opportunity to enjoy solitude.

With a forlorn look in her eye, she pulled a beige, backpack-style purse from the back seat of her perpetually open convertible. She dug through its contents but couldn't find what she was looking for. Admittedly she hadn't used it in a while, but she knew it had to be in there somewhere. After a long moment of fruitless rummaging, she finally set the purse on the hood, pulled out a tiny plastic flashlight, and shined its yellow beam into the opening.

In the deepest, darkest depths of the purse she found it: a dried-out tube of lipstick. She twisted a crumbling pink shaft from the tube and began applying it to her lips with a clumsy, unpracticed stroke. This face-painting was just to fit in at the Banyan Terrace, she reminded herself. It was all just a part of the blackmail process. It was to get her job back. It was not to impress Nick.

"I hope you don't have to go too far with that fella tonight."

Vivian jumped and spun around guiltily, as if she had been caught in some unwholesome act. The unexpected voice belonged to an avuncular man fueling up an age-beaten Winnebago with Pennsylvania license plates.

"Excuse me?" Vivian squeaked, wiping an errant streak of pink off her chin.

The man ambled over and pointed to the Rabbit's comically undersized spare tire. "That fella there. The donut. I hope you don't have to go too far with it," he repeated. "You better get that replaced or it'll blow at the worst possible time. Believe me, I know what I'm talkin' about when it comes to cars."

"Oh, right. Thanks," Vivian said. "I know. Don't worry, I won't go too far. Ever."

The man nodded in agreement.

"If I were you I'd never go too far neither. Every time we come down to Florida the wife gets to wantin' to close up the farm and move here permanent. Stillwater is just like paradise, ain't it?"

Vivian flashed an insincere smile at the man and nodded. She didn't want to get into it. The man looked her up and down with a twinkle in his eye like a proud uncle on prom night.

"You're all dressed up mighty purdy, if you don't mind me sayin' so," he said. "You goin' someplace fancy with your fella?"

Vivian sighed and spoke in a surrendered monotone.

"I'm going on a date with a guy that I don't like in order to save a job that I don't want so that I can afford to pay bills that aren't mine."

The man let out a long, low whistle and leaned up against the Rabbit next to Vivian. Apparently he was in as much of a hurry to get back to his motor home as he was to get back to his farm.

"Well, that don't seem fair, does it?" he said. "Listen, I figger I can help you out a little."

He shifted his weight on his hips and wrestled a misshapen old wallet from the back pocket of his oil-stained shorts.

"Oh, no no. I'm okay, really," Vivian said shaking her head. "I couldn't take your mon-"

Before Vivian could complete her protest the man pulled a wrinkled photograph from his wallet and shoved it under her nose.

"What do you think of that?" he said reverently. "Ain't she a *beaut*? "

Vivian struggled to focus her eyes on the photo that hovered inches from her glasses. It depicted a bright yellow classic convertible, with the gregarious man behind the wheel wearing an embroidered black jacket and smiling from ear to ear. The photograph reeked of old leather and butt sweat. Vivian pulled her head back with an affronted squint.

"That there's a 1953 Cadillac Eldorado," the man said proudly. "Beautiful, beautiful machine. I restored her myself."

"That's ... nice?" Vivian ventured.

"She's more than nice! She's an absolute gem!" the man said defensively, stabbing his finger into the photo. " *That's* the kind of car you drive to paradise!"

He sighed and tucked the photo back into his wallet tenderly before continuing.

"But the wife, Lord love 'er, she don't like to stay in hotels. Says she don't like Bernice sleepin' on unfamiliar beddin'. Not that there's much of a chance of that happening, if you know whut I mean."

The man shook his head heavily and looked at the dilapidated motor home. Vivian peered through its sooty windshield to see a lanky, underweight teenage girl with dirty blond hair and the most homely face that she'd ever had the misfortune of laying eyes upon. The girl's mouth hung open like the leaf trap on a dingy motel swimming pool, displaying two rows of teeth that seemed to be arguing about

directions. She had a nose like an overripe radish and her eyes were neither the same size nor color. Vivian suppressed a horrified gasp, which collapsed into a feeling of overwhelming shame in her stomach.

"It's like I always say," the man said solemnly, "some people are the Caddy, and some are the motor home. Do ya see what I'm sayin' here?"

"I uh ... I think so," Vivian stammered uncomfortably. Her pump had clicked off ages ago.

"Let me explain myself," the man nodded. "On the one hand you've got people like the '53 Eldorado. They're flashy and slick, and everybody wants a piece of them just because they're so damned beautiful. But a lot of these classic cars are all chrome and polish with nothin' under the hood. All glitter and no horsepower, right? Then on the other hand you've got folks like the ol' mobile homestead here."

He threw a glance as if indicating the motor home, but his mournful eyes were obviously focusing on the obtuse lump in the passenger seat. His speech had taken on a well-worn cadence, as if he had mused through these points a thousand times before.

"Sure, the motor home here ain't a looker, but it's real reliable and comfortable. It's got all the comforts of home on the inside, so it don't have to be beautiful on the outside. Smart people know better than to just buy the Caddy because of its looks. They think about what's really important and hold out for the real deal. Anyone would be damned lucky to get a solid, down-to-earth motor home like that instead of some flashy, troublesome Caddy. Damned lucky. Do you see what I'm sayin'?"

"I think I may have picked up your deftly woven subtext," Vivian muttered. "It's what's on the inside that counts."

"That's right," the man nodded wisely. "So don't you go turning this boy of yours away just because he's the motor home and not the Cadillac."

Vivian blinked.

"Oh, no, you misunderstood," she said. "This boy *is* the Cadillac."

The man's eyes widened, and he took Vivian by the shoulder with a confidential whisper.

"Shoot, missy! If you've got the goods to get yourself a Cadillac, quit yer whinin' and go ride it to paradise!"

A vision of paradise jiggled in front of Trent and Bobby's mesmerized eyes as they began their third round of drinks. Sunny vigorously shook a silver cocktail shaker, causing her physique to bounce in the most pleasing way imaginable. Trent took in the show with drooling glee as he continued trying to talk her out of her sarong.

"Girl, it's a sin seeing an angelic creature like you all penned up behind that bar. You should be out dancing under the stars from which God dropped you. How about after you close down this dive you and I hit the beach, yo?"

"I'd really love to," Sunny lied. "But after work the only thing I'm going to be hitting is the books. I've got a lot of studying to do if I intend to pass the summer term."

"Oh, so you're a little schoolgirl, eh?" Trent smiled smarmily. "What institution of higher learning would be so cruel as to keep a sassy little co-ed like yourself all cooped up in the school house all summer long?"

"It's just community college," Sunny said humbly. "I've been taking classes to become a nurse."

"In that case, I'd be more than happy to help you with your homework," Trent grinned. "What do you say you come back to my hotel and we play doctor for a while, girl?"

Sunny smiled insincerely.

"With my grades, *playing* doctor is about the best I can do," she sighed. "I'm thinking about quitting school and just working the Martini full time. After all, I'd still be giving shots-I'd just be trading in needles for glasses."

She poured her silver shaker into a pair of shot glasses and pushed them across the bar toward Trent and Bobby. Before she could retrieve her hand, Trent took it in his own and spoke in a smooth, reassuring tone.

"Don't give up on your dreams so easily, girl," he said. "If you're half as smart as you are sexy, I guarantee you're gonna be the best doctor in the world before you know it."

Sunny returned Trent's hand to the bar gracefully.

"Well thanks, but a *whole lot* of doctors are going to have to die before I can claim that title."

Bobby downed his shot without a word. He had a real "live and let live" kind of attitude toward other people's lives. He didn't care if Sunny failed out of school or not. As far as he was concerned, he would rather have her at the Bikini Martini serving drinks than hidden away in some sterile hospital ward anyway.

When Sunny excused herself to the other end of the bar, Bobby's gaze drifted past her and onto the disgustingly familiar scene unfolding near the submarine. A stout and muscley-looking frat boy with a red face staggered toward the sub, escorting a skinny, drunken co-ed who seemed to have lost the ability to stand unsupported. A table full of his Greek brothers were cranking their arms in the air, barking and making deeply unintelligible catcalls.

The frat boy pressed a wad of sweaty bills into the hand of the bouncer stationed beside the sub, and the burly man pulled open the watertight hatch. The frattie swung his date's limp body into the land-bound vessel and then stepped in behind her, making one last bellowing call to his friends before the bouncer closed the door behind them. As the portal clanged shut, some yellow siren lights on the sub flashed weakly, and crackly speakers emitted a fake diving klaxon mixed with a sound bite of Steven Tyler crooning, "*Goooooiiiiiiiing doooooown.*"

The fraternity brothers again exploded into testosterone-charged hollering. Bobby shook his head in disgust and returned to his unfinished beer.

"Hey, B-Dawg," Trent said suddenly, apparently addressing Bobby. "See that fly honey over there?"

Bobby looked across the bar in the direction in which Trent was pointing. Sitting at the other end of the bar was a full-figured blond vixen in a tight red leather dress. She was making a good show of herself, despite the fact that she was obviously in denial about her actual age.

"The burned-out Loni Anderson chick?" Bobby asked.

"Yeah. I bet you twenty bucks I can get her phone number before you do."

Bobby burst out laughing.

"Why would I want her phone number?" he snorted. "She looks like Brett Butler in a porno movie!"

"Older women just have more experience in *knockin' da boots!*" Trent said, leaning back and banging the chunky heels of his wingtips together in the air.

"Okay, you're on," Bobby said. "I could use your twenty bucks to buy some better drinking buddies."

"I'll use *your* twenty to buy that hoochie some breakfast!" Trent bragged.

He jumped off his stool and strutted over to the woman as if listening to a song with an entirely different beat from the amateur reggae that was actually playing. She noticed him coming and smiled. Trent returned her smile and oozed an introduction.

"Damn, girl, is your daddy a thief?"

"No, why?" asked the woman, sounding suspiciously as if she was trying to hide something.

"Because I just wanted to know who stole the stars from God and put them in your eyes."

The woman laughed the hoarse cackle of a seasoned smoker.

"That's cute; I like that," she said, running her long, red fingernails up Trent's neck and around the back of his head. "But you know what I would like more?"

"A bottle of fine merlot, my hotel suite, and a 'do not disturb' sign?" Trent offered.

The woman grabbed his ear and forced his head down to the bar with an empty *thud*.

"I was thinking more along the lines of four steel shackles, my fourteen-inch black strap-on, a tube of Astroglide, and your sweet virgin ass," the woman growled, flicking her tongue stud against her teeth. "But we can forgo the lube if you like, slave."

From the other end of the bar, Bobby could see the color drain from his

adversary's face as he wriggled out of the savage grip of the lusty dominatrix. The rhythm had dropped out of Trent's step as he hurried back over to his stool.

"So where's her number, hotshot?" Bobby asked.

"I don't want none a' dat ass!" Trent said, staring blankly into the bar.

"I didn't want any either, but you wanted to make the stupid bet. Pay up."

"I don't think so, home-dawg! I don't have to give you nothin' if you can't get the digits."

"Alright, alright. I'll be right back."

Bobby's barstool breathed a creaking sigh of relief as he slid off of it. Trent watched in anxious anticipation as his rival strolled with casual indifference toward his fate. From this end of the bar, he couldn't hear what the two of them were saying, but he could see every move that they made.

Bobby tapped the woman on the shoulder and said something, thumbing at the door. The woman nodded her head and looked slightly alarmed. Bobby made a sort of comforting gesture with his hands and continued to talk to her. The dominatrix waved a summons to the bartender. Mike came over and gave the woman a pen, which she promptly used on a cocktail napkin.

Trent's jaw dropped to the bar. Not only had the husky loser managed to get her phone number, but he didn't look at all alarmed about the unholy reaming that would ensue if he used it.

When the woman was done writing her number, Bobby apparently wrote his number on a napkin and gave it to her in return. After the exchange, the woman left the bar, and Bobby returned to his weary stool.

"Here's her number," Bobby said, taking a swig of his beer and tossing the napkin in front of Trent. "Go knock yourself out ... or let her do it for you."

"Daaaaamn, B-Slice! How did you work that so fast?"

"I told her that I ran into her car and we should exchange numbers so my insurance company could pay for the damage."

"Oh, shit no, dawg!" Trent contested. "That's not cool! You tricked her! You didn't convince her that she wanted to blast off on your love rocket!"

"The bet I made was twenty dollars for a phone number," Bobby shrugged. "You'll have to raise the stakes if you want to make S&M part of the deal."

"Ooooh, cuuuuuuwl whip!"

Harry Stokes's tiny hand darted to a dusty shelf of He-Man action figures, snapping up a whip-toting Beast-Man and stuffing it into his pocket without a hint of subtlety. Almost before he had released his grip on the figure, Erik's bony fingers had plucked it away from him.

"Oh no you don't," he chirped. "Don't steal Beast-Man, Harry."

With no apparent recognition of Erik, Harry grabbed another figure from the

shelf.

"Cuuuuuwl axe!"

Harry made a motion to stuff Ram-Man into his coat. Erik snatched the figure with his empty hand.

"Don't steal Ram-Man, Harry."

"Cuuuuwl ccrossbow!"

"Don't steal Hordak, Harry."

"Cuuuuuuwl goat stick!"

"Don't steal Skeletor, Harry."

Erik held his fully laden arms clumsily across his chest as he attempted to keep half the population of Eternia out of Harry's shoplifting grasp.

"Whooooa, cuuuuwl swowrd!"

Before Erik could tell Harry not to steal He-Man, he realized that the shelf was already bare. He turned his eyes to the manic youngster just in time to see him hauling a full-sized sword out of a *Superman III* garbage can at the end of the aisle. This bin contained an assortment of wooden and plastic costume weapons, but Harry's discriminating eye had gone straight for the only steel blade in the bunch.

"Izaawesome! I'ma Powa Waynja! I'ma Powa Waynja!"

"Harry, no! Put that down!" Erik squeaked.

He dropped his armful of plastic musclemen to the floor with a clatter, but his desperate lunge was too late to catch hold of the youngster's tiny arm. Harry bolted across the store, brandishing his heavy blade in a lurching, off-balance swing. He teetered down the next aisle, coming to a stop next to his sister's upturned backside. Debbie was on her knees with her head lost beneath an eight-foot-tall shelving unit.

"Don't be scared, kitty! I'll get you out!" she called urgently. "Come here, kitty! I love you!"

The heavy steel shelves teetered menacingly as Debbie attempted to cram her round little body underneath them. Rows of ancient Looney Tunes and *The Great Muppet Caper* drinking glasses tipped over and rolled in meandering arcs as their shelves bounced and hopped erratically. But a mewling hiss stabbing from under the shelves suggested that Debbie was in more immediate danger from feline-related injuries than from falling glass.

Erik leapt between the siblings and threw a skinny hand on each of them.

"Harry! Give me that!" he snapped, yanking the sword out of Harry's tiny fist. "Debbie! Get out of there before you kill yourself!"

He grabbed Debbie by the belt of her little pink jeans, hauled her out from under the shelf, and dropped her on the carpet. Her mousy brown pigtails were covered in dust and cobwebs, but she didn't seem to notice or care.

"Harry! Quick!" she squeaked, clutching her chest. "The kitty needs help! Get under there and get the kitty out!"

"Owigh, Debbie! I saveda kitty!"

Without a moment's hesitation, Harry dropped to the floor and began to shimmy under the shelves, sending them again into a swaying bounce. Erik caught the first falling glass in his left hand, then caught one in his right, then could only watch in horror as the third and fourth smashed on the thin, padless carpet. He quickly returned his rescued merchandise to safety before snatching Harry out from under the unit and plopping him down on the floor next to his sister.

"Alright, you little mother fu-"

He took a deep breath.

"Alright, you little *monsters*, " he revised. "This is a place of business. This is not *Romper Room*. You can't just hang around here all night and play with Do Bee and wait for me to look at you in my magic mirror!"

The siblings looked at each other quizzically. Erik continued.

"So either buy something or get-"

Suddenly he noticed Debbie was clutching some tiny object to her chest.

"Debbie, what's that in your hands?"

"Nothing," Debbie said innocently.

Erik's eyes narrowed suspiciously. He held out his hand.

"Give it to me."

"No!" Debbie snapped. "It's mine!"

"Whatever it is, it's not yours," Erik argued. "Now give it to me."

"No!"

Erik thrust out his hand.

"Debbie Stokes," he roared, "whatever that is, you give it to me *now!* "

"Fine!" Debbie screamed. "Take my present away! See if I care!"

She unclasped her hands and defiantly slapped a dead mouse into Erik's outstretched palm. Erik's face instantly bleached white as the smashed rodent's blood leaked warmly through his fingers.

"Eeeeaugh!" he recoiled, dropping the carcass with a tiny, wet *splat*.

He grabbed a nearby box of tissues and frantically wiped his palm. He continued to wipe long after the blood had been cleaned, as if trying to erase the stain from his mind.

"Ew, ew, God," he chattered. "Oh God, ew. Ew."

When he had exhausted the entire box, Erik finally turned on Debbie.

"Debbie, what's the *matter* with you?" he shouted. "Where did you get that?"

"The kitty gave it to me!" Debbie cried. "The kitty gives me presents because she loves me!"

"Twiki gave this to you?" Erik squeaked. "Well, she's a bad kitty!"

He reached his long arm under the shelves and grabbed Twiki by the scruff of her neck, pulling her out and thrusting a trembling finger at her bloody mouth.

"Twiki!" he snapped. "I told you to stop killing mice! It's disgusting! No more dead mice, Twiki! Do you understand? No. More. Dead. Mice!"

Whether she understood or not, Twiki was not the kind of cat who liked to be lectured. In a flash of feline muscle, all of her front claws were once again planted in Erik's chastising forearm. He dropped the cat with a yelp, and she darted away into the shadows of the dusty aisles, closely pursued by a giggling, bloodstained Debbie.

"Man, I've gotta quit doing that," Erik whimpered stupidly, rubbing his scratched arm.

He turned to clean up the dead mouse but found that it had suddenly gone missing. He dropped to one knee and held out his empty tissue box toward the five-year-old.

"Hand it over, Harry."

Harry opened up his coat, guiltily pulled the dead mouse from an inside pocket, and dropped it in the cardboard makeshift coffin. Erik shook his head.

"What is *wrong* with you, Harry? Why are you trying to steal a dead mouse?"

Harry shrugged.

"A'cause Debbie tolme to."

"Debbie's not *well*," Erik said disgustedly. "Don't listen to her. If Debbie told you to jump off the Skyshine Causeway Bridge, would you do it?"

Harry's eyes grew wide as a smile spread across his tiny face.

"Debbie ses I can jump offda bwige! Cuuuuwl! Lesgo for swimmies!"

Erik shook his head in disbelief.

"Why do I get the feeling you're not going to live to see your sixth birthday?"

"Well, happy birthday to *me*," Trent grinned, making goo-goo eyes across the room. "I do believe that business-suit beauty over at that table is checking out the T-man's goods!"

Bobby glanced over at the bony, straitlaced woman perched like a crane behind a nearby table. When she noticed the boys looking at her, she turned away with a fierce scowl.

"Ally McBeal with PMS?" Bobby asked. "Yeah, go get her, stud boy."

"Oh, I'll get a piece of that," Trent nodded. "But first how about another friendly

wager? Double or nothing you can't get her phone number."

Bobby squinted at Trent.

"You don't even have my twenty, do you?"

"Don't be dissin' my greenbacks, Heavy B! I got the dollars if you got the digits."

Bobby sighed.

"Alright, alright. Let's do it."

"None of this insurance scam bullshit this time, yo. She has to give you her phone number because she wants to do a little naked bed wrestling. Are you down?"

"Yeah, yeah. You want to try first again, Mr. Smooth?"

"Damn straight, and this time your sorry ass isn't going to *get* a turn!"

Bobby watched Trent head across the plank floor to the round plastic table, strutting suavely past the submarine as another anonymous jock and another drunken sorority sister folded into the dubious privacy of its steel belly. Trent approached his mark from behind, leaned in over her shoulder, and trickled a hot, moist whisper into her ear.

"Did it hurt?"

The woman recoiled in surprise, choking on a sip of her drink. She twisted in her plastic chair and sized him up furiously.

"Did *what* hurt?" she snapped.

Trent smiled and slid into the seat next to her.

"Did it hurt when you fell down from Heaven?"

The girl gave Trent a fiery scowl.

"*That's* not the direction that I came from," she growled. "Get lost, asshole."

She crossed her legs tightly and returned her stare to the bar.

"Oooh, feisty!" Trent said with a wide, gleaming smile. "I love the women down here in Florida. Y'all keep it real, yo. I hate it when people try to act fake and pretend they're something they're not, you know?"

"Bullshit," the woman spat. "You're the stereotypical fake asshole poseur male. Look at yourself. You're a mess. Your skin is a fake bottle-bronze, your fake gold jewelry looks like it's out of a box of Cracker Jacks-even your big, fake, shit-eating grin looks like it's made out of toilet-bowl porcelain."

Trent covered his conspicuously white teeth with a conspicuously bronze hand in embarrassment.

"Damn, baby, why so harsh?" he said, pretending to investigate her cocktail. "You must be drinkin' the Haterade! I came here to get myself enhanced, not beat down!"

"Well, I came for the view," the girl snarled. "Not to get harassed by every fake

asshole tourist looking to show off his newly enhanced fake dick."

"Oh no, I assure you, little Moses is all natural," Trent said defensively, puffing out his chest and adjusting the lump in the front of his trousers. "And he's ready to raise his staff and divide your Red Sea, girl!"

From across the bar, Bobby saw Trent take a whiskey sour square in the face. Dampened and downtrodden, he returned to his loser stool at the bar.

"You must have really scored that time!" Bobby grinned. "She bought you a drink!"

"Shut up," Trent growled. "You're not gettin' none a' dat. She's got da itch wit' da capital B."

"Well," Bobby said, finishing off his fourth beer, "at least she's already spent her ammo on you."

He set down his mug and waddled off toward the boiling feminist. Trent called after him in a forced whisper.

"Remember, the number has to be for *sex!* "

"Yeah, yeah ..."

Trent watched from the bar as his rival approached the girl's table. She looked as if she was about to smash her empty tumbler on the table and ram a shard of jagged glass through his throat. As if oblivious to the danger, Bobby just sat down and started talking.

Trent was impressed: If nothing else, his adversary had balls. It was a shame this chick was about to tear them off. He took another sip of his drink and glanced at the submarine. To chaotic applause, another frat boy climbed out of the hatch and held aloft a pair of red satin panties as if they were the Holy Grail. Trent took another casual sip of his drink and looked back at Bobby just in time to see the skinny girl grinning from ear to ear and handing him a folded cocktail napkin. She continued to gleam with happiness as Bobby returned to the bar.

"Oh you are so bullshit," Trent snapped. "Quit frontin'. I said that the number had to be for *sex!* "

"It is! I don't know how you didn't catch the vibes she was throwing off, but that girl is horny as hell. I assure you, this number is for sex."

"You're lying!" Trent bawled. "You're such a big liar they call you Simba the lyin' king! If it's for sex, then prove it, fat boy!"

"Alright, alright. Keep your shorts on."

He gestured over the bar to Sunny.

"What's up, Bobby?" Sunny asked.

"I don't know how open you are to experimentation," Bobby said, pushing the napkin across the bar, "but that girl with the bad attitude over there *really* wants to get up your skirt."

Vivian's wheezing Rabbit skirted the ornate fountain that stood in the center of the traffic circle, welcoming her to the town of Port Manatee. Although she was only ten miles north of Stillwater on the map, she was a million miles away financially. There were no roadside tourist traps in Port Manatee, no cut-rate rental cars or seedy hotel chains. There were only seaside manors, private beaches, and a harbor full of yachts so sprawlingly gargantuan that they threatened the very laws of hydrodynamics. In Port Manatee, the air itself smelled of high society and old money.

Vivian glanced down at the large analog clock in her dashboard and winced. She was officially over twenty minutes late. Ordinarily it wouldn't have taken so long to get here, but the man at the gas station had made her so paranoid about her spare tire that every tiny imperfection in the road rattled up her steering column as a warning to slow down. She turned off of the main street and onto a spotless white concrete driveway that swerved between rows of perfectly manicured miniature palms. With a lingering press on the brake, the Rabbit scraped to a grinding halt in front of the valet counter at the Banyan Terrace.

A green-vested valet rushed up to the disintegrating car with a look of smugness pulled tightly across his pimply teenage face. In his dark eyes was the cold glare of a tyrant with little to be tyrannical over. He glowered at the shuddering Rabbit as if it were a pile of freshly skinned kittens.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said curtly. "The Banyan Terrace's parking structure is full to capacity this evening. You'll have to park your ... *vehicle* someplace else."

His mouth and tongue formed the word "vehicle," but his voice clearly said "piece of shit, unworthy of our accommodation." A second valet pulled a long black Mercedes around the rattling convertible as if to literally drive this point home. Vivian quickly understood how things worked at the Banyan Terrace.

"Perhaps you could check again," she said, digging into her purse. "I think there may be a space that you've overlooked."

With a subtle flick of her wrist, she pressed a crushed five-dollar bill into the valet's hand. He looked at her contemptuously.

"No," he said. "There isn't."

Vivian smirked and pulled out the remainder of her cash.

"Okay then," she said, "how about now?"

She took the valet's hand and slipped him a pair of wrinkled one-dollar bills. The oil on his face seemed to ripple with insult.

"Oh, come on," Vivian pleaded. "I'm already half an hour late for my reservation. Work with me here."

The valet looked at the line of impatient luxury sedans building in the acrid blue smokescreen pouring from the Rabbit's back end. After a long pause, he stuffed the money into his pocket and opened Vivian's door with a stiff bow.

"All right," he muttered under his breath. "I might be able to squeeze it in under a

ramp somewhere, but I can't guarantee that it won't get scratched."

The way he delivered the phrase made it seem not as much a disclaimer as a promise.

"That's fine. As long as I get it back in one piece," Vivian sighed. "Just leave it in gear when you park it. The hand brake is out."

"I would expect nothing less," the valet sneered.

Vivian quickly wrenched her sneakers from her feet and replaced them with a pair of black heels of a timeless design that any generation would have found bland. She started to toss her ragged sneakers in the back seat but then thought better of the idea and set them on the dashboard instead.

When the snobby valet slipped behind the wheel, he found himself face-to-acne-riddled-face with two mangled ruby tongues effusing a foot odor so noxious its use in warfare would have been banned by the Geneva Convention. Vivian gave him an innocent smile as he covered his nose, put the shifter in gear, and wrestled the ornery vehicle up the driveway and into the parking garage.

Slinging the narrow straps of her purse over her shoulders, Vivian turned and proceeded up the sidewalk toward the restaurant. Her awkward, stumbling steps betrayed how long it had been since she had been given an opportunity to wear high heels. Even so, the scenery made up for her inconvenience.

The Banyan Terrace's front walk was straight from the pages of a fairy tale. Even though there had been a downpour only hours before, the velvety emerald carpet that blanketed the path was perfectly clean and dry. Through the decades since the restaurant opened, the hanging root systems of a pair of two-hundred-year-old banyan trees had been carefully braided over a series of wire arches, forming a knotty wooden tunnel that led to the sparkling green glass front of the building. When she reached the end of the path, a doorman greeted her wobbling stride with restrained doubt and ushered her through the entrance.

Nothing that Vivian had seen in her life on the other side of the poverty line could have prepared her for the wave of dining opulence that broke over her and smothered her senses.

The main foyer of the Banyan Terrace was nothing short of spectacular. Directly in front of her an artificial rock face towered the full height of the two-story interior, spilling a crystalline, almost champagne-like waterfall quietly over the stone and into a serene goldfish pool below. The floor was an exquisite mosaic of seashells, arranged by natural color to form an idyllic image of a peaceful beach at sunset. On each side of the waterfall, elegant oak staircases flanked with golden banisters spiraled to the second floor. The whole room smelled of fresh bread and sweet linens.

Maybe this wasn't going to be so bad after all.

"May I help you, miss?"

Vivian looked to her right and saw a narrow, balding maitre'd posted behind a

gold-trimmed lectern with a tiny, emerald-colored banker's lamp.

"Yes, I'm supposed to be meeting with a friend," she said, turning the word over in her mouth as if trying to make it sound true.

"The gentleman's name, please," the man said through his nose, thumbing his reservation book.

"It's um ... Nick."

"The gentleman's *last* name?"

"I, uh ... I guess I don't know his last name," Vivian admitted meekly.

The maitre'd gave her a glare that made the way the valet had looked at her car seem like true love.

"If you don't have a reservation, miss," he droned, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to-"

"Check under Aspen. Nick Aspen."

Vivian turned to find Nick standing behind her, grinning confidently at the flustered maitre'd and holding a drink in each hand. He was wearing an olive-green suit that was tailored to his body with such precision that one could imagine a team of biomechanical engineers blowing an entire grant on its construction. His green eyes caught hers, delivering a friendly wink. Despite all efforts to the contrary, Vivian blushed.

"C'mon," Nick said, gesturing with a broad shoulder. "We've already got a table over here."

Vivian shot a satisfied glance of victory at the scowling maitre'd before taking a step, falling off of her heel, bumping into Nick, and splashing his drink onto the pristine mosaic floor. The maitre'd put his fingers to his forehead in a gesture that screamed, "There goes the neighborhood."

The table to which Nick led Vivian was located in a corner of the dimly lit restaurant overlooking the outside gardens. A tall white candle stood in the center of the table, flickering its light as if to demand that romance transpire in its presence. Nick set down his beverages and escorted Vivian into her seat before taking his own.

"Where you been, Red?" he smiled. "I've been here for like, an hour. I just hit the bar and picked up some drinks while I was waiting for you to show up."

He pulled a tall glass of light beer toward himself and pushed the other glass toward Vivian. It was a stemmed fishbowl the size of her head, filled with a frosty pink beverage and ornamented with a fat strawberry.

"I got you a strawberry daiquiri," he continued, "to match those beautiful strawberry locks of yours, Red."

"All right, stop calling me Red," Vivian snapped. "My name isn't Red-it's Gray. Vivian Gray."

"Vivian Gray," Nick said dreamily. "Vivian Gray. That's a pretty name."

"No it isn't," Vivian scowled. "It sounds like one of the suspects from *Clue*."

Nick smiled and raised an eyebrow.

"Well, with a tight little body like yours, I'm sure that you could get away with murder."

He threw her a wink and magnificent grin. Vivian rolled her eyes.

"So, have you spoken to Boltzmann about my job yet?" she asked.

"That's no way to be, Vivian Gray!" Nick laughed. "You're in the most expensive restaurant in Port Manatee! And just look at the rockin' dude you've got on your arm! That bogus McJob of yours should be the last thing on your mind right now. You need to just loosen up for a while."

He took a sip of his beer, smiled his centerfold-perfect grin, and put his hand on Vivian's knee. She politely removed it.

"So, shall I assume then that you have *not* yet spoken to Boltzmann about my job?" she asked sourly.

Nick's smile faded.

"Alright, you got me. I haven't," he admitted. "And, to be totally honest, I was never really going to."

"Oh, come on, Nick," Vivian pleaded. "Extortion is a very simple process! I go on a date with you; you get me my job back. What part of this transaction don't you understand?"

"The part I don't understand," Nick frowned, "is why you're so anxious to get that heinous job back when you could be doing something so much more intense with your life!"

"Oh right," Vivian huffed. "Like what? Selling Fusion Fuel like you?"

"I was thinking more like selling Fusion Fuel *with* me," Nick said seriously. "Vivian, I want you to ditch that grocery store job and come join my modeling agency. That's the real reason I wanted to take you out tonight."

Vivian burst out laughing, but her good humor quickly turned sour.

"I can't believe I wore lipstick for this," she grumbled, wiping her lips on a napkin. "If I'd have known that you had no intention of getting my job back I never would have come here."

"Seriously! I *know*," Nick said with exasperation. "For some reason you're so dead set on living at the bottom of the retail food chain that you won't even give a dude a chance when he wants to kick your career up a level! I could make it so that the next time you walk into Boltzmann's Market that fat bastard would be kissing your ass instead of the other way around. Doesn't that interest you at *all*?"

Vivian's harsh scowl suddenly softened around the edges as the thought poured over her mind. She took a long, contemplative pull from the straw of her daiquiri before finally speaking.

"All right, I came all the way out here for this; I may as well hear the pitch."

"Rockin' cool! That's the way to be!" Nick grinned. "I've had my eye on you ever since I saw that fiery hair of yours this morning, Red ... er, Vivian. I'm tellin' ya, you could be the Angie Everhart of the Gulf Coast if you just joined up with my agency. Nobody can ignore a natural redhead! You'd get the top-dollar jobs just banging down your door!"

Vivian looked over her glasses at Nick skeptically.

"I see. So you're just looking to make sure that I exploit my follicles to the fullest?" she challenged. "I suppose there's nothing in it for you?"

Nick's smile wilted as his eyes shifted guiltily to his drink and lingered there for a long moment.

"Well, I guess you *would* need somebody to show you the ropes," he said innocently. "And, you know, I guess I *do* need to find myself a top-shelf partner if I'm ever going to make platinum level ..."

Vivian nodded her sudden comprehension.

"Ahh, yes. Perhaps I should take this opportunity to remind you that I'm not the boss's daughter," she said, drawing finger quotes in the air. "'Nailing' me isn't going to provide you with anything but sexual disappointment."

Nick shook his head defensively.

"It's not like that," he explained. "The boss's daughter isn't just *sleeping* with Mr. Platinum, she's also *working* with him. They're a promo modeling team. No, that's not even fair—they're a promo modeling *force*. But you and me, Vivian, if we teamed up we could totally kick their asses, hardcore!"

Vivian laughed joylessly.

"Oh, we could *not*. Have you even bothered to look below my scalp, Nick? I'm not exactly supermodel material here. I'm just a tall, skinny goon with no fashion sense. I'm not even pretty!"

Nick tipped his head and a long smile blossomed across his face. He put his hand on top of Vivian's and spoke in a voice like warm honey.

"You are too pretty, Vivian. I know you've got the soul of a model, if only you'd stop trying so hard to hide it. All you need to do is just let down your hair and take off your glasses."

With a slow, comforting reach he grasped the corners of Vivian's thick black rims and pulled her glasses from her face. Almost immediately her eyes turned toward each other, leaving her staring at her own nose in a blind, cross-eyed goggle.

"Okay," Nick conceded. "So maybe just let the hair down then."

Vivian snatched her glasses and planted them back on her freckled nose, straightening out her vision with a series of quick blinks.

"Just forget it, Nick," she said. "Nothing you can do or say is going to make me

want to be your modeling partner. End of discussion."

Nick sighed and picked up a tall green menu. Vivian did likewise.

"Alright, you win," Nick said. "I guess I'm on my own for this tour. I just thought you might like to get out of Stillwater for a while."

Vivian's eyes flicked up over the top of her menu curiously.

"What do you mean, 'get out of Stillwater'?"

"Oh, you know. New York, Chicago, San Francisco, wherever," Nick said matter-of-factly. "The Fusion Fuel promo blitz is gonna hit all of the regular metro regions."

Vivian blinked. Then she blinked again.

"Wait, wait," she stammered. "Do you mean to tell me that they send you all around the country just to be obnoxious and peddle your quack remedies?"

"Oh sure," Nick shrugged. "My agency is the big time, baby. We only take national-level gigs. You didn't honestly think that I just worked Stillwater, did you? None of us models are ever in Florida for more than a few days a year."

Vivian took a long, quiet sip of her daiquiri.

"So," she said casually, "tell me more about this agency of yours."

"I've never earned so much money for such easy work," Bobby said coolly. "Do you want to just fork over the forty you now owe me, or shall we go for eighty?"

"Okay, B, we've had our fun. What do you say I just buy the next round and we call it even," Trent said amicably. "After all, let us not forget what the Bible says: 'Money is the route to all evil.'"

Bobby snorted.

"Well, the Bible's never seen my sister when the rent is due. Pay up, sucker."

The brown-nosing smile dropped from Trent's face and was replaced with a combative scowl.

"Whatever, homes. You been scammin' all night," he muttered, gesturing at Sunny. "Hey beautiful barmaid, you gonna let this punk straight-up rob your customers right under your fine little nose?"

"Oh no, don't drag me into this," Sunny said defensively. "I have a strict policy of non-involvement in bar bets. You two work this out yourselves."

The conversation was interrupted by another chorus of frat-boy cheering as the bouncer pulled open the submarine's hatch. A husky jock in a crushed cowboy hat stepped from the vessel, still fastening the oversized buckle of his belt. He strode aggressively into the swarm of his brothers, and they greeted him with a thunderous round of congratulatory slaps delivered to his thick back and arms.

"Hey, Sunshine," Trent said, gesturing to the sub. "What's that thing all about?"

Sunny stopped wiping down the bar and looked at the sub bitterly.

"Some bars have a mechanical bull. Some bars have karaoke. This bar has a lawsuit waiting to happen," she sighed. "The guy who owns the Martini picked up the *Sawfish* at auction when the Stillwater Oceanographic Institute lost its funding back in the '70s. Since then it's gone from 'deep sea' to *Deep Throat*."

When the crowd's focus had long since left the darkened sub, a narrow co-ed stumbled from its door, rubbing a trickling nosebleed on her limp forearm.

"So it's like some kind of make-out room?" Trent asked.

"Wow, nothing gets past you, eh Sherlock?" Bobby grumbled, sliding off his stool. "Okay, it's been real. Time to cash out, big shot. My work here is done."

Trent put his hand on Bobby's shoulder and pushed him back onto his stool.

"Whoa whoa, hold up, homes," he said. "What do you say we make one more friendly wager? Go for an even hundred bucks."

Bobby sighed.

"You're lucky I need the money," he muttered. "Alright, whose number do you want this time, Valentino?"

"Uh uh-when you play for the big bucks, it's high stakes," Trent said. "For the Benjamin, you have to get a girl into that sub."

"Oh, screw you!" Bobby spat. "If I wanted to sit in a puddle of frat-boy spooge, I'd go to a House of Pain concert."

"S'cool with me, bro. S'cool. I respect a man who knows his limits," Trent gloated. "Scamming numbers is one thing, but there ain't no way a butterball like you could get something sweet down on his meat."

Bobby glared at Trent as his freckly cheeks prickled into redness. He settled back on his stool and cracked his knuckles.

"Alright, smart-ass, any girl in the bar. Pick one."

Trent's lips slid away from his broad, square teeth. It seemed that the tide had finally turned in his favor. Finding a girl that wouldn't spend seven minutes of heaven with Bobby wasn't exactly a challenge, but he wanted to find the perfect foil. A girl so outrageously gorgeous that she would never touch a slob like Bobby in a million years. A second later he had made his selection.

"I choose the prettiest girl in Stillwater, Florida," he announced, "our gracious host, Sunflower."

Sunny looked up from her work with a raised eyebrow.

"Pick someone else," she ordered. "I wouldn't get in that filthy sub to save my life."

"Ha! That's what I thought!" Trent gloated. "Ain't no way something so fine as you would go down on something so foul as him. *Cha-ching!* Pay up, dawg."

"I think you misunderstood me," Sunny corrected. "As I said before, I do not get involved in bar bets. It's got nothing to do with Bobby. Everyone knows I love

Bobby."

With that she leaned over the bar, took Bobby's head in her flawless hands, and kissed him on the forehead. Bobby rocked back on his stool with a dreamy smile pushing out the corners of his goatee. He knew that the kiss was only meant to infuriate Trent, but the fact that it had obviously worked made it almost as sweet as if it had been sincere. At this point Bobby realized that all of the money that he had won from Trent would be going directly toward Sunny's tip.

"Alright, seriously now," he said. "You lost fair and square this time. Can I have my money now?"

"It ain't like that," Trent argued. "The naughty nurse rendered that transaction officially null and void. No harm, no foul, yo. The T gets a do-over."

Bobby sighed.

"Oh, just get it over with already."

Trent turned back to the barroom and profiled the few remaining beauties with extreme scrutiny. He picked apart every shapely young girl in the room, trying to find whatever tiny loopholes they might open up for his unscrupulous competitor to latch on to and exploit. This was now about more than just money. Trent needed to find the girl who would not only ensure his victory but publicly humiliate Bobby as Bobby had been humiliating him ever since he walked through that bamboo doorway.

And then in that same doorway she appeared. A pair of bony legs wrapped in torn fishnets stumbled into the bar, balancing atop them a severely drunk, savage-looking girl. One hand clutched what looked like a forty-ounce malt liquor in a wet paper bag, the other an unfiltered cigarette, belching out black fumes like a '73 Plymouth Duster.

"Right there," Trent said, throwing out a finger. "There's your girlfriend, B. Go get her."

Bobby glanced at the menacing newcomer expressionlessly.

"Forget it," he said. "A hundred bucks isn't worth it."

"Bullshit," Trent said. "You just don't have the goods."

Bobby looked the girl up and down.

"A hundred bucks?" he confirmed.

"Yep."

"To get her in the sub."

"Right."

"And you've got the money?"

"Right here," Trent said, patting the squarish bulge in his back pocket.

Bobby downed the remaining half of his beer in one go.

"Alright," he said, wiping his mouth on his forearm. "You're on."

He creaked off his barstool and met his mark halfway across the planked floor. The girl took a drag from her cigarette and blasted dual jets of smoke from of her tiny, pierced nose, giving her the look of a demon straight from the pits of Hell. Her fierce eyes stared down Bobby's approaching form with a glare of burning menace.

But it's hard to intimidate somebody after he's seen you bagging his groceries.

"Hey, Scary Sherri," Bobby said calmly. "You look more like a corpse tonight than usual."

"Pissh off, Gray. I'm schelebrating," Sherri slurred through an almost visible haze of alcohol. "If you like your teshticles where they are, I suggesht you step out from between me andza booze."

She threw a small white pill into the back of her throat and washed it down with a nip from her bottle.

"Look, this is going to sound strange, but I promise my intentions are pure," Bobby said, holding up his right hand. "There's fifty bucks in it for you if you'll just sit in the sub with me for five minutes. No sex."

Sherri paused. She rolled her eyes skyward and tapped on her lips.

"Hmmm, innsheresting offer," she said, "but I think I'm going to go with '*Fuck you!*' "

She resumed stomping unsteadily toward the bar.

"Fair enough, fair enough," Bobby said, quickly blocking her path. "But what if I told you that this simple task would not only earn you fifty bucks but would also completely humiliate that smarmy *Swingers*- lookin' asshole at the bar?"

Sherri glanced over Bobby's shoulder.

"Cheshire cat with sideburns?"

"That's the guy."

Sherri blinked and took a long, hard swig out of her forty-ounce.

From across the bar, Trent's stomach plunged into his empty wallet as he saw Sherri take Bobby by the hand and lead him down the boardwalk to the submarine. He turned back to the bar and looked at Sunny with desperation.

"How? How did he? How could he?"

Sunny looked at Sherri and Bobby climbing into the sub and shrugged.

"You know what they say," she mused. "Nobody can ignore a natural redhead."

Vivian raised her fingers and drew in an expectant breath, but before she could push it through her vocal cords yet another waiter had swept past her table without so much as a curious glance. He slid a silver tray of exotic coffees onto a neighboring table to the delight of a sexy young Latina with a high giggle and a low décolletage. Vivian dropped her extended hand on the green tablecloth next to a

fishbowl containing nothing but a shallow pink froth and a nibbled strawberry stem. Her heavy head seemed to wobble across her shoulders, and she propped it up on her elbow.

"Did you see that? That's the fifth waiter who's totally ignored me," she muttered drunkenly. "How many waiters does Charo need over there? At this rate we'll starve before we even place an order."

Nick laughed.

"You can't give up that easy," he said. "If you want to be a promotional model, you're going to have to learn to get people's attention."

"By doing what?" Vivian said. "Wearing a low-cut dress and giggling rapidly? I'd rather starve."

Nick waved a dismissive hand.

"You're looking at it all wrong," he said. "You just see a girl busting out of her dress over there. I see a girl using what she's got to command every waiter in this restaurant. I'll totally bet she's not even getting charged for that coffee. I'm telling you, Vivian, if you ever want to succeed you've got to learn to use your assets."

"I *do* use my assets," Vivian snapped. "The assets I choose to use are right here."

She tapped her index finger on her cranium.

"Well, in a perfect world that might actually get you somewhere," Nick said comfortingly. "But in reality, you'd get a lot farther in life if you just got yourself a low-cut dress and a push-up bra."

Vivian's eyes went narrow with disgust.

"Spoken like a true model," she smirked. "How can you even *suggest* that physical beauty is more important than intellect?"

"I guess there's a time and a place for everything," Nick said flatly. "But if brains are really more important than looks, then how come Miss Teen South America over there has five waiters and you have a big round zero? I'm tellin' ya, Vivian, you just need to find the self-confidence to use your sweet little body to your advantage for once. Smarts are all fine and good, but there's no way in a million years that you're going to out-flash a girl with assets like hers using nothing but your big brain."

A fire blazed in Vivian's eyes.

"You want flash?" she snarled. "Just watch me, pretty boy."

She leaned over to the giggling Latina's extravagant coffee set and gestured at the sugar and creamer.

"May I?" she asked.

The girl gave an affronted nod as if Vivian was a vagrant who had just climbed out of the sewer and asked for her underpants. Vivian leaned back over to her own table and tore open five purloined packets of non-dairy creamer, pouring them into her slender palm.

"So what, you're just going to start begging for food?" Nick laughed. "That's the best plan your big brain can come up with?"

Without warning, Vivian drew in a lungful of air and blew the powder through the table candle's flame, producing an enormous flash of fire. All the waiters in the room dropped what they were doing with a clatter and stared in terror at the scorched air. Even the spicy Latina stopped her giggling to pay homage to what had, if only for a second, eclipsed her as the hottest thing in the room.

"Whoa! That was *intense!*" Nick gasped. "What did you put in that?!"

"Just science," Vivian explained. "The entire surface area of each suspended granule is exposed to oxygen, so it burns quickly and spreads the fire to its neighbors at an exponential rate." She smiled. "I'd like to see you out-flash *that* with a Wonderbra."

Nick's gaping mouth twisted into a delighted smile.

"So you do have a wild side, Vivian Gray!"

Before Vivian could reply, the maitre'd rushed across the room, surrounded by a gaggle of pointing, whispering waiters. He stepped up to the table and cleared his throat.

"As you may or may not be aware," he said sternly, "the Port Manatee fire codes expressly forbid pyrotechnic displays in places of business."

"Sorry, I was just trying to get your attention," Vivian grinned. "We're ready to order."

"The Banyan Terrace does not oblige take-out orders," the maitre'd replied tersely.

"Oh, we're not leaving now," Nick smiled.

"Yes," the maitre'd said, "I'm afraid that you are."

The watertight door of the *Sawfish* slammed closed with a harsh, rattling *clank*, blotting out the sound of the fake klaxons and whooping fratties outside and leaving Bobby and Sherri in a dark, stale silence. Although the vessel was the size of a short bus on the outside, the thick steel walls shrank the cabin down to a volume roughly equivalent to that of a Ford Festiva. A half-burnt-out string of white Christmas lights provided a light wash of illumination over a squalid, beer-poster-plastered chamber containing nothing but a graffiti-tagged wooden bench bolted to the back wall. Sherri dropped heavily onto the seat and took a heavy drag of her cigarette, making the hot, claustrophobic interior of the sub that much more oppressive.

"Judging from the condition of the floor," Bobby observed, "it looks like this thing has seen more 'spit' than 'swallow.'"

Without a word, Sherri wrenched her feet from the sticky floor and pulled her skinny legs onto the bench, pressing her knees against her hollow chest and leaning her narrow back against the sealed entry hatch. Bobby plopped down on the other end of the bench, making a conscious effort not to accidentally make contact with

Sherri's combat-boot-clad toes. They sat for a moment in awkward silence before Sherri finally spoke.

"You owe me a schhitload of drinks as soon as we geddoutta here."

"You got it, Sherri. Anything you want."

"Absinthe."

"The closest you're going to get to absinthe around here is a piña colada."

Sherri blinked her massive eyes.

"I hate this fucking town."

She popped another pair of white pills into her mouth and drowned them in malt liquor.

"What's the matter?" Bobby asked. "Got a headache?"

"I don't *get* headaches," Sherri said, "I *give* headaches. Ish Special K. I scored it offa shum guy over at the Gator Club."

Bobby looked at her skeptically.

"Isn't Special K a liquid?"

"Yeah, when ish raw. You gotta evaporate it into powder."

Bobby nodded.

"Okay. Sure. Those are *pills*."

Sherri fumbled another pill between her numbed fingers.

"The dealer saysh he presshes the powder into capsules."

Bobby squinted.

"Even if that was possible, which it isn't, you would have taken enough by now to kill a rhino."

Sherri scowled.

"Who are you, McGruff the fucking crime dog? Shudda fuck up."

She threw the pill at Bobby. It bounced off his belly and landed in his lap. He held it up to the light for investigation and then burst out laughing.

"What'sh so funny?"

"You might want to see your dealer about a refund on these. I think you've been ripped off."

"Tell me about it. This schhit is *weak*. I've taken like, twenty of theesh bitches and I'm not even gettin' a buzz-I just feel like ..."

"A natural woman?"

"Huh?"

Bobby held the pill in front of Sherri's empty eyes.

"These aren't Special K. They're those estrogen pills for old ladies. I've seen the commercial on TV. *Don't treat menopause like a lady ...* "

"Bullschhit."

"Look, the name is printed right on there. *Menoplay.* "

"Aw fuck *me*, " Sherri moaned, squinting at the pill. "That asshole told me it was hard-ass street talk! 'Me no play.' You know, like it's hardcore shit that doesn't fuck around."

"*Me no play?!*" Bobby laughed. "Who's your dealer? Tickle Me Elmo?"

Erik sat behind the counter, thumbing ticklishly through a dog-eared 1968 copy of *Criswell Predicts Your Future From Now to the Year 2000!*

"Oh Criswell, you loon," he smiled, "none of these predictions were even *close.* "

He glanced up from his book to see Debbie squeezing and hugging the Batty Koda doll that Harry had failed to steal earlier. What had formerly been a mint-condition collectible now hung from her arms in a limp and mangled heap. Erik sighed a resigned sigh as he approached her.

"Alright, Debbie, give me that before you completely ruin it."

"No," Debbie sulked, clutching her treasure. "It's my baby."

"It's not your baby," Erik said. "It's the physical embodiment of a spastic Robin Williams voice-over."

"It's my baby!" Debbie shrieked.

Erik shoved his upturned palm under her nose.

"It's not your baby until you pay for it!" he barked. "Now hand it over!"

"I hate you!" Debbie screamed. "You never let me have anything the kitty gives me!"

With that, she reared back and clapped her baby into Erik's palm. A pair of lifeless membrane wings unfurled wetly over his narrow hand, revealing the mangled body of a dead bat. Erik's blood-spattered arm spasmed involuntarily, sending the deceased on a final flight across the room.

"Ew! Ew, God! No," he stammered, wiping his hand frantically on the carpet. "Debbie! Where did you get that?!"

"The kitty gave it to me!" Debbie pointed.

Erik looked past the tip of Debbie's pudgy digit to see Twiki guiltily darting away, leaving a trail of grisly red pawprints in her wake. His eyes followed her across the store and past Harry, who was conspicuously trying to stuff an Inspector Gadget doll in his coat pocket.

Erik shook his head heavily and looked at his wristwatch. The arms of a cartoon Mr. T indicated quarter to midnight.

"Look, your dad is going to be here any minute," he sighed hopefully. "Why

don't you kids just go wait outside so that I can lock up? I'm too tired to play *Charles in Charge* any more."

"Okay! I'mago ouside an jump offa bwidge!" Harry said, running for the door.

Erik stepped up behind the retreating kindergartner and put a long hand on his tiny shoulder.

"Whoa whoa, not so fast, Captain Kleptaroo."

He turned Harry around and began patting down his coat, relieving it of its store of misbegotten treasures.

"Oh look, it's Optimus Prime," Erik said, pulling the battered robot from a bulging pocket. "And who's this playing backup? Why, it's the California Raisins!"

Debbie stepped up behind Erik and spoke sweetly.

"Can I go wait outside?"

"Yeah, sure," Erik said distractedly, pulling a handful of pink M.U.S.C.L.E. figures from Harry's pocket. "Your brother will be out in a second."

The bells on the front door gave a jingle as Erik continued his inventory control.

"Leonardo, Donatello, Raphael, and *two* Michelangelos."

Erik sighed and searched Harry's innocent-looking little eyes.

"Why do you do this, Harry?" he asked. "Why are you constantly trying to steal stuff?"

Harry shrugged.

"A'cause Debbie ses ..."

"Debbie said this; Debbie said that," Erik said dismissively. "You obviously look up to your big sister a lot, but you could get yourself into big trouble if you don't stop trying to impress her by stealing. This is just like that episode of *Full House* where DJ's sweater got run over by a lawnmower, so Stephanie shoplifts a new one to replace it. Stephanie thought she was just helping out her big sister, but she still got into big trouble for it. Do you see what I'm saying, Harry?"

Harry looked at Erik emptily.

"Debbie ses I godda beeda virgin."

Erik blinked uncomfortably.

"Well," he said. "That's an entirely different 'very special episode' that I'm not going to get into tonight."

He stood up and pushed open the front door.

"Alright, get out of here, kid. Your dad oughta be showing up any minute."

Harry shuffled out the door and Erik closed it behind him, turning the sign in the window from "Open" to "Closed." He picked up the pile of attempted misdemeanors on the floor and began returning them lovingly to their shelves. When

the store was returned to order, he grabbed a bag of cat food from behind the counter and poured it into a Garfield "I hate Mondays" bowl with a loud, plastic clatter.

"Come and get it, Twiki," he called. "I gave you a double dose today so that you don't have to go killing anything before tomorrow. Does that sound like a good deal to you, Twiki? Twiki?"

He stood up and looked around the darkened shop. That was strange. Usually Twiki had her head buried in the bowl the second she heard the sound of him picking up the bag. He made a quick circuit of the aisles, but his cat had seemingly vanished.

"Twiki? Hey Twiki, where are you, kitty?"

Just then his eyes passed over the front window and into the street beyond. There stood Debbie Stokes with her short, stubby arms wrapped around Twiki's flailing body, spinning her around and swinging her back and forth like a disoriented feline pendulum.

"Debbie!" Erik gasped. "How did she get Twiki out of-"

He smacked himself on the forehead as everything suddenly became clear.

"A *diversion!* " he snapped. "She told Harry to be a *diversion.* "

The bells on the shop door chimed wildly as Erik exploded into the street, shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Debbie Stokes, you give me back my cat!"

"You can't have her!" Debbie wailed, swinging Twiki defensively. "She loves me! The kitty loves *me!* Don't you, kitty?!"

More than pleased at the opportunity to add her two cents to the debate, Twiki lashed out with her claws and drew a long red gouge across Debbie's face. With an earsplitting scream, the startled girl dropped her stolen pet and planted both hands on her tiny, wounded cheeks.

"Oh my God, Debbie," Erik gasped, dropping to his knees. "Are you all right?"

He grabbed the girl around her shoulders and held her comfortingly, pulling her little hands away from her face for a better look at her injuries. Twiki ran off in a reeling, dizzy trot, frantically seeking refuge from all of the insane people who were so desperate for her love.

"Catch my kitty," Debbie sobbed, clutching her cheeks. "Harry, catch my kitty!"

"The kitty will be fine," Erik said. "Let me see your face!"

Just then Erik heard a tiny splash and a long, echoing mew. He whipped around to see Harry on his hands and knees, peering into the open mouth of a curbside storm drain.

"Da kitty falled inda wawtew!" he laughed.

"No! My kitty!" Debbie wailed. "Harry, go get her!"

"Owigh, Debbie!"

Erik leapt to his feet and whirled around.

"Harry, no!"

But it was too late. Erik's eyes had barely focused on the narrow drain by the time Harry Stokes had disappeared down its throat with a scream and a shallow splash. Erik ran to the opening and lay down on his belly in the abandoned street, peering into the eight-inch-tall opening.

"Harry!" he screamed. "Harry, are you all right?"

Somewhere in the blackness below, Harry was crying.

"Aaaaah! No! No! I don' wanngo swimmies. I don' wanna, I don' wanna," he stammered. "I wanngo home. I don' wanngo swimmies, I wanngo home."

Debbie leaned over Erik and screamed down the hole.

"Harry! Stop crying and go find my kitty!"

"No! Don't find the kitty!" Erik squeaked. "Just stay right where you are, okay, Harry? Don't move! I'm going to get you out of there!"

He sat up and impotently scrabbled his fingernails around the edges of the manhole cover set in the sidewalk above the drain, trying to get a grip.

Debbie stuck her tiny head into the opening and shouted.

"Harry! Find my-"

Before she could finish her command, Erik had pulled her out of the drain and set her down on the curb with a furious impatience in his eyes.

"Stop it! Leave him alone!" he screeched. "You just sit here and be quiet, or else!"

"Or else *what*?" Debbie said petulantly.

"Or else! Or else ..." Erik raised a bony finger as a long string of nothing ran through his head. "Or else you don't even want to *know*, okay?! Now just sit still for five seconds!"

With that, he tore off across the street and back into the shop. The second Erik was out of her field of vision, Debbie was back on her hands and knees in front of the grate.

"Find her, Harry!" she whispered loudly. "Find my kitty!"

"Debbie Stokes!" Erik bellowed. "What did I just tell you?!"

Debbie looked over her shoulder and screamed in outright terror. Erik had already returned, and he stood looming over her with the blade of the heavy theatrical sword hoisted above his head, twinkling menacingly in the moonlight.

"Move it!" Erik barked. "Or *else*!"

Without a sound, Debbie scrambled over the top of the drain and pressed herself

up against the nearest building in horror. When she was clear, Erik jammed the point of the sword under the lid of the manhole and pried it up, then scraped it heavily aside. He dropped the blade and gave Debbie a stern look.

"You stay here and don't move, you understand? I'm going to go save your brother."

Debbie nodded nervously.

"Please, just find my kitty."

With an exasperated roll of his eyes, Erik climbed down the short ladder of iron bars that protruded from the wall of the small cement cube. The floor appeared solid and slick, but as he stepped off the ladder he realized the bottom of the chamber was shin-deep in murky brown water.

"Ack! Jesus," he hissed, pulling his waterlogged sneaker out of the muck.

"I ... I don' wanna finda kitty. I don'. I don' wanna. I wanngo home."

Erik's eyes quickly adjusted to the dim light, picking out the shivering form of Harry Stokes hunched in a corner. He bent over and gave the boy a quick examination. Harry was soaking wet and nearly paralyzed with shock, but otherwise he appeared to be unharmed.

"You're okay," Erik said, giving Harry's arm a reassuring squeeze. "There, you see what happens when you just do whatever Debbie tells you to?"

Harry just sniffled and trembled, and Erik suddenly felt bad for taking advantage of the opportunity to lecture him.

"Come on, let's get you out of here where you'll be safe."

He pulled Harry to his trembling feet and helped him climb the wet, slimy ladder. When Harry was safely on the sidewalk, Erik started to climb out of the hole behind him.

"Wait! Where's my kitty?!" Debbie wailed. "Where's my kitty?!"

Erik looked back down into the grimy pool at the bottom of the drain.

"She's not here," he said bitterly. "She's gone."

"My kitty, my kitty," Debbie sobbed. "Please, find her! Find my kitty!"

She put her tiny, pigtailed head on Erik's shoulder and cried long, hot tears. Erik's face collapsed into an annoyed smirk as his heart started to melt.

"Alright, alright," he said. "I'll go look, but you have to make me a promise."

"Anything! Anything for my kitty! Oh, my kitty!"

Erik looked Debbie sternly in the eye.

"Promise me that you'll stop bossing Harry around. That kid idolizes you. You should treat him more like a brother and less like an accomplice. Deal?"

Debbie bobbed her head.

"Find the kitty. Please," she choked.

"I'll see what I can do."

After depositing a reassuring pat on Debbie's head, Erik lowered himself back into the drain and took a cursory look around the small compartment. Rotting palm fronds, crushed beer cans, and whatever other debris had been cleansed from the streets by the afternoon storm floated listlessly in the scummy water. The cement chamber branched into a large corrugated steel pipe about four feet in diameter that seemed to twist off infinitely in both directions.

Twiki was completely gone. Lost somewhere beneath the city of Stillwater. Erik knew that, but it didn't cause him too much concern. Twiki had gotten lost before, and a few days later she'd always show up again-skinny, hungry, and with her fur matted with blood, none of which was hers.

His memories were suddenly interrupted by the sound of an Aerostar pulling up on the street above, followed immediately by the sound of a slamming door and a furious shout.

"Holy Christ, Debbie! You're bleeding! What happened to your face?!" an unfamiliar, burly voice hollered. "Harry! You're soaking wet! And you're dirty as shit! What in the hell is going on around here?! Who's watching you?! Where's that toy geek at?!"

Erik's eyes popped into saucers.

"Oh ... *shit*, " he murmured.

Erik had always known that the first time he met Richard Stokes face-to-face would be unpleasant, but he never dreamed it would be quite like this. He cringed and backed up into the dark shadows of the corrugated steel drainage pipe. Maybe Stokes would just assume that he was in the store ... or that he'd gone home. Maybe he would leave without incident.

"He's in the hole, Daddy!" Debbie sang. "He's looking for my kitty!"

"He's down in ... the shitter? What kind of freakjob is this guy?" Stokes snarled, leaning over the manhole. "Hey, toy geek! You down in the shitter? Get your ass up here! I'd like to have a word with y'all."

The tone of Richard Stokes's voice had all the pleasant subtlety of a spiked club pounding into a skull. Erik slumped and bowed his head. This was not going to be pretty.

"Well," he sighed, "I guess everybody's gotta die someday."

He put his hands on the damp rungs to begin his fateful ascent when he noticed a pair of reflective eyes peering at him from the mouth of the corrugated steel tunnel. He bent down and squinted into the shadows.

"Holy crap, it's Twiki!" he smiled. "Come here, kitty!"

He splashed through the brown water to the pipe, grasping his lost pet by the furry scruff of her neck and lifting her up.

"Oh Twiki, that's a good kitty kityaaaAAGH!" he screeched.

As soon as he pulled the creature into the dim moonlight he realized that it wasn't his cat at all, but the fattest, most virulent-looking sewer rat that he had ever seen. He screamed like a girl, dropped the rat, and tumbled backward into the pipe on the opposite side of the cube. He splashed himself out of the puddle and back onto his feet, wiped his rat-dirtied fingers on his runoff-dirtied pants, then wiped his runoff-dirtied hand on the wall.

"Ew! Ew! Gross! Gross! Gross!"

While Erik wiggled out, the rat remained perched on its haunches, lurking in the darkness of the pipe. It cocked its head to the side and stared at Erik as if questioning his sobriety.

"It was just *one strawberry daiquiri*," Vivian moaned. "I still think I'm okay for drive."

"You're okay for drive?" Nick asked skeptically.

"I'm okay *to* drive," Vivian corrected. "I'm okay for *driving*."

"Lady, I don't think you're either one," Nick smiled. "Look, we're already halfway there, so there's really no point in arguing about it anymore. Just give it up and relax for once in your life. I'll have you home in like, five more minutes."

Vivian crossed her arms moodily and settled back in the black and orange passenger seat of the Fusion Fuel Hummer. Although Nick was in the driver's seat, the two of them were separated by a two-foot-wide tower of steel that housed the vehicle's elevated drivetrain. The car customizers had attempted to hide this barrier beneath black leather upholstery and a plethora of Fusion Fuel bottle holders, but it still divided the Hummer's east and west sides as subtly as the Berlin Wall. This was just fine with Vivian, as she was in no mood to be any closer to Nick than she had to be right now.

What was she even doing here? She knew that she was perfectly capable of driving herself home, and she didn't care what Nick *or* the valet had to say about it. She glared angrily across the vehicular fortification at her date's face, but his features were hazy and indistinct. Fear flashed through her as she realized that she had lost her glasses, but a clumsy exploratory grope of her lenses proved that she had in fact only lost her vision. A scowl of recognition slid numbly across her face. She didn't know which was more humiliating-being too drunk to drive after one daiquiri or losing an argument to Nick.

"Well, how am I supposed to get my car tomorrow?" she asked defeatedly.

"Don't sweat it. I'll swing by and pick you up."

"I don't doubt it," Vivian grumbled. "You haven't stopped trying to pick me up since we met."

Nick shook his head with a long, patient sigh.

"Tell me, Vivian Gray," he said, "what are you going to do when we get back to

your apartment?"

"Go to bed," Vivian answered. "Alone."

"And that's going to make you happy, is it?"

"Well, I'll be happy to have this day over with, that's for sure. It's been nothing but miserable from start to finish."

Nick threw her a sideways glance.

"I had a really good time with you tonight too."

His tone cut through her like a guilty knife. There was nothing sarcastic or hurtful in his inflection—that hardly would have fazed her at all. Instead the words came out with a sort of dull, chastening timbre, like when your mother catches you doing something you know is stupid and says that she is "very disappointed" in you.

"I'm sorry, Nick," she backpedaled. "I didn't mean it like that. The date was fine. I'm really sorry that I got us kicked out of the restaurant. I was having a really good time."

Nick looked at her with a doubtful smile.

"No you weren't."

"No," Vivian admitted, "I wasn't. Everyone in that restaurant treated me like dirt just because I didn't drive the right car or wear the right clothes. They judged me entirely by my appearance."

Nick nodded.

"And you wanted them to look past all that and just appreciate you for your mind?"

"Yes," Vivian said. "Exactly."

"And so you tried to use your mind to blow up their restaurant?"

Vivian sank in her seat.

"Touché."

She looked sleepily out the window and down the shallow bluff toward the moonlit water of the bayside below. A shadow of longing passed silently over the back of her mind.

"So taking you to the Banyan Terrace wasn't exactly your kind of scene," Nick acknowledged. "But what exactly is your scene, Vivian?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you didn't go out with me tonight, where would you have gone?"

Vivian glanced at Nick, then back toward the lonely beach. She bit her lip in silent debate.

"Are you speaking hypothetically for the sake of conversation," she asked, "or do you actually want to know?"

"I actually want to know," Nick nodded.

"Then make a right turn up here."

Nick squinted.

"Um ... do you mean *left*? There's no road to the right."

"Yes there is," Vivian said. "It's not paved, but if my little Rabbit can handle it, your big Hummer certainly can."

Nick slowed down and peered into the periphery of his headlights.

"It's a HumVee," he corrected distractedly. "The civilian models are called Hummers."

"I hate to break it to you, Nick," Vivian muttered, "but you *are* a civilian model."

She pointed into the darkness off the side of the road.

"Here. Pull off at the break in the guard rail."

Nick reluctantly turned the wheel and coaxed the behemoth off the shoulder of the paved road. Its broad wheelbase was wider than the two narrow strips of packed dirt that ran down the hillside, and its studded tires flattened the tall grass that bordered the path all the way to the white sand below. He parked on the beach and silenced the brutish engine.

"You'd rather be *here* than the Banyan Terrace?" he asked skeptically. "What is this place?"

Nick leaned toward the windshield and looked at the colossal hulks of industrial steel and concrete that loomed out of the darkness. The Hummer was now parked just below the mainland end of the Skyshine Causeway Bridge, the titanic elevated thoroughfare that linked Stillwater to its island neighbor. A broad black swatch of humming asphalt soared above them in a graceful arc that traversed the bay and touched down on the end of Songbird Key. From this vantage point, the lights of the distant luxury condominiums and premium hotels of the key were putting on a better show than the architecturally blotted heavens above.

"This used to be a construction access road years ago when they were building the bridge," Vivian said quietly. "Sometimes I come down here to be alone. The tourists never come this far down the beach."

"I can see why," Nick said disgustedly. "Is there some kinda sewage plant nearby or something?"

Vivian looked through the intense white beams of the Hummer's headlights and into the gently rolling surf of the bay. The salty water was as lumpy and pink as her Banyan Terrace daiquiri, but instead of strawberries it was garnished with clusters of dead, rotting fish. Nick looked at Vivian and spoke soulfully.

"How can you possibly be happy in a place like this, Vivian?"

"It's not usually like this," Vivian defended. "This freak red tide just rolled in a few days ago."

Nick shook his head.

"No, I mean here in Stillwater. How can you actually be happy living in this bogus little corner of Heaven's waiting room?"

Vivian frowned and stared into the filthy surf.

"Oh, I'm far from happy here," she said mournfully. "Some days I can barely get out of bed knowing that it's just going to mean facing another identical, humiliating day in this dead-end town."

"Well then why won't you team up with me, Vivian?" Nick asked. "If you just accept my offer to become a promo model you could get out of this place and never look back."

Vivian sighed gloomily.

"Thanks for the offer, really, but ... I *can't* be a model."

"Don't kick your own ass like that! You *can* be a model, Vivian!" Nick said forcefully. "You just need to start believing in yourself and put your assets to work for you. I've known it since the moment I saw you."

"Oh, get real, Nick," Vivian snapped, tugging on her copper bangs. "You wouldn't have even given me a second look if it wasn't for a potentially lucrative genetic quirk in my sixteenth chromosome. Believe it or not, my head holds more valuable assets than red hair."

"I never said that it didn't," Nick said smoothly. "But you're so intent on getting everyone to bow down before your big brain that you totally shut out every other good thing that you've got going for you. And there's a lot of them. I mean, look at these beautiful assets right here."

Nick leaned over and gestured to Vivian's bosom like a spokesmodel on *The Price is Right* romanticizing a blender. Vivian crossed her arms over her chest and started to voice a syllable of indignity, which Nick silenced with a manicured finger over her lips.

"Don't get all embarrassed; I'm just speaking professionally," he said pleasantly. "You're obviously unhappy with the size of the twins, but let me tell ya, reedy girls like you are the hottest thing right now. The days of the double-D melons are history. Even Pamela Anderson just got her implants taken out a few months ago. Don't you see? You're sitting here thinking you're *soooo* ugly while one of the most successful models in the world is trying to make herself look *more like you*."

Vivian rolled her eyes and took a breath, but Nick interrupted her before she could protest.

"And of course there's the asset that gets you fired up so easily," he said, tucking a stray lock of red hair over Vivian's ear. "You know the redhead Spice Girl? The alleged 'Ginger Spice'? You know that hot chick from *Will & Grace*? Both out of a bottle. How can you not believe that you're beautiful when top-shelf hotties are doing dye jobs just to look more like you do straight from the factory? You can cry about

your looks all day and night, but your physical assets aren't what's holding you back, Vivian."

"So, in your expert opinion," Vivian glowered, "what, pray tell, *is* holding me back?"

Nick leaned over the drivetrain wall and tapped his fingertip on her forehead.

"You think your big brain is so great, but it's the one and only thing you've got working *against* you," he said. "Seriously, Vivian, how are you supposed to convince anybody else that you're beautiful if you can't even convince *yourself*? For some reason you think that something terrible is going to happen if you let down your hair just one time. If you would just believe in yourself long enough to take a chance, this could be the last night that you ever spend in Stillwater. You and me and this HumVee could be heading out across the country in search of extreme fun and adventure tomorrow morning. Don't let your big brain talk you out of it."

Nick stretched his arm over the wall and gently took Vivian's hand.

"Nobody in this town can see that you're platinum level, Vivian," he said softly. "Not even you."

Vivian felt the warmth of Nick's hand running through her slender fingers as she gazed into his hazy face, letting his words absorb slowly into her tipsy brain. Her immediate instinct was to dismiss everything that he had said as nonsense-but what if he was right? Promotional modeling wasn't exactly her dream career, but neither was Boltzmann's Market. At least modeling would be a fresh start. She was being offered a real opportunity to change her life, and the only apparent thing keeping her from taking it was her own self-doubt. After all, she reasoned, she had been failing to get out of Stillwater by using her brain for her entire life. Maybe it *was* time to use, as Nick said, all of the assets at her disposal.

"Okay," she said nervously. "I'll try it. I'll join your agency and tour the country with you. I'll be your partner."

A smile passed over Nick's face that was so glitteringly perfect it could have easily stood twenty stories high on a Times Square toothpaste ad. His enthusiasm pounded off of his body in glowing waves, evaporating Vivian's skepticism and pushing the corners of her mouth into a reluctant grin.

"You see? Nothing but good things happen when you just believe in yourself!" Nick cheered. "We're gonna be the new platinum team, baby! Platinum! You've made the right choice teaming up with me, Vivian Gray! C'mere and sign the papers!"

He twisted in his seat and leaned toward Vivian, closing his dazzling green eyes and putting his lips into a pucker so beautiful that it seemed sinful to describe it with a word as ridiculous as "pucker." Before he could reach Vivian's smudged pink lips, however, his ribcage bumped up against the impervious barrier of the drivetrain. The leather-covered steel pressed numbly into his side as he craned his neck and continued to lean over, thrusting his inviting, pouty lips toward Vivian. Vivian looked at the uncompleted kiss hanging in the air in front of her and rolled her eyes.

"Ah, what the heck," she smiled.

She twisted in her seat and leaned over the barrier, stretching her long neck to plant her lips upon Nick's in a small, clumsy little kiss. A tingling warmth began to spread across her cheeks, and almost before the kiss had started, it was over. Vivian dropped back into her seat and bit her lip shyly. A feeling of guilty apprehension trickled through her brain. Her body, for once, told her brain where to stick it.

"See, now that wasn't so bad, was it?" Nick smiled.

"No, the kiss was okay," Vivian admitted reluctantly. "I'm not keen on the hump though."

"Oh, come on, I wasn't even going to try to go there on the first date," Nick said defensively.

Vivian shook her head and tapped her fingers on the hump of the drivetrain.

"The hump," she clarified.

"Oh, right, right, the hump," Nick said, running his fingers through his hair. "Well, there's not a lot I can do about that."

"No, I guess not," Vivian agreed.

The words seemed to tremble out of her mouth as something of a relief.

"Luckily there's plenty of room for both of us on your side!" Nick grinned. "Don't move a muscle, partner. I'll be right over!"

Before Vivian could argue, Nick threw open the driver's-side door and practically leapt into the powdery sand. As soon as the seal of the door was broken, a fetid, overpowering stench of rotting cabbage and decaying fish rolled off the churning bay and into the car. Nick took a reeling step backward and covered his nose before slamming the door and prancing around the back of the vehicle.

Vivian's heart pounded anxiously in her chest; her mind was racing a mile a minute. What just happened? Yes, she was excited for the opportunity to get out of Stillwater, but this was very unlike her-she didn't kiss boys in cars-she could barely remember the last time she kissed boys at all, yet she couldn't say that she didn't enjoy the kiss, and she certainly couldn't say that she wouldn't like another. What was she going to do?

She caught a glimpse of Nick in the rearview mirror and turned to face it, seeing her own reflection. She angled the glass toward her nervous face and gave herself a long, hard look. The two ugly chopsticks stuck out of her messy librarian's bun perpendicular to each other, like two street signs bolted together at a crossroads. Vivian recognized that she was at a sort of crossroads herself. One road led an intellectual introvert back to a wasted life in Stillwater, the other led a physical extrovert on to a life of adventure.

In one decisive movement, she grasped the chopsticks with both hands and unsheathed them like a pair of swords, dropping a wrinkled cascade of fiery red hair around her head. She shook it out, took a deep breath, and spoke to herself

reassuringly in the mirror.

"Nothing terrible is going to happen if you let down your hair just one time."

She bent over to stuff the chopsticks into her purse, but before she could reach it the Hummer was blasted with a flash of hot white light. Two seconds later Vivian was knocked unconscious by seven tons of steel rising to meet her forehead.

"Menopause pills?" Sherri raged. "Shit! If you tell *anyone* about this, I swear to God you'll be dead in a-"

"Hot flash?"

Before Sherri could wallop Bobby in his smart mouth, the bouncer swung open the door of the sub, flooding the cabin with a blast of barroom noise and fresh air. Sherri had been leaning against the door, and when it suddenly went missing, she tumbled out of the sub backward, landing on her head on the hard wooden boardwalk outside. She drunkenly rolled over and scrambled to her feet, but the tail of her leather trench coat had flipped over her head in the commotion, forming a thick, black veil.

At the sight of a girl coming out of the sub with her clothing in disarray, the gathering of frat boys began their ceremonial round of catcalls and dog barking. Sherri wrestled herself out of her narrow coat and threw it on the ground in a crumpled heap. Freed of her leather hood, she shot a chillingly empty glare at the room that silenced every last brother.

Bobby started to exit the sub in a more traditional fashion, only to be stopped short by a wall of teeth. Trent briskly shoved him back into the sub and slid into Sherri's vacated spot on the bench.

"Oh no you don't," Bobby said. "I don't care how much you want to bet, I'm not letting you go down on me."

"No no, the T don't swing that way," Trent chattered, glancing back over his shoulder. "Hey, no shit now, did that pretty little kitty with the itty bitty titties just make a withdrawal from your sperm bank?" His eyes flitted around the cabin as if looking for some evidence of the dirty deed.

"A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell," Bobby smirked. "You draw your own conclusions."

He made another move for the door. Trent pushed him back down, took another glance outside, and whispered.

"Do you think she'd do me next?"

Before Bobby could bring himself to answer, the bar was bathed in a fiery blast of light. The Bikini Martini was well distanced from ground zero, but the flash was still hot enough to make the fraternity brothers release their bellowing screams one last time.

Blinded by the flash, Sherri staggered backward toward the sub, flailing her bare, sizzling arms. Her wrist connected hard with the open steel door, catching its interior

handle on her bracelets and sending a shot of scraping agony rocketing through every pain receptor left between her forearm and her alcohol-soaked brain. The chunky heel of her boot caught the edge of the hatchway and she tumbled inside with Trent and Bobby, the meager weight of her body slamming the watertight door behind her.

"Hey! Toy freak!" Richard Stokes bellowed. "Quit dickin' around down there! Hiding out in the sewer ain't gonna save you now!"

At that moment, a shaft of sparking blue light blasted through the manhole. A few brief, chaotic seconds later, a thunderous shockwave rolled through the street above, buckling the tunnel with its force and knocking the terrified and unprepared Erik unconscious on his back in the shallow, dirty water.

CHAPTER FOUR

Consciousness trickled into Vivian's body, giving her a dull physical awareness of being crushed. She slowly peeled open her dry eyelids and found herself crumpled in an upside-down heap on the floor of the Fusion Fuel Hummer. She righted herself with a groan, pushing her narrow rear end back into the passenger seat. The strain on her compressed lungs immediately lifted, and her groggy head began to clear.

Her glasses had fallen off, but even without them Vivian could tell that something was very wrong with the Hummer's interior. It wasn't demolished, or even crushed, yet its angles had somehow turned disquietingly obtuse. Every surface seemed to be unified in a shallow twist, as if a massive pair of hands had grabbed the vehicle by its bumpers and cranked them in opposite directions. The thick windows were white and opaque with spidery fracture lines, and tiny shafts of sparkling pink light sliced through the interior at wild angles like swords stabbed through a magician's basket.

Vivian snatched her glasses off the floor and placed them on her nose, splitting the interior of the vehicle into disorienting slices. She blinked twice and realized that her left lens was cracked from top to bottom.

"Oh my God," she thought. "What happened?"

Her head throbbed as she tried to recall. She could remember that she was on a date with Nick, and that they had come to her secret hiding place, but after that it went fuzzy. She remembered an empty daiquiri glass the size of a small birdbath.

"Nick?" she croaked. "Nick, are you there?"

She pulled on the door handle, but the door didn't open. She tried shoving and pounding it with her narrow shoulder. Finally she leaned back against the drivetrain hump and kicked both heels squarely into the orange leather trim. A seal of fused automotive paint gave way, throwing open the door and filling the cabin with a cloud

of reeking pink fog.

Vivian gagged and squinted against the vapor's sting as she staggered to her feet in the sand. When she opened her eyes, she found herself in the middle of a surreal, nightmarish parody of the beach she once knew. The single thought in her head fell involuntarily from her trembling lips-four words, in a barely audible whisper.

"This is not good."

For as far as she could see, tentacles of black smoke twisted from the ruined city of Stillwater into the churning gray sky, forming a charcoal cloud that touched every point of the horizon. Large, powdery flakes of ash fluttered gracefully from the doomsday cloud, gathering like snow in the battered Hummer's crevices.

Vivian took a few awkward steps in the sand, too overwhelmed to realize that the heel had broken off one of her shoes. She turned and ran her eyes along the first mainland span of the Skyshine Causeway bridge overhead. A hundred feet from shore it terminated against the empty sky in a claw of smashed concrete and twisted steel. She followed its broken trajectory through the fog and into an empty void where Songbird Key should have been.

"What in the ..."

Songbird Key was gone, replaced by a bank of dense pink fog that rolled off the sizzling pink water of the bay. The acrid, cabbagey odor of red tide, airborne in millions of gallons of vaporized seawater, burned Vivian's nasal passages.

"How could this happen?" she mumbled. "How ... how can this be?"

Her knees started to go weak, and she turned and hobbled back to the Hummer. It had been thrown against the concrete hulk of a bridge abutment and was damaged almost beyond recognition. The tires were nothing more than oozing strips of rubber hanging from four misshapen rims. Its warped frame was marred with streaks of smoldering steel sizzling through peeling orange logos. Vivian didn't know what was going on, but two things had become abundantly clear.

One: This vehicle *was*, in fact, a fully armored, military-surplus HumVee.

Two: She and Nick would *not* be driving it across the country.

"Nick?" she called desperately. "Nick, are you there?"

There was no reply but eerie silence.

"Is anybody out there?"

Erik shivered in his sleep. He rolled over to grab a blanket and dunked his face in four inches of murky street runoff somewhere beneath the streets of Stillwater. With a spluttering gasp, he rolled over onto his hands and knees.

"Blghg! Ack! What the-"

He leapt to his feet, bashed his head into the tunnel's low ceiling, and fell back into the puddle with a splash. His skull vibrated from the impact, and bright white flashes of pain seared the backs of his eyeballs.

"Agh! Gaaah dammit!"

He climbed to his feet, cautiously this time, and blinked his tingling eyes up and down the cold passageway of the cramped drainage pipe in which he had lain unconscious. In one direction was nothing but a velvety blackness. In the other, a whisper of dim light spilled over a mountain of pulverized earth and pavement that had collapsed into the drain.

What was happening? How long had he been here? Erik held his watch up to the faint light to find Mr. T's arms pointing at nine minutes to noon. His eyebrows arched in surprise. Twelve hours!

He looked back at the narrow sliver of light pouring over the mound of debris. A hazy pink fog rolled eerily through the opening like something out of a low-budget horror movie. Erik climbed onto the pile and pulled himself as close to the crack in the street above as he could get.

"Hello?" he called. "Hey?! Hey!"

He started to claw at the crack with his bony fingers.

"Hey, what's going on?!" he screamed. "Is anybody there?!"

His mind raced as he dug frantically at the debris. What had happened to the Stokes family? Were they still there? Did they go for help? Help for *what*?

Several increasingly frenzied minutes and two broken nails later Erik stopped digging and fell into a panting slouch. It was futile. He couldn't have cleared this heap of rebar-laden concrete if he had a bulldozer, let alone with his soft, girlish hands. Given no other options, he reluctantly rolled his pant legs up to his knees and waded into the shin-deep water in search of another way out.

Just then a distant splash echoed out of the darkness. It was followed by a sort of dull crackling, like stalks of celery being ever so slowly bent in half. Then another splash, followed by a flat, quiet kind of moan.

Erik suddenly realized that he was not alone.

"Hello? Debbie? Harry?" he called hopefully. "Hey! Who's there? Who's in here?"

As he waded down the pipe, the sparse pink light tucked itself away between the ribs of the corrugated steel walls, and soon he was splashing through the low tunnel in complete darkness.

"Hel ... hello?" he called nervously.

He held one arm in front of him and shuffled cautiously through the murky water. The splash of his waterlogged sneakers echoed back and forth between the curved metal walls, growing louder and louder and drowning out all other sound. He stopped. When the ripples of his own footsteps had faded into silence, he again heard the strange crackling sound. It was getting louder. Closer. His heart pounded in his chest.

"Is ... is somebody there?"

He slapped himself on the forehead. *Is somebody there?!* Did he really just say that? This was suicide! Never in his life had he seen a movie character tiptoe into the dark unknown shouting "Is somebody there?" and live to tell the tale. If he were watching this from the safety of his couch, he would be *furious* with himself right now. This was exactly the kind of idiotic behavior that infallibly ended in bloodshed.

He stood there for a long, terrified minute, listening to the crackle echoing louder and louder up the tunnel. Something was coming, but the obfuscating acoustics of the pipe made it impossible to discern its speed or proximity.

What was he supposed to do now? To keep walking would be to deliver himself straight into the arms of a psycho, that much was certain. But he couldn't turn back either. No, the second he got too scared to move forward and turned around, the killer would somehow be right behind him. One nerve-shattering orchestral blast later and he'd be nothing but a red slick in the water.

His eyes began to pool as his lip quivered helplessly. In his realm of experience there were two and only two possible outcomes to this situation, and neither one would see him live another day. The echo of the approaching splash grew deafening. The hideous crackle reverberated back and forth, louder and louder until it sounded like bacon frying in his skull. He peered into the darkness, trying desperately to see, but he could see nothing. But something was there!

This was it. This was the end. There were no other options.

Suddenly, miraculously, a thought flashed from the back of his mind.

"No, wait!" he remembered. *"There is a third option!"*

Just when the tension is cranked up to the highest level possible, just when you think the killer is about to spring machete-first out of the shadows, just when you draw in your breath and cringe in anticipation of a bloody evisceration, what leaps out of the darkness with a howling screech?

The cheapest trick in the horror book. The cat scare.

As soon as the idea had crossed his mind, Erik felt a familiar texture brush against his exposed and trembling leg. It was rough, wet fur. He felt a clawed foot step on his own. Erik relaxed and let out a relieved breath.

"Twiki!" he beamed. "You scared me to death, you little creep! Come here!"

The grimy animal made a leaping attempt at escape, but Erik's experienced hands grabbed her in the utter darkness. He picked her up and pressed her tightly against his chest in a loving embrace.

"Oh, you had me so scared, Twiki!" he sobbed. "I thought you were going to kill me!"

Erik's furry captive thrashed in his passionate cuddle, but he didn't care. He was accustomed to her playing hard to get. But as he struggled to contain the writhing beast, Erik realized that Twiki was not only heavier than he remembered, but also much, much stronger.

"Twiki? Twiki, stop it!" he chirped. "Hey! Hey, what's got into-"

Erik's bewildered query broke into a shrill, piercing shriek as two paws' worth of razor-sharp claws sliced deeply into his sides. The oversized talons tore through his flesh like rusted daggers, carving ragged gouges into his doughy love handles.

"Aaaaaauugh!" Erik wailed. "Stop! Stop it!"

Fueled by adrenalin, Erik instinctively ripped the attacker from his shredded body, inadvertently slamming it into the low steel ceiling of the pipe. He heard a brittle *crack* and felt a quick blast of hot blood on his face.

"Augggh!" he gagged. "Oh God!"

The body went limp and slipped from Erik's agony-weakened hands with a heavy splash. He tumbled backward into the rounded wall. The jagged rips in his sides burned with a ferocious intensity, like canals of boiling, scalding grease. He clutched his wounds and drew strangled breaths through clenched teeth.

"Twiki!" he seethed. *"Bad kitty!"*

Blood gushed through Erik's fingers as his unfocused eyes fell upon the carcass lying in the polluted water. All he could see was a pointed jaw of gnarled teeth pushing a soft blue glow against the utter blackness, as if the murdered creature was grinning at him from the afterlife.

Erik slid down the wall, collapsed into a bloody heap, and closed his tearful eyes.

Bobby opened his eyes. He closed them again. Then he opened them.

There was no difference either way. Open or closed, his eyes could discern nothing but one flat shade of black inside the tiny submarine. He turned to his other senses for backup.

Smell reported a heavy and oppressive scent of stale nicotine and bad breath. Hearing came back with the sounds of shallow respiration.

Touch told him that he was lying on his back with varying loads of dead weight distributed over his body, the most egregious being a sharp elbow digging painfully into his chest. He grabbed the elbow to push it away, and his thumb sank into a hot, fleshy wound! Before he could recoil, the gash slammed shut, crushing his thumb between hard, bony plates!

"Aaaaaaaaargh!" he screamed.

He yanked back his hand and the grip on his thumb released, followed by the sound of a sputtering cough and gasping breath.

"Blaagh!" a voice choked. "What did you put in my mouth, dawg?! I thought I told you, T-Money don't swing that way, yo!"

Bobby shoved Trent off of his lap and sat up.

"Relax, dumb-ass," he said. "It was just my thumb. Your heterosexuality is still intact."

Trent shifted in the darkness. After a pause, he spoke softly.

"Hey B, can we turn the lights back on? I don't mean to be insensitive to those of alternate lifestyles, but I just want to make it clear that I personally don't-"

"Oh shut up," Bobby snapped. "It was an accident. I thought your chin was an elbow."

"Sure sure, okay. No harm, no foul," Trent said consolingly. "But seriously, now, hands off the family jewels."

"What the hell are you talking about? I'm not touching you."

"Look, I told you, homes. The T don't play this game."

Trent grabbed the offending hand from his lap, finding it limp, bony, and hot to the touch. The second he made contact, the fingers slipped out of his grasp and a pained shriek and unbridled string of obscenity flooded the cabin.

"Aaaaaaugh! Fuck! Fuck! Jesus H. Fuck! Fuckerall Fuckington McFuckerberry!"

Trent and Bobby scrambled blindly into the steel walls as Sherri's wild, thrashing fury wound to a sobbing conclusion.

"Jesus Harold Christ, what did you just do? Burn me with a fucking cigar?" she whimpered. "Try that when I'm not asleep and see how funny it is when I shove that shit up your ass, motherfucker!"

In the perfect darkness of the *Sawfish*, Bobby and Trent exchanged uncertain glances.

"I ... I'm sorry-my bad," Trent stammered. "I apologize if my tender touch is too hot for you to handle, love, but-"

"Wait, wait, where am I?" Sherri spat. "Who the hell is that?"

"It's just little ol' me, Terence Trent DeLaRosa. We're in the submarine of love."

There was a tense silence as Sherri worked over Trent's words.

"Holy shit," she whispered. "You and me didn't-"

"Don't worry," Bobby reassured. "You didn't."

"What the ... Bobby Gray, are you in here too?"

"Yeah. Hi Sherri."

"Shit, you and me didn't-"

"No, no," Bobby said impatiently. "Relax, you didn't do it to anybody."

A long moment passed before Sherri spoke again.

"So did the two of you-"

"No!" Bobby and Trent barked in unison.

Sherri blinked vigorously.

"Holy shit, I'm fucking blind!" she gasped, waving her hand in front of her eyes.

"How much did I drink last night?"

"Last night?" Trent laughed. "Do you think they just closed up and left us in here or something? 'If the sub is a-rockin' don't come a-knockin'" only goes so far, right?"

"Okay, so my memory is a little cloudy," Sherri admitted, "but the last thing I knew I was shitfaced on Schlitz, and now I wake up and I've got the mother of all hangovers. You do the math, Pythagoras."

"Look, you're not blind. The lights just burnt out," Bobby said gruffly. "I'm not drunk enough for this much fun. Trent, gimme my hundred bucks. I'm outta here."

With that, he found the door and pushed it open, flooding the tiny chamber with a cold, moist blast of pinkish light and stinking vapor.

"Ain't no way I'm payin' out, dawg!" Trent argued. "You just said that she didn't do it to *anybody!* The bet was--"

"To get her in the submarine; nothing else," Bobby interrupted, bending over and stepping through the low hatch. "Look, I'm done with this stupid bet if you are, but for what it's worth, I still beat your sorry--"

Bobby stopped dead, his giant backside framed in the narrow doorway.

"Uh uh, no way, homes," Trent argued, shoving Bobby out of the way. "It was implied! There was an explicit implication for explicit content, and once again you holy Jesus, Mary, and Joseph ..."

Trent trailed off as he took in the same apocalyptic nightmare that had frozen Bobby in his tracks. The Bikini Martini had all but evaporated around them, replaced with a few steaming bamboo poles and the empty, smoking hulls of the surrounding buildings. Where the barroom had once stood there was now nothing but a brittle framework of blackened beams and bent plumbing, offering an unobstructed view of the fire-gutted cars in the street beyond. The ground was littered with mementos of civilization ripped from the buildings of downtown Stillwater. All of it was blanketed in a damp cloud of pink fog, reeking like a mountain of rancid sauerkraut.

"What ... what did ..." Trent stammered. "I mean, seriously, I'm supposed to be on *vacation* here, dawg! I ... I'm just here for a little bit of personal enhancement! What kind of place ... I mean, has this ever happened here before?!"

"Shhh," Bobby said quietly. "No, no. Shut up."

They stepped out of the sub and silently wandered into the field of random, broken souvenirs of humanity. A bent filing cabinet leaned against the curb, transforming once-important documents into meaningless fluttering debris as it released them gently into the swirling breeze. A refrigerator door lay in the street, followed by a toaster and half a dozen smashed television sets of varying size and color. The gutter was littered with *Planet of the Apes* toys and a stuffed Mogwi with a knife and fork rubber-banded to its hands.

"Whoa, your face!" Trent gasped suddenly. "You got your burn on, homes! For real!"

Bobby rubbed his hands across his cheeks. On the right he felt nothing but a night's accumulation of skin oil and stubble, but the left triggered a hot, dull burn upon contact. He held his arms out and investigated them. The right was of its usual couch-potato pastiness, but the left was glowing with an angry red sunburn. He glanced back at Trent.

"Looks like you got a piece of that too," he said, pointing. "The back of your neck and arms have gone all Red Lobster."

Trent's eyes widened as he gently probed the back of his blistering neck.

"Wait, I remember now!" he said. "I was talking to you in the sub and some asshole threw a pot of hot coffee down my back! Next thing I know, I'm in the dark and homeboy's violating me!"

"No, no, you've got it all wrong," Bobby said, shaking his head. "Number one, it wasn't coffee. I remember now. There was a fire. It was like the whole bar exploded. That explains the sunburns and the, well ..."

He gestured around at the neighborhood of smoking carnage.

"And number two," he continued, "I didn't violate you. Shut up about it already."

He bent down to investigate the remains of the heavy plank boardwalk. The wood had been imprinted with a series of shadowy stains that looked almost human in a Rorschachian way. A scrap of fabric was pinched between the boards in the center of a long hourglass of char. He picked it up and immediately recognized the pattern from Sunny's trademark sarong.

"Well, all I know is that somebody *up there* must have been looking out for us," Trent said gratefully, flicking his finger skyward. "We got off lucky, homes. If we weren't in that sub when this shit went down, we'd have been royally messed up, right?"

Bobby didn't answer. He was staring over Trent's shoulder, agape.

"Right? Hey, B-Dawg. What are you looking at over oh *daaaaamn!* "

The boys stared with chilled horror at Scary Sherri clinging limply to the side of the submarine's hatch, looking like she was ready for the grave ... or had just returned from it. Whereas the submarine's walls had shielded Bobby and Trent from the searing energy of the flash, Sherri's pale, unprotected skin had taken it full-on.

Like a decade of damaging sunlight focused into the blink of an eye, the flash had faded Sherri's burgundy skirt and blood-red T-shirt to flaccid shades of pink. It had bleached her coarse black hair to a soft, wispy mass of angelic white. But the damage the blast had done to her clothes and hair was nothing compared to what it had done to her unshielded ivory complexion. In one scalding instant, the milky white pallor of Sherri's skin had been replaced with a crispy, sunburnt palette of flaming reds and sickly purples.

"I ... I didn't think it was possible," Bobby stammered, "but your eyes are more horrible now than they were before!"

Sherri blinked blindly and turned toward the sound of Bobby's voice. Her ghostly blue eyes had vanished, replaced with two bloodstained spheres of a deep, visceral red. She had made the mistake of looking directly into the flash, instantaneously bursting thousands of tiny capillaries in her wide, empty eyes. Her pupils were completely lost in the sea of dark blood, giving her a vacant, otherworldly gaze. As if to punctuate the ghastliness of it all, long red streaks of dried blood ran down her cheeks from the corners of her sanguineous eyes.

"Is it nighttime?" she whispered.

"No," Trent answered quietly. "You were right. It's morning."

Sherri blinked slowly, glaring into blank infinity.

"Shit!" she spat. "I *told* you I was fucking blind!"

She slowly lowered herself to the ground and leaned her charred body up against the doorframe.

" *Ssssst!* Owwww!" she winced. "Jesus, somebody get me a drink and explain what the hell just happened to me."

The boys looked on with shock and pity, not quite knowing how to respond.

"Judgment Day happened," Trent said dramatically. "Revelations 7:12. I looked and behold there was a great earthquake, and the sun became as black as sackcloth, the moon like blood."

Sherri blinked.

"Okay, *you* shut up. You're useless. Bobby, get me a drink and tell me what's happening."

"I don't really know," Bobby admitted. "But I'm placing my money on Y2K."

"My options are a wrathful God or Y2K?! That's the best you've got?" Sherri spat incredulously. "Considering that it's the middle of August and God is a fictional character meant to scare you out of casual sex, I'd say you've both been spoon-fed paranoid bullshit so long you can't even form your own thoughts anymore."

"No no, seriously," Bobby said. "I know that the Y2K bug isn't supposed to take the world by the nuts until January, but that's why they're testing the crap out of everything right now. I don't know if it was the power grid, or a gas line, or what, but I'm betting the Stillwater DWP just scored an 'F' on their Y2K readiness exams."

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Trent agreed. "Matthew 13:40. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age."

Bobby squinted at Trent.

"And?"

"The end of the age *is* Y2K! The millennium! This is what Matthew was talking about, dawg! Judgment Day! We're in agreement here, B!"

"We are *not* in agreement, you idiot!" Bobby snapped. "Just because downtown Stillwater burned down doesn't mean that we're facing a doomsday of biblical

proportions!"

"Oh yeah?" Trent challenged. "If it's just some little thang, then where are all the people? Where's John Law at? Huh? Where's the rescue crews?"

"And the booze! Where's the fucking booze?" Sherri hissed, lifting a smoldering arm. "Come on, people, I'm dying here!"

Bobby ignored Sherri and scratched his beard thoughtfully.

"There must have been an evacuation."

He looked at the scrap of green sarong in his hand and nodded in self-reassurance.

"Yes. There had to be an evacuation," he continued. "I'll bet there was some kind of chemical spill or something. I mean, smell that nasty-ass air! We probably shouldn't be breathing this shit. God knows what it is."

"Yes," Trent said with a nod, "He does."

"Okay, seriously now," Sherri said urgently, "who do I have to fuck to get some booze around here?"

Trent sat down next to Sherri and spoke softly.

"Chill, baby. That's what we're trying to tell you! There is no booze. There is no *anything*."

"We don't know what happened," Bobby admitted, "and we've got no way to find out."

Sherri turned toward his voice and blinked.

"When the shit goes down, the mass media and their corporate sponsors are never far behind to market their fear-mongering onto the public. Why don't you just turn on the TV and see what the talking head on the news says?"

"That's what we're trying to tell you, girl!" Trent repeated. "There is no news! There's no TV!"

"There's always TV," Sherri said coolly. "This is America."

Bobby shrugged.

"She does have a point," he said. "So the TV is gone. We've got to be able to find a radio or *something* around here. We live in the golden age of telecommunication. I don't care how big the disaster is-there's no way we're completely out of touch with the rest of the world."

Vivian touched the broken piece of her heel to the spot where it had detached from the bottom of her shoe, then pitched it into the sand with a smirk. For lack of a better option, she jammed her remaining heel between the body frame and the open door of the HumVee and bent it back until it snapped off. She then slipped her shoes back on and stood up on flat feet, although her toes pointed into the air like she was one of Santa's elves.

A noise came from the depths of the ominous silence. She pricked up her ears and listened. Footsteps! The sound was definitely footsteps plodding through the crushed shells of the beach toward the front of the wrecked HumVee.

"Oh my God, Nick!" she gasped with relief, rushing around to the front of the vehicle. "Nick, where have you been? I was so-"

Vivian's words froze in her throat as a hunched, moaning creature extended its bloody hands toward her. She leapt back with a startled scream.

"Aaaaaaaaaaugh!"

With a frenzied jolt of adrenalin, Vivian's fist flew from her shoulder, connecting heavily with the creature's grimy forehead. Her soggy would-be assailant dropped flat on its back in the sand.

"Don't kill me!" it wailed, rolling into a pathetic ball. "I'm harmless! I'm not a looter!"

Vivian gasped. She suddenly recognized this monster.

"Oh my God! Erik?!"

She dropped to her knees and pulled him across her lap, clutching him around his damp, filthy shoulders.

"Please! Don't hurt me!" Erik whimpered. "I ... I just ... what the ... *Vivian?* " He uncurled and sat halfway up in surprise.

"Erik, I'm so happy to see you!"

Vivian gave Erik a relieved hug, but he was too busy rubbing his throbbing forehead to return the embrace.

"Ow! Hey, why did you just go all *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!* on me?!"

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry," Vivian chattered, shaking out her smashed fingers. "You scared me to death! You're bleeding! What happened to you?!"

"Twiki attacked me!" Erik squeaked.

He pulled up his shredded and bloodied shirt, revealing two massive clusters of wounds torn in his sides. Thanks to Vivian, a fresh layer of white sand and broken shells now stuck to the moist, gooey surface of coagulating blood.

"Twiki, your *cat?* " Vivian said with disbelief. "Are you sure?"

"I ... I think so," Erik murmured. "It was dark. The hurricane blocked all the storm drains. I had to go all the way to the end to get out of the pipe."

He pointed at four giant drainage pipes extending from the bluff and hanging gape-mouthed over the bay. This reply effectively created a whole new slate of questions in Vivian's mind, but none of them seemed important enough to actually ask.

"This wasn't a hurricane," she said quietly. She looked at the pillars of smoke and flame licking the sky up and down the coast. "I think this was something much,

much worse."

Erik began to cough as the thick pink vapor rolled into his burning sinuses.

"Well, I don't care what it was," he gagged. "I just wanna get to the hospital before I run out of blood."

His struggle to stand up pushed a fresh wave of blood from his wounds and a tight groan from his throat. He fell back into Vivian's arms, and she laid him gently in the sand.

"We'll get you to a hospital," she said reassuringly. "But first things first."

She stood up and grabbed the ripped edge of her skirt, giving it a gentle tug and tearing the fabric in a long, jagged line a few inches above her knees.

"Oh, that's swell," Erik moaned. "I'm dying here and all you're concerned about is this season's hemline. Who are you-Mr. Blackwell?"

Vivian rolled her eyes.

"You're not dying," she said. "We'll get you to a doctor; we just need to get that bleeding under control first."

She took Erik by the hand and helped him to his feet, escorting him to the passenger seat of the HumVee. A little nursing and a lot of whining later, Erik's wounds were dressed in a six-inch-wide bandage of black polyester torn from the hem of Vivian's cocktail dress.

"That's not exactly sterile," she frowned, "but at least it'll keep you together until we can get you to the hospital."

Erik lifted his shirt and looked at the neatly tied bandages.

"Thanks, Viv," he said graciously. "Come on, let's get the hell out of here."

He gingerly exited the HumVee and began struggling toward the bluff, shouting over his shoulder.

"Let's try to find where they set up the hurricane shelter."

Vivian rubbed her eyes.

"Erik, there's not going to *be* a hurricane shelter," she groaned. "I'm telling you, this wasn't a hurricane!"

"Why do you keep saying that?" Erik shouted. "Look at this destruction!"

"Exactly, Erik!" Vivian said. "Look at *this* destruction! Hurricanes cause flood damage! Wind damage! Not fire damage!"

She slammed the HumVee's door with a harsh metallic *crash*.

"Look at this car, Erik! Have you ever seen a hurricane do this?!"

She threw out her arms toward the scorched vehicle. Erik wasn't looking at her, but past her, at the smoldering door. His mouth fell quiet and slack as his eyes widened.

"I've never seen a hurricane do that," he admitted.

Vivian squinted at him, blinked twice, and turned to see what he was looking at.

Etched in the peeling black and orange paint of the door was a steaming human silhouette, its ghostly arm terminating in a tiny reflective glint. Permanently welded into the steel of the door handle was a ring inscribed "*Gold Level Sales Champion 1998.*"

"Come on, champ."

Bobby turned the key in the ignition of a smashed Oldsmobile. He flicked it back and forth a few times, but the electrical accessories failed to power on.

"Come on, champ. Let's go. Come on, come on, come on ..."

The key clicked back and forth in the tumbler but had no effect. He pulled it from the steering column and threw it onto the dashboard.

"Damn it! Another dud. You having any luck over there, Trent?"

Trent was trying the key of a New Beetle, but the round little car wouldn't cooperate either. He removed the key and put it on the warped dashboard.

"Uh uh," he answered. "I got no tunes here either."

"Man, this is *unbelievable*," Bobby grumbled. "These cars are all obviously too toasted to drive, but I thought we could at *least* get a radio working!"

He waddled over and plucked another key from the smashed metal valet box lying on the sidewalk. It was for a Honda. He compared it to the remaining wrecks in the street and made his way toward a Civic crushed under a utility pole.

Blinded and unable to help with the radio-finding effort, Sherri sat limply on the singed back seat of a nearby station wagon. The side of the vehicle was marked with crude, soapy letters reading "Alpha Beta Gamma Summer Break '99: Fort Lauderdale or Bust!" Sherri's head rested listlessly on the edge of the burnt doorframe, and her blood-red eyes stared emotionlessly into the middle distance. Her central nervous system had saturated itself with pain-relieving endorphins, downgrading her searing agony to a subdued throbbing. She wrapped her sticky arms around her bony chest and shivered.

"Man, it's as cold as a witch's clit out here," she said icily. "If you can't give me any liquor, could you at least give me my coat?"

"Doubtful," Bobby said. "Judging by what ended up landing *here*, I'd say your coat is probably in Port Manatee by now."

Trent kicked aside the debris that had collected against the side of the battered, yet unmoved, submarine. A thrashed leather collar peeked out from under a displaced heap of planks.

"*Au contraire*," he said. "I think you may be in luck, my little chilly filly."

He grabbed the coat and pulled it slowly from the wreckage. With the exception of the intact collar, the rest of the coat had been reduced to a shredded mass of

black leather.

"On second thought, never mind," he said. "This thing got the beat-down, for real."

"Wait," Sherri said, "did you find it?"

"Yeah, but you can't wear it; it's all-"

"Gimme it."

Trent shrugged and handed what was left of the coat to Sherri.

"As you wish, love."

Sherri took the bundle of mulched fibers and searched it with her hands. Unblinkingly, she reached inside the tangle of burnt cowhide and produced her skull-capped whiskey flask. A quick examination of its surface with her blistered fingertips revealed a jagged hole and a dry interior.

"Shit," she muttered. "There really *is* no booze left."

She threw the flask blindly and heard it clatter away somewhere in her personal darkness.

"Shhh!" Bobby said. "Hey, did you guys hear that?"

"What?" Trent asked. "The flask?"

"No no," Bobby said. "There's something else. I think there's somebody there!"

Sherri and Trent stopped breathing and listened as the ash gently fell through the pervasive pink vapor. There was no sound at all. Then suddenly, something! A *clank* of tumbling debris, followed by an odd crackling noise.

"Hey! Is someone there?" Bobby yelled. "Heeeey! Hey! Over here!"

"We've got an injured girl over here!" Trent added. "Let's get some help on, yo! Send a doctor!"

"Fuck the doctor!" Sherri shouted. "Send Jim Beam!"

The sounds of their voices echoed off the remains of the downtown buildings and then evaporated into a whispery silence. Trent scrambled onto the roof of a demolished SUV and strained to see any sign of movement in the surrounding field of urban rubble. He turned all the way around, scanning the horizon.

"Do you see anything?" Bobby asked.

"No. Nothing but fog," Trent said. "There's nothing out ... whoa! Check it out, homes!"

"What? What do you see?"

On the top of the car, Trent set his feet apart and rubbed his hands together.

"By my right of victory! By my blood!"

He grabbed hold of a blunt metal handle that jutted from the scraped roof and, with a dramatic thrust of his body, drew Planet Packrat's theatrical sword from

where it had been jammed into the wreckage. He held the blade aloft and bellowed.

"Give me the power!"

Bobby glared at Trent with annoyance. "What the hell are you trying to do, turn into He-Man?"

Trent swished the heavy blade through the air, then raffishly planted the tip in the dented metal roof.

"He-Man? Oh, come on, B. Have you no sense of higher culture?" Trent smiled. "That was *Excalibur*. I saw that film, like, fifty times. The hot chick gets 'em out in the first twenty minutes, yo."

Bobby rolled his eyes. Trent continued.

"I just pulled the sword from the stone. That makes me king of England."

"That's not a stone," Bobby sighed. "It's an SUV."

"Fair enough," Trent nodded. "That makes me king of Detroit."

"Well, that's very special," Bobby said. "Would you mind coming back down here and trying another key, your majesty?"

"You're just jealous," Trent smiled, climbing to the ground. "You know the king always bags the fairest maiden in the land."

"Oh please, God," Sherri moaned. "Don't let him be referring to me."

She slowly slid her shoulder off of the doorframe and fell on her back across the seat, her boots sprawling out onto the pavement. The second she landed, a tongue of flaming pain licked down her back and through her body.

"*Ahhhh!* Ouuuuch!!" she hissed.

She realized that her head was in a cold puddle on the seat, a puddle with a stale yet recognizable odor. The wincing pain of her intense burns suddenly slipped her mind as she sat up and patted the puddle with her fingers, trying to scout out its edges and its origins.

Bobby pushed through the cloud of pink vapor toward the Civic. The door had gone missing, so he just plopped into the driver's seat and punched the key into the ignition.

"Come on, champ; come on, champ ..."

He cranked the key and nothing happened. Not so much as a flicker.

"Damn it," he moaned. "They're *all* hosed? This is statistically impossible."

He jammed the key into the soft, melted plastic of the dashboard and grumbled. His nose stung from the pungent air. With a roaring snort that flushed his sinuses into his throat, Bobby gathered and released a huge, wet loogie into the passenger seat. The syrupy mass of mucus was an unnatural shade of pink.

"Aww, nasty," he grumbled. "I'll never be able to take Pepto-Bismol again."

Suddenly, he heard a noise. It was the crackling again, but this time it was louder. Closer.

He glanced out the shattered windshield and saw a dirty old Army-surplus backpack fly out of the Alpha Beta Gamma station wagon. It was followed by seven dirty socks, a chain of condoms, four rolls of toilet paper, and three issues of *Hustler*.

Sherri's ransacking of the frat boys' car did not produce any kind of crackling.

Bobby hopped out of the Civic and met Trent next to the valet box.

"Hey!" Bobby whispered. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Shh! I hear it again! The crackling. Listen!"

Trent strained his ears gamely for Bobby's alleged crackle. He could hear the fluttering of papers. A loose door creaking on ravaged hinges. Somewhere the breeze whistled eerily through a lonely window screen. The overarching theme of this auditory picture, however, was silence.

Pure, thick, pink silence.

"BBBBRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAWWWWWP!"

Bobby leapt in the air like a startled housecat before spinning around toward the sound.

"Waaaaah!" he gasped. "What the hell was that?!"

"Pardon me," Sherri said dryly.

She was sitting on a large box in front of the station wagon, chugging a can of beer, and wearing the remains of her shredded coat as if in protest of the whole situation.

"Whoa!" Bobby said. "What is that?"

"It's beer, lame-ass," Sherri said triumphantly. She jabbed a thumb toward the station wagon. "There was a whole cooler full of it in the way-back. I told you there was booze-you guys are just too brainwashed by the rules of society to think outside of your narrow-"

"No, shut up," Bobby said sharply. "I meant, what is that you're sitting on?"

Sherri looked down and blinked.

"How the hell should I know? I'm fucking blind, remember?"

Bobby shuffled over and shooed Sherri from her perch. He picked up the hefty box and read it excitedly.

"Hibakusha Electronics 5-in-1 Camping Lantern. Where did this come from?"

Vivian and Erik plodded through the abandoned streets of Stillwater with directionless ambition. They didn't know exactly what they were looking for, but

they each had a sense that they'd know it when they found it.

The pulverized road was dotted with vehicles reduced to little more than charred husks and broken glass. Vivian didn't look directly at them as she trudged by. She knew that within each makeshift crematorium was a driver who had met with some terrible fate, but a fierce sense of denial kept her eyes pinned to the ground.

She couldn't get her mind off of Nick. He was dead. Vaporized. His life had been snuffed out against the side of his precious HumVee, and a feeling of deep mourning gnawed at her mind.

Or rather, its absence did.

As she looked over each tiny ruined element of her demolished town, she felt no heightened emotion for Nick whatsoever, and that fact disturbed her. It was as if he was just another wrecked building or another crumbled street. Set within the epic scale of her loss, Nick's last shadow was reduced to nothing more than another gray, cold cog of Armageddon imagery that silently meshed in the machine of her numbed mind. She could hardly describe the ache that was churning her gut.

"I'm hungry," Erik said.

Vivian jumped at the sound of his voice. She had retreated so far into herself that the sudden break in the silence was like a splash of cold water across her consciousness. As she processed the words, she realized that her own stomach was cramping into an empty knot.

"I ... yeah, I guess I am too," she said emotionlessly. "Maybe it's time for ... breakfast?"

She looked at the unyielding black clouds above. The sky offered very little hint as to what time of day it was. Erik looked at his watch.

"More like lunch," he said. "It's already ... 11:51? Still?"

"What do you mean, 'still'?" Vivian asked.

Erik shook his wrist and listened for ticking.

"I think my watch stopped," he said. "It was 11:51 when I looked at it like, two hours ago."

Vivian shrugged.

"Maybe the water damaged it when you were in the drain."

Erik shook his head.

"I doubt it. It's supposed to be waterproof up to a hundred feet."

"Well, maybe you just smashed it into something in the dark."

"Doesn't look like it," Erik said, rubbing his finger on the dial. "It doesn't have a scratch on it."

"You probably just forgot to wind it."

"Uh uh, it's got a battery," Erik said. "I may be retro-chic, but I'm not a primate."

"Look, Erik, forget about your stupid watch, okay?" Vivian said irritably. "Let's just find some food."

She looked around at the crumbling neighborhood. Ordinarily she would have known exactly where she was, but looking through the surreal lens of the post-apocalypse, Vivian found herself lost. She scanned the area, trying to find some small kernel of familiar reality upon which to latch.

An expanse of empty blacktop. A corner of white concrete.

It meant nothing to her.

A section of collapsed blue roof. A giant "B." An overturned ... wait.

The "B" stood out against the records of her memory. Suddenly, the meaningless details snapped together in her mind's eye and rippled outward, forming a complete picture that overlaid the desolation of reality.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "It's Boltzmann's Market."

The ruins before them were, in fact, all that remained of Boltzmann's Market. The shockwave had beaten the store's concrete shell from the shape of an elongated cube into a pathetic, slanted heap. The left side of the store still stood more or less intact, dangling its "B" menacingly over the dusty parking lot, but from there the roofline plunged through a pile of collapsed concrete debris until it touched the ground on the right.

Vivian stood petrified, covering her gaping mouth in silent shock. Erik looked at the building, then at her.

"Hey, isn't this that sucky place where you work?" he said.

Vivian nodded grimly. Erik continued.

"Wow. Be careful what you wish for, eh?"

In the crushingly bleak absurdity of it all, Vivian choked out a guilty laugh in spite of herself.

"Come on," she said. "There'll be food in there."

They walked briskly across the parking lot and up to the front door. Vivian had repeated this trek a thousand times under the blazing oppression of the Florida sun. Today she shivered under the shadow of a massive, lazy whirlpool of smoke and scorched stratosphere. The sun managed to smuggle some light through the cloud but couldn't deliver heat.

When they reached the door, they found only bent metal frames holding teeth of shattered glass. Erik made a motion to step through the opening and into the darkness, but Vivian put her hand on his shoulder.

"Wait; hold on," she said. "I've got a light."

She unslung her purse from her back and dug inside it, producing her flashlight. The tiny switch clicked under her thumb, but the bulb did not illuminate. She tried again, then pounded the flashlight against her palm and tried again.

"What's the matter?" Erik asked. "Batteries dead?"

"No, they're fine," Vivian said. "I just used this yesterday."

"Huh. First my watch and now your flashlight," Erik shrugged. "I guess it's just a bad day for electronics."

Vivian's forehead wrinkled as she pondered how both devices could have failed at once. She quickly shook her head as if to keep her first paranoid hypothesis from jelling. It was probably just a coincidence.

"Forget it. It's not even that dark in there," Erik said. "Let's just go."

"I'm not going into a collapsing building in the dark," Vivian said firmly. "It's too dangerous."

"Oh, it'll just be for a minute," Erik said dismissively. "Come on, I'm too hungry to be afraid of the dark today."

With that, he bent down and climbed through the jagged mouth of the doorway.

"Erik, wait!" Vivian called.

But it was too late. Erik had completely disappeared into the darkened bowels of Boltzmann's Market. Vivian frowned. There was no way she was just walking blindly into a demolished building, no matter how hungry she was. She snapped the switch of her deceased flashlight on and off impotently.

"Find another way," she muttered to herself.

She dropped the inoperative flashlight back into her purse and looked around the parking lot. An uprooted palm tree lay across a scorched blue sedan still flickering with tiny points of flame in its upholstery. The car's trunk had been blown open by the impact of the tree. Vivian went over to investigate. Inside were a spare tire and an L-shaped tire iron. With an industrious shuffle of her hands, she snapped off a long, dry palm frond and tied it into a ball around the crooked end of the tire iron. She held the leafy end of the assembly in the dim flames, igniting her makeshift torch. She knew it wouldn't burn for very long, but it would at least cut through the store's darkness long enough for her to safely gather some provisions. Torch in hand, Vivian returned to the blasted door and stepped through it cautiously. From within the cloud of pink and gray smoke she could hear a wet, muffled crunching sound.

"Erik? Where are you?"

"Mmnn!" he replied through a full mouth. "M'mover here! D'ritos!"

Vivian stepped cautiously through the charred interior toward the sound of Erik's voice. A fire had obviously gutted a good portion of the store before growing weary and shrinking into a handful of flickering embers. The smoky air smelled overwhelmingly of burnt sugar, with undertones of barbecued meat and brine.

The tiled floor was both slippery and sticky. Vivian held the torch low and saw a river of stagnating cola, marbled with artificial purples and oranges. Apparently the collapsing roof had crushed the soft-drink aisle. She kicked a misplaced bottle of gin out of her path and turned her gaze back into the smoky darkness.

"Erik?" she repeated. "Come on, where are you?"

"Over here," he called.

"Where?!"

Vivian raised her torch and squinted into the disorienting fog. At the edge of her vision she could pick out a silhouette examining the warped shelves. She let out a sigh of tense relief.

"There you are. Come on, let's just grab some stuff and get out," she said, lifting her torch toward the shadow. "This place is freaking me-"

Vivian's thought was disrupted by her own bloodcurdling scream. The shadowy figure wasn't Erik at all, but an unfortunate county health inspector who had been in the wrong place at a very wrong time. The buckling shelves had sent a metal support strut springing out like a harpoon, impaling him through the chest and holding him to the ensuing blaze like a marshmallow over a campfire. One entire side of his body had been reduced to a charcoal-black mass of brittle carbon, and a thin trail of silvery gray smoke gently vented from his empty eye socket. His remaining eye was opened wide and fixed unblinkingly on Vivian.

At the sound of her screams, Erik came sprinting from the next aisle, clutching a half-eaten bag of Doritos 3Ds.

"What?! What's going aaaugh!"

As his feet hit the slick of spilt soda, Erik's sneakers kicked out from under him and dropped him flat on his back. He slid across the aisle, knocking out Vivian's legs and slamming into the corpse's dangling ankles. With the force of the impact, the metal spear made a crumbling slice through the ashy flesh and dropped the remains on top of Erik's startled body.

"Aaaaaugh! Shit! Holy shit! Get it off! Get it off!"

Erik flailed under the torched cadaver, tearing its desiccated limbs from its body in his frantic struggle. Vivian clambered to her feet, slipping and sliding in a breathless panic. She grabbed the disintegrating health inspector and threw him off of Erik's spastic body. In the dim torchlight, Erik's cheese-powder-stained face was as white as hotel linens.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" he shrieked.

Their appetites effectively ruined, the two terrified survivors bolted out of the aisle and toward the front of the store.

"Where's the door?" Erik panicked. "It's too dark! I can't find the front door!"

"It's over here," Vivian said, holding up her torch. "Come on! And watch your ste-"

Before the words had come out of her mouth, Vivian's foot caught on the cable of a fallen fluorescent light, yanked itself out from under her body, and sent her smashing down again on the cracked tile. Her torch flew out of her hand and skidded across the floor, slamming to a stop against the remains of checkstand two.

Its flames licked at an intact heap of paper grocery bags, quickly igniting the whole pile.

Vivian pulled her face from the puddled floor and began wringing the slime from her hair. It flowed out of her red locks with an unnerving, clotty sort of warmth. The smell of it was familiar and organic. Vivian froze in the slowly increasing firelight. Erik slipped to her side and grabbed her by the elbow.

"Oh God, are you okay, Viv?! You went down hard and-oh shit, you're bleeding!"

"No," Vivian said numbly, looking at the dark red substance on her hands. "I'm not."

Her eyes rolled numbly toward the blaze enveloping the checkstand, landing upon the ghastly white flesh of Verman Boltzmann's drained carcass. The blubbery heap of his earthly remains was draped over the smoldering conveyor belt like a whale beached on a breakwater. His skin was riddled with a network of gruesome splits and tears, as if the blast had finally driven his substantial innards to rupture his overstuffed hide. As the hot flames began to lick the sides of his body, stinking yellow bubbles of molten fat oozed from his lacerations like lava from a volcano that really needed to work out more often.

Erik's legs went weak and buckled beneath him. Almost before he had landed on his knees, he had already thrown up half a bag of nacho chips.

Vivian just stared. Frozen. The warm blood of her late boss dripping from her pointed chin.

"Come on! Let's go!" Erik screamed, staggering back to his feet. "Dead things, Vivian! Dead things!"

He grabbed her by the arm and yanked her toward the pale, foggy pink glow of the door as the fire quickly spread through the unburnt debris. They stumbled out into the parking lot and collapsed on the dusty pavement, forcing the stench of smoke and nausea out of their bodies with sharp, phlegmy coughs and bitter dry heaves. After a long moment, they fell silent.

Vivian stared into the black smoke that was now pouring from the entrance. The spreading fire threw orange flickers of dancing light across the lenses of her glasses as it consumed the remainder of Boltzmann's Market.

"All right," she whispered. "Let's not *ever* do that again."

"Alright, let's do it again," Bobby said dismally. "Turn it right. Right. Right. Stop! No, left, leeeeft. Stop! Come on! Baby steps!"

The 5-in-1 camping lantern sat on the roof of the Alpha Beta Gamma station wagon, surrounded by the broken plastic of several D-cell battery packages. Bobby fiddled with the on-screen menu of the five-inch television built into the lantern's face. Sherri lounged across the back seat of the vehicle, nursing her third beer.

"This is bullshit, yo," Trent said. "Why don't you just use the antenna?"

"I did use the antenna, genius," Bobby said. "I tried the TV and radio bands. It doesn't pick up anything on AM, FM, UHF, or VHF. It's just a cheap-ass camping lantern; it's not Ted Turner's limo. I'm amazed this piece of shit actually has a built-in satellite receiver. Now turn the dish to the left, *slowly*. "

Trent grumbled and shuffled in tiny steps, scraping the edge of a stained satellite dish into the pavement. The Bikini Martini's new digital mini-dish had been blown to atoms with the rest of the bar, but its obsolete one-and-a-half-meter analog forebear had survived inside the steel Dumpster. Trent was now struggling to hold its awkward girth up to the southern horizon.

The tiny black and white screen crackled to life as the signal bar suddenly leapt to maximum strength.

"Stop! Stop!" Bobby ordered. "We got something!"

"So come on with us now, and discover the wonder of youuuuuuu! Welcome to Zoobilee Zoo!"

"God damn it!" he barked. "Zoobles again. Turn right."

"No way. Uh uh. I'm done," Trent said, leaning the heavy dish against the Dumpster. "I've gone all the way around seven times and you ain't found nothin' but that kiddie show. Are you sure you're working that thing right, B?"

Bobby flipped through the thin instruction book.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sure," he said. "I don't get it. Even if we can only find one satellite through this shitty cloud cover, we should be able to get more than one non-subscription feed off of it. This TV sucks ass."

He threw the book back into the box and slumped against the wagon's fender in frustration. Trent squinted at Mayor Ben's face chirping on the tiny screen.

"Hello, my little Zoobaroos! It's zoo-pendous to see you again for another zoo-riffic adventure!"

"Does he actually talk like that for the whole show?" Trent asked.

"Shhh!" Bobby hissed. "Turn that off!"

"For real," Trent agreed. "This guy is as irritating as underwear with a zipper."

"No no, listen!" Bobby continued. "I hear it again! The crackling! Listen!"

"Ah shit, not this again," Sherri muttered.

Trent turned down the tiny volume knob and once again listened into the thick, heaving silence. Somewhere a piece of metal banged against another, echoing dimly across the distance. Then nothing.

"Hello out there!" Bobby yelled. "Hey! Is anybody there? Sunny?"

His words echoed off of the buildings and evaporated into quiet.

"Give it up," Sherri said darkly, curling up in the back seat of the wagon. "There's nobody coming for us but the reaper."

"Stop it! I'm serious!" Bobby snapped. "There's something out there! Listen!"

He stood up and yelled into the pink fog.

"Hey! I know you're out there! I can hear you! Say something!"

His words decayed and died in the air. He cupped his hand to his ear and concentrated on the direction from which he had heard the crackle, but there was nothing. Nothing. It must have been his imagination after all. He drew a breath to say as much but was interrupted by a tiny voice that returned from the opposite direction.

"Bobby? Oh my God-Bobby!"

Bobby blinked in startled surprise, then whirled around and ran into the fog. He barely recognized the voice, as he wasn't accustomed to it sounding happy to see him.

"Holy shit!" he yelled. "Vivian?!"

The blood-and-soda-streaked forms of Vivian and Erik emerged from the obscurity of the vapor, both running to meet Bobby in the open street. The two redheaded siblings caught each other in a tight embrace.

"Oh Bobby!" Vivian sobbed. "Oh God! I'm so glad you're alive!"

A tear formed in the corner of Bobby's beady eye.

"Right back atcha," he said with a smile. "After all, I do still need a place to crash."

Vivian choked a laugh through her sobs and punched her brother in the arm.

"What the hell have you been doing to Erik?" Bobby continued. "He looks like shit."

"Oh, ha ha," Erik said, pointing at Bobby's face. "You're not looking so great yourself. You've got a whole 'Let That Be Your Last Battlefield' thing going on there."

Trent stepped in front of Erik and bowed ceremoniously to Vivian, planting a kiss on her hand.

"And who is this lovely creature that has graced us with her presence?"

"This is Vivian. My *sister*," Bobby said menacingly. "So whatever you're thinking, just stop."

"Enchanted to meet you, Vivian," Trent oozed. "Thank the good Lord. I was beginning to think that the last woman on Earth was an angry little goth girl."

"Hey!" Sherri snapped. "When you label me you negate me, you preppie fuckwad!"

"Sherri?" Vivian gasped, peering into the dim back seat of the station wagon. "Oh my God, Sherri, is that you?"

She ran to the side of the car, leaned down, and poked her head through the back

door. Although she managed to squelch the first words that her brain conjured, her gasp at the sight of Sherri's fiercely sunburnt flesh was quite audible.

"Go ahead and stare," Sherri shrugged, her useless eyes peering gruesomely through Vivian's shoulder. "Doesn't bother me. I'm fuckin' blind."

"Oh, Sherri. I ... I'm so sorry," Vivian stammered. "I mean, you ... your skin is all ..."

"Yeah, the sun's a bitch," Sherri said coldly. "Lucky I was wearing SPF 90."

Vivian bit her lip. Blinded or not, being captured in Sherri's bloody gaze was unnerving. She stood up and pulled her head from the doorway, coming face-to-face with the muted camping lantern on the roof of the vehicle. Her brow wrinkled.

"So we meet again," she said irritably. "Haven't you already caused me enough trouble?"

"What is that thing?" Erik asked.

"5-in-1 camping lantern," Bobby said. "Radio, TV, satellite receiver, flashlight, and lantern. All the conveniences of home in a smaller, shittier package."

"You're such an addict," Erik sighed. "You can't even stop watching TV for five minutes in the middle of a disaster."

"Hey, get offa me," Bobby grumbled. "We were just trying to find some news. We couldn't get a single radio working in the shitmobiles on this street. Every last one is dead."

Vivian's face clouded as she looked up and down the street at the disabled vehicles.

"So do you guys know what the hell happened last night?" Sherri asked.

"We got our asses kicked by a hurricane," Erik said.

"Okay, so we've got Y2K in August, wrath of an angry God, or a hurricane that made an unannounced, exclusive, one-night-only appearance," Sherri muttered. "For fuck's sake, you people couldn't identify your own asses if somebody didn't give you a hint."

"It wasn't any of those things," Vivian agreed. "I think ..."

Her throat closed against the words, as if saying them would make them true.

"I think ..."

"Oh, just spill it," Sherri snapped. "What do you think it was?"

Vivian looked at the rest of the group with solemn eyes.

"I think it was a nuclear bomb."

The group fell silent for a long moment. Everyone who was able looked at everyone else, trying to discern some sense of whether Vivian was serious and, if so, whether she was right. Finally Bobby broke the tension with a fit of derisive laughter.

"Oh, come on, live in the now, Viv! This is 1999! The Cold War is over. We won. There are no nukes anymore."

"Bobby, be serious!" Vivian said coldly. "All of the signs point to a nuclear explosion."

"Alright, girl. I'd buy the bomb if we were someplace that mattered, like Hollywood," Trent said incredulously. "But do you think somebody would actually waste their big badda-boom on a Podunk whistle-stop like *Stillwater, Florida*?"

"They didn't bomb Stillwater," Vivian snapped. "They bombed Songbird Key."

Sherri shook her head.

"Ohhh, of course," she said sarcastically. "Everyone knows that commies hate condos."

Vivian rubbed her eyes.

"Okay, I can't explain the *whys*," she said affrontedly. "But if you apply Occam's Razor to the circumstances, the only reasonable *how* is a nuclear detonation."

"Apply the octo *what*?" Trent asked dumbly.

"Occam's Razor," Vivian repeated. "It's methodological reductionism. It basically states that for any given problem the simplest answer is the most likely solution."

"If I had Occam's Razor, I'd apply it to my throat," Sherri said wistfully.

"Just look at the facts," Vivian continued. "Songbird Key is gone."

"What do you mean, 'gone'?" Bobby snuffed. "Everything I've seen all day is gone."

"No no. I don't mean 'burned up' gone," Vivian said. "I mean 'underwater crater' gone. This wasteland of overpressure and fire damage we're standing in would be consistent with a blast at that range. And what about this?"

She yanked the flashlight out of her purse and rapidly clicked its non-functional switch on and off.

"So what?" Trent questioned. "Homegirl's got some dead batteries."

"It's not dead batteries," Vivian corrected. "The EMP did this."

"This is all because of a fucking ambulance driver?!" Sherri shouted.

"No, the *EM P*. Electromagnetic pulse. Nuclear detonations temporarily electrify the atmosphere and wreak havoc with electronics," Vivian explained, pointing up and down the street. "Don't you see? Electric ignitions. That's why you couldn't start any of these cars!"

She grabbed Erik's arm and wrenched him around, showing his watch to the group.

"That's why Erik's watch is stopped," she continued. "Look, it's stopped dead at nine minutes to midnight. That's got to be the exact time the bomb went off!"

Vivian's frantic explanation echoed into cold silence in the crumbling street. An examination of their own memories of the previous night eerily validated Vivian's last point.

"Alright, Vivian, I don't mean to interrupt your '50s-era duck-and-cover flashback," Bobby said, gesturing with his thumb, "but I think Mayor Ben here would disagree with your batshit EMP theories."

Vivian looked at the picture on the tiny television screen and blinked.

"Where did that come from?" she asked.

"Right here," Bobby said, kicking the cardboard box by his feet. "It was in the frattiewagon there."

Vivian bent down and looked at the packaging. Inside the shipping foam was a static-protection bag made of shiny metallic foil.

"Well, this explains it," she said, holding up the bag. "It was encased in metal. Anything completely shielded by metal would be protected from the effect."

"But what about the satellite dish, yo?" Trent said. "It came out of the Dumpster."

Vivian crossed the street and knocked on the metal top of the solid steel Dumpster.

"And the Dumpster is made of *whaaaat*?" she asked rhetorically.

The wheels of rebuttal spun frantically in the minds of Vivian's companions. Some of them wanted to be right for the sake of being right, others for the sake of proving Vivian wrong, others just out of a refusal to accept the horror of her increasingly convincing argument. But in the end, nobody could contest her hypothesis, and by the virtue of Occam's Razor, it became a chilling fact.

"It's just like I said," Trent nodded quietly. "God is cleansing the earth with fire."

Erik shook his head and gently crossed his arms over his slashed midsection.

"This isn't nearly as fun as *Damnation Alley* led me to believe it would be."

"So, what now?" Sherri asked.

"We've got to get out of here," Vivian said. "This place has got to be buzzing with radiation right now. We need to get as far away from ground zero as possible, ASAP."

"Whoa, whoa, not so fast," Bobby said. "We've got to search for other survivors first!"

He pulled the bloodstained scrap of sarong from his pocket and squeezed it sadly. Vivian understood.

"I'm sorry, Bobby," she said softly. "There are no other survivors in Stillwater. Believe me."

She reached into her purse and pulled out a gold ring fused to a broken door handle. Bobby had never met Nick, but somehow he understood as well. Vivian

continued.

"Nobody is leaving this town but us."

She dropped the handle on the ground and patted her brother on the back.

"There's nothing we can do here," she said. "We've got to go."

"But how?" Trent asked. "We told you, girl. None of these cars work. What are we supposed to do?"

"Well, the way I see it we have two choices," Vivian said.

She sat down on the pavement, kicked off her broken shoes, and pulled a pair of a deceased frat boy's tube socks onto her blistered feet.

"We walk," she said, "or we die."

Erik's oversized Adam's apple twitched as he swallowed hard.

"You say that as if it can't be both," he whimpered.

"For real," Trent said. "If the Almighty is layin' down the smack, there ain't nowhere to run."

"No, Vivian's right," Bobby admitted. "We need to grab our shit and get the hell out of here before we all end up like ..."

He dropped the scrap of sarong and watched the breeze carry it away. "We just need to get out of here while we can."

With muttered agreements, the five survivors gathered anything of potential use from the debris. Bobby unhooked the camping lantern from its cable and slung it over his back by its shoulder strap. He grabbed the edge of the dish and hefted it toward Erik.

"Give me a hand with this, man."

"Oh, come on, Bobby," Erik said. "I don't care how addicted to TV you are. I am *not* carrying that."

"I know it's a load, but we've got to take it," Bobby argued. "We're bound to pick up a news feed if we keep scanning the satellites. Plus once we get back to civilization ... hey, free Skinemax."

Vivian picked up the discarded Army backpack and began stuffing it with the loose rolls of toilet paper.

"What's up with that?" Trent asked. "You gonna get revenge on your math teacher on the way out of town?"

"I don't know how long it'll be before we find safety," Vivian said. "And I, for one, don't want to be without this when we need it."

"Good thinking, Vivi," he grinned, picking up the chain of condoms. "And in the spirit of preparedness ..."

Vivian smirked and pulled the bag's drawstring tightly shut.

Erik helped Sherri out of the station wagon, holding her hand gingerly and guiding her blinded steps. Vivian stuffed her purse into the Army backpack and then hung the olive-colored bag over her slender shoulders. She looked at her brother, and he gave her an acknowledging nod.

"All right, rambler," Bobby said. "Let's get ramblin'."

With that, the tiny caravan of unlikely survivors left the ruins of the Bikini Martini and set off down the long and lonely road out of Stillwater, leaving its downtown in a foggy silence.

Five minutes later, another set of feet quietly crackled through the abandoned street.

CHAPTER FIVE

Five survivors trudged down the road in a ragged, exhausted caravan. It had been hours since they had left Stillwater's city limits, yet the acrid pink fog still followed them, covering the wasted earth in ethereal sheets.

Vivian walked awkwardly in her broken shoes. With the high heels severed, their stiff toes curled unnaturally upward, making each step a conscious exercise in balance. Even so, in these streets full of broken glass and crushed gravel, they were better than nothing.

She kept her eyes fixed on the dusty pavement as she walked. The scenery had not improved during their trek, and she couldn't bear to look at any more gray desolation swaddled in a blanket of noxious pink vapor. Her lingering hangover and the reek of the fog kneaded a growing nausea into her stomach. She yearned to step outside of reality for a minute, if for nothing else than to get a breath of fresh air.

Trent walked just in front of her, carrying his found sword with an air of masculine authority. He sliced the blade through the fog with thick, whooshing strokes, thrusting it aggressively into the shadows. He flung the tip of the sword dramatically around a vacant corner with a swaggering leap.

"Who goes there?" he demanded.

He cast an expectant glance at Vivian out of the corner of his eye. She wasn't paying any attention to him. He continued addressing the empty alley anyway.

"Yeah, you best not be there," he said commandingly. "Don't be messin' with my ladies unless you're looking for a beat-down from Big T. I protect my girls 24/7, yo."

He glanced back at Sherri. She also wasn't paying any attention to him. He pranced ahead and continued his protective posturing nonetheless.

Sherri's bleached-white hair and shredded black coat fluttered in the breeze, making her look like a shipwrecked ghost. The tattered leather no longer produced any sensation of pain as it brushed over the char of her skin. In fact, it no longer produced any sensation at all. Her scorched nerve endings had completely given up, leaving her blistered flesh soaked in a thick red numbness.

Her blindness had begun to fall away, and she could now sense shapes and movement in the dark sea of her vision. Still, unable to properly see the road before her, Sherri clenched the drawstring of Vivian's backpack for guidance. Her bloodstained eyes narrowed as her ears pricked up.

"Hey, Powderpuff," she whispered, "do you hear that?"

"Yeah, don't worry," Vivian said. "It's just that guy Trent acting like a freak."

"No, not that," Sherri said. "Believe me, I've heard enough of that to be able to identify it. It's like this weird crackling."

Vivian listened. All she could hear were five sets of feet crunching on the wrecked pavement and broken glass of the street.

"I don't hear it," she shrugged. "I'm sure it's nothing to be concerned about."

Behind the girls, Bobby and Erik struggled to carry the awkward, burdensome load of the satellite dish. They each had their hands hooked under the lip of the parabola; Bobby in the rear, Erik in the front. After a morning of torture the likes of which he had never before experienced, Erik was moving slower than Bobby could tolerate. He was reminded of this fact regularly by none-too-subtle jabs of the blunt dish into the small of his back.

"Ow! Jesus, Bobby," Erik whined. "Take it easy back there, will ya?"

"Well, pick up the pace already," Bobby snapped. "You're slower than a Kermit download."

Erik stopped walking and dropped his end of the dish with a *clang*, whirling angrily on Bobby.

"Oh, well excuse the shit out of me! I don't need a *break* or anything!" he cried. "After all, I *did* get a good night's sleep and a complete breakfast! Oh wait, I'm doing that thing again where I confuse eating Cap'n Crunch with *bleeding to death from a near-fatal mutant attack!* "

"Mutant attack?" Bobby snorted. "Erik, what the hell are you talking about?"

"In the storm drain!" Erik chirped. "I got attacked by some kind of mutant!"

"You said you got scratched by your cat!"

"I thought it was my cat, but now I know better!" Erik squeaked. "Vivian was right, this was an atomic bomb! I was attacked by a radioactive mutant!"

Bobby let out a single, derisive laugh.

"You're imagining things," he said dismissively. "This is exactly like when we were kids and you saw *Poltergeist* for the first time. Remember that? That same

night you thought a ghost was attacking you in your bedroom."

"That was totally different," Erik said defensively. "I was just-"

"Remind me, how many stitches did your grandma end up getting that night?"

"Look, shut up about that, okay?!" Erik squeaked. "This was totally different!"

"There were no ghosts then, and there are no radioactive mutants now," Bobby said calmly. "It's just your overactive, movie-freaked imagination."

"My imagination?!" Erik squealed. "My imagination?! Oh, I suppose *these* are my imagination too?!"

He grabbed the bottom of his shirt and yanked it up over his chest. The skin surrounding his injuries had become ghoulishly swollen and inflamed, and unidentified protrusions pressed menacingly against the back of his soiled dressings. Bobby's eyes went wide behind his glasses.

"That's messed up," he said reverently. "It looks like you're smuggling Klingon foreheads under there."

"I'm going to die! I just know it!" Erik panicked. "I had a mid-life crisis when I was thirteen years old!"

Vivian looked at Erik's sides with a diagnostic squint.

"I'm sure you just need a few injections of antibiotics. You'll be fine as soon as we find an emergency shelter," she said. "In the meantime, I think we could all use a break. Let's just sit down for a while and rehydrate ourselves. I see a fountain up ahead."

"Good thinkin', Vivi," Trent agreed with a showy twirl of his sword. "Sit your weary body down and let the T soothe your parched throat with some cool, gentle water."

With that, he bounded up to the nearby fountain and sprung lightly onto its green and sea-foam blue edge. Not long ago it had almost certainly been a beautiful work of art, but today it was little more than a knee-high ring of concrete and cracked tile about ten feet in diameter. The granite nub of a fluted column extended abortively from the center of the pool, terminating in a mass of broken stone and bent pipe. Trent looked into the stagnant bowl and winced.

"On second thought, maybe we best keep moving until we find some cocktails instead."

He probed the tip of his blade into the fountain and swirled it around. The pool's spoiled surface was thick with fallout dust and rainbowed swirls of oily condensation. Vivian limped over to the fountain and sat wearily on its edge.

"Okay, so forget the rehydration," she muttered thirstily. "How about we just sit down long enough for some skin to grow back on the soles of my feet?"

She pulled off her mangled shoes and rubbed her swollen feet and ankles. Trent quickly knelt in front of her and gracefully brushed her hands away, taking her

blistered foot in his fingers and massaging it gently.

"Hey Vivi, those pretty little shoes aren't really appropriate for walking this kind of long haul."

Vivian glared at him with an expression that clearly stated, "No shit, Sherlock."

Trent continued. "So what do you say you let Big T carry you on his back for a while?"

Vivian shook her head.

"I don't think so. Just give me a minute. I'll be fine."

"Come on, girl, just spread those long legs and jump on," Trent grinned, breaking into song. "*Come on, ride the Trent! Hey ride it! Wooo-wooooo!*"

He turned his back to her and pointed his sunburnt arms at his swinging backside. Vivian raised an eyebrow.

"Let me explain something to you right now," she deadpanned. "I wouldn't 'ride the Trent' if he was the last lifeboat on the *Titanic*, all right?"

"Aww, it's not like that, sweetness," Trent smiled, putting his hand over his heart. "It's my duty as a good Christian to give you the piggyback, girl. It's right in the Bible. 'During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints in the sand, it was then that I carried you.'"

"Hey Mr. Pious Playa," Erik said bitterly. "If you're so anxious to carry something, why don't you carry this freakin' dish for a while? Bobby's having a contest to see what he can kill first: the batteries in the TV or me."

"Oh, quit being such a drama queen," Bobby muttered. "You'll thank me when this TV finds the emergency broadcast that ends up saving your ass. I'm gonna give it another try."

He propped the satellite dish against the side of the fountain and began hooking it up to the camping lantern. Erik slumped down on the ground and did his best to look miserable. Sherri plopped down heavily on the edge of the fountain and hung her head nauseously between her bony knees.

"Man, I am still hung over as shit," she moaned. "I didn't drink enough last night to still be feeling this bitch."

"I hear that," Bobby agreed. "Usually I can just sleep it off, but my guts are all a-tingle today. The puke has been burning up and down the pipe all day like a barf barometer."

"Me too," Erik moaned. "I wasn't even drinking last night and I *still* feel like I'm gonna hurl. It's like the air is just *crawling* in my *stomach*."

"Okay, I don't know what y'all are talking about," Trent said proudly. "I drank responsibly, and I feel right as rain. Nothing is sexier than somebody who knows when to say when, right Vivi?"

Vivian didn't hear him. She was still preoccupied with what Erik had said. She had

been feeling the same thing all morning but hadn't been able to express the sentiment so succinctly. She too felt like the air was *crawling* in her stomach. Not only crawling in her stomach, but in her lungs, and bladder, and in her toes and fingertips. It was as if the piercing reek of the pink fog was so thick and inescapable that it was invoking a physical madness. She felt like the vapor was not only assaulting her burning nose, but her entire body, soaking into her chilly, exposed skin and saturating it with a ripe, cabbagey stench. She knew this feeling could only be one thing, and it wasn't a hangover.

It had to be the preliminary effects of radiation poisoning.

"Vivi?" Trent repeated. "You okay, sweetness? You look like you're about to give greetings and salutations to your old friend Ralph."

Vivian held her tingling abdomen nervously. There was no point in telling them what was really making them sick. It was better they didn't know. There was nothing they could do about it if they did. As this helplessness wrenched down on her stomach, Vivian realized that Trent's assessment of her expression was about to become disgustingly accurate.

"No no, I'm okay. I feel fine," she lied. "I just have to um ... go to the bathroom or something."

Trent swished his sword into the air and offered Vivian his arm.

"Please, allow me to escort you to a discreet location," he said with a bow. "I shall be honored to be your humble bodyguard whilst you take care of business."

"Ha!" Sherri laughed. "Or with the bullshit filter on, 'The thought of peeping on you squatting with your panties around your ankles gives me a hard-on.'"

Vivian glanced at Trent. He looked about as innocent as a barbecue at Jeffrey Dahmer's house.

"I think I can keep an eye on myself," she said, disgusted. "Could somebody else please keep an eye on Trent?"

"Oh, that's cold," Trent said guiltily. "A guy tries to look out for a lady, and look what happens. That's just cold."

With an annoyed glance, Vivian wandered away from the group to find some modicum of privacy in which to lose her lunch. She limped in her cruel shoes around the back of the nearest remaining building. All of the detail had been ripped from the face of the groaning structure, leaving no way to tell what it had been in its past life. Reduced to its most rudimentary elements, it was little more than a monolithic stack of crumbling concrete slabs extending five stories into the burnt sky.

She leaned against the cracked cement wall and felt her body cells rolling in a cold boil. It was like thousands of insects were running across the inside of her skin, scuttling around her limbs, scurrying up her back, and burrowing into her face. Her stomach convulsed and her mouth jerked open, yet it produced nothing. Not even a gag or cough. Finally she wrapped her arms around her trembling body and slouched nauseously against the building.

Through her cracked glasses she could see that she was in the midst of a grim automobile graveyard. Chunks of vehicles lay slammed into the ground, as if some gigantic monster had taken bites out of them and cast them aside. To her right, half of a BMW leered at her with its broken grille. To the left, a Lexus was driven nose-first into the hard earth, standing perpendicular to the ground with its rear tires slowly rolling against the stale air.

As Vivian crouched anxiously against the chilly concrete wall, the pink vapor oozed over the derelict automobiles, seeping through their broken windows and pouring out of their forgotten tailpipes. Slowly. Sickeningly. She imagined the fog curling into a mass of radioactive tentacles, creeping toward her vulnerable position-ever closer, ever more solid, twisting across the ground like tongues of rancid cotton candy, sliding out to lick her chilled skin. She could almost hear it breathing: inhaling and exhaling in a heavy stroke, crackling like a bonfire.

A jingle of broken glass against cement roused her from her trance. In a flash she had retrieved her senses and launched to her feet. She turned in place uneasily, her eyes stabbing into the once again inanimate fog. She *had* heard someone breathing.

"Trent?" she squeaked. "Damn it, Trent. Leave me alone! Give me some privacy for a minute!"

She closed her eyes and listened, trying to locate the source of the noise. The heavy breath was definitely coming from behind the vertical Lexus. With a sudden fury she rushed around the automotive wall, her own thumping footsteps eclipsed by the heavy pounding of the retreating voyeur.

"Trent? Trent! Yeah, you better run, you pervert!" she yelled. "Is it too much to ask for you to just leave me alone for a minute so I can-"

Vivian stopped short and her words fell into empty air. There was nothing on the other side of the car but a broad, yawning hole in the side of the concrete monolith.

"I found something!" Bobby said excitedly. "Turn left ... left ... stop! We got it!"

With Erik rotating the dish, Bobby had finally managed to get a picture on the lantern's screen. The crackle of the tiny speaker drew the boys into a huddle around the bluish-white flicker. Even Sherri leaned in with casual interest.

The televised transmission was a simple animation drawn in sketchy watercolors. It depicted an ape-like man shambling across an empty white screen, holding a blunt rock. The hominid shortly froze at the left of the frame, and a stout, upright-walking *Homo erectus* emerged from behind it wielding a crude hand axe. After two steps, the primitive man froze, and a caveman in animal skins emerged holding a sharpened spear, and so on until the screen contained a simplified representation of the evolution of Man. The lineage culminated in the thin, tall form of modern man, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, holding a glowing, oversized atom in his outstretched hand. A soft voice echoed the text that faded onto the bottom of the screen.

"Realize your potential. WOPR - Liberty Valley, Pennsylvania."

"Hey!" Trent said. "That's not the Zoo Crew! You found something else!"

"Naah. It's the Zoobles all right," Bobby said with irritation. "This is just a PBS station bumper at the beginning of the show. I saw it this morning too."

Sure enough, as soon as he had said the words, the promo dissolved into the upbeat opening theme of *Zoobilee Zoo*. Bobby punched the "scan" button and watched with diluted optimism as the screen rolled through channel after empty channel.

"Wait, wait," Erik said. "Are you telling me that with this big dish and all the satellites on the horizon, all you can pick up on this thing is *one station*?"

"So far," Bobby said.

"And instead of any news about what's going on, that one station is playing nothing but a *Zoobilee Zoo* marathon?!"

"Not exactly a marathon," Bobby said. "It's actually the same episode. At the end it goes to black for about thirty seconds, then bars and tone, the promo, and then back to the start. I think the tape is stuck in a loop."

"*Hello, my little Zoobaroos!*" Mayor Ben cackled. "*It's zoo-pendous to see you again for another zoo-riffic adventure!*"

Erik rubbed his forehead with his fingertips.

"That's it. Forget it," he said. "I'm not going to carry this heavy-ass dish another inch just so that I can bask in the nightmarish glow of Ben Vereen in cat makeup."

Sherri shrugged casually.

"When I was a kid I always thought that makeup was kinda hot," she said. "There's something sexy about a dude with animal parts."

"Okay, fine," Erik muttered. "From now on, let's make the furvert carry the dish. She's the only one who's going to get anything out of it."

"Hey!" Sherri snapped. "I'm not a furvert just because I'd fuck Mayor Ben!"

"Perhaps not," Bobby shrugged. "But that fact *does* open up a whole new slate of potential psychological problems."

"Oh, screw you and your satellite dish," Sherri murmured. "What do I need TV for? I'm fucking blind."

"Jeez, what is with you people?" Bobby huffed. "I can't believe you just want to just abandon our only chance of ever seeing an emergency broadcast!"

"It's not that we don't want to keep scanning the satellites for news," Erik explained. "We just can't keep carrying that two-ton dish on our backs! We'd all be totally gung-ho about keeping it if we had a car!"

"And if 'ifs' and 'buts' were fruits and nuts, every day would be Christmas," Bobby smirked. "Fine, just forget it then. We're never gonna find a working car in this wasteland."

From out of the fog, Vivian ran up to the fountain and slid to a stop on the dusty pavement in a pair of ruby-red Airwalk sneakers.

"Good news, everybody," she said cheerfully. "I think I just found our ride out of here."

"This way! In here! Come on!"

Holding aloft the camping lantern, Vivian plunged intrepidly through the garage-door-sized hole in the disintegrating concrete cube. A dusty concrete ramp, wide enough for a car, stabbed upward into the heart of what had previously been the parking garage of the Banyan Terrace. Up the ramp she hiked, and her four companions followed warily.

The heavy structure had buckled against its own framework, shearing story after story of concrete floor from its moorings and piling the fallen levels in sedimentary layers. The ruined floors sagged over the massive support pylons of the lowest levels, forming a broad, straight tunnel through the center of the wreckage. The lantern light played eerily over the crumpled remains of luxury cars smashed within the collapsed walls. Between the mangled fenders, narrow, shadowy cavities opened off of the main shaft like tunnels in an ant farm. After about a hundred feet, the ramp terminated in a short cross of perpendicular roadway, creating a squarish chamber of dark, stale air twenty feet wide. The building groaned and squealed under its own pressing weight, dropping a powdery snowfall of pulverized concrete on the five survivors as the light of the entrance slipped into the distance behind them.

Erik shuffled to Vivian's side and whispered urgently.

"Vivian, are you crazy?!" he squeaked. "I thought we were going to stay out of condemned buildings from now on! What are we doing here?!"

Vivian stopped as she reached the end of the inclined tunnel.

"We're here to get the Rabbit out of its burrow," she answered.

She lifted her lantern toward the wall, throwing its yellow light over the nose of her rusted convertible sticking out of the debris. It was nearly buried, but apparently unharmed.

"You've *got* to be kidding me," Bobby sighed.

"Damn, Vivi," Trent quipped. "God may have given women all the sugar and spice, but he sure didn't give y'all any skillz when it comes to parking an automobile."

"I didn't park it," Vivian muttered. "I paid a guy seven dollars for this exclusive VIP space."

In the truest sense of the word, the space where Vivian's Rabbit was parked was not, in fact, a space at all. For those to whom this was not readily apparent, the floor had been painted with a series of tight, parallel lines and stenciled letters reading "NO PARKING!"

The convertible had been backed, as the valet had promised, under the access ramp to the next level of the garage. To each side of the vehicle stood a titanic pair of concrete pylons straining to hold both the massive ramp and the several collapsed

floors that were now piled brutally upon it. Their buckling weight had come to rest against the fenders of the Rabbit, barring access to its doors and, in fact, making it impossible to get around the sides of the vehicle at all.

The ramp of the groaning ceiling ran parallel to the length of the car's windshield, pressed harshly on its rollbar, and continued downward to meet the ground ten feet behind its rear bumper. This slant allowed one and only one access point to the Rabbit's interior: an eight-inch gap between the crumbling ceiling and the top of the windshield.

"What are we supposed to do with *that*?!" Erik whined. "It's crushed! Let's get out of here before we are too!"

"It's not crushed; it's just trapped," Vivian said. "And it's the only car in the whole building that's still intact. All we need to do is pull it out of there."

"Uh uh. No way, Viv," Bobby said, eyeing the crumbling ceiling. "That car is probably the only thing holding up the roof in here. And even if we do get it out, it's not like we could start it."

"Come on, Bobby," Vivian pleaded. "The keys are right there in the ignition!"

"It doesn't matter," Trent argued. "We punched a key into every car at the bar and we didn't even get as much as a car alarm to go off, yo."

"It's the EMP-you said it yourself," Erik agreed. "The ignition circuits are gonna be fried. Keys or not, we'll never get that little car running. It wasn't shielded with metal."

"Yes, that might be true," Vivian growled. "It wasn't *completely enclosed* in metal, but there sure was a lot of metal trapped in the *hundreds of tons of automobile-laced concrete* that it *was* enclosed in!"

"Yeah, exactly," Erik chirped. "The same hundreds of tons of automobile-laced concrete that are going to crush us to death as soon as we start messing with it! Let's just get out of here already!"

"So that's it? We're not even going to try?" Vivian asked, frustrated. "It's not even worth the *chance*? "

"The chance of *what*? " Sherri barked. "Of getting our asses killed trying to save a car that barely ran *before* the apocalypse?"

Vivian pushed up her glasses and rubbed her eyes. She took a deep breath of the stale, claustrophobic air, and a low, menacing crackle emanated from the overstrained walls of the garage.

"Fine. You can all just leave if you want," she said sternly. "I'll pull that car out all by myself if I have to."

"Oh, come on, Vivian," Erik pleaded. "Be reasonable."

"I tried being reasonable," Vivian said. "Reason says that the ceiling will collapse if we disturb the car. Reason says that the EMP destroyed the ignition. I'm not getting anywhere using reason."

"So what are you going to do?" Bobby asked.

"I'm going to believe in myself," Vivian said. "And I'm going to drive that car out of here."

With that, Vivian set down the lantern and sprang onto the hood of her car. She squeezed her arms and shoulders through the gap and came to a struggling stop, her body pinned between the windshield and the deteriorating ceiling above. This was exactly how far she had managed to get in her previous attempt, when she had snatched her sneakers from the dashboard. She couldn't even reach the keys from here, let alone the shifter or pedals. Yet she clawed her feet into the sun-faded hood, trying futilely to shove herself through the opening as bits of gravel and silt flaked off of the ceiling and rolled down her back.

Bobby and Erik exchanged exasperated glances. Sherri stared blindly into the sound of the scuffle. Trent just gazed hungrily at Vivian's wriggling backside. Finally he turned on the group and spoke with the command of a man who changed the course of history, as portrayed by a washed-up actor in a made-for-TV movie.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen. What kind of pathetic creatures are we? For real, yo?" he declared. "Whilst we stand here all scaredy-catted up, that woman is risking her fine neck to score some wheels for us cowering and lowly wretches. Listen up, dawgs: If the lady wants her car, we shall help the lady get her car. It is our duty as men to fulfill our women's every wish."

"I wish you'd decide if you're a poseur intellectual or a poseur gangsta," Sherri muttered.

Bobby and Erik looked at each other and shrugged.

"We're not leaving without Vivian," Erik frowned. "And I guess Vivian's not leaving without her car."

"So by transitive axiom," Bobby sighed, "we're not leaving without Vivian's car."

"Now that's what I'm talkin' about!" Trent beamed. "Come on, let's give the lovely lady a hand."

He leapt to the Rabbit's fender and slid his hand down Vivian's long calf. Vivian kicked at him distractedly.

"What's the word in there, Vivi?" Trent said. "You all good?"

Vivian's muffled voice came back.

"I'm stuck. The gap is too narrow. My chest won't fit through it."

"Here, let me help," Trent said, stepping forward. "If I hold down your girlie bits all Janet-Jackson-style, you'll be able to-"

Bobby put a heavy hand on Trent's shoulder, stopping him in his tracks. He slowly wagged his index finger in the air scornfully.

"Damn, homes, don't be like that," Trent said bitterly. "I'm just trying to look out for the greater good here, yo!"

Vivian wrestled her shoulders back through the gap, slid down the hood, and hopped down to the cement floor.

"I can't reach the ignition," she said defeatedly. "I'm just too big."

"Good, let's go then," Erik said, turning toward the exit.

"Aw, Vivi, don't be all down on yourself," Trent said reassuringly. "You're not too big. You're the perfect size. Everyone knows a woman with a few curves is far sexier than one that's all skin and bones."

"Well, it's my 'curves' that are the problem," Vivian blushed, crossing her arms over her chest. "I could have fit in there if I was all skin and bones like ..."

Vivian stopped before she had completed her thought, but nobody seemed to realize it. They had all heard the end of the phrase as clearly as if it had been said out loud, and their heads turned in unison.

Sherri blinked a slow, unseeing blink in the pregnant silence.

"You're all staring at me right now, aren't you?" she scowled. "Forget it. I can't drive stick."

"You don't have to," Vivian said. "All you have to do is see if it'll start."

"And we *have* established that I'm fucking blind?" Sherri continued.

"Okay, I know the situation is somewhat less than ideal," Vivian said encouragingly. "But you're the only one here thinner than I am."

"Or, alternately," Erik suggested anxiously, "we could take this as a sign that we should just give up and get the hell out of here right now."

Vivian turned her back to Erik and put her hand on Sherri's crispy shoulder.

"Please, Sherri," she said. "Don't listen to him. You're our only hope."

Sherri rolled her reddened eyes.

"Alright, alright, I'll do it," she sighed. "Don't get all melodramatic about it."

With a broad smile, Vivian helped Sherri onto the hood of the Rabbit and up to its windshield. Sherri easily slid both arms and shoulders through the tiny opening, grabbed the headrests of the front seats, and pulled her narrow body through the gap. She dropped straight down on the other side of the windshield, landing on her head and tumbling over into a heap.

"Ow! Shit!" she grumbled.

Vivian took the camping lantern and held it to the windshield. She could see Sherri's skeletal body lying chest-down across the driver's seat, her narrow hips stuffed awkwardly between the front seats, her knees planted in the faded upholstery of the back. The rusted lever of the defunct parking brake wedged itself brutally into her blistered stomach.

"Are you all right?" Vivian asked.

"Do I look all right?" Sherri bitched. "I've been in fetish beds more comfortable

than this!"

Vivian rolled her eyes.

"Can you reach the ignition?"

In the sparse light, Sherri could see nothing but a maroon-hued quilt of flat blackness. She fumbled her hands around the wheel and down the steering column until she located the dangling keychain.

"Got it," she said, grasping the keys. "Let's burn some dead dinosaurs."

"Wait! Wait!" Vivian piped. "It's still in gear! Push in the clutch first or it'll stall."

"Oh, screw you," Sherri snarled, struggling against the seats. "It's not even going to start anyway!"

"Come on, Sherri," Vivian begged.

"Alright, alright," Sherri moaned. "God, you're so needy."

Sherri swept her left arm over the floor until her hand connected with a pedal. She felt out the clutch and, with the sum of her meager upper-body strength, shoved it to the floor with her palm.

"Unnung!" she strained. *"Now what?"*

"Turn the key and hope for the best," Vivian answered, crossing her fingers.

While struggling to keep the firm clutch pushed in with her left hand, Sherri awkwardly reached her right hand over her shoulder and caught hold of the key. With a breathless groan she gave it the most violent crank she could muster.

The key pushed against the sides of the tumbler.

The tumbler turned with a click.

The engine returned nothing but a cold, blue silence.

Not a rev of the starter. Not a flash of accessory lights.

Nothing.

Gasping air into her strained lungs, Sherri let go of the key and collapsed with her shallow chest draped across the edge of the driver's seat, her forehead resting on the floor.

"It's totally dead," she mumbled. "Just like us."

Her words darted out of the crevice, slapping the optimism clean off of Vivian's face.

"I told you it wasn't going to work," Bobby said.

"It must feel great to always be so right," Vivian scowled. "Fine. Let's get out of here before you're right about the roof collapsing too."

"Yes! Yes, let's do that!" Erik said quickly. "Come on, Sherri! Time to move out!"

They heard a scrambling commotion from inside the car, quickly increasing in intensity and then falling into silence.

"God *damn* it," Sherri barked.

"What is it now?" Vivian sighed.

"I can't get up. My sleeve is stuck on something."

In the darkness under the dashboard, the torn cuff of Sherri's mangled sleeve was looped irretrievably around the clutch pedal. Vivian held the lantern up to the window and squinted at Sherri's prone form stuffed between the bucket seats.

"Well, if your sleeve is stuck, just take your coat off."

Sherri thrashed against the binding black leather, but the stringy remains of her coat were wrapped tightly around the length of her captured torso.

"I can't get it off!" she spat.

As the Rabbit swayed angrily on its loose suspension, large knots of crushed cement broke free of the ceiling in waves, tumbling down the ramp and clattering off of crushed metal body panels. Everyone threw their arms over their heads and ducked for cover as the concrete supports let out a moan like whales on honeymoon.

"Stop! Sherri, stop!" Vivian yelled. "Don't move! Stop moving!"

Sherri's struggle broke off into coughing and strangled breath, and the Rabbit settled down in its crumbling cavern. Even as the debris temporarily ceased to precipitate from the ceiling, a loud, splintering crackle issued menacingly from the walls.

"God damn it!" Sherri snarled. "I'm stuck like a dick in a duck in here!"

"Oh no, no no," Erik mumbled. "Now what do we do?! We've got to get her out of there! The roof is coming down!"

"Don't panic," Vivian said sternly. "We just need to stay reasonable and use logic. Now just calm down and don't touch *anything*. You got it?"

"Got it," Bobby nodded.

"You know I got it, girl," Trent agreed.

At that moment a thunderous sound of snapping timber rang out from Erik's direction, sending a shower of gravel tumbling out of the ceiling and into Vivian's hair.

"Erik!" she snapped. "I said don't *touch* anything!"

"I didn't! It wasn't me!" Erik yelled, turning toward the noise. "It came from over-oh my G-God ..."

Erik's grimy complexion paled as he gazed into the narrow gap between the two demolished vehicles behind him. Trent brandished his sword and snatched the lantern off the hood of the Rabbit.

"Aww, what's got you spooked, Little E?" he said. "Man, you need to work up some testicular fortitude and quit being such a little ..."

He took two bold steps toward the dimly lit crevice before freezing in his tracks.

"... pussy!"

Trent was correct. In the dim light of the lantern, all available evidence suggested that the creature lurking in the ruined garage was indeed a pussycat. It had the reflective yellow eyes, the pointed ears, the clawed feet. Yet this creature, which upon inventory purported to be an average housecat, stood just over three feet tall at the shoulder. Erik stared in horror as he tried valiantly to form a sentence.

"What the ... I ... I mean ... this can't be!" he stammered. "It ... it's *Twiki!* "

"Twiki?!" Bobby hissed. "I thought you said you killed Twiki!"

"I thought I did!"

"Well, apparently she didn't get the memo!"

Although Twiki was most certainly not dead, she did not look at all well as she emerged threateningly onto the broad concrete ramp. Her horrifically stretched butterscotch hide struggled to cover a pronounced skeleton suitable for a Saint Bernard. Yellow bones ruptured sickeningly through blood-caked rips in her fur at the overstressed joints of her knees and shoulder blades. Her enormous teeth curled from her head in great crooked rows, jutting forward out of her mouth like uneven spears jammed into her bleeding black gums. Dagger-like claws extended from the bloody, fallout-dusted flesh of her mutilated toes, scratching horribly against the cement floor. As she stepped out of the shadows, her ever-expanding flesh and bones crackled like an overstuffed wooden barrel on the verge of eruption.

"That crackle!" Bobby hissed. "That's what I've been hearing all day!"

Erik gasped. "She must have followed us here!"

Erik, Bobby, and Trent all pressed themselves against the gnarled walls as Twiki stepped forward, letting out a piercing, mewling hiss. Vivian slowly pushed her palms and heels into the rusted steel of the Rabbit's hood, crab-walking herself to the windshield and pressing her back against it. Four sets of eyes frantically flashed back and forth among each other as they tried to work out a non-verbal plan of action. None of them understood anything any of the others tried to convey. All they understood was that any plan for a prompt retreat was foiled by one tiny detail.

"Hellooo, assholes? I'm still stuck in here!" Sherri yelled. "Hey, what's going on out there?"

Twiki's beach-ball-sized head snapped toward the sound, and she locked her huge golden eyes directly upon the flushed redhead pressed against the Rabbit's windshield. Without taking her eyes off of the monstrous cat, Vivian leaned her head toward the gap and hissed out of the corner of her mouth.

" *Ssssh!* Not now, Sherri!"

"Don't *sssh* me! What's that noise? It sounds like Snap, Crackle, and Pop are

having a three-way out there!"

"Sherri, shut *up!* " Vivian bristled.

Twiki's eyes narrowed as she turned her hulking body toward the convertible. Her claws scraped like steel tent stakes against the pavement as she lowered her stance and began a slow, stalking stride toward the car. Vivian knew there was no sense in trying to run. This overgrown feline's hunting instincts would be far too sharp to allow her to escape.

"Okay, Trent, it's showtime," Bobby whispered. "Get in there and do your thing!"

The hilt of Trent's sword shook violently in his trembling fist.

"I ... I ... w-w-what's that now?" he chattered.

"You protect your girls 24/7, remember?" Bobby coached. "This is what you've been waiting for all day, tough guy. Make us proud!"

At that, Bobby put his doughy hand on Trent's back and shoved him into action. Trent took several stumbling steps and came to a halt directly between Vivian and the monstrous form of the mutant feline. Twiki rocked back on her crackling haunches and hissed as Trent raised his sword shakily with two rapidly whitening hands. He stood completely frozen in his wingtips, too terrified to even blink.

"S-st-s-st-stay b-b-back," he stammered. "I ain't p-p-pl-playin'."

With Twiki momentarily distracted, Vivian didn't waste a second in returning to Sherri's rescue. She scrambled to her feet and thrust her head and shoulders into the gap, once again wedging to an abrupt stop at her chest.

"Sherri!" she hissed. "Get out of there! Now!"

"I *can't!* " Sherri sneered. "What part of 'stuck like a dick in a duck' didn't you understand?"

Vivian pushed her feet against the hood and struggled against the ever-narrowing space between the car and the angled roof, but she was just too big for the gap.

She blinked thoughtfully.

Or was the gap just too *small* for her?

"Sherri!" she squeaked. "Can you still reach the clutch pedal?"

"Hellooo? I'm *tied* to it!"

"Push it in!"

With a grunt and a thrust of her tiny bicep, Sherri drove the clutch to the ground.

"*Now what?*"

"Just hold it there!"

Sherri wedged her elbow under the front seat, pinning down the pedal with the skinny bones of her own forearm. Vivian wrestled herself free of the gap and threw a glance over her shoulder at the boys. Bobby and Erik stood behind the snarling

mutant, glaring at Trent and throwing out desperate body language that screamed, "Just *do something* already!" Trent still stood with his back to the car, sword in the air, not having moved a millimeter in any direction since the last time Vivian had seen him.

"Y-y-y-you d-d-don't wanna m-mess with m-m-me," Trent yammered. "I'll m-m-mess you up! For r-r-real!"

"Keep it up, Trent!" Vivian whispered. "Just keep her occupied for one more minute!"

Without another word, she whirled around, squatted down against the hood of the car, and planted her palms shoulder-width apart on the sloping ceiling. She took a deep breath and coordinated every muscle in her body for one concentrated push. With a sad, rusty *creak*, the tiny car began, ever so slowly, to roll forward. Jagged blocks of white cement splintered from the ceiling as the Rabbit scraped against the walls of its tomb. Vivian could feel a stream of fine debris flaking off of the ceiling and funneling down her arched back as her head began to pound from the exertion. The gap was growing slowly larger before her clouding eyes as the angled ceiling crept farther and farther from the top of the windshield.

"Just believe in yourself," she thought. *"Like Nick said. Use your body! You can do this!"*

Behind Vivian's back, a wet, throaty hiss poured around Twiki's mangled gums and into the claustrophobic air. Her softball-sized eyes were fixed hatefully on Trent's chattering teeth as the bloody pads of her feet kneaded the floor menacingly. Her weight shifted back on the tensed muscles of her hind legs.

"Y-y-you d-d-don't want to g-g-get all violent," Trent choked. "D-d-do you, g-girl?"

The demonic yellow slits of Twiki's eyes narrowed furiously as she released a cry like a hundred babies being thrown into boiling water. In a terrified sort of slow motion, Trent could see each individual claw dig into the concrete as Twiki's powerful hind legs launched her payload of sharp, ragged teeth toward his soft flesh.

In a sudden flash of clarity, Trent knew that it was time to make his big move.

His sword clanged noisily to the concrete as he turned tail and dove to the ground, shielding his head with his arms. Twiki sailed over Trent's prone form, landing claws-first in the soft skin of Vivian's back!

Vivian's chest cracked the windshield as the monster's full weight slammed down on her unprepared body. A piercing cry of agony was squeezed from her lungs as the bony hooks sunk deep into her flesh and clattered down her ribcage like sticks across a picket fence. A split second later, Vivian's quickly silenced screams were replaced by Sherri's.

"Shit! Vivian! What in the name of Jesus H. Fuck is going on out there?!"

Twiki quickly ripped her claws out of Vivian's back and turned on the hood, slipping on the bloodied pads of her paws. She didn't care about Vivian. Vivian

wasn't a challenge; she was merely collateral damage. Twiki's true prey was escaping.

As Bobby and Erik were scrambling to Vivian's aid, the chunky soles of Trent's shoes were clambering in exactly the opposite direction. With a deafening screech, Twiki launched off of the blood-slicked hood of the Rabbit and darted after him. Trent's ankles twisted on the pavement as he changed direction and dove into a tiny space between the remains of two parked cars jutting from the tunnel wall. The crush of the collapsed garage had compressed the wrecks into little more than two rectangles of oily steel, but there was still enough space for Trent to shimmy between them. His craven screams were slightly muffled by Twiki's sinewy mass as she rammed her giant head into the opening, slamming her shoulders against the demolished fenders. A few seconds later, Trent's screams were abruptly squelched as Twiki's feline instincts wriggled her massive body into the narrow crevice.

Bobby and Erik grabbed Vivian's limp, bloody body and turned her over on the Rabbit's hood. Her naked green eyes stared blankly into nothingness.

"Oh my God, oh my God," Erik implored. "Please don't be dead! Don't be dead!"

Bobby picked up Vivian's glasses and slipped them over her empty eyes. Tiny movements of air and spittle whistled between her teeth as she struggled to remain conscious.

"Bobby, we've got to get her out of here!" Erik squeaked.

Erik grabbed Vivian's wrists, but Bobby shoved him away with a blunt forearm.

"I'll take care of Vivian!" he shouted.

With that, he squatted down, grabbed his sister around the waist, and hauled her over his shoulder. He wrapped one arm around the backs of her knees and threw out the other toward the Rabbit.

"You work on Sherri!" he barked. "I'll be right back!"

Without waiting for a reply, Bobby turned and ran down the ramp toward the only way out. With his heart pounding in his throat, Erik spun around and scrambled onto the hood of the car. The garage wailed as several tombstone-sized chunks of concrete smashed down like bombs along the corridor. Before Erik could wonder what was triggering the collapse, a small gap between two nearby wrecks vomited out a bucketful of gravel, followed by a scrambling Trent. The pockets of air within the fallen walls had formed a network of catacombs large enough for him to claw his way through in his desperate retreat. Almost before he hit the floor, the fleeing hipster was immediately back on his feet and sprinting for the exit. Erik grabbed Trent's sunburnt arm and stumbled along behind him like an ineffectual anchor.

"Trent! Stop!" he screamed. "Get over here and help me!"

"Ouch! Damn! Get offa me!" Trent wailed, shoving Erik away. "She's after me! That bitch is gonna kill me!"

Just then a groaning ripple ran through the ceiling, knocking off a hail of skull-sized debris. From the same gap from which Trent had emerged, a gouged, dust-covered Twiki was frantically clawing her way to freedom. Trent gave Erik a shove that knocked him to the ground.

"Trent!" Erik screamed. "Get back here, you wuss!"

But it was too late. Trent was already halfway to the exit. Erik grabbed the discarded sword and leapt to his feet as Twiki emerged bloodily from the scar in the wall. The mutant's fierce, gurgling breath rolled into an earsplitting screech as the matted orange fur of her back rose up into angry spikes.

"I tried to tell you that killing is wrong," Erik said shakily, "but I guess you'll have to learn the hard way!"

With all the grace of a man who had never played an organized sport a day in his life, Erik took an awkward step forward and swung the sword in a clumsy, girlish arc. The blade not only failed to hit Twiki by a wide margin, but also managed to slip out of his hands and sail through the air in a helicopter-like spin, clipping the sloped ceiling and dropping hilt-first into the Rabbit.

"Ouch! What the hell?!" Sherri screamed. "Quit throwing shit at me, asshole!"

Erik's shoulders bunched.

"Sorry!" he cried.

He turned back to his former cat with a nervous smile.

"Ah, yeah, so about that whole 'trying to kill you' thing. I was just-"

Twiki didn't want Erik's excuses. She just wanted Erik out of her way. Without a second glance, she plowed past him and down the ramp. Trent was still a good thirty feet from the end of the tunnel when the mutated beast caught up with him. With a screaming leap, he launched himself between two ravaged automobiles and back into the catacombs of the groaning walls. A second later, Twiki disappeared into the opening behind him.

Erik climbed onto the hood of the car and thrust his hands into the ceiling, trying to push the convertible out of its grave as he had seen Vivian doing before. He slipped in the puddle of fresh blood and dropped to his knees with a painful *bang*. With a wincing hiss he was back on his feet, pushing as hard as he could while increasingly large chunks of the building splintered off around him. He slipped again and his chin hit the top of the windshield, slamming his jaw shut and sending a shockwave through his skull. Fist-sized clods of jagged concrete pounded down upon Sherri inside the car.

"Ow! Ow! Shit!" she thrashed. "Will somebody get me out of here already?!"

"Shut up! I'm trying!" Erik wailed. "I can't move the car!"

"Well, stop throwing shit at me!"

"I'm not! The ceiling is coming down!"

"The ceiling is *what?!* "

Erik didn't have to explain. At that very moment the building let out a groan like a constipated elephant, dropping the thousand-ton ceiling. With a shower of liberated debris, the sloped roof came down in a massive wave, starting from its fulcrum in the darkness ten feet behind the Rabbit. The cascading concrete slab fell like the arm on a movie director's clapboard, pinching the back end of the trapped vehicle and launching it out of its cell like an unwilling Tiddly Wink.

"Shit, we're moving!" Sherri yelled. "Where's the brake?!"

Erik threw out his long arms and desperately grabbed the corners of the windshield as gravity quickly pulled the liberated Rabbit down the ramp.

"Don't hit the brake!" he screamed.

Not known as one who worked well with others, Sherri punched her free hand into the brake pedal. She pumped it furiously, yet the car just kept picking up speed. Had she retained the gift of sight, Sherri would have realized that she was actually pumping the accelerator.

"The brake is broken!" she wailed.

"Don't hit the brake!" Erik repeated.

Sherri made a motion to lift her hand from the pedal, but before it had moved an inch it came to an abrupt halt. In her frenzy, the looping shreds of her right sleeve had become entwined around the accelerator.

"Oh, come *on!* " she groaned.

As tons of tumbling steel and concrete squeezed in all around him, Erik looked at the single point of light in the distance and suddenly understood what it felt like to be toothpaste. The Rabbit sailed down the ramp with building speed, but the walls were coming down faster than the dead hulk could possibly accelerate. In a matter of seconds the last thing that Erik would ever see would be the light of the approaching exit snuffed out by the same toppling concrete that would crush him into a wet meat pancake.

"Fuckshit O'Fuckery!" Sherri cursed.

Her constrained arms thrashed madly in their bonds. Clutch, gas. Clutch clutch, gas.

From the other side of the windshield, Erik couldn't hear Sherri's curses over the frenzied squeaking of the pedals, the thunder of the splintering garage, and the roar of the Rabbit's engine as it suddenly sprang to life!

Before Sherri realized that all of her weight was resting on the gas pedal, the tires ripped against the dusty floor, spinning madly with the motor's awakened fury. As if trying to save its own miserable life, the Rabbit bucked forward with a blast of speed, tearing its way down the ramp and out the exit just as the last remaining supports of the building came down, blasting a volcanic eruption of dust and gravel against its rear fenders.

Sherri struggled to push her face off the floor, grinding her back into the steering wheel. The Rabbit careened in a mad, squealing arc across the empty street and around the side of the building.

"Bobby!" Erik screamed. "Look out!"

Under the weight of his lacerated sister, Bobby stumbled out of the path of the flailing Rabbit as it tore past him.

"Brakes, Sherri! Brakes!" Erik wailed. " *Now* you can hit the brakes!"

Sherri's left arm was now tightly bound to the clutch, her right to the gas. There was only one thing to do.

"Hold on to your ass!" she screamed.

With a craning lurch of her neck, Sherri slammed her sunburnt forehead down on the brake pedal, locking the Rabbit in a spinout. The bald tires skidded across the fallout-dusted pavement, not coming to a full stop until the front bumper rammed the side of the fountain. Erik slipped off the slick hood like a puck on an air hockey table, landing in the filthy water with a dramatic splash. Having served its purpose, the Rabbit's engine shuddered, wheezed, and promptly stalled itself out.

Erik scrambled out of the water and dropped with a wet *plop* onto the dusty concrete. An out-of-breath Bobby quickly arrived and gently set Vivian down on the fountain's edge.

"Erik, you okay, dude?" Bobby puffed.

"I'm okay," Erik nodded. "You?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," Bobby nodded gravely, touching his bloody shirt. "None of this is mine."

"I'm okay, you're okay, everybody is fucking okay," barked a tiny voice. "Now will somebody fucking get me the fuck out of this car for fuck's sake?!"

Bobby waddled to the side of the convertible and pulled open the creaky door. Sherri's narrow hips were still wedged in between the front seats, her legs thrown across the back, both arms tied down to the pedals. Bobby grabbed the dusty sword from where it lay across her back.

"Stay still for a second," he ordered.

With a few sawing thrusts of the blade, he cut the knotted strands of leather from Sherri's wrists. He dropped the sword in the street with a clatter before pulling Sherri's thrashing body from between the seats and doing likewise to her.

"Ouch! Oh, real chivalrous, dickwad."

"Sherri, you started the car!" Erik said. "How did you do that?"

"I don't know-it was rolling and I just mashed all the pedals," Sherri shrugged. "I told you I don't know how to drive stick."

"She did a push start," Vivian mumbled.

Erik leaned in with a squint.

"She did what?"

"It's a trick to turn over an engine with a bad starter," Vivian whispered. "You just get it rolling and pop the clutch."

Erik blinked twice, then snapped his fingers.

"That's right! Just like in *The Karate Kid!*" he exclaimed. "Remember, Viv? Daniel's mom's car would never start, so they always had to pop the clutch, and when he went on that date with the rich girl--"

"Erik," Vivian whispered, "not now."

Vivian's face had turned a pale, floury white as two streams of blood leaked down her back and into the squalid water of the fountain. Erik's face collapsed guiltily. He sat down at Vivian's side and gently took her hand.

"I'm sorry, Viv," he said tenderly. "You were right: The car works. We're going to find a hospital. We're all going to be safe. All five of us."

Bobby's eyes popped open.

"Holy crap," he gasped. "What happened to that other idiot?"

Erik's eyebrows raised helplessly as he looked at what was left of the garage. It no longer retained the shape of a cube, but had fallen into a classic heap. The pulverized cement dust hung heavily in the moist pink vapor, threatening to reconstitute itself into a statue of a cloud.

"Oh my God, he didn't make it out," Erik said softly. "He was still inside when the building collapsed!"

Vivian and Bobby looked reverently at the slabbed pile. Sherri shrugged emotionlessly.

"Serves him right," she said. "Cowardly prick bastard."

Erik scowled at Sherri. She was right-Trent was definitely a cowardly prick bastard-but he deserved a better eulogy than that. It was wrong to speak ill of the dead, even if they had it coming.

"He technically saved our lives in there," Erik said truth-bendingly. "Sherri and I probably wouldn't have made it out alive if he hadn't been ... distracting Twiki. He may have had his shortcomings, but we have to at least thank him for doing that."

The others nodded and grunted noncommittally.

"Compliment accepted," a smarmy voice replied. "Now y'all know, when the goin' gets tough, you best step back and leave the heroics to the T!"

Four heads snapped toward the voice that emerged from the dust cloud from behind two rows of gleaming white teeth.

"So he's alive then," Sherri smirked. "Gee, that's swell."

"Alive and kickin, yo! That wild pussy was all up on me, but the Lord guided me

to safety just before the walls came a-tumblin' down."

Bobby looked at Trent skeptically.

"Yet you *somehow* managed to get out without so much as a scratch."

"Not hardly, Big B," Trent said. "That escape was tight, yo. I'm talkin' 'door hit my ass on the way out' tight."

He turned and stuck out his hip, gesturing over his shoulder at his trophy: Just below his beltline, a single, pathetic slash of blood cut across the back of his khaki trousers. Erik leapt to his feet and shot out a furious finger.

"You cowardly prick bastard!" he screamed. "We could have all died in there because of you!"

"Little E, you're straight flippin' like a dolphin at Sea World," he said innocently. "I saved all y'all and you know it. You had nothin' but good things to say about the T a minute ago."

"That was because I thought you were dead!" Erik snapped.

Trent shook his head.

"You thought the cat was dead too," he said. "It's a good thing you're not a medical professional, Dr. Gravedigger."

"Look, I killed whatever attacked me in that sewer!" Erik defended. "So maybe it *wasn't* Twiki after all!"

Trent waved his hand dismissively.

"That's right, E. You best change your story. Only one man had the stones to kill that savage beast, and it was yours truly, Terence Trent DeLaRosa. I used my mad skillz to mess that girl up, yo."

"She's not the only girl you messed up!" Erik shouted. "You almost got Vivian killed!"

Trent brushed Erik aside and knelt down next to Vivian's hunched, bloodied form.

"Vivi girl, I offer you my humblest and most sincere apologies," he said ingratiatingly. "You know what they say about the best-laid plans. For real. You know that I wasn't jumpin' out the way up in there! I was tryin' to lure that foul creature away from you. How was I to know it would be too stupid to take the bait?"

Vivian pushed Trent away and wobbled to her feet, making her way to her brother and leaning heavily against him without a word.

"Leave her alone, Trent," Bobby growled, gently embracing his wounded sibling. "I saw your distraction technique, and it looked to me like the only thing you were trying to save was your own ass."

"Save my ass? Save my ass?"

Trent turned and thrust out his backside, pointing to his single scrape.

"Hello? I tore myself a new asshole trying to save you ungrateful clowns. For real!" he squealed. "Vivi, you know I'm bein' straight with y'all! I was just tryin' to get that thing away from you so that I could properly dismantle it without soiling your pretty green eyes with the spectacle."

Vivian turned her dizzy head away from him and rested it on Bobby's shoulder. Trent continued.

"Come on, girl! I killed that monster! I killed it for you! Once I knew you were safe I ripped that bitch apart, yo! With my bare hands! I was all smashin' in its grill like 'Bam! This one is for my homegirl, Vivi!' I ain't lyin', girl! And you know what? If that freaky freak was here now, I'd do it all again just so you could see it. For real. That's the gospel truth, y'all."

Just as Trent raised his right hand and unsheathed his winning smile, a familiar crackling sound ripped from the settling cloud. The particulate-laden vapor seemed to curl away from the monstrous, screeching form of Twiki as she came barreling into the street at full speed. Torn to shreds by the collapsing walls of the garage, the ragged net of her filthy fur barely managed to contain a spill of pulsating organs, their moist surfaces coated with clinging concrete powder.

Trent turned to run, but his heels knocked against the side of the fountain. There was no time to consider another direction. There was no time to even scream. Everything in the universe disappeared in Trent's consciousness as Twiki launched off of the ground, reducing his entire world to two flying rows of blood-slicked fangs.

The next thing Trent experienced was a whoosh of cold air and steel and a face full of hot, stinging viscera. Before he knew what hit him, the full force of a flying, headless feline connected with his chest, splattering him with liberated organs and knocking him backward into the murky water of the fountain.

The tip of the sword smashed into the shattered tile, completing a whistling arc that had carried its blade cross-sectionally through the middle of Twiki's mutated neck. The force of the impact sent a tremble through the hilt and into Sherri's skinny arms. Through the blood-red midnight of her vision, she had cleanly decapitated the monster in mid-air with one mighty swing.

Trent frantically thrashed his way out from under the draining carcass and flopped with a gruesome, soggy *splat* onto the sidewalk.

"I ... I ... you ... you ..." he gasped, collapsing to the pavement. "You ... you ..."

"Yeah, yeah, shut the hell up," Sherri said. "I know what I did. I'm regretting it already."

She drove the tip of the blade into the sidewalk inches from Trent's ear.

"Now could you all stop freaking the fuck out for a second and tell me exactly what it is that I just saved your asses from?"

"It was my cat!" Erik squealed. "She mutated into an atomic monster! It's the radiation from the bomb!"

"Erik, you're *insane*, " Vivian muttered. "Radiation doesn't turn house pets into monsters!"

"Vivian, for cryin' out loud, look at it!" Erik chirped, pointing toward the fountain. "It's glowing like something Homer Simpson brought home from work!"

Everyone glared at the decapitated remains of the beast resting on the bottom of the fountain. The murky water obscured its form, but they could still make out the sinister shapes of claws and teeth radiating from the pool with an eerie blue glow. Erik continued.

"Whatever it was that attacked me in the sewer did the exact same thing after I smashed its head. These things glow when you kill them! Now tell me *that's* not a classic indication of a radioactive monster!"

Bobby scratched his chin.

"I suppose it's not *impossible*, " he said doubtfully. "I mean, after the Chernobyl meltdown they had all kinds of freakish mutant animals being born with too many heads and not enough anuses."

"That's the key word," Vivian muttered, " *born*. Radiation is not a toggle between 'normal' and 'B-movie.' Those mutants had their DNA damaged while their cells were still forming."

"Who are you-Mr. Fucking Wizard? Who fucking cares?!" Sherri said, exasperated. "Cats are turning into hellspawn here! Does it really matter what *caused* it?"

"You're right. It could have been anything," Erik said nervously. "Who knows what kind of atomized toxins we've been exposed to today. Asbestos, mercury, *olestra!* I mean, just smell that air, for Christ's sake!"

With those words, everyone's acclimated nostrils were suddenly reminded of the acrid stench of the pink vapor burning their sinuses. Trent blinked with sudden realization.

"Hold up; hold up. We've been huffin' on that air all day too," he said. "If that's what turned pretty kitty into a stone-cold killer, why isn't it happening to us?"

"Who says that it's not?" Bobby said grimly. "Maybe it *is* happening to us. Maybe it just hasn't started to take effect yet because we're so much bigger than Twiki is. Er ... *was*. "

A long moment of silence passed.

"Well, it's not going to happen to me," Sherri said sternly.

"How can you be so certain?" Trent asked.

Sherri whipped the sword from the ground and set it against her neck.

"Because I'll kill myself first."

Everyone stared at Sherri as her grisly words splattered against their ears.

"Oh, that's such a poseur goth answer," Erik sneered. " *I'm* not going to mutate, *I'm* just going to commit *suicide*. I'm so *dark* and *tragic*. Why don't you just kill all of us too, while you're at it?"

"Who says I won't, smart-ass?"

Sherri's bloody eyes rolled over the shadows of her friends disquietingly. She stabbed a blistered finger toward the fountain and spoke with menace.

"Whatever happened to that cat is probably happening to every one of us right now. I say we make a pact right here and now that as soon as one of us starts to go all *Food of the Gods* like that, the rest of us swear to take the motherfucker down."

She made a fist and thrust it into the center of the group.

"Who's with me?"

"Oh jeez, Sherri," Erik sighed. "Kill me if I turn into one of them? That's a little *From Dusk Till Dawn* ian, isn't it?"

Trent put his hand on Sherri's and gave it a lecherous squeeze.

"No no," he said, "she's right, E. Don't get me wrong, I consider it an honor and a privilege to know all of you fine people, but if you come at me like that big pussy at the fountain, I'll send any one of you to the next world in a heartbeat. That's a promise."

"Oh, please," Erik said. "The last guy I saw who dealt with monsters as effectively as you had a goatee and a box of Scooby Snacks."

Bobby clapped his hand nonchalantly on top of Trent's.

"I'm in."

"What?!" Erik squeaked.

"Seriously, *look* at that thing," Bobby said. "Take a good look at it, Erik. It's not Twiki. It's not even a *cat* anymore. That thing had an unrecoverable system error on a genetic level. If that shit happens to me, I hope that one of you will have the balls to put an end to it. I'd do it for you. That's all I'm sayin'."

"That is so messed up!" Erik argued. "Bobby, I'm your best friend! Vivian is your own sister! Are you telling me that you could just take that sword and *murder* one of us? Well, we wouldn't murder you! Right, Viv?"

He threw a fiercely hopeful look at Vivian. She turned her eyes sorrowfully to the ground and dropped her bloody hand on top of Bobby's.

"I would," she said quietly. "It's the right thing to do under the circumstances."

"Under the circumstances?!" Erik yelled. " *Under the circumstances?! This is crazy! And blatantly illegal! Under no circumstances do the laws of civilized society allow for friends to murder each other!*"

"We're not in civilized society," Vivian said darkly. "And until we are, the only

laws we have are our own. Everything else has been lost to oblivion."

She looked coldly at the glowing remains in the fountain.

"We're now part of the oblivion society."

CHAPTER SIX

The push-started Rabbit's three bald radials hummed a hypnotic bass note over the bleached blacktop of Interstate 67 northbound. Their deep trio was accompanied by the uneasy guest tenor of the temporary donut spare whining from beneath the front fender. Above this quartet, the wind sang a shrill aria as it rushed over the curved surface of the satellite dish. The giant bowl was crudely lashed to the hood of the car with a scavenged rope of colorful, triangular plastic flags, which contributed a continuous round of flappy-slappy applause.

The damp and chilly air took on an absolutely arctic character in the forced wind of the open convertible. Vivian sat, nearly frozen, in the driver's seat, peering awkwardly over the top of the dish through her fractured glasses and windshield. Logic dictated that someone less injured should drive, but after being attacked by a giant housecat, Vivian was not exactly on speaking terms with logic. In its place, she had fallen back on habit. Her old car was all that was left of the world as she knew it, and she was going to drive it. Period.

She leaned restlessly over the steering wheel in order to keep her weight off her brutally lacerated back. The wounds had been bandaged at the scene of the attack, but the medical know-how involved in the procedure had left something to be desired. For lack of any better options, the survivors of Twiki's final catfight had patched themselves up with the only fabric they had on hand: the moldy canvas of the Rabbit's convertible top. Bobby and Trent had easily pried the roof's steel frame from its brittle, rusted-out hinges, and from there Erik had sliced the sun-damaged fabric into bandages with Vivian's Swiss Army Knife. The thick, coarse canvas was completely inappropriate for medical dressings, but it was better than nothing, and nothing was the only other thing they had.

In this makeshift clinic of dubious medical prowess, Trent had done up Vivian's entire torso in a stiff, unyielding wrap as tight as a boa constrictor. He had yakked all the while about stopping the blood flow and the principle of the tourniquet, but when he was done with his handiwork it was fairly obvious to all gathered that he had been trying to improvise a sort of cleavage-enhancing corset. In this endeavor, he had been quite successful.

To Vivian's right, Erik was slumped, unconscious, in the passenger seat, arms crossed, palms pressed firmly on the soiled polyester bandages of his own injuries.

The others were wedged into an awkward compromise in the tiny back seat. Although liberating the convertible top's hardware had provided a few inches of extra elbow room, the back seat would have been cramped for two passengers, let alone the three it was now forced to accommodate.

Bobby was behind his sister, with his head tipped over the back of his seat, snoring loudly into the wind. Trent was on the opposite side, behind Erik. Between them, Sherri's slumbering face was buried in Trent's chest, depositing a puddle of drool on his shirt. Trent slept soundly with one arm around her shoulders, one hand on her narrow thigh, and his cheek resting softly on the top of her white-haired head. Judging by the grin on his face, even in his dreams, he could feel the round nubs of the girl's hitherto unknown breasts pressing pertly against his side. Despite being nestled against Trent's amorous body heat, Sherri's disintegrating skin had taken on an icy pallor of spidery blue in the whistling breeze.

Nobody could say exactly how much time had elapsed since they had left the ruins of the Banyan Terrace parking garage, but it had been long enough to make Vivian feel uneasy that they had not yet reached a destination. Any destination at all. Her dusty eyes scraped the inside of her eyelids as they rolled wearily to the instrument panel. Again, this was not done out of logic, but habit. She knew that no matter how many times she looked at the large, analog dashboard clock, its arms would remain seized at exactly nine minutes to midnight.

In the delirium of her exhaustion, Vivian subconsciously wondered whether the clock was dead, or whether it was functioning perfectly, and reality itself had died. With the exception of the dry, wilted flora of the highway, they had not yet seen a single sign of life on their drive. Perhaps more chilling was the fact that they had traveled through an unknown number of hours and an immeasurable stretch of miles, yet the sky had remained an unflinching gray of dismal twilight. It wasn't as if time had stopped as much as time had simply got up and *left*.

If there was one thing that could be considered fortunate about this chronological anomaly, it was the moment at which it had occurred. In the middle of that ordinary Wednesday night, while the Gulf Coast's retirees and exhausted tourists slept soundly in their beds, its highways lay nearly abandoned as the last atomic traffic light blinked a fiery red.

Vivian started to nod off, then jerked into a caricature of alertness. She slapped herself sharply on the cheeks and blinked her eyes with huge, dramatic squeezes. She was exhausted almost beyond the point of conscious thought, yet she dared not stop. In the monotony of the desolate highway, she could hear Sherri's words repeating in a haunting echo.

"Whatever happened to that cat is probably happening to every one of us right now."

This was the fear that had driven a wedge between Vivian and logic. She could come up with no reasonable explanation for it. What *did* happen to that cat? What if it *did* happen to one of her friends? What if it happened to *her*? In her sleep-deprived psyche, her fear of the mutant cat became one with the fear of the

unknown itself.

Unable to explain away the feline demons, Vivian had decided that the only course of action was to outrun them. It had been a long time since they'd emerged from the cloud of pink vapor that shrouded Stillwater County. It couldn't be much longer until they were out from under this canopy of churning black atmosphere and basking in blue sky and hot Georgian sun. If she just kept driving north on the interstate they'd find civilization, and somebody would give them a simple, logical explanation as to what had happened. Someone would tell them that they were safe.

Everything would be okay. She just needed to keep driving.

Vivian's feverish train of thought was interrupted by a long finger of smoke touching the horizon. She squinted at the form in the distance, and her heart began to beat hard against her sternum in anticipation. The black finger slid over the landscape, ever closer, ever larger in her field of view. She flicked her eyes anxiously to her unconscious companions, but none of them stirred. Her hands instinctively tightened on the sticky steering wheel. Her breathing quickened, slamming her burning lungs against the sides of their canvas prison with each constricted pant. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the shape was upon her, hurling itself at her front bumper. It was a cat the size of a pickup truck, its coat burning with a hellish red flame! The monster's wide, round eye sockets were five feet apart and devoid of flesh, full instead of a reflective metallic sparkle that stared straight through her. Vivian's terrified reflexes jerked the steering wheel and the car swerved dramatically, missing the creature's blazing grimace by mere inches.

The Rabbit's sleeping passengers launched into abrupt consciousness as it fishtailed across the empty lanes with a heart-stopping squeal.

"Jesus Christ, Vivian!" Bobby roared. "What the hell?!"

"Bobby!" Vivian gasped. "It ... it was a-"

She threw a terrified glance into the rearview mirror and saw nothing but a burning pickup truck lying in the center of the road. The smoldering wreck was completely bereft of life, feline or otherwise. Vivian rubbed the residue of the hallucination out of her eyes with her palm.

"I'm sorry; I'm sorry," she said softly. "I thought it ... I mean, the headlights looked like ... never mind."

"Whoa, where are we?" Erik asked groggily. "How long have I been asleep?"

Vivian shook her head.

"I don't know. A long time," she said. "I think we're getting close to the state line."

"Don't you think we should switch drivers for a while?" Erik asked pointedly.

"No," Vivian yawned. "I'm fine."

Before Erik could attempt an appeal, the sound of bony fists pounding into muscley flesh splattered from the back seat.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?" Sherri shrieked. "Get off of me, you assbag!"

"Ow! Hey hey! Watch the sunburn!" Trent yelped. "We're all friends here!"

He let go of the tiny, thrashing girl and held his blistered red arms above his head in the cold breeze. Sherri gave him one last elbow in the chest for good measure.

"Don't you fucking touch me again, diaper boy!"

"Ha! Diaper boy," Bobby laughed. "Classic."

Trent scowled. The slash in his hindquarters had necessitated a unique bandage configuration, and after being corseted, Vivian had been happy to take her passive-aggressive revenge. Over his trousers, Trent now wore what could only be described as a comically oversized diaper of canvas bandages. He looked at Sherri and smiled innocently.

"You don't have to be so aggressive, girl," he said. "These quarters are cramped and you're chilled all the way to your fine little bones. Why don't you just snuggle up and enjoy the generous body heat that the T is serving up? My guns are hot, and your honey-barbecued skin is so, so cold. It's more comfortable for everybody if we get them together, sweetness."

Sherri's eyes narrowed menacingly.

"Touch me while I'm asleep again, and I'll tear your arm off and shove it down your throat until you punch yourself in the balls from the inside. Got it?"

Trent fidgeted in his diaper, wrapping his arms around himself and pulling as far away from Sherri as possible.

"Alright, look, I respect and admire this whole 'punk rock' thing that you play so delightfully," he muttered, "but you're going to have to let down this hostile curtain sooner or later for the sake of humanity."

Sherri blinked her featureless red eyes.

"What the fuck is *that* supposed to mean?!"

"I think you know. 'Be fruitful, and multiply. Replenish the earth, and subdue it.'"

Bobby let out a sudden snort.

"Dude, I think the earth is about as subdued as it's going to get," he said.

"Plus," Sherri added, "I don't care what your bullshit mythology says, there is no chance of me ever having sex with you. *Ever.* "

"Seriously, dude, give it a rest," Bobby said. "For all we know, we're all one step away from turning into bloodthirsty mutant monsters, and you still can't wrap your head around anything bigger than your own wang. You're pathetic."

"On the contrary," Trent said smugly. "I am comfortable expressing my healthy affection for the fairer sex because I know we're all safe. I've figured out the secret."

"Alright, I'll bite," Bobby said sardonically. "What's the secret, professor?"

"I've been trying to think-what protected us? What makes us so special?" Trent said. "What was flowing through each and every one of us that was *not* in that creature that attacked us? Then it hit me. It's all about the spirits."

"Hmm ... spirits," Bobby said, rubbing his chin. "You know, that's actually a pretty good theory!"

"But of course," Trent gloated.

"What if it *is* the spirits? Pure alcohol is a powerful disinfectant, and we were all sauced to the gills with it last night," Bobby continued. "You and me were going into about round eleven, and Sherri must have had at least twice her body weight in malt liquor."

"Wait, hold up," Trent interjected.

"And I had a daiquiri the size of a bowling ball," Vivian nodded. "Maybe all of the disinfecting alcohol in our blood was enough to kill whatever pathogens caused Twiki to mutate!"

"Then I'm gonna live for-fucking-ever," Sherri said. "I've been pissed since I was fourteen years old."

"No no, listen!" Trent said irritably. "I'm not talking distilled spirits, I'm talking the *Holy Spirit*, yo. I'm talking *souls*."

"Nah, I like Bobby's answer better," Sherri said. "I don't have a soul."

"You *do* have a soul," Trent argued. "God created man in His image and endowed us each with a soul. Animals don't have souls. That's why that little kitty cat turned into a demon!"

"Oh, shut up, Trent," Erik said irritably. "My cat had just as much of a soul as I do. Cats are people too!"

"Cats are *not* people," Trent said firmly. "Starting today, cats aren't even cats. They're the minions of Beelzebub himself. The only thing standing between our warm bodies and his cold puppet strings is that little impervious suit of armor called the everlasting soul, yo. Besides, Little E wasn't even drinking last night, were you?"

"Shut up," Erik grumbled.

"That's right," Vivian said thoughtfully. "Erik, you *weren't* drinking last night."

"Well, no, not last *night*," Erik replied sheepishly. "But I did have a bunch of Tequizas over at your place before work yesterday afternoon. So, you know, I'm alright. Don't nobody worry 'bout me."

His eyes rolled apprehensively to his swollen bandage and lingered for a long moment before returning to the gray scenery.

"Alright, I don't care what y'all choose to believe. It will all become clear when *He* wants it to be clear," Trent said, pointing skyward. "Vivi, my love, could we please pull over and take a little rest break? If I have to endure this sandpaper seat against my sunburn for another minute, I'm going to go insane in the membrane, for

real. Are you with me here, Lobster B?"

"Nah, my sunburn's fine," Bobby said, rubbing the flaking side of his face. "But I'd still like to take a break from Sherri's bony-ass elbows digging into my side for a while."

"Oh, and let me tell you, it's a real picnic having your fat gut all blubbering against me like a horny walrus," Sherri said, leaning forward. "Can somebody explain to me one more time why I'm stuck back here with fat-ass and the perv while you two beanpoles get to sprawl out all over the front seat?"

"It's sort of like triage," Erik said meekly. "Vivian and I shouldn't be physically traumatized right now. We have the most severe wounds."

"Where the hell was *I* when we took this vote?!" Sherri exclaimed. "Because last time I checked, you two pussies had some little scratches and I had a full body sunburn and eyeballs full of my own blood! What makes you think you're so goddamn fragile up there, Sievert?"

"Never mind," Erik said darkly.

"Fuck you, never mind!" Sherri snapped. "Get your narrow ass back here; I'm riding in the front."

Erik looked at the floor sullenly.

"Okay, okay. I didn't want to show you this, but I guess it's only fair."

He slowly unbuckled his seat belt and, with a labored and deliberate motion, turned in his seat and stood on his knees to face the back. He moved with an unnatural stiffness in his torso, as if unable to bend anything from his distended waist upwards. His thick, wavy hair thrashed around his skull as his head cleared the protection of the cracked windshield.

"Believe it or not," he said, pulling up his shirt with dramatic flair, "there are worse things that can happen to you than having to sit next to Trent."

Erik's twin wounds stared down on the back seat, so swollen and gruesome that they defied rational description. Purple and black swells of infected flesh rolled from the top and bottom of the stretched bandage in four heaving masses, like an old tree trunk that had grown around an unyielding fence post. Masked behind the wrappings, clusters of knobby flesh blossomed from the epicenter of each wound, some remaining contained within the soiled fabric, others poking bony points through its thin surface.

"Oh, *hell* no!" Trent gasped, putting up a wall of palms between himself and the seething scabs. "That shit is messed up. Seriously, homes, you need to get those filthy-ass bandages changed, and you need to do it yesterday!"

Vivian glanced at Erik and gasped. She had never seen living tissue swell up so quickly. Well, that is, she had never seen living tissue swell up so quickly before she saw what happened to Twiki. Her vision went hazy as she watched Erik gingerly slide his fingers under his bandages and yank them apart with a furious thrust. As the

wrappings disintegrated, a hail of blood and meat exploded from his slashed midsection, revealing Twiki's gore-streaked face screaming from between his shredded organs!

"No freakin' way," Erik said gloomily. "There is no way this bandage is coming off until there's a doctor around."

Vivian blinked hard and shook her head. Erik's bandages were still fully intact around his dirty, bloated wounds. She pounded her palm against her own forehead as a shiver of relief and residual hallucinogenic terror flushed from her lungs all the way through her frigid toes and fingertips. All other eyes remained fixed on Erik's gruesome abdomen.

"Hey, what's the big deal? What are we looking at?" Sherri squinted blindly. "C'mere, let me touch it."

Before Erik could protest, Sherri's bony finger shot out and poked into the bandage. As she touched it, the bony mounds within almost seemed to close in on her fingertip. Erik slapped her hand away with a gasp, and the lumps retreated to their original positions.

"Holeeeeeeeey shit," Bobby said. "Did that feel as bad as it looked?"

"It didn't, actually," Erik breathed. "She just surprised me. It ... it actually doesn't hurt at all."

He poked his own finger at the numb scars.

"In fact, it doesn't feel like *anything*," he continued. "It's not even warm. Just all stiff and bloaty. It's like-"

"It's like a cadaver's flesh," Sherri said, rubbing her fingers with fascination.

Erik's expression agreed, then tried to deny agreement, then settled on regret for bringing it up at all. He turned and slumped back into his seat without another word.

"Your body's dying," Sherri said dryly. "Pay no attention."

Vivian's face wrinkled at this suggestion, though honestly Erik's words troubled her more than Sherri's did. She knew that the human body could produce endorphins and other chemical responses to deal with pain, but she was hesitant to believe that anyone could sustain injuries as severe as Erik's and feel absolutely *nothing*. It wasn't natural. It wasn't right.

It scared her.

It made her wonder about herself.

With the biggest breath that she could accommodate, she straightened her arms against the wheel and pressed her slashed back firmly against the seat. Two streaks of visceral pain immediately shot down the parallel gashes in her flesh and up her spine, hitting the bottom of her brain with a flat, heavy punch that echoed for several throbbing heartbeats. She leaned forward with a heaving pant, taking small comfort in the continuing burn from her stiffly wrapped dorsal scars. Never had she imagined that she'd be so thankful that she could feel pain.

In the back seat, Sherri pulled her frozen knees up to her chest and rolled herself into a tight ball. Her legs and cumbersome boots on the seat further cramped the boys into the walls, but they each silently conceded their space in hopes that it might be enough to keep her quiet for a while. Behind her knees, Sherri shivered against the unrelenting *whoosh* of the open air.

"It's colder than the ninth circle out here," she moaned. "Seriously, Vivian, will you pull the hell over already? What's your deal? Are we in bat country or something?"

"For real," Trent agreed. "Either stop the car, or kill me, yo."

"Does it have to be one or the other?" Bobby quipped.

"We can't stop," Vivian said sternly, eyes locked on the road. "I'm sorry that you're all uncomfortable, but until we find safety, nothing short of an act of God will stop this car."

Almost before the words had left her lips, the Rabbit's engine began to convulse under the hood.

"Oh no," Vivian panicked. "Come on, little car. Not now. Not now!"

She furiously pumped the gas pedal, but after a chugging fit of death throes, the old engine choked into silence. The lifeless Rabbit rolled a few hundred feet to a tranquil stop in the middle of the road.

"Oh crap," Erik whimpered. "What happened? Why did the car stop?"

"Who cares why it stopped?" Sherri said, stepping harshly on Trent's lap and vaulting out of the vehicle. "As long as we get to get out of the car for a while."

"It's out of gas," Vivian groaned. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. The gauges are all dead. I mean, I knew the fuel wouldn't last forever, but I just filled up last night, and I was hoping that it would last until we got to ... you know ... *something*."

"Don't sweat it, Vivi," Trent said. "You said yourself that only an act of God would stop this car. Maybe we were supposed to stop here. Maybe He's trying to give us some kind of sign."

"Yeah, I'm sure that's it," Sherri said sarcastically, stretching out her legs with long, ambling steps. "We just drove three hundred miles non-stop in an overloaded beater, and somehow through the majesty and spectacle of God's will we managed to run out of gas. That's it. I'm converted."

Vivian slid defeatedly out of the car and carefully stretched out her weary back and shoulders.

"What do we do now?" Erik moaned.

"There's only one thing *to* do," Vivian shrugged. "We're going to have to walk to the next gas station and bring back as much fuel as we can."

"What makes you think the next gas station is within walking distance?" Bobby asked.

Vivian slung the Army backpack over her shoulder and surveyed the long, empty highway ahead.

"Because it has to be."

The five survivors walked single-file down the derelict highway. Although logic told them that there was no sense in it, years of habit made them walk on the shoulder, ten safe feet from the side of the abandoned road. They had been walking for at least four hours, and the cloudy gray sky was quickly cooling into an earnest shade of black. In the middle distance, an enormous rectangle of fluorescent yellow peered dimly down the highway through the haze of encroaching night. Although unspoken, a sense of desperate hope united them all in the idea that this shape was the profile of a gas station.

Bobby led the sleepy pack, followed by Trent. Behind him, Sherri was guided by the cranberry-colored blob of their combined silhouettes in her vision. Erik walked slowly and stiffly behind Sherri, his shoulders slumped, his eyes barely focused on the back of her boots. His bloated torso swung rigidly as his pelvis turned into every plodding step. Vivian walked behind him, watching his labored gait and trying to ignore the fact that he looked exactly like something out of *Night of the Living Dead*.

She shook her head in an attempt to clear out the zombie imagery before it took hold, and she immediately started to slip into a wave of lightheadedness. Her constricting bandages did not allow her lungs sufficient air for this unrelenting march. She breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth, trying to concentrate on moving the oxygen through her body.

"We've been walking for hours," Erik moaned. "If we don't find something soon, somebody's going to have to carry me."

"S'no problem, eh!" Bobby said cheerfully.

"Really?" Erik said skeptically. "Cool. I was expecting a little more resistance than that."

"No. *S'no problem*, " Bobby repeated. "Look."

Erik lifted his drowsy gaze from Sherri's boots and looked to the side of the road just past Bobby's outstretched finger. Suddenly his field of vision was filled with a near-blinding shade of Day-Glo lemon. The structure that they had been hiking toward was not a building at all, but a billboard of disgustingly gratuitous proportions.

From the left side of the sign, a cartoon member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police towered thirty feet into the air, chest deep in snow and holding aloft a shovel. Despite his hypothermic predicament, the broad grin on his face and the twinkle in his Pac-Man-shaped eyes betrayed no sense of imminent danger or fear of death. To the right was a field of hot-pink text in block letters three feet tall. Trent read them aloud.

"Pierre sez, 'S'no problem, eh!' North of the Border - 363 miles."

"S'no problem my *ass*, " Erik moaned. "There had better be a gas station before *that!* "

"Screw this," Sherri said angrily. "I'm tired, I'm blind, and now my ass crack is frozen shut. I'm done."

With that, her bony legs crumpled, dropping her body into a lethargic sprawl across the cold pavement.

"When you get the car started, come back and run me the fuck over."

"I'm with Sherri," Bobby said, looking at the clouds. "I'm beat, and it's getting dark. Well, *darker*. Looks like it's time to stop for the night."

"What do you mean, 'stop for the night'?!" Erik squeaked. "What are we supposed to do? Just lay down here by the side of the highway and go to sleep like a bunch of rail-riding hobos? Are you insane?!"

"I'm sorry, Erik," Bobby sighed sarcastically. "All of the five-star places were booked up tonight."

"No, I agree with Erik," Vivian said urgently. "We have to keep moving. We have to find some shelter before it gets dark. It's not safe here."

"Look, Vivian, we've been walking for hours and we haven't seen jack shit," Bobby said. "I'm sorry, but we're on the interstate in the middle of nowhere. It's safer to just stay put until morning. We don't want to be wandering around once it turns blacker than Darth Vader's codpiece out here."

Vivian felt panic rising. Her frantic breath surged against her bandages, yet her lungs refused to accept any air. Her corset suddenly felt tight enough to splinter her ribs. They couldn't just stay here in the open. It was illogical. It was dangerous! In desperation, she turned to the one person who was guaranteed to agree with anything she said.

"What do you think, Trent? We should keep going until we find shelter, right?"

"Sorry Vivi, consider me with S and B," Trent said. "My dogs are barkin'. It's time to bed down and get some serious sleep on, yo. But there's no need for unease, girl. We're all safe here."

Vivian's eyebrows arched in disbelief.

"Safe? What makes you think that?"

"That's the sign. The sign from God," Trent said, pointing at the billboard. "He wanted to tell us that there's no problem. We're safe here."

"That is *not* a sign from God!" Erik argued. "It's barely even a sign for some crappy North Carolina tourist trap! It's just a bad pun and a rip-off of Dudley Do-Right!"

"Alright, cut it out," Bobby said. "I'm too tired to fight about it. Let's do this diplomatically. All in favor of staying, say 'aye.'"

In unison, he and Trent cemented their already known position.

"All against?"

Erik and Vivian emphatically cast their votes.

"Come on, Sherri," Bobby said. "You're the tiebreaker."

Sherri rolled over and pressed her cheek sleepily into the pavement.

"Put me down for whatever says I don't have to get up."

"That's it then," Bobby said, dropping his massive weight into the grass. "We're down for the night."

"But ... but!" Vivian stammered anxiously. "But, you guys, seriously! We've got no protection!"

"You've got all the protection you need right here, baby," Trent said, holding out his arms. "Come on over here and get enveloped in a field of securi-T."

"You guys, this is serious," Vivian said desperately. "If we're going to stay here, we need to at least build a fire before it gets any colder."

"Ix-nay on the ire-fay," Trent said. "Don't go messing with the equation, Vivi. We're safe now. A fire might just attract those things that go bump in the night. Besides, you've got all the warmth you need right here, my little frost bunny."

With a broad grin, Trent again held out his arms. Vivian ignored him and began searching through the tall grass for dry sticks. In the back of her mind, she seethed at the unfairness of it all. The forefront of her mind, however, was concerned only with the task at hand: getting a fire lit before it was too dark to see anything.

"Bobby, come and help me with this, please?"

The heap of her brother returned nothing but a resounding snore from the very base of his sinuses.

"Great," Vivian said. "Thanks a lot, Bob."

She could feel her face prickle with hot frustration. Why wouldn't anyone just help her?!

"I'll help you," Erik said softly.

He smiled and took a stiff, lurching step toward her. In spite of herself, Vivian stared apprehensively into the bloated wounds peeking from under his shirt.

"Oh, uh ... thanks, Erik," she said. "But you shouldn't exert yourself with your ... I mean ... you really don't have to-"

"Yeah, quit being such a kiss-ass, Little E," Trent sneered, holding out his arms. "She can stay plenty warm tonight without your help."

"He's right," Vivian said.

Her face crunched up in revulsion.

"I mean, he's *not* right, but you're all ... I mean ... Look, you're in no condition to-"

"I'm okay," Erik said, squatting laboriously to pick up a stick. "I want to help you get a fire going."

"Of course you do," Trent grumbled. "Lousy cock block."

Vivian turned on him with fury in her eyes.

"Trent, are you going to help us or not?"

"I *am* trying to help! I tell you, this fire is not meant to be, Vivi," Trent said sleepily, slouching down against the front of the sign. "When you get tired of your little fire idea, my offer, and my arms, stay open all night, girl."

With that, he put his hands behind his head, kicked his legs apart on the ground, and closed his eyes smugly.

Vivian took a shallow breath, unclenched her jaw, and went back to gathering sticks. Although practically crippled by his wounds, Erik was good to his word and continued to pick up firewood with only minor grunts of complaint. In about ten minutes they had gathered a decent stack of kindling by the shoulder of the road. They squatted down next to their pile, enveloped in a cold silence broken only by three points of faint snoring in the darkness nearby.

"Thanks, Erik," Vivian said drowsily. "Thanks for your help."

"Eh, I had to," Erik said. "If it gets any colder out here, *I'm* gonna take Trent up on his offer."

Vivian smiled weakly. She picked up two of the larger sticks and started frantically rubbing them together.

"Oh no," Erik said disappointedly. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm starting the fire," Vivian said. "Of all people, surely *you* have seen somebody do this in a movie."

"No, I haven't! Have *you*?" Erik moaned. "Oh man, I thought you had a lighter in your purse! This will never work."

Vivian lowered her sticks and raised an eyebrow at Erik.

"Why won't it work?"

"Because it's just a cheap plot device. Have you ever noticed that every time a civilized person in a movie tries to make a fire, he says 'I saw this once in a movie,' then he rubs the sticks for an hour but never gets it to work? Only faithful Indian guides and crafty indigenous aliens can actually pull off that trick. It's how the screenwriter teaches the jaded urban protagonist to appreciate a simpler way of life."

"Don't be silly, Erik," Vivian argued. "It's just simple physics. Friction makes heat; heat makes fire."

"I'm sorry, Vivian," Erik said. "We probably would have had better luck using your glasses to focus the sunlight. That one always works."

He looked up at the cloudy sky.

"Well ... when there's sunlight."

Vivian shook her head and went back to her stick-rubbing.

"Well, this isn't a movie," she muttered. "Trust me, this will work."

She rubbed her sticks quickly and furiously. She had laid down dry brush for kindling. There was sufficient airflow around the friction surfaces. She knew what she was doing, and she was doing everything right. Yet after several long, darkening minutes of increasingly sloppy strokes, she dropped the sticks and fell into an exhausted, wheezing defeat.

"Damn it, Erik!" she gasped, tugging at her constricting bandages. "This ... should ... work ..."

"Oh Viv, I'm so sorry," Erik said, putting his hand on the icy skin of her exposed shoulder. "I'm not trying to be a jerk or anything; I was just telling it like it is. The stick thing just doesn't work. Ever. We may as well just go to sleep."

Vivian leaned dizzily into Erik's chest as she struggled to pull air into her lungs. A stagnant aroma of skin oil and rotten cabbage wafted from her red hair into Erik's nose, but he didn't mind. He put his arm around her comfortingly, gently pressing her against his gnarled midsection. As soon as her frozen side brushed the clumped masses of Erik's scars, Vivian chirped in surprise and reflexively shoved herself away from them. Her cheeks blushed as her eyes flicked guiltily to the ground.

"Right, uh ... yeah," she said with forced nonchalance. "So, okay. No fire then."

She shuffled herself away from Erik's side and glanced uneasily at his knotted injuries. Erik followed her eye line and understood what she was thinking. He had been thinking it himself.

"It's okay, Viv. I'm going to be all right," he said. "I promise I'm not going to hur-"

He stopped and shook his head correctively.

"Not going to *let anything* hurt you."

He put his hands over his scars thoughtfully and stared silently into the darkness. In the pitch blackness of the freshly fallen night, Vivian looked dreamily into the space where she estimated Erik's horrific wounds to be. Although there was no light at all, she could swear that his bandages had just the *slightest* hint of a blue glow coming from behind them. She tried to blink her eyes and realized that they were already closed. As her pupils rolled against the back of her eyelids, the phantom patches of blue glow streaked around the inside of her skull and dissolved. A minute later, she was lost in a black and dreamless sleep.

Erik watched Vivian's cold, vulnerable body shivering against the frosty ground for several long minutes as an ill-conceived notion formed within his muddled head.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Vivian lurched into consciousness with a gasping, coughing breath. Her aching lungs felt as if she had slept with a set of encyclopedias stacked on her chest. She sat up and found herself wrapped in a blanket of Day-Glo yellow Mylar emblazoned with an enormous "3." She blinked hard, letting her poorly rested eyes sponge up her surroundings.

Directly to her side was the pile of sticks that she and Erik had collected, still intact, still unburned. In the dim gray light of this perversion of morning, the pile looked exactly as it had in the last vestiges of twilight. Exactly the same, that is, except for the shredded bark.

And the blood.

Vivian's mind reeled in horror as she kicked her way out of her impromptu sleeping bag and stumbled to her feet. Once the blanket was off, she could see that it too was smeared with broad swaths of dried blood.

As her heart began to pound against her compressed lungs, Vivian gave herself a quick examination. A tiny relieved sigh escaped her lips as she realized that the blood was not hers. Her eyes flashed frantically around the sketchy campsite.

Bobby and Trent were still exactly where she had last seen them the night before, unconscious and vigorously snoring. Sherri lay on her back in the middle of the road with her limbs splayed like Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. Vivian couldn't hear her snoring but could mark the swells of her healthy, dreamlike respiration with the rising and falling of her frigid chest. They were all unharmed.

In a panic, Vivian's head swiveled so quickly that she passed right over what she was looking for three full times before she spotted it by the side of the vandalized billboard. Erik's body lay crumpled in the tall grass, leaning against the edge of the sign, showing no apparent signs of life.

"Erik?" she squeaked. "Erik, are you okay?"

She scrambled over to where he lay, and her hand shot to her mouth to stifle a scream. Erik's chest was soaked in a pool of dried blood, covered only with the palm of his limp right hand.

"Erik?" she gasped, dropping to her knees. "What happened? Erik!"

She pulled his hand off of his bloody chest and let out a relieved breath. There was no massive chest wound. There wasn't even a rip in his shirt. But the blood?

She turned his hand over to see his slender palm torn open and fringed with ragged skin. A quick investigation showed his left hand to be wrapped around her Swiss Army Knife, also soaked in the blood of a mangled palm and twisted with tiny fibers of yellow plastic.

With Vivian yanking at his arms, Erik roused groggily.

"Erik! Your hands!" she exclaimed. "What happened?"

Erik blinked dimly and looked Vivian in her trembling green eyes.

"Rubbin' sticks didden work," he mumbled sleepily. "Can't makea fire. Made a blanket inseed."

With that, he closed his eyes wearily and slumped off the side of the billboard into the dusty gray dirt. Erik's muttered words unraveled the previous night's sequence of events in Vivian's mind. He must have rubbed those sticks for *hours* before giving up and devising a Plan B.

"Oh Erik," she said, "why did you do this to yourse-"

She squatted down next to Erik's collapsed body, but before she could right him, she suddenly noticed something beyond the edge of the billboard. She blinked hard to clear what must have been a mirage, but it remained steadfastly in position, not a hundred yards behind the tower of tourist trap advertising. Nestled off the highway, on a loop of blacktop that could only be called an offramp in the most liberal of definitions, sat a sleepy little mom-and-pop gas station surrounded by a rusted platoon of old green military Jeeps in various states of decomposition.

Vivian grabbed Erik by the shoulders and shook him from his dozing.

"Erik," she whispered reverently. "Erik, you found it!"

"Wha?" Erik said, rubbing his bleary eyes. "Whadd I find?"

Vivian stood up and turned toward the others, gleefully ecstatic.

"You guys! Wake up! Wake up and come here!"

She could hear the sounds of interrupted snoring, muffled stirring, and coughed complaints coming from the other side of the massive sign. A moment later, Bobby, Trent, and Sherri had assembled at her side.

"A gas station!" Vivian pointed. "Look! Erik found it!"

Trent looked at Erik and frowned irritably.

"Little E didn't find anything, oh ye of little faith," he muttered. "It was the sign, yo. The *sign* led to our salvation. Just like the T told you it would."

"Yeah, great work," Bobby said sarcastically. "We could have slept on something soft inside that building last night if God hadn't put this giant comforting sign in our way."

"Or we could have walked past it in the dark and never found it at all," Trent countered.

Sherri interrupted the argument with a rasping, trachea-blistering cough.

"Are you all right?" Vivian asked.

"Yeah, yeah," Sherri croaked. "I just need my wake-up smoke. Man, I'd give anything for a cigarette right now."

"A lot of good it would do ya," Erik said, raising his shredded palms for display. "Even if you had one, you couldn't light it."

Sherri turned to him with a squint of incomprehension.

"And why not?" she asked.

With that, she whipped out a silver Zippo lighter and produced two inches of dancing yellow-blue flame with a snap of her finger against the flintwheel. Erik folded his clotting palms under his arms with a scowl.

"Never mind," he moped.

"Well, I don't know about you good folks, but I'm starvin' like Lee Marvin," Trent said, thrusting out a genteel elbow. "I know we skipped the step that traditionally comes before, but could I escort you to breakfast anyway, Vivi?"

"Go to Hell, Trent," Vivian growled.

"I'd go anywhere for you," Trent said. "But I won't go there."

"Jesus, I've only been awake for five seconds, and you people are already annoying the piss out of me," Sherri grumbled. "Let me at that gas station already. I need a pack of cancer sticks to complete my balanced breakfast."

Following Sherri's lead, the group stretched the remaining sleep out of their weary bodies and took off at a somewhat refreshed pace for the nearby filling station.

The gas station was what some would describe as "quaint." The building was outfitted in a worn-down clapboard siding that had once been a dull maroon color but was in the process of weathering itself down to a previous coat of a dull mustard that it seemed to prefer. A Confederate flag fluttered limply in the slow breeze from a flagpole jutting from the side of the building, and over the door hung a weathered wooden sign bearing the words "The South will rise again!"

The hulks of the Jeeps that crouched near the building were overgrown with weeds and were leaking various unpleasant fluids into the dirt. Whoever had accumulated these rusty derelicts had obviously been trying to cobble them into one working specimen but had utterly and completely failed.

In the driveway sat two square, stainless steel gas pumps from a time in history somewhere after "antique" but before "modern," just skirting the edge of "obsolete." The front of the building featured a homey porch, haunted by a wooden rocking chair and a chunky red cooler that whispered "Enjoy Coca-Cola" from under a heavy blanketing of filth.

"All right!" Erik exclaimed. "The pause that refreshes!"

He scrambled onto the porch and yanked open the antique cooler. Inside he found six glass bottles of cola floating in a pool of lukewarm water. He pulled one out, wrenched off the top with the cooler's built-in bottle opener, and dumped the whole thing down his dry throat without coming up for air.

"Ahhh," he said with a satisfied belch. "Can't beat the real thing."

"It's about time," Sherri said, stomping onto the porch and sticking out her hand. "Gimme one!"

Erik fished a wet bottle out of the cooler, popped it open, and slipped it into her slender fingers.

"Catch the wave," he smiled.

Sherri plugged the bottle into her lips, took an impressively long swig, and then spat out the soda like a carbonated volcano.

"Aaaugh! This isn't beer!" she gasped, foam dripping from her tiny chin. "Why didn't you *say* this was Coke?"

"Didn't I?" Erik asked with confusion.

"This is bullshit," Sherri declared. "I'm going to find some real food."

"I'm with you," Bobby said. "Let's eat already. I feel like somebody did an 'rm star' on my stomach."

He grabbed the handle of the sagging front door and pulled it in a scraping arc across the plank floor. The second the door had cleared the jamb, an overwhelming stench of putrid meat poured from the interior of the general store. Everyone on the porch took a stumbling step backward and interjected their personal favorite expletive.

"Good Lord," Trent muttered, holding his nose. "What crawled all up in there and died?"

"It smells like everything in the meat cooler has spoiled," Vivian said. "This place has probably been without power for about two days now."

"Fuck it," Sherri sighed, pulling her T-shirt over her nose. "I'm starving. I don't care what it smells like-I'm getting some breakfast."

With that, she marched boldly through the door's dark outline in the strawberry jam of her vision.

"You gotta do what you gotta do," Bobby shrugged, pulling his own shirt over his face. "C'mon, let's go shoplifting."

Vivian stood on the front porch, looking into the shadowy darkness on the other side of the door. Although the smell of rancid meat was almost physically overpowering, all she could smell was a non-existent aroma of burnt soda and spilt blood running down her chin. While her nose tingled with phantom odors, her freshly carved scars burned up and down her back. Her paralyzed mind was trying to tell her that it had detected a pattern.

Every time she went into a building something very bad happened to her.

"I ... I'm not actually that hungry. It's ... you know, the smell and everything," she said with affected nonchalance. "Erik, could you please just grab me something for later?"

Two steps to the right of Vivian, a frozen Erik stared into the darkened doorway.

Just inside the entrance, a shaft of faint daylight fell across a rack of Doritos 3Ds. He remembered the circumstances surrounding the last time that he had seen that red foil bag, and an imaginary reflux of nacho-cheese-flavored stomach acid burned in the back of his throat. He shook his head, and in his mind the Doritos became the walls of a parking garage coming down around him like clods of earth into a grave. Independently reaching the same conclusion that Vivian had, he opened his eyes and took a nervous step backward.

"Nuh-uh. No. No way," he stammered. "Forget breakfast-I wouldn't go in there for all the gold in Scrooge McDuck's vault."

Trent shook his head disgustedly, then bowed before Vivian and kissed her hand with a smarmy grin.

"*I'll* bring you something, sweet Vivi," he said heroically. "We *real* men exist only to serve the fairer sex. I would be honored to bring you whatever tasty treats your little heart desires."

Vivian turned her eyes to the ground shamefully.

"Thanks, Trent," she muttered. "I'm not picky. Just bring me something that's not spoiled and has some nutritional value, please."

"Your wish is my command," Trent cooed, holding his nose and sweeping himself into the store.

"God, what a tool," Erik grumbled. "Bobby, could you just grab something for me too while you're in there?"

"Ha! Do I look like I want to get into your pants?" Bobby laughed. "Get your own food, wussy."

"Come on, Bobby," Erik whimpered. "I don't care what it is-just grab me something, okay?"

"God, you are such a pain in the ass," Bobby grumbled.

He stepped into the store and grabbed the first thing he could reach. It was a flimsy wire rack that held an assortment of three-foot-long plastic tubes hanging from cardboard tags. He planted it on the planks of the front porch like a climber who had just reached the summit of Mount Everest.

"Thaaya. Guurly men get Pixie Stix," he bellowed in a comical exaggeration of an Austrian accent. "Eat uup, flabby man."

Erik's face fell.

"Thanks, man," he muttered disappointedly. "That'll ... that'll be okay. I guess."

Bobby rolled his eyes.

"Dude. Don't be so sensitive, I was just messin' with ya," he sighed. "Don't worry, I'll find you guys something good. But if you aren't coming in here, you have to find some way to get the gas back to the car. Deal?"

"Okay, yeah. Right!" Erik said with a sheepish smile. "Okay, deal. Thanks,

Bobby."

With a nod, Bobby took the Army backpack from Vivian and disappeared into the store. Erik pulled one of the huge Pixie Stix from the rack and dropped heavily onto the front step. He pulled the cardboard top off of the enormous straw and tipped a pile of blue sugar onto his tongue. Once it started flowing, the column of powder exploded from the straw and slammed against the back of his throat. He jerked his head forward with a gagging cough, pouring a mouthful of wet blue crystals down his chin and through his slashed hands.

"Ow! Ow! Shit!" he coughed, wiping his bloodied palms on his shirt. "That stuff smarts!"

With each downward stroke on the destroyed fabric of his polo shirt, the holes in its sides stretched open like two diseased mouths gnawing at his infected skin. Vivian could see that his bandages were fouled with grime and pus. With each explosive cough of Pixie Stix dust, the scars seemed to leap against their sheath, pressing nightmarishly shaped lumps against the thin barrier.

"Erik," Vivian asked cautiously, "are you, you know ... okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," he gagged. "I hate these mutant-sized Pixie Stix. Every time I put one in my mouth I end up almost choking to death."

"No no," Vivian said, casting her eyes at his gnarled belly, "I mean, are you ... *okay?* "

Erik narrowed his eyes at her, then nodded in understanding.

"Ohhhh, right," he said, looking at his torn-up palms. "Yeah, I'm okay. I just wish I'd thought of cutting a blanket out of the billboard *before* trying to make a fire. I guess my hands have never really done anything more rugged than playing ColecoVision."

Vivian rolled her eyes. She couldn't tell whether Erik was intentionally dodging her question or not. Either way, she did owe him some gratitude.

"Thanks for trying to make a fire for me, and for the blanket," she said softly. "You didn't have to do that."

"Eh, you know. It's no big deal," Erik said shyly. " I couldn't sleep last night anyway. Let's just say that I don't exactly feel okay."

Vivian's eyes opened wide.

"So you *don't* feel okay?" she said nervously. "How so?"

Erik's eyes darted with embarrassment.

"Well, uh ... to put it discreetly, I feel like I haven't taken a dump since *Mork and Mindy* was on the air."

Vivian closed her eyes tightly as if to shut out that imagery.

"Well, thank you," she muttered. "Just ... thanks again, for everything."

"Hey, it's no problem," Erik smiled.

Vivian knew it was just the candy, but it still bothered her that his teeth had been turned a bright, glistening blue.

Bobby, Sherri, and Trent fanned out between the blue steel shelves of the tiny, foul-smelling convenience store. The peculiar architecture of the interior suggested that this gas station had once been a private residence that had been retrofitted for retail. Although most of the walls had been knocked out to make the space more commercially friendly, a seemingly random scattering of load-bearing structures broke the store into a circular labyrinth of at least four semi-autonomous rooms. Without power to the clumsily dispersed fluorescent shop lights above, the store's windows were too small and ineffectively placed in the building's current configuration to allow more than a dusty gray veil of light to pour across the shelves and against its walls.

"Whoa, it's like if Rambo moved to Hazzard County," Bobby quipped. "Look at this place!"

Above the shelves of expired snack foods and warm sodas, the upper perimeter of the store was encircled with a mishmash of framed plaques, pictures cut from magazines, and old girlie calendars. From where he was standing, Bobby could see a picture postcard from Stone Mountain Park ("The Mount Rushmore of the South!"), a torn poster of a Camaro painted up in camouflage, and half a dozen sleazy pin-ups of melon-breasted bikini models holding oversized firearms.

"Disgusting," Trent said. "Women are not objects."

With a glance to make sure he wasn't being watched, he snagged a picture of a voluptuous redhead with a flamethrower and stuffed it in his pocket.

"Hey, B-Money," he continued, "what delicacies would tickle your fine sister's discriminating palate? As her knight in shining armor, I intend to bring her back a meal that's fit for a princess, such as she is."

Bobby sighed deeply and ran his hand over his stubbly face.

"Look, Trent, I'm going to level with you here in an attempt to save us all a lot of headache. You are not going to sleep with Vivian. Ever. Trust me, I've seen her reject guys that were only *one-quarter* as disgusting as you."

Trent shrugged.

"Just you watch, dawg. Once the T turns on the charm, the ladies always-"

"Dude! Seriously," Bobby interrupted. "Give it up. Your bullshit is not going to work on her."

"Come on, B. We're pals!" Trent nudged. "Give me the inside scoop. What's it gonna take to win her over?"

Bobby blew a long breath through pursed lips and shook his head.

"Okay. How can I put this so that you can understand it?" he brooded. "The *only* way you would even have the *slightest possibility* of a *chance* with Vivian is if *every single other guy on the planet* was *dead*. Do you get that?"

"Oh, I get it," Trent said with a smarmy grin. "But I think you underestimate me."

Bobby rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger.

"It's like trying to reason with monkey testicles."

While the boys had their relationship counseling session, Sherri turned in a slow circle, dragging her stare across the walls with a sneering squint. All she could see were four rectangles of pink light hanging in a field of darkness. The first was the door she had just come in through, followed by three visible windows. She held out her hand until she touched a shelf, then followed it, grasping its contents and looking them over with her blistered fingertips. Half a dozen unidentifiable cleaning products passed through her hands before thumping to the floor, rejected. She tore open a bag of Fritos only to find upon her first greedy mouthful that it was actually dry macaroni. After a second mouthful proved to be no better than the first, she dropped the bag to the ground with a clatter and continued down the shelf.

"Man, this place smells like a heavy girl on a hot day," Trent coughed. "Let's make with a little freshness in here."

He picked up two cans of aerosol deodorant, popped the caps off with his thumbs in a maneuver reminiscent of a cowboy drawing his guns, and proceeded to spray down the fetid air with the flowery scent of shower-fresh underarms.

"Mr. Clean and the Scrubbing Bubbles working in ten-hour shifts couldn't take the stink out of this place," Bobby said, taking a can from Trent's hand. "There is, however, still hope for my cabbagey ass."

He shoved the can under his stained T-shirt and sprayed down his gnarly armpits. When he was finished, he pulled the can from under his clothes and, with a shrug, sprayed down his arms and legs. Trent gingerly sniffed under his own arm, winced, and followed Bobby's example.

"Whoo!" he hooted, spraying himself. "That B.O. has got to G.O."

He wandered into the next aisle and found Sherri, her completely full mouth leaking a trickle of thick brown saliva down her chin. With a wiggle of her pierced nostril, her face twisted into a disgusted knot.

"You smell like vending machine tampons," she slurred.

Trent looked at her chomping mouth and grinned.

"So tell me, Elvira," he asked smarmily. "What does a goth girl eat for breakfast?"

Without a word, Sherri flashed a box of Count Chocula from under her arm.

"Typical," Trent laughed, picking up his own box of cereal and hungrily tearing off its top.

Sherri swallowed her crunchy cocoa mouthful and wiped her mouth on what was left of her sleeve.

"So tell me, Preppie," she said sweetly, "what does an overcompensating closet queer eat for breakfast?"

Trent stopped in mid-chew and looked guiltily at his box of Fruity Pebbles.

"This means nothing," he said.

"Here, take a hit of this, Stinky," Bobby interrupted, pressing a deodorant can into Sherri's free hand. "It's strong enough for a man, but it's made for an angry little woman."

Sherri dropped the can on the floor and went back to her cereal.

"Nah," she said. "I'm fine."

"Fine?" Bobby said. "Not hardly, cabbage pits. You smell like the baby that Xavier Roberts threw away."

"I don't wear deodorant," Sherri said firmly. "That's how the Man marks you with his scent and makes you his property. It's just like how dogs piss on trees. Every time that you wear deodorant, you're just letting the Man piss on you."

"Fine. Have it your way, Little Miss Tinfoil Hat," Bobby said, picking up the can and stuffing it into the backpack. "I'll just save it so Viv and Erik can have a spray."

"And then you'll be stanky all by your lonesome in your own little stanky club of one," Trent said condescendingly. "Girl, don't you even want to *try* to be like everybody else?"

Sherri's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"You know, sometimes I can't tell if you're kidding, or if you're actually this clueless."

Outside of the convenience store, Vivian and Erik had separated, each following their own clues to find receptacles in which to carry the gasoline back to the Rabbit.

Erik squatted on the ground to the side of the front porch, his arm shoulder-deep in its nether recesses. The porch's knotty floor was held up by a series of thick, wooden supports three inches wide and six inches apart, caging a tangle of uncut weeds and various abandoned tools. Under the porch, his fingers fumbled against the rusted handle of a watering can.

"Come on ..."

His sneakers dug at the hard, dusty dirt as he tried to force his arm just another centimeter closer to his prize. The can could carry at least a gallon of fuel, if he could just get his hands on it. With his cheek pressed harshly into the boards, a throbbing pressure spread across his jawbone and right eyeball.

"Come on!" he hissed breathlessly. "Come on, you little bastard!"

With a final chest-deflating exhale and a thrust of his legs, he caught the handle between the very tips of his index and middle fingers. Without even taking a breath to fill his voided lungs, he pinched his fingertips together and carefully, carefully, pulled back. The can dragged against the tall grass, gaining a tiny bit of resistance with each stiff blade that bent against it. A bead of sweat rolled down Erik's forehead and into his clenched left eye. Finally, with one desperate and suffocating effort, he

was able to wrap his fingers around the rusted handle, and the ancient watering can broke through the weeds and clanged to a stop against the support beams. The impact reverberated into Erik's weary arm, making his elbow feel like it had been hit with a tuning fork. He tried to yank the can out again and again, but it just slammed against the bars of its prison with a series of frantic clangs. It was too wide.

"But ... but! Oh, come on!"

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he had gained the clarity to turn his wrist ninety degrees, aligning the oblong can with the vertical gap and easily pulling it through.

"No sweat," he sighed, wiping the sweat off of his brow.

He brushed his hands together to knock the rust crumbles from the star-spangled maroon of his freshly bandaged palms. Climbing to his feet, he pushed aside a Confederate flag that had conspicuously shrunk by several ragged inches.

"Hey Viv!" he said proudly, holding aloft his prize. "I found a container to pump the gas into!"

"Great!" Vivian said. "I found a couple too."

Erik stepped around the corner of the porch and froze in disbelief. In front of the pumps was Vivian, flanked by six Army-green five-gallon gas cans.

"Where did *those* come from?" he asked incredulously.

"From the Jeep junkyard," Vivian replied. "They were strapped into holsters on the backs of some of them. I found one more, but it had a hole in it. What did you find?"

Erik looked at his hard-won watering can, noticing for the first time that it had no bottom.

"Nothing," he said bitterly. "Forget it."

He dropped the can onto the pavement, splintering off its brittle spout. With a flush of anger and a rough, throaty growl, he kicked the can as hard as he could, smashing it against the side of the derelict pump.

"Whoa, Erik!" Vivian cringed. "What was that all about?"

Erik squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head as if waking from a dream.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "I'm just frustrated and really tired. I don't feel like *myself* today."

A chill ran icily down Vivian's spine.

"If you don't feel like yourself, then ... what *do* you feel like?" she asked quietly.

Erik glared.

"Who are you-Sigmund Freud?" he snapped. "Look, I'm just beat-up and tired. Quit treating me like I'm about to claw your skull open and eat your brains! It's me, Erik. I'm cool."

Vivian tipped her eyes to the ground in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry. You're right," she blushed. "I'm just scared. I shouldn't be taking it out on you."

Erik shrugged.

"Forget it. Let's just get these tanks filled, okay?"

Vivian nodded shamefully. She stuck the nozzle of the pump into the open mouth of the first gas can and pulled the handle.

Nothing happened.

"What's wrong?" Erik said.

"It's not working," Vivian replied, pumping the trigger.

"But ... but it has to work!"

Vivian shook her head with realization.

"No ... it doesn't have to work. It doesn't have to work at *all*," she said, shoving the nozzle back onto its hook. "God, I am so *stupid*."

"What? Why are you stupid?" Erik said desperately. "Why doesn't it work?"

"The pumps. They're machines. They need electricity, just like everything else."

"But ... but this isn't how it's supposed to work!" Erik stammered. "We beat the level boss! We found the gas station! We won!"

He picked up the nozzle and clicked the trigger several times into the nearest gas can. Not a drop of fuel fell from its scraped-up tip. He dropped the nozzle into the dust and buried his head in his arms against the side of the pump, kicking it fitfully.

"This isn't right! This isn't how it's supposed to work!"

Vivian watched Erik's tantrum in silence. She felt the same frustration, but lack of oxygen had her feeling too light-headed to express it as passionately. Turning discreetly away from Erik's glazed eyes, she put her thumb between her squashed breasts and into the top of her corset of bandages, pulling it as far off of her constricted chest as she could. Stretching the wrap in one direction only tightened it in another, but the breath that she gasped into her crushed lungs still seemed somehow fresher than it would have been without the tug. She exhaled deeply through her mouth, and her lips smacked involuntarily against the feeling of pasty filth within. Finally she turned back to Erik, finding him with the pump nozzle in his mouth and his cheeks collapsed in suction.

"Erik!" she squeaked. "What the hell are you doing?"

Erik pulled the hose from his mouth and desperately swallowed a lungful of air.

"Got ... to ... get ... gas," he gasped. "Only ... way ..."

He put the hose back into his mouth and continued to violently suck. Vivian rushed over to him and yanked the nozzle from his lips, knocking his asphyxiated body backward onto the ground.

"Stop it, Erik," she said sternly. "That's not going to work. You don't have the lung capacity to pull a column of gasoline up a hose this wide!"

"Then we'll get Trent to do it," he countered breathlessly.

"No, you don't understand," Vivian said. "It's impossible. The laws of physics are against you."

"No no. Physics are with me," Erik prattled. "My grandpa used to suck gas out of Grandma's car to run his lawnmower. I just need to create a siphon, and physics will do all the work. It'll work!"

He grabbed the hose, but Vivian put her palm over the tip before he could shove it back into his mouth.

"It *won't* work," she said firmly. "For a siphon to work, the fluid has to be moving from a higher to a lower elevation. You can't pull gas from an underground tank that way. Not with your lungs."

"My eighty-six-year-old grandpa used to be able to do it, and you're saying I can't?"

"No. Yes. Listen," Vivian said. "Your grandpa's siphon worked because it was going from the tank up *here* to a tank down *here*," she gestured with her hands. "We could *easily* get gas out of something like ... like one of those Jeeps, for example, because the gas tank is so high off the ground, you see?"

Vivian's eyes widened and blinked involuntarily, as if someone had just pounded a very heavy idea into her brain.

Inside the store, Sherri's boots pounded between the darkened shelves with a sense of purpose that contrasted her usual state of resigned nihilism. She walked with blind determination through the aisles until her outstretched palms connected with something solid. With a sweep of her arms and a flutter of her bony fingers she explored the objects on its surface. Her left hand hit a small cardboard box, and her fingers scurried inside, feeling out two plastic and metal tubes.

"Oh, fuck me. I can't find a cigarette to save my life, but I can always find lipstick."

She picked up the box with the intention of throwing it at the nearest wall, but instead paused and licked her uncharacteristically pink lips. Without turning, she pulled one of the heavy tubes from the box and held it in the air.

"Hey, what color is this lipstick?" she demanded of nobody in particular.

On the other side of the store, Bobby was thumbing through a wire rack of road maps. Most of them were for Florida and Georgia, but toward the rear of the bunch he found a highway map of the entire eastern United States. He stuffed it into his pocket and squinted at Sherri in the dim light.

"Looks black," he replied.

"I'll be damned," Sherri shrugged. "It's my lucky day."

Trent closed his eyes and shook his head slowly.

"Just like a woman," he sighed. "You send them to get food, and they come back with makeup."

"Why don't you come here and I'll put some on you?" Sherri said. "I want you to leave a receipt when you *kiss my ass!* "

"Knock it off, you two," Bobby said. "Your charming banter isn't getting us out of this stinkbox any faster."

With an unintelligible grumble, Sherri stuffed both tubes into her intact coat pocket and continued her groping exploration. Her left hand hit paper. She picked it up. It was a book. Not too thick. Paperback. Damp. Irrelevant. She threw it over her shoulder and heard it flutter to rest on the ground.

The fingers of her probing right hand brushed against a square plastic dish. She dove into its shallow bowl to find six pennies, a toothpick, and a cigarette butt. Although she couldn't see it, she knew the dish was red and it said "Take a penny. Leave a penny." She had wasted innumerable hours of her life staring into one exactly like it on her checkstand at Boltzmann's Market. From this seed of familiarity, the rest of her immediate surroundings spilled out in the darkness of her mind's eye.

Her left hand shot below the counter. Wire. Paper. Glossy. Serrated edge.

"Tabloids ..."

Her right hand broke right. Square. Textured plastic. Keypad.

"Cash register ..."

Both hands shot up, connecting with an expanse of smooth plastic holding a sheet of bent cardstock across its front.

"Cigarette rack!"

She turned her back toward the counter, planted her palms on its edge, and hopped her skinny behind up onto it, leaning back as far as the counterweight of her heavy boots would allow. Both of her bony hands launched skyward and landed in a fully stocked rack of cigarettes, eliciting a gleeful smile from her peeling face. The stale air blossomed with a bouquet of tobacco as she ravenously tore open a pack of American Spirits.

"Well, Merry Christmas to me! It looks like *somebody* has been a good girl this year!"

Within seconds, Sherri was lying blissfully across the counter, sucking down lungful after ragged lungful of yellow smoke with a languid satisfaction that the average onlooker would have mistaken for post-coital. Her immodest posture only added to the illusion: legs thrown apart, one boot resting on top of the register, the other swinging limply over the side of the counter. Once her body had been brought up to its optimal nicotine saturation, she suddenly became aware that the smell of decay in the air was stronger here than it was anywhere else in the store.

"Alright, I'm done here," she exhaled. "Let's get out of here. It's like something died, but in a *bad* way."

"For real. I can't understand how this place can smell so freak nasty of food gone bad when everything in here has a longer shelf life than the Temptations," Trent said, unhappily scanning the ingredients on a bag of Cheetos. "I realize this is just a place for weary travelers to sugar themselves up enough to get another piece down the road, but damn, homes. Vivi wants nutritional value, and this whole store has a lower vitamin content than my shampoo."

"Uber-non-perishable snacks are a good thing," Bobby said, taking the bag of Cheetos from Trent and stuffing it into the Army backpack. "We don't have refrigeration, and we don't know how long it's gonna be before we get wherever we're going. Besides, the body doesn't need nutrients. You just need to put something inside to balance out the atmospheric pressure."

Trent patted Bobby's bulbous stomach with a condescending smile.

"And that, my friend, is why you are two seventy-five and are barely alive, and I'm a cut one-eighty and get all the ladies."

"Hah! Whatever," Bobby snorted. "I'm pushin' three bills with the mad love skills, and you're one-eighty-eight and prone to masturbate," he parodied.

"Holy shit," Sherri gasped, pulling her worn T-shirt over her nose. "Nobody told me that whatever Trent has is contagious!"

Trent swaggered over and leaned on the counter with a grin and a salacious glance.

"I believe it's called infectious charm," he oozed. "And everyone catches it sooner or later."

"I believe it's called my skirt," Sherri growled menacingly. "And everyone who stares up it gets their eyes gouged out."

The lascivious expression fell from Trent's face as he broke eye contact with the jet-black skull and crossbones that glared back at him from the crotch of Sherri's exposed red satin panties.

"B ... but I thought you were blind!" he blurted.

"I am," Sherri said, swinging her legs off the counter and hopping down. "But you're just so fucking *predictable*."

Trent opened his mouth to reply, but, as he got his first view behind the counter, he promptly lost his grasp on the English language.

"Oh m-m-my ..."

"Oh relax," Sherri grumbled, taking a long drag off of her cigarette. "It's just women's underwear. You'll get used to it after you've seen it more than one time."

Bobby reached the end of the aisle and slung his backpack full of empty calories over his shoulder. He noticed a small booklet on the floor and picked it up, flipping

through its red-flecked pages as he approached the counter.

"Hey, did you see this? *Proper cleaning and maintenance of your Remington firearm*," he said, looking up from the booklet. "Huh. That's a weird thing to find on the floor of a-" He gasped in sudden shock. "Holy *shit!* "

Sherri recognized this behavior by now. She pulled her cigarette from her lips and crossed her arms with an expression of resigned hopelessness.

"It's another killer mutant, isn't it?" she said dryly.

"M ... my ... my ... God ..." Trent stammered.

Sherri flicked her smoldering butt toward the sound of his voice. The hot ember bounced off his forehead, breaking him from his trance.

"No, no ... not a mutant," Bobby said at last. "Just a redneck who couldn't follow simple instructions."

"It's easy," Vivian said. "I'll show you how it works."

She had both hands wrapped around the empty Pixie Stix tube, which was planted into the gas tank of one of the rusty Jeeps like an oversized straw in an olive drab malt. Erik watched her demonstration as she continued.

"The trick is to get a column of gasoline in the tube *without* sucking it all the way into your mouth. Watch."

She took a few preparatory breaths, wrapped her small pink lips around the end of the tube, and gave it a gentle suck. Almost immediately her lungs felt like they were being sat upon by a Brontosaurus. Her head began to pound, but she kept at it, sucking with all of her diminished might.

Erik watched silently. Through the translucent sides of the plastic tube he could see a tiny percolation of fuel inching into the bottom of the hose, then slipping away like a shy earthworm. Watching Vivian's lips work the top of the shaft clenched in her petite fists reminded him of a magazine that the older kids had once shown him at summer camp, and his face flushed with embarrassment.

Vivian's vision crumbled into a mosaic of green and black distortion. With each renewed pull she could feel the air being crushed into paper-thin sheets as it was squeezed through the rollers of her lungs. The front of her brain started to throb like it was being poked with the butt end of a pool cue. She stumbled against the side of the Jeep, catching herself against the door before she could fall to the ground.

"I ... can't ... do ..." she gasped, wiping the sticky, sugary drool from her lips.

"It's okay; it's okay," Erik said quickly, shifting his weight in an attempt to hide the erection that had appeared against his will. "I get it. I can do it. You just relax."

He took the tube in one hand and grabbed a handful of his shirt to wipe off the end. Remembering everything that his filthy shirt had been through, he thought better of the idea and just put the sticky tube into his mouth as it was. Even through his tongue's coating of blue sugar, he could still taste the warm, rotten cabbage of Vivian's saliva, and it gave him a fluttering feeling in his stomach.

"My stomach's gonna go inside out, for real," Trent muttered. "That shit ain't right."

Sherri blinked blindly.

"What? What shit ain't right?"

She turned toward the checkout counter and squinted into a scarlet-splattered darkness. Of course, all she could see were the shadows of her own blood-soaked corneas, but had she retained her sight, the view would not have been very much different. Just over the register, a narrow wire brush was embedded in the wall, encrusted in a thin, cobwebby layer of dried gore. The brush angled toward the ground, directly into the cold chamber of a double-barreled shotgun that leaned innocently against the front of a wooden rocking chair. Between the end of the barrel and the strangely placed brush was a gangly gas-station clerk, outfitted with gray camouflage fatigues and with a rather sizable hole that started in his chin and went clean through the back of his mullet. The wall behind the counter was covered by a huge, blood-splattered Confederate flag with the words "DIXIE MILITIA" written across it in uneven black brushstrokes.

"Congratulations, Sherri," Bobby said dryly. "You found the source of the smell."

Trent pulled an old field radio from a rusty nail at the side of the counter. The knob was turned to the "on" position, but it was silent. He clicked it back and forth a few times but failed to bring it to life.

"Come on, speak to me," Sherri coached. "What are we looking at here, people?"

Trent returned the radio to the nail and made the sign of the cross.

"This poor bastard must have got the 411 about the bad-ass shit going down out there and decided to bust a cap in his own ass before somebody else could."

"So it's a guy who Kurt Cobained himself?" Sherri asked.

"Not a chance," Bobby said. "This wasn't suicide. This is Darwinism at work."

He flipped open the cover of the blood-sprinkled instruction manual.

"Always make sure that your firearm is unloaded before cleaning!" he read. "Page one, fifty-point font, bold print. He probably heard some emergency broadcast and got so excited about his chance to mow down some Yankee tourists that he lost his head. No pun intended."

Trent's stomach violently heaved, but as it was empty, nothing came out of his mouth but a grotesque wretch of noise and bad breath. He covered his mouth with both hands, but he didn't stop looking at the body.

"Alright, show's over," Bobby mumbled, dropping the manual. "Let's get the hell out of here before Trent loses a lung."

Sherri reached behind the counter and grabbed as many packs of cigarettes as her mangled pockets could hold.

"Fine by me. I got what I came for."

Before Sherri and Bobby could take two steps, Trent held out a hand for pause.

"Wait, wait," he said thoughtfully. "We should take it."

"What for?" Sherri said. "To give it a proper burial and a headstone that says 'Dumb Redneck Asshole - Died 1999 - Good Riddance'?"

"No, no," Trent said. "Not the body. The shotgun. Next time we run into one of Satan's fun-time freakouts, I'd like to have a little bit of phat firepower in our corner."

"You know, that's actually a good idea," Bobby nodded. "Go grab it and let's go already."

"I ain't tryin' to hear that, homes!" Trent passionately refused. "I'm just the idea man here. *You* go get it."

"Nuh-uh. I'm not touching that shit," Bobby said. "It's got redneck blood all over it. I might get infected and suddenly like listening to Billy Ray Cyrus."

"Oh, come on, Big B," Trent whined. "If I get any closer to the reek on that freak I'm going to make a big ol' pot of rerun stew-you said so yourself."

"Jesus H. Christ," Sherri exclaimed. "I've been in a girls' shower room and I've never been surrounded by so many pussies. *I'll* get the fucking gun."

Feeling her way along the now-familiar countertop, she found her way through a saloon door at its side marked with a swatch of duct tape labeled "Employees 'Only'!!!!" For a fraction of a second she lost her balance as her boots slipped on the blood-slicked linoleum, but she caught herself with determined dignity. She held out her hands and swept them across the open air of the small space.

"Come on, people, hot or cold?"

"Warm," Trent said, peering over the counter. "Getting hotter ... a little to the left."

"Here?"

Sherri took a step to the left and her heavy boot came down on one of the chair's wooden rockers. With a stiff lurch, the corpse slumped forward in the seat, forcing the cold steel barrel of the gun all the way through the hole in its skull like some kind of grim Halloween novelty. When the scrape of the walnut stock shifting on the floor reached Sherri's ears, she immediately zeroed in on the firearm in the darkness and grabbed the end of its barrel with a swing of her hand.

"Got it! Now let's go!"

With a satisfied flash of her teeth, she turned toward the boys and took a step, but with the stock of the gun firmly anchored in the blasted-out skull of its owner, it refused to move an inch.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," she said peevishly. "Hold on, it's stuck on something."

"No no! Just forget it," Bobby gagged with revulsion. "Forget it! Just let it go and

come on."

"Get off me. I got it; I got it," Sherri spat. "Just give me a second."

With a frustrated dedication, she wrapped both hands around the barrel and started yanking up and down against the inert human blockage, looking something like an unspeakable version of an old-fashioned butter churn maid. The stock banged into the floor with each thrust, throwing up crowns of drained blood from the floor and splattering Sherri's ragged legs. With each thunderous *bang*, the clerk's empty head slid up and down the barrel like a hairy meat yo-yo.

"God, what's this thing stuck on?" Sherri muttered. "It's like pulling teeth!"

Trent gasped, choked, and then finally released the meager contents of his stomach onto the floor. Executing an awkward lurch that suggested that only half of his brain was in on the idea, Bobby rushed through the saloon doors to stop the inadvertent desecration.

"Stop! Sherri, stop!" he yelled. "Just stop! You don't know what you're doing!"

Before Bobby's words had reached her ears, the wet gun slipped out of Sherri's hands, hammering its bloody stock into the ground with just enough force to drive the clerk's cracked jawbone into the cocked trigger. With an explosion that rattled the windows and sent Sherri reeling to the floor in a convulsive shock, the second barrel of the shotgun blasted its load into the air, eradicating the end of a hanging fluorescent shop light.

Spitting out a half-realized expletive, Bobby threw his arms in front of his face just in time to catch the full brunt of the mangled shop light as it swung in a graceful arc from its one remaining chain. The jagged teeth of the torn metal sliced the backs of his arms from elbow to wrist bone before smashing a bloody gash out of his poorly protected forehead. His face was already coated with the hot flow of his own blood before his unconscious body hit the floor with a ground-shaking *thud*.

The cold flow of gasoline slid halfway up the hose as Erik sucked gently upon its sugary end.

"Good, good," Vivian said. "You're just about-"

Just then, the sound of the shotgun blast from inside of the store smashed through their skulls like a slaughterhouse hammer. Vivian's hands shot to her ears. Erik's startled diaphragm made a convulsive spasm that pulled enough gasoline into his stomach to start a moped.

The burn hit him in slow motion, like a liquid fire spreading from the back of his throat, raging down his tongue and up in two tendrils of acid that scorched his sinuses right behind his eyeballs. With a sputtering choke, a glut of fuel exploded from his nose, got sucked back into his gasping mouth, and rolled back down his scalded throat. He fell to the ground in a violent fit of spitting and coughing, both hands clawing at his burning face.

"Erik!" Vivian screamed. "Erik, no!"

She fell to her knees next to him and struggled to hold him upright. His eyes had turned a screaming shade of bloodshot red, and his nose leaked a noxious trickle of sugary blue petroleum. He vomited a thick, flammable goo onto his filthy shirt and fell limp in her arms.

"Erik!" she screamed.

She quickly lay him down on the ground. His eyes stared without focus into the sky.

"Erik! *Erik!* Come on, Erik!"

Vivian's mind raced. Erik wasn't breathing. Time seemed to go by at ten times normal speed. She didn't know what to do, but she knew that if she didn't do something immediately, he would be dead. Her brain screamed through its medical files, but the only thing she could seem to remember was a faded yellow instructional poster from some long-forgotten food service job. A second later she had wrestled Erik to his feet and was standing behind him, arms wrapped around his belly, frantically thrusting her clenched hands upward.

"Come on, Erik, come on," she gasped. "It's the Heimlich maneuver! Come on, breathe!"

As Vivian repeatedly pumped her fists into Erik's stomach, dark blood began to spill from the top of his snarled abdominal bandages. She was obviously reopening the wounds in his sides, but she didn't have time to be gentle. She would apologize later.

"St-" Erik choked. "Sto-"

"It's working!" Vivian screamed. "Cough it up! Breathe!"

Erik's brain swam in a pool of fumes and burning disorientation. He didn't know what was going on. All he knew was that somebody was trying to kill him, squeezing him around his tortured middle. Squeezing, squeezing, squeezing on his stomach. His knees buckled, but the squeezing arms held him upright. In his stupor, he clawed at his assailant's hands but couldn't force enough strength into his fingers to pry them apart.

"That's right, Erik," Vivian said, still pumping. "Hold on! You're going to be okay!"

Erik's foggy brain couldn't decode the words; all he could feel was the pounding wrench of the squeezing arms. Squeezing, squeezing, squeezing. Squeezing him to death! The squeezing had to stop, and it had to stop at any cost.

"Stop," he choked. "Stop it. *Stop it! Aaaaarrngh!* "

With a rippling strain of his abdominal muscles, Erik's frayed bandages tore to shreds as his wounds exploded outward. The hardened spines of his infection burst from his scars on stalks of hairy flesh, clamping two fistfuls of gnarled fingers around Vivian's wrists!

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Aaaa! Aaaaa! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Sherri's blighted ears were pierced by a high and frantic shrieking.

"Shut up! Shut *up!*" she screamed, clamping her hands down on the sides of her head. "Tell me what the fuck just happened!"

The shock of the gunshot coupled with the sight of Bobby's near decapitation had sent Trent over the edge. From his position on the other side of the counter, his feet were locked to the floor in sheer, primal terror, and he could do nothing but scream like a chorus of police sirens rushing to the scene of a quadruple homicide.

"Shut up!" Sherri repeated. "Trent! Shut the fuck up!"

She scrambled her hands across the floor until they hit the stock of the shotgun. Following the accidental discharge, the clerk's badly damaged neck had been wrenched almost all the way around, and he now lay on the floor with the cold barrel threading his reamed-out skull. Still blindly oblivious to the repercussions of her actions, Sherri grabbed the gun and sprang to her feet, finally disconnecting the redneck's pulpy head with a *snap* of tendons that was never heard over the piercing stab of Trent's continued scream.

"Trent, if you don't stop screaming, I swear to God I'll blow your fucking face off!"

To drive her threat home, Sherri shouldered the weapon and swung the muzzle up toward the sound of his wail. As the barrel swished through the air, the disembodied head slid down the slick metal and launched across the room, hitting Trent in the chest with a wet and understated *thunk*.

The next thing Sherri heard was Trent's silenced body hitting the linoleum in a shock-induced faint, followed by nothing but the ringing in her own ears.

"That's better," she said, lowering the shotgun and lighting a cigarette. "Now, Bobby, could you please start at the beginning and tell me what the fuck is going on? Bobby? Trent? Helloooo?"

From outside the store, Vivian's bloodcurdling screams reached Sherri's tired ears.

"Fuck me," she muttered. "What *now?*"

Vivian screamed with such intensity that her fillings rattled in her skull. She could feel consciousness slipping from her body as her tortured lungs seemed to fill with a cold, liquid pain. This was no hallucination. Her thrashing arms were being held firmly by two clawed hands, their knotted fingers twitching erratically against her skin, dripping with ropes of thick, clear fluid. In a powerful motion, the claws ripped her arms from Erik's battered waist and flung them aside. She stumbled backward, tripped over the empty gas cans, and tumbled to the ground.

Freed from Vivian's crushing embrace, Erik staggered forward with a hacking cough, wiping the last vestiges of sugary fuel from his lips. Vivian scrambled backward and looked at him with terror. Erik's pouchy love handles had unexpectedly sprouted a monstrous set of black rodent forearms. He looked down on his own body with complete incomprehension, holding his human arms out to his

sides as if to protect them from their newly formed brothers.

After a second of silence that seemed to last an eon, Erik tipped his head back and released a roaring scream. In spite of herself, Vivian joined in on the scream and didn't stop screaming until Sherri kicked open the door of the convenience store with a splintery *bang*.

Sherri's bloody eyes focused into the dim light and picked out two shapes. From the scream, she knew that the one crumpled on the ground was Vivian, but even through her blasted corneas she could see that the one looming over her had two arms too many to be Erik. She brought the shotgun to her shoulder and slipped her finger into the trigger guard.

"Hey! Freakshow!" she barked, cigarette hanging from her lips. "Paws off the powderpuff!"

Erik turned toward the sound of Sherri's voice and instinctively put his human arms over his face, as if that would do anything to protect him from a blast of red-hot lead.

"Sherri!" Vivian screamed. "Wait! Don't!"

Sherri's finger squeezed the moist trigger, firing off nothing but an impotent *click*.

"Fuck!" she spat. "It's empty!"

Erik clasped his hands over his throbbing heart and turned back to Vivian.

"Oh thank Go-"

Before he could finish expressing his relief, Erik was silenced by the resounding *clang* of an empty five-gallon gas can hitting him square in the face.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Vivian sat in a hollow-eyed slump on the worn wooden steps of the convenience store. Although she barely moved, her breath came in a shallow, nervous pant. She held an open bag of Cheetos in her left hand, but the barely orange fingers of her right betrayed her lack of interest in it. The rocking chair had been moved from the porch to the driveway, and Vivian watched Bobby and Trent hovering busily around it.

"Yeah, I can *see* what you're doing, but I'm drawing a 'no comprende' card here, homeboy," Trent whined. "Someone's got to protect the ladies from this creature, and if you're not man enough to take action, then-"

"For once in your life, just shut up," Bobby said through clenched teeth. "Just shut ... the hell ... up."

Trent viciously snapped off a mouthful of beef jerky and scowled as Bobby tugged the end of a grimy orange extension cord. In the dusty driveway in front of the gas pumps, an unconscious Erik sat neatly bound to the weathered chair. His ankles were tied securely to its wobbly legs, and his human arms were stuffed through the slats of the back and bound behind him. From there, the cable looped back around, tying his superfluous rodent limbs together in a bundle that hung limply in his lap.

Bobby knotted the end of the cord around the mutant wrists and stepped away, rubbing the backs of his own wounded arms. The blasted shop light had managed to dig two gouges in his forearms from elbow to wrist bone, but his defensive posture had put the rifts relatively harmlessly up their backs. A Dixieland medley of red, white, and blue bandages dressed his wounds, finishing off the remainder of the Confederate flag that once flew proudly by the front of the store. A series of mismatched cartoon Band-Aids held together the fresh, lamp-induced gash that ran across his forehead. He waddled back across the wide driveway, grabbed a bag of corn chips and a can of purple soda from the backpack, and plopped down next to Vivian.

"Ahh, yes, come to Bobby," he hummed, tearing open the bag. "I think this is the longest that I've gone without Fritos in my life."

"No shit?" Sherri said through a mouthful of waxy chocolate cake. "You'd never know it by looking at you, fat-ass."

"Cut it out, you two!" Vivian interrupted. "This is serious! What are we supposed to do about Erik?"

"He's not going anywhere," Bobby said, nudging Vivian's bag of Cheetos with the back of his bandaged arm. "Just relax and get some calories in your system. We'll see what happens when he wakes up."

"When he wakes up?!" Trent squawked. "Listen to me, people! I'm telling you, when he wakes up, he's going to be just like that kitty cat from Hell! The last thing you ever hear is gonna be me saying 'I told you so' when that thing comes to and starts putting a fresh set of holes all up in your asses!"

"Yes, Trent. Your opinion is duly noted," Vivian sighed. "Not that I think that will stop you from continuing to voice it *over and over again*."

Trent shoved another hunk of jerky in his mouth and grumbled to himself.

Sherri sat on the antique Coca-Cola cooler in a cross-legged slump, perched between a half-eaten package of Hostess Sno Balls and a quart of warm beer. She tilted her head back and pushed her stringy hair out of her eyes, leaving a trail of sticky pink coconut shavings down its length. Two days of pollutant-riddled air had taken their toll on her blast-bleached locks, turning them from a snowy white to a grimy shade of yellow.

"I've got an idea," she said, sliding off of the cooler. "Why don't we quit screwing around and just wake him up?"

Before anyone could suggest otherwise, Sherri clomped to the bound lump of Erik's form in her ever-clearing vision, stomped on the back of the wooden rocker, and dumped half the bottle of brew over his swollen forehead.

With a loud, wet snort that sent a whiff of petrochemical stench into the air, Erik regained consciousness, thrashing against his bonds with a furious, choking cough. Sherri continued to pour the bottle over his head, the peeling flesh of her face twisting into a satisfied grin.

Erik thrashed his shoulders against the chair, desperately trying to escape the drowning flow of warm beer.

"Up and at 'em, Sideshow," Sherri sang. "If Trent's gonna kill you, I at least want you to mess him up real bad first."

Erik floundered and choked under the dripping foam. His immobilized hands scrambled at the back of the chair, unable to come to his aid. A draught of beer ran down his nostril and was violently choked back out of his dripping mouth.

"Sherri, stop it!" Vivian barked.

"Okay, hold on," Sherri said, raising a finger. "Only half a bottle left."

In a sudden lightning-quick motion, Erik's rat arms lurched upward in a tied-together mass, grabbed the bottle from Sherri's hand, and hurled it across the driveway. Trent narrowly leapt out of its way as it smashed against the pavement where he had been standing.

"Ggg|glgg|gg! Grr! GrrRrrrawWWwg!" Erik roared.

"Did you see that? Did you see that?" Trent squeaked, pointing at the shattered glass. "Aw shit! You went and put the rage in it now, yo!"

"Auug!" Erik choked, eyes clenched against the dripping foam. "Whatsaggg?"

His shoulders tugged impotently at his imprisoned arms. As if aware that their human brethren were incapacitated, the pair of clasped rat arms rose from his lap and swabbed his eyes with the backs of their furry wrists. Erik blinked furiously as his eyes cleared, revealing a vision of yellow claws and matted, beer-soaked fur.

"Man," he coughed, "that stung like a son of aaaAaAaAAAaAAA!"

He kicked out in a frantic attempt to scramble away from the gnarled paws that pressed against his face. With every thrust of his immobilized legs, Erik tipped the creaking chair away from the mutant hands, only for them to be shoved right back toward him on gravity's return stroke.

"AAaaAaaaAaAAaa!" he screamed.

"We've got to kill it!" Trent wailed. "Kill it now! Before it kills all of us!" He snatched the sword from the front porch and charged at Erik with a terrified battle cry.

"Trent, no!" Vivian screamed.

Bobby made a spastic lurch to grab Trent but missed him entirely, slipped off of

the step, and crashed clumsily to the pavement. Half a second later, Vivian's long, powerful legs had launched her over the pile of her brother and within three explosive steps had caught up to Trent's howling stampede. She leapt onto his back, taking them both to the ground and sending the sword skittering across the dusty blacktop. Vivian rolled onto her back in a fit of convulsive, gasping coughs.

"Damn, Vivi!" Trent moaned angrily, rubbing his bloody knees through fresh holes in his khakis. "This is seriously not the time to be jumpin' a brotha's bones! You got to wait until *after* I slay the beast to express your gratitude!"

Vivian's sudden exertion had left her completely breathless.

"Don't ... you ... touch ... him!" she wheezed furiously.

Bobby scrambled behind the panicking Erik and slammed his foot down with a splintery *crunch* on the wooden rocker, arresting its maddened swing.

"Erik, if you understand the words I'm saying, quit wiggling out before we have to kill you!"

" *Kill me? Kill me?!* " Erik chirped hoarsely, the words scraping against the gasoline-burnt sides of his throat. "W ... what the hell is going on here?!"

Bobby stepped off of the rocker and backed away, leaving Erik slowly oscillating in the dust. As Erik took in the faces of the shocked onlookers, his rodent arms fell limp across his lap.

"We're cool. Everybody be cool now," Bobby warned.

Vivian pulled herself into a crouch and coughed violent, gravelly coughs that shook her slender body. Trent thumped on her back with his open palm.

"Breathe, Vivi, breathe," he coached. "Don't you worry, I'm here to look out for you, girl. I'll keep you safe."

Vivian pushed Trent away without looking at him and shuffled over to join Bobby and Sherri in an uneasy semicircle around the rocking chair. Sherri now held the sword slung over her shoulder.

"Dude?" Bobby ventured, leaning over Erik. "Dude. Are you okay?"

"Am I okay? Am I *okay*?!" Erik whispered through a sandpaper larynx. "Do I look okay?! What the hell happened to me?!"

"I don't know!" Vivian confessed. "I was just trying to help you, and *this* happened!"

"Trying to *help* me?!" Erik coughed. "You were squeezing the shit out of my ripped-up stomach!"

"I was doing the Heimlich maneuver!" Vivian yelled weakly. "You were choking!"

"So you were trying to dislodge the *fluid* stuck in my throat?!" Erik rasped bitterly. "Very nice. You could have killed me!"

"She *should* have killed you as soon as you became one of *them*, " Trent said coldly. "But your weak-willed, so-called 'friends' decided to bind you up instead of

sending you to your final reward. People, people. Why are we prolonging this wretched soul's suffering?"

"Whoa whoa!" Erik stammered. "I'm not suffering! I'm okay! Trent, you said it yourself! Humans are okay because we have souls! I have a soul!"

"Oh, I think not, Evil E," Trent said smoothly. "You *had* a soul. I'm man enough to admit when I'm wrong. Heavy B had the right idea after all, yo. This ain't about souls anymore. It's about the toxic germs we breathed and the disinfectants in the blood. For real. Every one of us was drinking liquor on Judgment Day. Every one of us but *you*. "

"I *was* drinking liquor!" Erik screamed. "I told you! I drank! I drank a lot! Tell him, Bobby! Right before work I had like, four Tequizas!"

"Tequiza?" Trent huffed, leaning aggressively into Erik's face. "Does that even have alcohol in it? What kind of man drinks Tequiza? That stuff is little Mexican girl piss."

Erik's face crinkled as Trent's stale, spicy meat breath rolled up his scorched nostrils.

"Look, will you just untie me?" he winced. "Seriously, I'm *okay*. "

Trent leaned in menacingly close to Erik, locking his bloodshot eyes in a cold stare.

"I think as long as *I'm* still in God's image, and *you're* a four-armed demon freak tied to a chair, *I'll* be the judge of who's *okay*, you abomination of-

Erik's eyes narrowed angrily and his tied-up mass of rat arms swung violently upward, connecting with a *crack* to the bottom of Trent's toothy jaw. Trent staggered away, clutching his mouth as the blood flowed from his freshly bitten tongue.

"Ow! Damn it! Son of a ..."

Erik's eyes widened and flicked over the shocked faces of the others.

"I didn't do that!" he piped. "I'm sorry, Trent! I didn't mean it! It just happened!"

"Well, that's good enough for me," Sherri shrugged. "Let him go. Anyone who wants to knock Trent on his ass can't be evil."

"I'm sorry; I'm so sorry!" Erik blathered. "It was an accident! I can't control them!"

"Listen to him!" Trent seethed, pointing an agitated, bloodied finger. "He just said himself that he can't control those things! If he's not controlling them, then *who is?!*"

With a seemingly choreographed leap, he snatched the sword from Sherri's hands and thrust its pointed tip toward Erik's chest.

"Y'all are letting your fond memories of what this thing *used* to be interfere with your duty!" Trent boomed. "This thing is *not* your friend!"

"I *am* your friend!" Erik screamed desperately. "Help me!"

Bobby stepped forward and brutally shoved Trent out of the way.

"Quit being an asshole, you asshole," he growled.

He wrestled the sword out of Trent's hands and handed it back to Sherri.

"Thanks, Bobby," Erik said with relief. "I knew you'd be on my side, buddy. Come on now, untie me!"

Bobby looked away.

"I'm sorry, dude," he mumbled. "You know I can't."

"You can't?!" Erik shrieked. "Why not?! You're my best friend!"

"I know. That's exactly why I can't," Bobby glowered. "We both know that's exactly how this thing always plays out in the movies. Even though you're obviously all freaked up, I untie you because you're my best friend. Then when we least expect it you'll be jumping out of the closet with glowing red eyes and a mouthful of bloody fangs. You of all people should know this. It's your own logic, Erik. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?!" Erik yelled. "Well, sorry doesn't cut it!"

"Don't be sorry!" Trent boiled. "Stop being sorry! Stop thinking of that thing as if it's still your friend! It's over and you know it! He's gone! We all knew that it would eventually come to this! That's why we made a pact!"

"But I didn't make a pact!" Erik wailed.

For a moment, everyone went silent, contemplating the echo of Erik's shrieked words.

"He's right, you know," Vivian said softly. "He *did* refuse to be a part of our agreement."

"You see?!" Erik squeaked hopefully. "This is *exactly* why you should never join a homicide pact! It never works out in your favor in the end!"

"Damn, woman!" Trent blurted in exasperation. "How can you still be on his side?! Look at him! He's a monster!"

"But what if he's *not*?!" Vivian shouted. "We don't know! We don't know anything about these creatures!"

"I'm not a creature!" Erik hissed.

"We know something about them," Sherri said leadingly. "We know that they glow blue once you kill them."

"Homegirl's right," Trent agreed. "Let's slice off his head so y'all can see how it shines."

"Whoa whoa," Erik interjected, shaking his head violently. "I don't think that I can get behind this plan."

"Oh alright, ya pussywad," Sherri conceded, raising her sword. "How about we

just hack off a big toe and see if *it* glows."

"No, no," Erik stammered. "I'm not on board with any plan that involves the words 'slice,' 'hack,' or 'kill.'"

"Find another way," Vivian said sternly. "This is not Salem, and it's not 1692. We're not going to have a witch trial here."

"But that's just what we're dealing with, Vivi!" Trent said. "Don't you see? The devil possesses his soul! Second book of Moses says, 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.'"

"Ha! He isn't a witch," Sherri laughed. "I *know* witches, and they're way cooler than *Erik*."

"Don't get yourself all boxed in on the Lord's language, yo," Trent said authoritatively. "A witch, a demon, a zombie, it's all umbrellaed under the same scripture. Thou shalt not suffer a zombie to live!"

"Stop it, Trent," Vivian snapped. "He's not a zombie!"

"Vivi, he's got *arms* growing out of his *belly*! Are you blind?! He's a freaked-up bloodthirsty zombie!"

"He's not a zombie," Vivian's steely voice repeated. "He's a *mutant*."

"So *what*?! " Trent barked. "They're the same thing!"

Vivian looked at Erik as his own rebuttal replayed in her memory. For once, she put away the encyclopedia of her mind and picked up its remote control instead.

"No, they're not. Zombies are nothing but rotting, reanimated corpses. All they do is shamle through the night infecting people and eating brains," she quoted. "A mutant *can* be evil, but it doesn't *have* to be."

Erik's lips stretched into a grin as Trent's hands fell to his sides in frustrated disbelief.

"Where on God's green Earth did you get that crazy-ass bullshit?"

Vivian gave Erik a weak smile.

"I once got lectured by someone very close to the subject."

Trent snatched the sword back from Sherri and backed away angrily.

"But how do you know he's not a zombie?" he sneered. "It's not like you can just give him the First Response Early Zombification Test or something!"

"I can't be a zombie!" Erik volunteered. "Zombies have no thought process!"

"Put a zip-zip on your lip-lip," Trent said sharply. "This is a discussion for normals only."

"No no," Bobby said thoughtfully. "I think he might be on to something there."

"Unbelievable!" Trent yelled, throwing his hands in the air. "Now you're taking advice from the *zombie*?! "

"From the *mutant*, " Bobby countered. "He's right. If he can still reason, then he's not a zombie. What if we give him a series of carefully worded questions and statements and monitor his response?"

"That sounds like a reasonable idea," Vivian agreed.

"Ha!" Erik laughed joylessly. "It sounds like a Voight-Kampff test! Are you trying to figure out if I'm a mutant, or if I'm a replicant, Rick Deckard?"

Bobby shifted his eyebrows as the corners of his lips pursed into a grin.

"Congratulations, old chum. So far you're one for one."

"Oh no," Trent argued. "We must be having duck soup for dinner, because I smell something *foul*, yo. Whatever the hell homeboy just said doesn't prove anything to me. You can't go speaking your own geek language and pretend like that makes him okay."

"Trent has a point," Vivian said. "If we're going to do an interrogation, we should start with simple questions. You know, establish a credible baseline."

"Me first," Sherri squeaked. "Name every country in the world!"

"Um, okay," Erik said, his eyes rolling back in concentration. "United States, Canada, Mexico, Panama, Haiti, Jamaica, Peru-"

"Wait, wait," Vivian said, rubbing her eyes. " *Simple* questions. Baseline. Like, what year is it?"

"It's 1999," Erik said. "As you can tell by the way that I'm *partying*. "

"How much money do you have in your wallet?" Sherri asked.

"I don't know-about fourteen bucks?"

"Can I have it?" Sherri continued.

"Uh, I guess."

"Uh-uh. No," Trent scowled. "Don't go pullin' out the payola. Let's keep this legit, alright, E? No bribing the jury."

"I wasn't! She asked if-"

"What's it like to be a damned creature?" Trent interrupted. "What are you feeling right now?"

Erik cast his eyes downward. "I'm scared," he mumbled soulfully. "And also really, really hungry."

"Hungry?" Trent repeated eagerly. "Hungry for what?"

"It doesn't matter. Anything."

"Anything? Like *human flesh*?!" Trent thundered.

"No, not human flesh," Erik sneered, fixing Trent with a glare. "Quit putting words in my mouth!"

"I think we all know what you want in your mouth," Trent said, grasping his own

arm like an oversized turkey leg and pretending to take a bite.

Bobby stepped forward and put his heavy palm on Trent's face, shoving him away.

"On *Get Smart*, " he asked, "what was Agent 99's real name?"

"Barbara Feldon."

"Wrong! That's the actress's name! I want the character's name!"

"That's a trick question!" Erik protested. "Agent 99 had no real name!"

"He's right," Bobby nodded.

"If I asked if you liked smelling little girls' used underwear," Sherri interjected, "would your answer be the same as the answer to this question?"

"No!" Erik shouted. "Er ... yes! I mean ... you're disgusting!"

"What does it feel like?" Vivian blurted.

"It's humiliating," Erik blushed.

"No, I mean ... the arms. Are they hurting you?"

"They're not. It doesn't hurt at all," he admitted. "It doesn't even feel like they're a part of me. I can't control them, but I can *feel* them."

He paused.

"When they grabbed the bottle, I could feel the glass, but ... but it was like I was feeling it in my *real* hands. They're like ... it's like they're my real arms' evil twins. It's like having unwelcome guests in my own body. It's ... it's weird."

Vivian stroked back the mop of Erik's beer-soaked bangs and looked into his eyes. He could feel the warmth of her breath on his cheeks and smell the old cabbage on her skin.

"You poor thing," she whispered solemnly.

Trent looked at Vivian gazing sympathetically into Erik's sorrowful blue eyes and scowled angrily. He jealously stepped to the front of the rocker, gently nudging Vivian away with a protective shove of his forearm. Turning to Erik, he lightly slapped his right cheek, as if challenging him to a duel. He continued to slap the left, then the right again.

"Trent, stop it," Vivian spat.

"Yeah, knock it off, jerkbag!" Erik winced.

"Make me, *freak*," Trent smirked, slapping him again.

"I would if my arms weren't tied behind my back, you cowardly prick bastard!"

"But they're not, are they, bro?" Trent said coolly. "Not *all* of them."

Erik's mutant arms lay flaccidly across his lap like the empty sleeves of a gorilla costume.

"I just *told* you," he seethed, "I can't control them!"

"Well, *somebody's* controlling them, and I have a pretty good idea who it is," Trent said, pointing dramatically downward toward the pits of Hell. "So, you can't control them, right? Well, what part are you going to lose control over next, E? Your legs? Your *brain*? Who are *they* going to attack next? Are *they* gonna be all up on me again? Or on your boy B here? Or what if *they* take a savage interest in the defenseless blind girl's fragile feminine form? Then what?"

Erik cast his eyes helplessly to the stony pavement.

"I ... I really don't know," he admitted.

Bobby intervened, thrusting Trent aside with his hip and clapping his hands distractingly.

" *Duh-nuh nuh-nuh-nuh!* Fresh air!"

" *Duh-nuh nuh-nuh-nuh* . Times Square," Erik returned pathetically.

"Yep, this is Erik alright," Bobby said conclusively. "No self-respecting zombie would watch *Green Acres*. "

"Be serious, Bobby!" Vivian snapped, losing all patience. She squatted down in front of Erik and leaned in, putting her hands on his bound knees.

"Erik, do you feel like ... do you feel like you're going to hurt somebody?"

"No!" Erik said defensively. "I don't! I absolutely don't! Vivian, please! How could you even think that I could-"

In the middle of his sentence, the sharp, yellow-clawed fingers of his mutant hands raised ghoulishly from his lap and extended toward Vivian's soft, freckled cheeks. With a squeak of terror, she slapped them away, lost her balance, and fell on her behind.

"I'm sorry!" Erik yelled frantically. "Vivian, I'm sorry! I didn't-"

Vivian scrambled to her feet.

"I'm sorry, Erik! I didn't mean to-"

"I'm sorry!" Erik repeated. "I wasn't going to hurt you! I'd never hurt you!"

"I know, it just ... they just ..." Vivian murmured quietly. "I know you wouldn't, Erik."

Trent watched the tense affection sizzle back and forth between Erik and Vivian, and a new line of questioning suddenly popped into his greasy head. He nudged Vivian aside and spoke with a sudden airiness.

"Little E, have you ever been in love?"

Erik's distressed gaze broke from Vivian and landed on Trent.

"What?"

"You know. The big one. The three little words," Trent said smoothly, coming to

stand in front of the rocking chair. "I'm guessing that you've never made love to a woman, but nonetheless, tell me, have you ever really, really, loved a woman?"

"What are you getting at, Bryan Adams?" Erik said defensively. "Are you trying to say that I'm gay or something? Just because I don't try to stick it in every girl I like doesn't mean that I-"

"Whoa whoa! Easy, E. So maybe you've loved a woman. Maybe you even still do," Trent said pointedly, leaning in toward Erik's face without coming into claw range. "Let me ask you this, friend. This woman that you love. Think about her. Imagine her beauty. Think about the way that her eyes glimmer in the moonlight or the way that her hair hangs across the silky skin of her neck. Think of the soft curve of her body where the small of her back melts into her perfect *derrière*. Are you picturing her?"

Erik glared at Trent without saying a word. Trent continued.

"Would you leave this woman you love alone and unprotected with a thing like *you*? A creature so far removed from God's great design that he can't even account for the aggressions of his *own body*? Would 'I'm sorry, I can't control them' cut it when you're standing over her laying in a pool of her own sweet blood after you've done the unmentionable? *Would it?! "*

Erik turned his head and looked at the stony faces of his friends, gathered in the driveway to his left. Tears rolled from Vivian's eyes as they darted to the ground to avoid his glance. When Erik looked his way, Bobby quickly took off his glasses and guiltily pretended to blow dust from them. Sherri was the only one who didn't look away. Her reddened eyes just stared straight through him with a kind of visual shrug that suggested neither accusation nor compassion.

"Last question, E," Trent said. "Do you realize that this is not just going to get better? Do you recognize, in your heart, that you are no longer one of us, and you never will be?"

Erik's friends didn't look at him. Erik didn't look at any of his friends. He didn't look at Trent or the sword in his hands. He just looked down at the bony, hairy arms and the hooked yellow claws hanging impossibly from his own abdomen. They looked so harmless lying across his lap, but even he didn't know how long they, or he, would stay that way.

"I ... I can only say what I know," Erik stammered, his eyes welling up. "I don't know what's happened to me, but I know in my heart that I would never hurt you guys. I'll always be your friend. I just wish that I could show you all how much I-"

Erik's tearful speech was cut short by the sound of Trent's blade cutting through the air with a shrill *swish*, terminating in a muffled, organic *crack* and a guttural choke.

With a startled leap, the red-headed twins' averted eyes shot toward the grisly noise and then seized in horror. They saw Erik in grim profile, his mouth hanging frozen in a silent scream. Trent stood before him with both hands wrapped around the hilt of the blade that was now buried in the top of Erik's wretched skull.

Vivian's icy terror melted into a scream as a wave of anguish emptied her strangled lungs and dropped her to her knees in the dust. Sherri, for once speechless, rubbed her shocked eyes and squinted at what she was sure she had not just seen. Bobby just stood and stared in a stunned paralysis, his round, pasty face blossoming red with rage.

"No ... *no!* " he choked. "Trent, you savage son of a bitch!"

His trembling legs began to carry him toward Trent as his flexing arms prepared to perform some act of barbarism yet to be fully conceived. Before Bobby laid a hand on Trent, however, Erik's jaw began to quiver at the corner of his ashen face, then came alive with a hysterical scream.

"Aaaahaaahahahaha!" Erik wailed. "Shit shit! Help me! Holy shit, somebody stop this idiot! Shiiiiit!"

As he screamed, Erik's tightly bound body went into spastic convulsions, thrashing the chair around in a scraping quarter-circle on the pavement until it faced his friends. The new perspective revealed Trent's sword to be wedged firmly in the wood of the rocking chair, six inches from the side of Erik's intact head.

"Sit still, you freak!" Trent screamed, yanking to free his captured blade. "The power of Christ compels you, beotch!"

With a blast of dry splinters, the sword broke through the wood, freeing the blade and splitting the old chair nearly in two. Erik continued to scream and thrash, forcing the weakened structure of the chair to completely give way around him, leaving him flailing on the ground tied to nothing but shattered debris. Bobby grabbed his best friend by his bindings and hauled him out of the way just as Trent's blade smashed into the blacktop.

"Trent, are you out of your mind?!" Bobby screamed. "Put that down, you idiot!"

"Step aside, B! I cannot allow this perversion to live!" Trent cried. "Go back to Hell, where you came from, demon!"

Trent raised his sword over his head to finish the job. With a burst of sneakers against blacktop, Vivian launched at Trent, throwing him off-balance with a bony shoulder to his chest, aborting his deadly swing but failing to return him to the ground.

"Trent, stop it!" she screamed, punching and clawing at his sunburnt skin. "Stop it! Leave him alone!"

"I have to protect you!" Trent wailed. "That whiny bastard is a blasphemy on legs! Ouch, shit! You're not safe with a half-breed freak like him around! None of us are! Thou shalt not suffer a mutant to live! Stand back, Vivi! I said stand *back!* "

With a fiery flash of his eyes, Trent threw out his muscular arm, planting the heel of his palm into Vivian's bandaged chest with a powerful, resounding *thump*.

The blow hit Vivian like a shot from a cannon. Her eyes dilated as the wind was completely knocked out of her, and she felt herself suddenly drowning in open air. It

was as if Trent's hand had plowed all the way through her body, pushing her organs through her back in a gooey clump.

As she stumbled back, unable to draw breath, she could feel a cold, splitting wetness pour from her shoulders to her waist. Her corset of canvas bandages shredded and exploded from her body as a pair of grotesque limbs erupted from the gouges in her back. Two unfolding expanses of black flesh stretched across a framework of thin, bony struts, forming a hideous pair of bat wings! The sails billowed out to Vivian's sides in a four-foot span that threw a sinister shadow over the crouching form of Trent's petrified body. A single flap of their leathery mass filled the air with a thrown-off mist of clotted blood and oily pus.

"Don't you *touch* him," she growled menacingly.

Without breaking her steadfast glare into Trent's unbelieving eyes, Vivian inhaled a deep, full breath into her suddenly unconstricted lungs, took one shaky step, and promptly passed out in his arms. Her head tipped back over his thick forearm, throwing the soft warmth of her hair cascading across his cold skin.

Bobby, Erik, and Sherri stared at them, all motionless, all with their jaws hanging open, limp as wet laundry on a clothesline. None of them spoke. None of them even blinked.

Vivian's mutant wings hung placidly from her unconscious shoulders, their tips collecting dry dust as they dragged on the ground. The shredded polyester of her abused cocktail dress hung low across her bosom, affording Trent an ample view of her apple-pie tanned cleavage heaving in the newly afforded freedom of respiration.

Trent looked for a long, introspective moment at Erik's arms, then back at the curves of Vivian's warm, mutated body. He dropped the sword and took Vivian tightly in his arms.

"Okay, I've decided," he said. "Little E is okay after all."

CHAPTER NINE

The refueled Rabbit shattered the silence of the thrashed Carolina pine forest as its overloaded engine screamed up the abandoned interstate. Trent was gangsta leanin' in the driver's seat, with his left arm resting on the crumbling doorframe and his right hand hanging in a limp curl over the top of the wheel. In his own mind he was driving a slammed '69 Buick full of hoochies down the Sunset Strip, and nobody bothered to tell him otherwise. Vivian sat in the passenger seat, and the others were packed in behind them. A tangible feeling of claustrophobic annoyance had been piling up in the tiny car like sand in the bottom of an hourglass as the hours trickled into the past.

Erik's bored eyes scanned the shoulder of the road for the next installment of a running gag that had been running for hundreds of miles.

"So much *maple*, you won't want to *leaf*," he moaned in a parody of comic delivery. "North of the Border, one hundred and thirty-two miles."

As he said the words, the car blasted past a faded billboard depicting the thirty-foot-tall cartoon Mountie wielding two oversized jugs of maple syrup.

"Get it? *Maple? Leaf?*" Erik continued. "Because he's *Canadian*, you see ..."

Trent scowled into the rearview mirror.

"Seriously, y'all," he muttered. "I *can't* be the only one having second thoughts about not killing him."

"Give it a rest, Trent," Sherri growled. "You're lucky we don't kill *you*. After all, *you're* the only one who's gone batshit and started attacking people."

"Aw, now that ain't fair," Trent smoldered. "You know I was just tryin' to protect all y'all. How was I supposed to know that Little E was okay?"

"You could have taken my word for it," Erik spat bitterly.

"God, will you two shut up already? You've been at this for hours," Bobby moaned. "Yes, we let paranoia get the best of us. Yes, it got out of control. Yes, we all screwed up. Especially Trent."

"Hey!" Trent snapped. "All I did was-"

"So let's just forget it and move on," Bobby continued. "No harm, no foul."

"No harm?" Erik squealed. "That asshole tried to put a sword in my-"

"Erik, *please*," Bobby interrupted, rubbing his eyes with frustration. "For the love of God ..."

Erik smirked and leaned heavily on the side of the convertible without another word. To his left, Sherri grouchyly shifted her weight between his abundance of knobby forelimbs on one side and Bobby's unforgiving girth on the other.

Her vision had mostly cleared, yet her ability to see color had been completely lost, replaced with a monochrome haze of pinkish tones. Where her ghostly blue irises had once been, there now remained only two cotton-candy-colored rings of bloodstain to serve as a permanent reminder of her temporary flash blindness. Her brutally sunburnt skin hung from her body in a thinning, feathery layer of dry, peeling flesh. As the worn fabric of Bobby's overstuffed T-shirt rubbed up against her, brittle curls of dead epithelial cells flaked off her arm, revealing dark patches of bronze lurking beneath.

"God damn it," she complained, slapping Bobby's relaxed flab with her tiny, crumbling palms. "I swear, the next time we stop I'm going to slice you open and let the lard pour out until you fit in a car seat like a normal person. When was the last time you got any exercise, Tubby?"

"Well, let me see," Bobby said gruffly. "If I recall correctly, I think it was this

morning when I carried thirty pounds of gas up the highway for five hours while your lazy ass sat around the convenience store eating chewing tobacco."

"Hey, screw you," Sherri shot back. "While you and Trent took your sweet-ass time bringing the car back, I was kneeling next to Jeeps and sucking like the head cheerleader on prom night. You think all those gas tanks in the trunk filled themselves? My lips are swollen up like an anorexic supermodel's and my breath smells like the ass end of a go-cart!"

"Yeah?" Bobby challenged. "Well, I had to spend five hours *alone* with Trent. "

Sherri folded her arms in a huff.

"Fine. You win."

Oblivious to the constant, frustrated bickering around her, Vivian sat in a silent denial in the passenger seat. She was focusing all of her energy on ignoring the fact that a pair of leathery black wings were currently folded over her icy shoulders like a bony vampire cape. In an attempt to distract herself from her own physique, her green eyes scoured the side of the darkening interstate for any sign of life. All she could see, however, was another lonely green highway marker leaning by the roadside like a tombstone.

Kickapoo - 14 miles

Baneberry - 27 miles

She glanced up through the cracked windshield. Fourteen miles ahead, the gray sky was split in two by a five-mile-wide tongue of charcoal-black smoke lapping the ground on the right side of the road. Another thirteen miles beyond that, a second streak billowed upward menacingly from the left. With a long, silent blink, Vivian crossed the cities of Kickapoo and Baneberry, South Carolina, off of the map in her mind. This was a ritual that she had been repeating with an increasing sense of despondency ever since the identical black funnel of a destroyed Stillwater had disappeared in her rearview mirror.

Vivian hunkered down into her seat and petulantly yanked the thick blanket of her wings around her head for warmth. As long as they were there, she may as well make the most of them, she reasoned. Although reason was now more foreign to her than ever.

There was no valid reason for her to have grown bat wings. It was biologically impossible. Yet there they were. And just as Twiki's twisted body had done before, these wings were growing at an alarming rate. It had only been a matter of hours since the mutant limbs had erupted from the slashes in her ragged dress, yet her wingspan had already expanded by at least two nightmarish feet.

From beyond the fleshy walls of her makeshift cocoon, Vivian could hear Erik's tired voice attempting to assuage his road-trip boredom.

"I spy, with my little eye, something in the car."

"Is it in the front seat?" Bobby asked.

"Yes."

Sherri's pink eyes rolled up and down Vivian's bundled wingspan.

"Is it leathery?"

"I'd say so," Erik nodded.

Bobby looked at his sister's dark, shrouded form.

"Is it black?"

"Well, it thinks it is," Erik said.

"Is it Trent?" Sherri asked confidently.

"Yes! You got it!" Erik beamed.

The back seat exploded into a round of high fives and derisive laughter.

"Oh, now, y'all are just cold," Trent sighed. "Why you gotta judge a brother by the color of his skin and not the content of his character?"

"You're not a brother!" Bobby groaned. "And you've got no character!"

"Always gotta be surrounded by da haters," Trent muttered.

He reached over and put a heavy hand on Vivian's chilled thigh.

"Come on now, Vivi. I know at least *you're* on my side here, girl," he coaxed. "Come out of that shell and help the T for a spell."

Vivian's reedy hand emerged from under her sheath of wings, grasped Trent's hand, and threw it off of her lap.

"Leave me alone, Trent," she grumbled, rustling her unnatural appendages. "I'm not coming out unless Commissioner Gordon calls for me."

"Oh, don't be like that, Vivi," Trent laughed. "You don't have to be self-conscious about your body! You know the T doesn't judge people by their physical appearance. It's what's on the inside that counts. Come on and show us that beautiful inside of yours, girl."

Vivian could feel Trent's warm fingertips touching her cold flesh. The sensation was indescribably weird, as if his hand had slipped under her skin and closed directly around the bones of her fingers. But as her arm shrank from his unwelcome touch, she realized that he wasn't holding her hand at all. He had wrapped his fingers around the bony end of her left wing and was gently peeling it upward and away from her face. As soon as the tip of the wing breached the windshield's protected air stream, the raging gale of their forward velocity thundered into its leathery pocket, blasting her wings apart like a pair of broken storm shutters.

With a fleshy slap, the full span of Vivian's left wing filled up like a sail, pinning Trent against his seat. Only a muffled scream came from behind the billowing black flesh as Trent's hands were ripped from the wheel and the Rabbit careened across the four abandoned lanes. As the car rapidly changed direction, Vivian's right wing caught the blast of oncoming air, violently blowing it open and nearly throwing her

over the back of her seat.

Amid a commotion of screams and curses, Bobby and Sherri clambered over each other and into a mess of uncoordinated aid. Bobby scrambled onto his knees on the seat, leaning over the side of the car and grabbing the extended edge of Vivian's left wing in both hands. With a motion like he was trying to close a stubborn sliding door, he brutally thrust the bony limb back toward his sister. Vivian let out a wail of pain as a manhandled wing joint tried unsuccessfully to bend the wrong direction.

"Ouuuch!" Vivian howled. "Stop it-you'll break my arm!"

"I'm not touching your arm!" Bobby screamed. "Come on, Vivian! Work with me here!"

"I can't! I can't bend it!" Vivian shrieked breathlessly. "For crying out loud, Trent! Let off the gas pedal!"

"Mmmgrlllph!" came Trent's reply.

Sherri's palm shot forward and popped a painfully hyperextended wing joint into its proper place, allowing Trent's scrambling hands to fold the flapping limb down against Vivian's side. He grabbed the wheel with two shaky fists, pulling the car back onto the road.

Sherri lurched forward and held Vivian's collapsed left wing in a bunch between the seats. To her right she noticed Erik sitting silently, his panicked face completely white. All four of his hands gently held strategic points on Vivian's forgotten right wing, which was now neatly folded between the passenger seat and the inside of the door. Sherri raised a curious eyebrow at him and he guiltily shifted his eyes away from her.

"Damn, Vivi!" Trent muttered. "Control yourself, girl! Back up off the T until the vehicle has come to a complete stop, a'ight?"

"I ... but I didn't ... you ... you!" Vivian yelled, rubbing the fierce, stabbing pain of a dislocated elbow that wasn't. "Just shut up, you idiot! Leave me alone. Everybody leave me alone!"

She belligerently slapped away all of the helping hands, grabbed her wings in her fists, and yanked them back around her trembling shoulders.

Bobby leaned forward and patted his sister's knotted wing compassionately.

"Don't worry, Viv," he said. "It's not that bad. You're going to be okay."

"That's easy for *you* to say!" Vivian snapped. "You don't look like something out of some freaky Japanese cartoon! Why is this *happening* to me?!"

"Don't sweat it, Vivi. I'm sure it's all just part of God's master plan for you," Trent said philosophically. "The Lord works in mysterious ways, yo."

"Ha!" Sherri burst out incredulously. " *The Lord*, he says!"

She clasped her tiny hand around Erik's mutant wrist, shaking his gnarled paw in

the air for emphasis.

"When it was just *Erik* sporting the extra equipment, you're all fire and brimstone and Hell on Earth, but as soon as we've got a pair of wings ripping out opposite a nice pair of tits, it's suddenly *the Lord's* work."

"Well, I don't know what else it could be, oh ye of questionable faith," Trent expostulated. "It's not alcohol that keeps us safe from doing the biological freakout, because Vivi was drinking, just like us."

"I was drinking too," Erik mentioned, grabbing his paw out of Sherri's grasp and returning its dead weight to his lap.

"And it also has nothing to do with the soul," Trent continued, "because when I look into those shimmering pools of green that are Vivi's breathtaking eyes, all I can see is miles of perfect, unblemished human soul."

"And also, *I* have a soul too," Erik said through gritted teeth.

"So it's got to be the Lord's plan," Trent concluded. "Ain't no other way around it."

"Ah, I hate to tear open your watertight argument," Erik gibed, "but there are most *certainly* ways around it."

"Like what?" Trent asked.

"Well, like that rotten pink vapor, for one thing. I'm sure that stuff was toxic! It must have contaminated Twiki and Vivian and me."

"But what about the rest of us then?" Bobby frowned. "We were all in that shit too, and nothing's happened to us."

"Yet," Sherri added.

"Wait, hold up. Maybe it's because we were in that yellow submarine," Trent said. "That thing was as airtight as a dolphin's derrière. Maybe the mutant juice wore off the fog before we got all up in it, yo."

"Or maybe the miracle cure is frat-boy jizz," Sherri conjectured.

"Ack. Jesus," Bobby grimaced, mopping phantom goo from his arms. "If that's the antidote, I'd rather have the extra limbs."

"Aaaugh! Knock it off!" Sherri squeaked. "You're getting your fat-boy body dandruff all over me!"

The top layer of Bobby's sunburn had almost completely flaked off, revealing a new layer of pasty white flesh beneath. As Sherri furiously brushed Bobby's freshly sloughed-off skin from her leg, twice as much of her own scorched thigh crumbled through the web of her fishnets and onto Bobby's lap.

"Hey. Hey, wait a sec," Bobby said thoughtfully. "I just realized-you, me, Trent-we all got sunburned!"

"No shit," Sherri said, scraping her ragged arms. "I'm fucking molting over here."

"So listen," Bobby said, "maybe whatever is causing the mutations got in through the skin. Since our skin was all scorched on the morning after, maybe that pink shit in the air couldn't absorb through it and get into our bodies. Maybe the burn lasted long enough to protect us, even though we're all fine now."

"Whatever," Trent muttered. "Speak for yourself, Heavy B."

He turned his collar away from the solid, beet-red blister that still encompassed the back of his neck and ran down his muscular arms.

"I ain't fine at all, yo," he continued. "This shit still burns like a son of a bitch. I need to get my aloe on, for real."

Bobby shrugged and probed the neatly clotted cut on his forehead with a stubby forefinger.

"Well, I don't know about Sherri, but fast healing has always been in my family's blood," he said proudly. "Hey! Maybe it has something to do with the blood, or the white blood cells or something. Sunburns make all the blood come to the surface of the skin, you know? That's why they turn red. Maybe that's what made Twiki and Erik and Viv different from us!"

"What difference does it make?" Sherri asked. "It's not like you're going to solve the puzzle and Pat Sajak is going to come out and give you the antidote and a fucking dinette set!"

"You're right," Vivian said darkly. "Figuring out the cause won't help Erik and me at this point, but at least there's still a chance we can prevent it from happening to the rest of you."

"Prevent it from happening to the rest of us?" Sherri said with surprise. "Why?! Am I the only one who thinks that this shit is dead sexy? I mean, look at this thing!"

She grabbed Erik's greasy black paw and thrust it between the two front seats and into the back of Trent's sunburnt arm.

"Tell me that this isn't totally bad-ass!"

"Aaah! Christ Almighty!" Trent recoiled, shoving the gnarled paw into the back seat with his palm. "Hands off the T-man, Evil E! I just told you that sunburn still stings like an S.O.B! Don't go puttin' your ugly-ass mouse mitts all up on me!"

Erik grabbed his limp rat hand and vehemently thrust it back into his lap, but this time Sherri did not let go.

"Sooo, okay then, thank you," he scowled. "Leggo my Eggo."

Sherri intertwined her tiny fingers with the bony claws and stroked the matted fur on the back of the forearm with fascination.

"Relax, Sievert. I'm not going to hurt you," she said with an uncharacteristic smile. "I just think it's kinda cool, that's all."

"Whoa!" Bobby gasped. "That's the first time you've ever admitted to liking something that isn't an addictive chemical!"

"Stuff it, fat-ass," Sherri said threateningly. " *You're* still on my shit list."

As her slender hands moved suggestively up and down the long, hairy shaft lying across his lap, Erik's groin clenched nervously.

"Hey! Hey there," he warned, embarrassed. "Watch it, you."

Erik's cheeks burned as Sherri's fingers continued to slip nimbly through the thick black fur of his rodent limbs.

"Whoa! These things are getting *really warm* all of the sudden!" she grinned. "God, I'm freezing! Gimme some of that heat!"

With a dramatic plunge, Sherri's tiny head dropped into Erik's lap, and she began nuzzling her frosty face into his warm pelt, inadvertently rubbing her peeling nose provocatively up and down the fly of his pants.

"Whoa, whoa! Knock it off!" Erik squeaked, pulling Sherri's face out of his lap. "If you want to snuggle up with something hairy and gross, I'll switch seats with Trent!"

"To the contrary, Furry E," Trent said. "The T is completely hairless. At least where it counts."

Sherri shuddered.

"Don't worry, Trent," she said mockingly. "I'm sure you'll hit puberty *someday*."

"Puberty is overrated, yo," Trent grinned. "Believe me. I was the last guy in my class to go through the special time, and while the rest of the pack was all pushin' out the shrubs, all the little girlies were up on Smooth T. Now I gots to bust out the lift-and-cut action to keep that baby-bottom feeling down under, but I can still give you the simulated stimulation of gettin' jiggy with a late bloomer, girl."

Sherri shook her head with a nauseous moan.

"Trent, you are truly amazing," she winced. "Just when I think that you can't *possibly* get any more disgusting, you manage to vomit up a shitbomb like that."

"Seriously!" Bobby agreed. "Dude, have any of your skanky lines ever worked on a woman, *ever*?"

"The words aren't as important as the moment," Trent shrugged. "Sometimes even the oldest line in the book will tickle a lady's fancy if the moment is just right, yo."

"For example?" Vivian asked skeptically.

Just then, the tired Rabbit began to buck against the pavement, choking out a sputtering black haze of death from its tailpipe as the engine fell silent. When the vehicle had rolled to a complete stop, Trent turned to Vivian, putting his arm around her winged shoulders with a grin.

"I'm sorry, baby, we just ran out of gas. I guess we'll just have to find a way to keep ourselves occupied until help shows up."

Vivian looked at Trent, blinked once, and got out of the car.

"Hey, come on! Give me some credit!" Trent called. "At least I didn't do 'put out or get out!'"

Though unplanned, the chance to get out of the tiny convertible was more than welcomed by the five weary travelers. Trent had taken two cans of gasoline from the trunk and was refilling the exhausted fuel tank while Sherri stood nearby, conspicuously flicking the ash from her burning cigarette in his direction.

Erik stood with his hands on his hips, squinting questionably at the face of another weathered billboard. The ubiquitous cartoon Mountie held an oversized gold coin between his thumb and forefinger, and a patch of faded lettering screamed, "*Go loonie at North of the Border!*"

"I don't get it," Erik said flatly.

On the other side of the road, Vivian took long, regal steps along the shoulder, stretching the weary tightness from her long-cramped legs. Outside of the confines of the car, her wings were allowed to hang naturally from her back, or at least as naturally as two sprawling black bat wings *could* hang from a young woman's back. The mutant limbs folded neatly against themselves, the top of them standing about six inches over her shoulders and the bottom tips hovering near her waist. She turned slowly, scanning a lumpy gray sky resting on the black pillars of cities that were no more.

"I can't believe we haven't found civilization yet," she said softly. "I thought we would have at least *seen* something by now."

Bobby nodded.

"It's hard to tell what's beyond the tree line," he said. "We might be able to actually find something if we could get a view of the whole area from the sky."

"Yeah, I suppose so," Vivian dully agreed.

"So why don't you just fly around for a while and see if you can spot anything."

"What ... *me*?" she laughed warily. "Bobby, what in the world makes you think that I can fly?"

"Well gee, Viv," Bobby said sardonically, "because you're the only one with a pilot's license."

"Get real, Bobby," Vivian grumbled. "Just because I have these wing ... like ... *things*, it doesn't mean that I can magically fly. There's more to it than that."

"Oh, come on, Vivian," Bobby said impatiently. "You haven't even tried."

"No," Vivian said conclusively, "I have not."

"Well, what are you waiting for-a magic feather?"

"No, I'm waiting for a fundamental shift in the laws of aerodynamics!" Vivian scowled. "It's physically impossible! Humans aren't biologically designed for flight!"

"Yeah, and humans don't typically have *wings* either!"

"All right, all right!" Vivian snapped. "Fine! I'll show you that I can't do it!"

"That's right, think positive," Bobby said sarcastically.

Vivian bounced on the balls of her feet, squinting into the clouds and holding her arms out eagerly to her sides. If Bobby didn't know better, he might have suspected she was about to try to steal second base.

"*Flap*," she thought.

Nothing happened.

"Flap," she grumbled, clenching her teeth. "Flap! Flap flap flap!"

"Come on, Viv," Bobby moaned. "They're not even moving."

"I *know* they're not moving!" Vivian snarled.

She grabbed the ends of the wings with her hands and yanked them out to arm's length, flapping them furiously.

"And ... *flap!* "

The second she let go of them, the wings fell back into their relaxed fold, bouncing to a stop against her back like cheap costume wear.

"There! See?! I told you it wouldn't work," she said bitterly. "They're not real wings. They don't work. I can't control them."

Before she could say another word, a pair of large, muscular hands grasped her firmly around the waist from behind.

"All you need is a little thrust, and when a woman needs thrust, the T is just the man to-"

At the sound of Trent's voice, Vivian's shoulders instinctually tensed in revulsion. This was followed immediately by the sound of flesh hitting flesh ... and flesh hitting pavement. She was thrown three stumbling steps forward, but she clumsily regained her balance and spun around. Six feet away from her, Trent lay on the ground, moaning and rubbing his abruptly bloodied face.

"Trent! What the ..."

Suddenly realizing why her center of gravity was so awkwardly misplaced, Vivian looked over her shoulder and saw her entire six-foot wingspan stretched out behind her like two enormous sails. As if they had been caught at the scene of a crime, upon being seen, the wings guiltily dropped back into their folded position with a flutter.

"Trent, are you okay?" Vivian squeaked apologetically, leaning down at his side.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Trent whimpered, putting down his hands and trying to look indifferent. "Ain't nothin' but a thang."

"Ugh!" Bobby gasped. "Gross!"

"I'm okay," Trent said, climbing to his feet. "Forget it. S'all good."

Despite his assurances, Trent's face had already swollen into a red puffy mess from the impact of Vivian's powerful wings. His punched-in eyes were rapidly blackening as a small cut leaked more blood down his left cheek than it had any right

to. Determined to uphold his masculine pride, Trent swallowed the pain and acted as casual as he could manage under the circumstances.

"Ha haa!" Sherri laughed. "The big man just got the shit beat out of him by a girl!"

"I said it ain't nothin' but a thang!" Trent shouted, wiping away the blood. "Just drop it, a'ight?!"

"You see, Bobby?" Vivian said angrily, tugging at her wings. "All these things are good for is getting people hurt! I can't *fly* with them! I can't even control them!"

"Enough with this 'I can't control them' shit!" Sherri snapped. "I've been watching both of you freakjobs, and those mutant parts do everything that you want them to!"

"What are you talking about?" Vivian said. "I can't control them at all!"

"Neither can I!" Erik chimed.

"Bullshit!" Sherri declared. "Sievert, I saw you use your rat arms to grab the powderpuff's wing in the car! And both of you have planted mutant punches into Trent's face! Tell me that *that's* not controlling them!"

"Well, I mean, I can't *control* them, as such," Erik admitted, shaking his head, "but sometimes they just do what I *want* them to."

"Wait, hold up!" Trent snapped. "When you punched me right in my grill you swore up and down that you didn't make them hit me!"

"I didn't *make* them hit you!" Erik confirmed. "But I never said that I didn't *want* them to hit you."

"Man, that's a load of semantic *buuullshit*," Trent scowled, hands on hips.

"But what about me?" Vivian asked defensively. "My wings don't do what I want them to at all. I couldn't even get them to flap!"

"No," Erik agreed, "but you've got to admit, they *did* just beat the shit out of Trent."

"It's just a scratch, a'ight?!" Trent said angrily. "Damn!"

"Wait, I think I get it!" Sherri said brightly. "This is just like this guy I know who got his arm ripped off in a motorcycle accident!"

"How so?" Vivian winced.

"If you licked the guy's flesh stump, he could feel you licking his missing hand."

"Eww!" Erik cringed. "So what?!"

"So what?! So *this!* "

Sherri grabbed Erik's left rat paw and painted a long, wet stretch of saliva up its palm with her pointed pink tongue.

"Eeeaaugh!" Erik gasped, instinctively wiping his human right hand on his pants. "God, you're so disgusti-whoa."

He held up his dry, untouched right hand in shocked bewilderment.

"See? That's what I'm saying," Sherri gloated, dropping the moistened left paw. "The connections to that guy's brain got all fucked up and made him think that there were still parts there that weren't. Maybe your brain is all fucked up because there's parts there that *shouldn't be*."

"So what does all that mean for us?" Erik asked.

"How the hell should I know?" Sherri shrugged. "I just wanted an excuse to lick your rat hand."

The cold wind licked the sides of the Rabbit as it plunged farther down the dusty interstate. The sky turned from a dismal, cloudy gray to an inky black as the sun set on the other side of the lingering atomic cloud. Inside the car, the passengers had reluctantly resumed the same seating arrangement from earlier in the day. Another blasted billboard slid into view from the darkened roadside, revealing the ever-present Mountie wearing a bib and holding a knife and fork over a plate piled high with cartoon food. Erik read the sign hungrily.

"Don't miss North of the Border's 'All *Yukon* eat buffet!'"

"Man, a buffet sounds good about now," Bobby said, licking his lips. "A mile of steamer trays piled high with scrambled eggs and fish sticks and greasy bacon and chicken nuggets and French toast."

"That's disgusting," Sherri objected. "The buffet line is a symbol of why our whole food-based culture is bullshit. It's America sticking its big, fat, overfed middle finger right in the face of starving people all over the-"

Her tiny stomach rumbled like thunder rolling off a Category Five hurricane.

"Alright, I don't care," she admitted. "I'm fucking starving."

She leaned back in her seat and Bobby's sagging gut rolled against her peeling side like a manatee desperate for affection.

"Alright, this is getting ridiculous," she protested, shoving an elbow into the fleshy pillow. "Isn't it Lard Lad's turn to drive for a while?"

"Can't drive stick," Bobby shrugged.

"But isn't it about time you *learned*?!" Sherri stressed. "Trent can't even see where the hell he's going anymore!"

Trent's hideously swollen eyes peeked into the rearview mirror. His bloated eye sockets were already beginning to melt from a swarthy olive-tan into a massive yellow-purple bruise.

"It's not like all that, yo," he said. "I can see everything I need to see to guide us safely."

"Why?" Sherri sneered. "Because God is your co-pilot? Please tell me that you weren't about to say because God is your co-pilot."

Trent's puffy eyes blinked sheepishly and returned to the road.

"Seriously," Sherri continued, "how long are we going to keep this shit up? We

don't even know where the hell we're going!"

"Maybe we don't," Vivian allowed. "But we do know where we've been."

She cast a poignant glance into the rearview mirror at the miles upon miles of charred landscape that lay behind them. She turned back to the windshield and continued.

"There's got to be better things up ahead."

"Oooh, that's so inspirational!" Sherri smirked. "Get a clue, Powderpuff. There's nothing for a thousand miles in any direction but burned-up cities full of burned-up assholes. Everyone knows mankind has been trying to wipe itself out since the dawn of time. Now it finally happened, and somehow we missed the boat."

"For real," Trent agreed. "Man got too big for his britches, tried to play God, and got the atomic smackdown. Now we've got to start the whole show over again all by ourselves."

"Stop it! Both of you!" Vivian reproached. "Nothing says that we're by ourselves! Just because we haven't found anybody else yet doesn't mean that there *is* nobody else."

"Your optimism is refreshing," Bobby frowned, "but seriously, we've covered at least five hundred miles already, and every major city has been a *Terminator-2*- style dystopia of flame and skulls. It's not even worth pretending that there were survivors in any of those hellholes."

"Yes, major cities," Vivian said sternly. " *Major* cities. If we're dealing with the war to end all wars, and I'm beginning to think we are, of course all the *major* cities are gone. What we need to do is stop in some sleepy little town that has no strategic importance."

"I used to live in a city like that," Sherri said dryly. "They bombed the living shit out of it."

"She's right," Bobby said. "Stillwater was nothing but beaches and old people, and that got totally wiped out."

"All right, all right. You're right," Vivian sighed. "My point is that there's got to be *someplace* so insignificant and pointless that nobody in their right mind would bother destroying it. If only we had some clue where it was."

She crossed her arms and slumped in her seat as a colossal pair of wooden antlers emerged from the darkness.

Straight ahead, you can't moose it! North of the Border. Next exit.

CHAPTER TEN

The Rabbit slowly chugged up a cracked driveway and between the blasted steel legs of a seventy-foot-tall cartoon Mountie colossus. In his rusted hands was an enormous sign, emblazoned with a broken neon message: "Welcome to North of the Border!"

The tired convertible came crunching to a stop next to the only other vehicle in the graveled parking lot, as if seeking safety in numbers. The car that was there first was an undistinguished, squarish affair from the mid-'80s, but its heavy, undisturbed covering of fallout ash gave it the aura of an ancient archeological relic.

"Well, I guess we're here," Trent said skeptically.

"It's about time," Sherri grumbled. "Let me out of this crapmobile."

As the others made their way out the doors, she stood up on the crowded back seat and hopped over the side of the open convertible. Before her boots could hit the ground, the tangled strands of her dilapidated coat caught on the broken roof hinges, yanking her out of the air mid-leap. Thrown off-balance by the unexpected anchor, she landed awkwardly on one foot and was pulled backward into the fender with a muffled *clang*, falling to her knees in the gravel.

"Ow, God damn it!" she seethed, climbing to her feet and rubbing her scraped knee. "I hate this piece-of-shit coat!"

She grabbed the knotted leather strands and yanked with both hands, snapping off the broken hinge with a sad little squeak of rusted metal.

"That coat is spent, for real," Trent said. "Why don't you just get rid of it already? You'd look better without it anyway."

"Oh, sure. Okay," Sherri said bitterly, clutching the remains of her coat around her chest. "I'm willing to freeze to death as long as it makes me look good to a poseur asshole with a load in his diaper."

Trent put his hands over the conspicuous lump on the back of his coarsely bandaged pelvis.

"It ain't like that. The only load here is the load of bills in my *fat wallet*."

Sherri shook her head with disinterest.

"Whatever, Mr. Poo Poo Pants."

At the far end of the parking lot, a break in the artificially snow-flocked perimeter wall framed a leaning parody of a customs house flying a thrashed Canadian flag over a set of turnstiles. A cold breeze blew through its shattered windows, picking up stacks of glossy red and white coupons from within and distributing them over the area like fallen leaves. Vivian took it all in with a hopeful look straining against all logic to reach her face.

"Of course, I am not one to doubt the wisdom of the fairer sex, Vivi," Trent said, "but we drive straight on through all no-nonsense for a million miles, and *this* is the first place you want to stop?"

"Seriously," Sherri nodded. "What a shithole."

"You're right-it is," Vivian agreed. "Exactly. That's my point! What nation would want to bomb a place like this?"

"Probably Canada," Bobby said thoughtfully.

"Well, let's not just stand here, you *hosers*. Let's check it out, *eh?*" Erik said, still stuck in his billboard-reading delivery. "What do you *Saskatchewan-na* do first?"

"Let me at that buffet," Bobby said hungrily. "I hear they have four pounds of back bacon, three French toasts, two turtlenecks, and a beer."

"Hold up, Hungry B," Trent said, popping the Rabbit's trunk. "We can't just go charging in there unprotected. There might be something in there that wants to take a bite out of *us*."

He pulled out the shotgun and clapped it to his shoulder like a square-jawed hero in a bad war movie.

"Oh jeez," Bobby said. "Put that away before you hurt somebody."

"My aim is to see that *nobody* gets hurt," Trent said melodramatically, offering his elbow to Vivian with a greasy smile. "May I provide secure passage to your feast, my lady?"

Vivian's wings twitched against her shoulders as she looked him menacingly in the eye.

"You know, you're still bleeding from the *last* time you tried to help me."

Trent's hand shot to his face, wiping a fresh smear of blood off of his cheek. Without waiting for a rebuttal, Vivian crunched across the driveway and pushed through the rusted turnstile. Unfazed, Trent wiped his hand on his pants, turned, and offered it to Sherri instead.

"Alrighty then, Goldilocks," he said without shame. "How would you like an armed guard to escort you safely to the ball?"

Sherri scowled as she pushed back the dark yellow straw of her stained hair.

"I've got something to escort to your balls right here," she said, clenching her hand into a fist. "That gun's not even loaded, you tool."

Trent squinted at Sherri, then at the shotgun. He cupped his hand over the end of the barrel, surreptitiously peeked inside, and shrugged ignorantly. He bent into the trunk and returned the shotgun, digging out his trusty old sword instead.

"I best keep it old school then," he said with a swish of his blade. "Tried and true is the way to be, right, B?"

As his words fell unheard in the empty parking lot, Trent realized that the rest of the group had abandoned him. He rushed to the turnstile and planted his free hand on its cold steel top, leaping over it with his sword in the air like a medieval commando.

"Hold up, y'all," he shouted, rejoining the pack. "The T doesn't want to be the

last one to get at those tasty ... aw, *hell* no."

Although none of them had expected much from a seedy tourist trap buried in the sleepy pine forests of North Carolina, North of the Border still managed to be a disappointment. Where there had once stood an entire log cabin village of stilted Canadian stereotype, there now remained little more than a field of ravaged debris punctuated by a few leaning piles of snapped logs and weathered roofing shingles. A banner hung from a faux-snowy concrete pillar on the left side of the path, its other end buried in the debris of a collapsed restroom on the right.

"North of the Border," Bobby read. "Family fun from 'Eh' to 'Zed.'"

"Who's Zed?" Trent asked.

"Zed's dead, baby," Erik said dimly. "Zed's dead."

"I don't get it," Trent said. "Who would up and bomb some skeezy interstate tourist trap, yo?"

Vivian's eyes were fixed and glassy, staring at everything and nothing at once.

"It wasn't bombed," she muttered. "There's no fire damage here."

"Well then, what happened?" Erik asked. "It looks like Godzilla stomped on this place."

Vivian turned in a slow circle until she spotted what she was looking for in dim silhouette against the blackening sky. A few miles away, a column of black smoke folded darkly into the night.

"It was that explosion," she pointed. "A nuclear detonation causes a disc-shaped hydrodynamic front of radially expanding gases in the atmosphere."

The others looked at her skeptically. She rephrased.

"The static overpressure creates dynamic pressures."

The group continued to gaze at her blankly. She blinked.

"The bomb makes it really windy."

Everyone nodded and made general sounds of acknowledgment. Vivian pulled off her glasses and rubbed her eyes.

"Well, this place was a dead end," Erik sighed. "I guess we should get going."

"No, we might as well stay here for the night now," Vivian said. "It's getting too dark to drive without headlights. Maybe if we look around we can at least find a shelter to sleep in."

"No way, no how," Trent said firmly. "This place got the K.O. all the day-o. I'm not letting you lay your pretty head down in some busted-ass cabin just to wake up with it smashed under a ton of logs in the morning."

Vivian took a few steps down the blacktop path, peering into the grid of shattered lumber heaps that had once been a quaint neighborhood of shops.

"Just take a look around, all right?" she said, striding around a corner. "There

must be *something* still standing that we can take shelter in. Maybe there's some kind of utility shed, or shuttle bus, or-

She stopped in her tracks, turning back to the group with a smile.

"... igloo."

In front of Vivian was a dome of coarse cement towering fifty feet into the air. It was apparent that its outside shell had been painted a bluish white many decades ago, but today brittle curls of paint revealed broad gray patches of the poured concrete beneath. A loose grid of dark blue lines delineated the edges of imaginary ice blocks, making the dome look like an igloo, but only to one whose familiarity with igloos did not extend beyond the realm of Chilly Willy cartoons. A series of thick iron bolts riddled its weathered side, vomiting rusty red stains down the curved slope of its wall. Although the circular structure had put up a much better fight than its fallen comrades had, it still bore the scar of a large irregular hole that had opened across the apex of its dome.

"What is that thing?" Bobby asked.

"It's an igloo," Erik said. "Haven't you ever seen a Chilly Willy cartoon?"

"Well, I *know* it's an igloo," Bobby said impatiently. "But what *is* it?"

"I don't know," Vivian said, pointing to the sheared bolts. "The sign is missing."

An arched entryway of crudely formed cement extended twenty feet from the base of the dome, ending in a pair of broken glass and steel doors. A plastic sign hung from a chain in the empty doorframe.

Sorry, we're closed!

Vivian peered into the inky darkness and her stomach contracted nervously. She remembered Boltzmann's Market, the Banyan Terrace parking garage, and the gas station convenience store. They were now three for three with innocuous spaces transforming into chambers of horror. She glanced at Trent holding his blade aloft in his broad fist.

"Hey, Trent," she said casually. "Why don't you go scout it out while we keep looking around out here?"

Trent shook his head.

"You know that I live to make your every wish come true," he said, "but I can't go in there and leave you here unprotected."

"Don't worry," Erik assured him. "I'll be here to protect her."

"What do you think I'm protecting her *from*?" Trent muttered.

"Okay, fine," Vivian said, rubbing her eyes. "Bobby, will you please go in there and check it out?"

"Forget that," Bobby said. "I learned my lesson at the gas station. I'm not going in there and stepping in a puddle of dead, bloated tourists."

"Jesus Harold Christ," a fed-up Sherri shouted. "You can all just sit out here and

wait for your balls to drop-I'm going to go in there and find some food."

"Thanks, Sherri," Vivian said shamefully. "Could you bring some rations back for the rest of us?"

"Fuck you," she spat. "You cowards can starve out here for all I care."

Sherri stepped through the broken door, carefully avoiding its teeth of shattered glass. Vivian watched the blackness of the abyss close around her friend's thin form as she slid into its ghoulish shadows. In another two steps, she would completely vanish, and then ... who knew what?

"Sherri, wait!" Vivian called guiltily. "I'm sorry. You're right. You shouldn't go by yourself. I'll go with you."

With a jaunty step, Trent suddenly leapt to her side, thrusting his sword toward the door.

"Please, allow me to accompany you," he said ceremoniously. "It goes against my nature to send two lovely ladies into a dark room all by themselves."

"Then I'm coming too," Bobby said. "For protection."

"Don't you think that my presence is sufficient?" Trent asked.

"What do you think I'm protecting them *from*?" Bobby muttered.

"Could one of you bring me back a sandwich?" Erik squeaked hopefully.

Vivian looked sympathetically into his apprehensive eyes and took his hand.

"Come on, Erik," she said. "We'll be fine if we stick together. Five is better than one."

Bobby held the 5-in-1 camping lantern in front of him, in "flashlight" mode, carving a tunnel of light through the cold darkness of the igloo's entryway. As the lamp cleared the end of the concrete tunnel, shadows of a large, semicircular room loomed chillingly into view. Like the outside of the dome, the sloping inner walls of the concrete vault were painted with an ice-block motif that disappeared into darkness as it slid out of the range of his light. The height of the curved ceiling would have been indistinguishable had it not been for the gaping hole in the roof showing the last light of day through gray cloud.

Bobby squeezed his eyes shut and then fluttered them open, trying to accelerate their adjustment to the dim light. He took a step and slipped on the tiled floor, but he grabbed Erik's arm before he could fall.

"Aaah! What?! What?!" Erik panicked, grabbing him with four terrified hands.

"Nothing-nothing-jeez!" Bobby said, slapping him away. "Careful-the floor has some goopy shit all over it. Don't fall. And don't wet yourself, spaz."

Bobby turned and held the lantern out in front of him, illuminating a shadowy figure. The sight of it forced an uncharacteristic shriek from his lips.

"What?!" Erik chirped. "What is it?!"

"Oh! Oh, shit ... heh," Bobby chuckled.

He held the lantern up to the hideous face of a mannequin in a Mountie uniform saluting a flag that wasn't there. Although it seemed normal in every other way, the figure's face had been crudely paper-machéd into that of a grotesque bumblebee, and two giant wings of wire and plastic were bolted to its fiberglass back. A signboard rested in its free hand, reading "Buzz in for a honey of a sale!"

"It's a bee," Bobby said, perplexed. "A Royal Canadian Mounted Bumblebee."

"A bee. A Mountie bee," Erik mulled. "Wait. Mountie bee? Mountiebee? Moun-T-B?"

He rubbed his chin and stared, the wheels of his brain turning.

"No," he said disappointedly. "I don't think I get this one either."

Bobby planted the lantern on the figure's head and wrapped its shoulder strap around the wire antennae sticking from its broad-brimmed hat. He clicked the switch to "lantern" mode, effectively turning the Mountie Bee into a lamppost that cast an eerie light over most of the room.

"What is this place?" Sherri squinted. "I can't see shit in here."

"Well, it's not the buffet-I can say that much," Bobby said dejectedly.

"It's a gift shop," Vivian realized. "Or at least it was."

The room was made up of a half-moon-shaped floor attached to a domed wall on its curved side and a flat wall on its flat, joining overhead to enclose a perfect quarter-sphere of space. This had indeed been a gift shop. Unlike the total annihilation of the park outside, the destruction of the igloo's interior had been left chaotically incomplete. Where one shelf lay shattered on the floor with its glass planks reduced to glistening shards, its neighbor remained standing, still fully stocked with knickknacks, untouched save for a blanket of dust that had fallen in from the hole in the ceiling. This pattern of random devastation could be seen throughout the whole place.

Vivian looked around at the remains of the ravaged gift shop mournfully. Having grown up in the tourist trap of Stillwater, she could imagine how the place had probably looked before the disaster. Rows of tall, clean glass shelves, laden with key chains and ashtrays and personalized coffee mugs waiting to be plucked up by loud tourists in louder shirts. But now the shop was silent.

"It looks like that blast wind totally messed up this place too," Erik said dully.

"Nahh," Bobby said, pointing to the hole in the ceiling. "I think the concrete dome took most of the piss and vinegar out of that. This is probably all from that section of the roof collapsing."

"I don't think so," Vivian said thoughtfully. "Look at this."

She ran a fingertip through the layer of dust on the remains of a glass shelf. The flat powder swirled into a paisley of cloudy gray and rich maroon. She held up her soiled finger with a poignant drip.

"Blood," she said dully. "It's all over everything."

Trent put his hand forcefully on Vivian's shoulder, raising his blade with the other.

"Another mutant attack!" he said dramatically. "Don't worry, girl. I've got your back."

"Ooooookay then! Nothing left to see in here," Erik said skittishly, taking a step back the way they had come. "Let's get back to the car."

"Oh, for cryin' out loud," Bobby moaned, grabbing Erik by the shoulder. "You said yourself that the mutations were caused by that toxic pink cloud. We've been out of that shit for three states! Relax, Erik. We're never going to see another mutant again. Thank God."

Erik looked pointedly at the paws hanging from his midsection.

"Present company excluded, of course," Bobby corrected.

"I don't think it was mutants either," Vivian agreed, pushing Trent's hand off of her shoulder. "I think this blood was spilled in panic. When the bomb went off, this place must have turned to complete chaos."

She closed her eyes and imagined the scene. She heard the buzz of the fluorescent lights and the warbling strains of "Oh Canada!" trickling from the Muzak. She saw dozens of people crowd the aisles, all so intoxicated by the cornball Canadian theme that they had become blinded to the fact that everything in the igloo was useless garbage made in Taiwan. A jolly fat man in a Hawaiian shirt thumbed through postcards of sexy "Eskimo" girls, surreptitiously eyeing his wife, who was obviously pawing a rack of irregular T-shirts. A little girl hugged a stuffed beaver in a Mountie uniform. She held it up to her mother, who in turn put it back on the shelf with an impatient excuse. Suddenly there was a clap of thunder louder than any they had ever heard, followed immediately by an abrupt shifting of the ground. The lights blinked off and on, then stayed off. The room was in complete darkness for one horrible moment, and then, *crack!* The concrete ceiling began to splinter away and fall into the crowd, opening up a swatch of flaming red sky. Somebody screamed. Somebody pushed. The fat man looked for his wife, but saw nothing where she had been standing but a twelve-foot slab of curved concrete. A shelf shattered. Feet clambered toward the door. Bodies pushed through glass. A stuffed beaver was suddenly soaked in blood.

She shook her head and blinked hard.

"It must have turned to complete chaos," she repeated.

"Look, I don't know about the rest of you gloomy motherfuckers, but I'm starving," Sherri interrupted. "If there's food in here, I don't care if it's surrounded by severed heads on pikes. So is there food in here or not?"

"But of course! When a lovely lady has a hunger at any hour or in any place, she can count on chef T to come to her aid with a fresh confectionery treat," Trent rambled, plucking up a cellophane bag tied with a red ribbon. "Would a sweet girl like a sweet maple candy?"

"How the fuck should I know what a sweet girl would like?" Sherri said distastefully.

She snatched the bag out of Trent's hand, tore it open, and stuffed a soft, crumbly candy in her mouth. Seconds later she spit it back out with a sputtering cough.

"Bleeagh! It's like licking the floor of an IHOP!" she gagged, throwing the bag on the floor. "What else you got?"

Trent scanned the slanted shelf, reading each label aloud.

"Maple sugar, maple syrup, maple cookies, maple butter, maple cream-"

"Stop-just stop," Sherri said, shaking her head. "Do you have anything that's *not* completely disgusting?"

"Well, there's this bag of barbecue-flavored worm larvae."

Sherri snatched the bag.

"Now that's more like it."

"Well, this place is a total bust," Bobby said. "Unless any of you want to pick up a North of the Border T-shirt to remember this delightful experience."

"I could find a souvenir," Erik said flatly. "Just to prove the world was here."

Vivian, rubbing her frosty arms for warmth, concurred.

"We should *all* find souvenirs," she said. "Look around. There's probably some things that we can use in here. At the very least we should all find something to wear to keep from freezing out there."

"Hell yeah," Sherri enthused, loosening the belt on her coat. "I call dibs on the first thing anyone finds that's black and encrusted in metal studs!"

"Fine," Bobby said. "I'll let you know if I find Dennis Rodman."

"Ba-zing!" Erik added.

The five survivors spread out through the semi-circular shop. Bobby soon found himself in one of its two legitimate corners. A huge slab of the collapsed ceiling had landed there, forming the basis of a formidable pile of broken concrete that lay heaped against the flat wall. With a small grunt, he sat down on the slab and picked up a crinkly cellophane bag of maple candies at his feet. He popped one of the lumps in his mouth and managed to chew it twice before turning and violently spitting it out.

"Blah!" he muttered, wiping his tongue with his fingers. "It *is* like licking the floor of an IHOP."

He pitched the bag over his shoulder and was surprised to hear a dull metallic thud echo from the shadows. With a puzzled squint, he climbed to his feet to investigate.

He followed the rough edge of the broken cement to where the slab met the flat

wall of the room, about five feet away from where he had been sitting. The debris didn't pile against the cement wall as he had thought, but against a pair of steel doors. The corner of the fallen ceiling chunk had dented them in, barricading them solidly shut. For a fraction of a second Bobby thought of calling the others to help him move the concrete to see what was behind the doorway, but he quickly realized the obstacle had to weigh several tons.

A small rectangular outline peeked out from the film of dust covering the doors. Wiping it clean, Bobby discovered a small sign reading "Exit only."

"Huh," he said, planting his hands on his hips. "I wonder where the entrance is."

At the end of a derelict aisle elsewhere in the shop, Vivian stumbled upon a large wire bin marked "Clothing Clearance!"

She picked up the first thing on the top of the pile and held it out in her arms, looking it over. It was an oversized wool varsity jacket, red with white sleeves and branded with a large white "N" on the left breast. The back sported both a white Canadian maple leaf emblem and a large, unfortunate coffee stain.

She slipped her right arm into the sleeve and reached around to grab the other side with her left but got a handful of leathery wing skin instead. Leaning backward at the waist and cranking her pelvis managed to swing the jacket far enough behind her back for her to grab it, but there was no way that her arm could reach the sleeve. With her wings, this was like trying to put on a dinner jacket over a camping backpack.

She pulled off the coat and rubbed her chin thoughtfully. If she couldn't go *around* them, maybe she could go *over* them. With the jacket bunched in front of her, she slipped her arms into the sleeves and then pushed the rest over her head. The bundled mass of the coat sat on top of her wings, turning her into a makeshift hunchback as it yanked her shoulders to her ears. With a violent thrashing of her arms, she pulled the coat back over her head, leaving her hair standing in a statically charged frizz. Erik wandered into the end of the aisle with a giggle.

"Need some help there, Puffy?"

"Forget it," Vivian said peevishly, jerking the coat off of her arms and handing it to Erik. "Here, why don't you take this. It'll fit *you*."

"Oh, thanks," Erik said meekly. "But ... ladies first, you know? You keep this; I'll find one of my own."

"No, it's okay," Vivian said dismally. "You take it. It's too small for me."

"Too small?" Erik said, investigating the oversized garment. "Are you crazy? This thing could fit Bobby!"

Vivian thumbed over her shoulders at her massive black obstacles to fashionable outerwear.

"Oh," Erik said guiltily. "Oh right. Er ... sorry."

"Hey hey, what's going on over here?" Trent said suddenly, sliding between

Vivian and Erik. "Oh, Little E, that's disgraceful. Just disgraceful. How can you take the only coat for yourself when sweet Vivi is standing *right here*, chilled to her very bones? You are a sorry excuse for a man."

"I didn't! I mean, she-I tried to-" Erik bumbled. "Oh, just shut up and mind your own damn business for once, Trent."

"Mind my own business, he says," Trent sighed histrionically. "How can I mind my own business when such a great injustice is being done to such a beautiful woman?"

He grabbed the jacket out of Erik's hands and returned it to Vivian. Vivian, in turn, handed the coat back to Erik.

"Knock it off, Trent," she said sternly. "The coat doesn't fit me."

"You're right. It doesn't *fit* you at all," Trent winked. "I see where you're comin' from, Vivi. It would be an insult to nature to mask such a beautiful figure in such a utilitarian garment. A girl like you requires a little *style*."

In one graceful movement he swept a small mannequin bust from a nearby shelf, cradling it in one arm like a toddler. With a flourish he easily skinned the figure's jacket from its armless torso and held it out toward Vivian.

"Here you are, my princess of discerning style," he said glowingly. "Your royal robes await."

Vivian looked skeptically at the fuzzy garment in Trent's outstretched hand. It was a tiny white jacket with fluffy faux fur ringing its hem, cuffs, and hood. The "North of the Border" logo was embroidered in silver thread across its back, followed by a crown and script lettering reading "Eskimo Princess."

"Trent," Vivian said dryly. "That is a child's size."

"So it is! That just means it's a perfect fit for my little babydoll," Trent cooed. "Ain't no man ever complained that his girlie girl's clothes were too small. Come on, Vivi. Flaunt it if you got it! You don't want people to think you're some kind of prude!"

Vivian's wings bristled against her back as her teeth ground together.

"Let me know when those black eyes go away, Trent," she said coldly. "I'm saving another pair for you."

With a sinister flash of her eyes, she turned and stormed down the aisle, her wings knocking a load of curios off the shelves as they made one threatening flap behind her. Erik and Trent watched her departure and then turned on each other with a glare of mutual hostility.

"Women," Trent shrugged. "They talk tough, but they're all soft little pussycats inside."

Erik raised an eyebrow.

"You know, your face is *still* bleeding from where she beat the shit out of you."

Trent scowled and yanked the varsity jacket from Erik's hands.

"Gimme that," he barked. "Go find something with more arms in it, freak boy."

On the other side of the gift shop, Bobby continued his solo exploration. Near the center of the flat wall, he found the checkout counter, raised the hinged countertop gate, and slid behind it. He pulled the lever on the side of the old-fashioned register, and the drawer opened with a loud, mechanical *ker-ching!* It was completely empty, bereft of even its money tray. He pushed it shut and squatted down to look under the counter. There was nothing there but a stack of mismatched plastic coat hangers, an empty Diet Pepsi can, and a roll of tickets. He picked up the tickets and held them up to the light. They were of the generic sort that came in two halves, one ordering the bearer to "Keep this coupon," the other simply bearing the word "Ticket."

"Tickets," he thought. *"Tickets to what?"*

He put down the roll and stood up, looking around the register for clues. On the back wall he could see a dry-erase board, but its face was completely coated in dust. With a curious squint, he slapped his palm onto the board and wiped away a streak of dust-and marker-leaving nothing but clean white lamination.

"Gah! Stupid!" he thought.

He leaned in close to the board and, with several spittle-laden blasts of air, blew enough dust off its face to reveal the remaining words. It was a schedule of operating hours and ticket prices. Bobby ran his hand across his meaty face with a grumble. It should have been obvious what the hours were for. It was written right there across the top of the board clear as day.

With one giant hand-streak through it.

North o ... rder

In ... gloo

B ... oo

"Ingloo boo," he thought. *"Inner igloo ... bamboo? Internet igloo broadband ... hullabaloo? Insanity igloo brain shampoo?"*

He stared at the blank spot and blinked.

"I got nothin'," he admitted.

Vivian stomped down a decimated aisle of bent steel and broken glass. When she felt that she had put adequate distance between herself and the boys, she slumped against the concrete wall, sliding her winged back down its curve until she was sitting on the floor with her knees bunched up to her chest. She was tense and aggravated, and although she was directing her rage toward Trent, she knew it wasn't really because of him. He was merely a catalyst. He was the drawstring on the garbage bag of horror and chaos that was enveloping her entire life.

She slipped her fingers under her glasses and wiped her slightly pooling eyes, focusing blankly on the shelf in front of her. It was conspicuously empty. Slightly to

her side, a large cardboard box sat in the aisle. The heavy-duty staples of its top had been wrenched free by unknown fingers, and its top was hanging open as if in anticipation. She lifted one of the flaps curiously and read the label.

SIX (6) - NOTB II MOUNTIE FRIENDS - #4 MORTIMER.

"*NOTB II?*" she thought. "*This is North of the Border two? I wonder where the original one is.*"

Her mind wandered as her fingers slid over the rough corrugation of the cardboard flap. The tactile sensation of this box of unstocked merchandise instantly flashed her back to her old life. It reminded her of Boltzmann's Market and the mundane grind of mindlessly stocking shelf after shelf of this or that, day after day.

She pushed herself away from the wall and knelt down in front of the box; in so doing she noticed something else on the floor. It was a small pink flip-flop. The sandal was typical, made of cheap foam and injected plastic. The only thing noteworthy about it was its covering of telltale bloodstains. The empty shelf again caught her eye, and her lip started to quiver. She knew that this sandal had come from someone just like her. Someone who wasted her entire life working for minimum wage. Someone who would never return to unpack this box of unstocked merchandise.

She set the flip-flop on the floor respectfully and reached into the abandoned box.

Three aisles away, Erik found a ball of gray fabric lying atop a shelf of otherwise colorful T-shirts. He picked it up and shook it, revealing a hooded sweatshirt with the words "North of" embroidered to one side of the zipper and "the Border" to the other. He slipped it on and held out his arms in appreciation. It was a good fit, and if he didn't zip it up, his extra limbs hung unmolested through its open front.

Bobby wandered up to his friend, muttering to himself, obviously deep in thought.

"Inbred igloo birth taboo?"

Erik turned to him with a questioning blink.

"What did you just say?"

"Wha? Oh, nothing, nothing ..."

Sherri wandered up behind Bobby and barked through barbecue-scented-worm breath.

"Man, it's cold as a polar bear's ass in here. Haven't you clowns found anything that I can wear yet?"

Trent swept in out of nowhere, pulling open the front of his oversized varsity jacket with a grin.

"You just need to learn how to share the wealth, my dear," he said greasily. "There's more than enough room in here for both of us."

Sherri squinted hard into the dim light, tracing Trent's form with her weakened

eyes.

"If I wanted that baggy-ass preppie shit I'd have already killed you for it," she muttered. "I'd rather wear my own piece of shit coat than look like I'm fucking a high-school quarterback."

Erik pulled off his sweatshirt and handed it to her.

"Here, take this," he said apologetically. "You need it more than I do."

Trent snatched the hoodie from Erik's hand and threw it to the ground.

"And shroud this pretty young thing in ill-fitting cotton with mutant juju on it?" he said. "Have a little bit of chivalry, Little E. For real! I can do better than your raggedy 'ol hand-me-downs."

He plucked the tiny white jacket from the shelf where he had deposited it earlier, giving it a single, showy flap in the air.

"You can't deny that it's your size, petite princess," he said with a grin. "And, excluding yours truly, it's got to be the warmest thing in the house!"

Sherri looked at the dainty white coat hanging from Trent's hands as the cold of the sarcophagus-like room sliced through her bones. As she reached out and touched the furry cuff of the jacket, the mangled sleeve of her own useless leather coat fell away from her skinny arm, exposing its peeled, flaky surface to the frigid air. Though she could barely see the white jacket in the dim light, she could feel its quilted nylon sliding warmly between her trembling fingertips.

Her shoulders slumped with a resigned sigh.

"Nahh, I'd rather freeze to death than wear that Gymboree bullshit," she said. "I'm just gonna go outside and set something on fire."

With that, she stomped to the corner of the room, planted her palms into a pair of stainless steel push bars, and disappeared through an unknown exit. Erik squinted at the hidden metal doors as they were automatically pulled closed by a pair of old-fashioned pneumatic elbows.

"But the exit is ... that ... way?" he said with bewilderment, pointing behind him at the cement tunnel through which they had entered.

"Hey, cool!" Bobby beamed. "Sherri found the entrance door!"

"To what?" Erik asked.

"Damned if I know," Bobby said.

Vivian pulled a heavy statuette from the box and set it on the empty shelf with a sentimental gleam in her eye. The figure was a six-inch praying mantis dressed in full Mountie regalia, cast in solid pewter in a rounded cartoon style. Like its bumblebee counterpart that guarded the door, the miniature Mountie stood at attention, bulbous eyes fixed on an unseen flag, clawed hand to his head in salute. Vivian saluted the figure gravely.

"In memoriam," she whispered, "of the fallen clerks of the ..." She squinted at the

text engraved on the figure's bulky wooden base-"North of the Border ... Insect Igloo Bug Zoo?"

Before she could wonder what these words meant, her attention was shattered by the sound of tiny fists and heavy boots pounding frantically on steel doors.

"Shit! Shit! They're on me! They're all over me!" Sherri's muffled voice shrieked. "There's no fucking handles on this side! Open the fucking doors!"

The words barely had time to hit Bobby's ears before he had run to the door and slammed his palms into the steel release bar. As soon as the swinging door had cleared the entryway, Sherri exploded into the igloo like a screeching missile.

"Fuck! Fucker fuckshit!" she cried in revulsion. "Get 'em off! Get 'em off!"

In the murky light of the camping lantern, clinging to the thrashing strands of Sherri's coat were eight monstrous, crackling spiders, each spinning a silken web around a different part of its fresh, flailing prey. One specimen the size of a basketball clung heavily to her back, slipping and clawing against the remains of her jacket. Another the size of a severed hand scurried nimbly around her head, wrapping it with a dense, sticky blindfold of webbing. As if their size didn't make them horrible enough, each rampaging spider sported an assortment of extra limbs so erratically placed as to guarantee that they were never a part of nature's blueprint.

"Do something, you fuckers!" Sherri wailed. "Help me!"

The others stood frozen in shocked terror. Vivian grabbed the first weapon that she could find. Wrapping a fist around the torso of Mortimer, the Mountie mantis, she leapt to her feet.

"Sherri!" she screamed. "Stand still!"

Vivian bounded to her friend's side and swung the square, wooden base of the figure through a grossly oversized arachnid abdomen, throwing a heavy spatter of clear innards across the wall. The shattered spider immediately fell to the ground with a piercing shriek and a heavy splash of discharged viscera. The glistening chunks of its freshly broken exoskeleton glowed a bold, ghostly blue. Vivian turned frantically to the others.

"Get over here!" she squeaked. "Help me!"

Erik jumped toward Sherri and raised a palm over his shoulder in preparation of a fierce slap. The spider on her arm seemed to look directly at him with eight beady black eyes. There was a row of jet-black ant legs running in an uneven row down its back, each one of them clawing against the air as if scurrying against a ground that wasn't there.

Erik put down his trembling hand with a girlish whimper, then raised it again. Holding his breath and biting his lower lip, he slapped at the crackling spiders with his four bare hands, knocking them willy-nilly off of Sherri's frantic body. Bobby jumped around in a kind of grotesque Irish jig, stomping on each bloated creature that Erik knocked free. With each step, he left behind a puddle of crunched, glowing remains; with each new victim, his footing got less and less steady on the slicked

linoleum floor.

"Ack! Ack! Nasty!" he grimaced.

Bobby could feel the slimy innards of the smashed mutants splattering over his Texas and onto his exposed toes. Another frantic slap landed a spider the size of cantaloupe upside-down in front of his gooey feet. It righted itself with a surreal-looking undulation of its legs and started to scurry across the floor.

"Oh no you don't," Bobby grunted.

As he leapt to smash the spider under both feet, his sandals, lubricated with mutant arachnid guts, slipped on the floor, twisting his ankle with a *pop*. Swallowing a scream of pain, he tried to catch himself on his other leg, failed, and slammed into the broken remains of a glass shelving unit.

He made up for the scream that he had swallowed before with an agonized wail as a plate of shattered glass shelving sunk its jagged teeth into his doughy abdomen. In a flash of pure reflex, Bobby slammed his palms into the metal frame of the shelf, tipping it backward and extricating its blades from his gut with a sound like boots being pulled from mud. He made a move to retreat, but his greased feet went out from under him, dropping him flat on his back. He landed on the retreating spider, destroying it with a wet, splintering *crack*.

Bobby's head swam through a sea of shock and pain, but he still could see the fruits of his actions coming to bear. When he had shoved the damaged shelf it had rocked sharply onto its back legs, and it was now swinging forward again toward an equilibrium that it would never find. Bobby managed to flip over onto his knees and make one slippery surge against the floor before the cracked shelf of the toppling unit slammed into his back.

"Bobby!" Vivian wailed. "No!"

She ran to her brother's side and fell on her knees next to the wrecked shelves, dropping the slimy statuette by her side. The display unit's heavy steel frame pinned Bobby to the ground, and its broken shelves had carved bloody gashes into the soft pink flesh of his back.

"Bobby!" Vivian sobbed. "Bobby, are you okay?"

Bobby lay with his cheek against the floor, barely moving. The blood from his back soaked through his spider-slime-tainted shirt and mingled with the pool created by the cuts in his belly.

"It burns," he groaned. "It burns like a son of a bitch!"

Vivian looked up to find Trent wrestling with the steel doors in an attempt to close off the unholy depths of the bug zoo. He had successfully shut one of the doors, but the other was still stubbornly wide open.

"I gotta close that shit up!" he wailed. "I can't close it! It won't close!"

Even in the frenzy of the moment, Vivian could see that the pneumatic elbow of the door had been locked into its "open" position during Sherri's explosive flight.

"Forget it!" Vivian screamed. "Get over here and help me!"

Trent obediently scrambled to Vivian's side, his feet sliding in the pool of blood and dimly glowing spider guts that spread from beneath her brother.

"Grab the other side of the frame!" Vivian ordered, grabbing one side herself. "We've got to lift this off of him!"

Without a word, Trent did as he was told, and after a quick three-count, the two began to lift the heavy shelving off of Bobby's wounded back. At that moment, an aimless blow from Erik's continuously slapping hands detached an eleven-legged spider from Sherri's shoulder, landing it directly on Trent's straining chest. Trent immediately let go of the shelves in a screaming paroxysm of shock.

"Aaah! Aaaaagh! Shit!"

Bobby howled in pain as the suddenly unbalanced shelving unit slipped from Vivian's grasp and crashed back down on his bloody back, but Trent didn't even seem to notice. His terrified hands clawed frantically at the air in front of him, as if they were primed for action but had no idea what they were supposed to do.

"Lord Jesus Mary and Joseph!" he chattered in horror. "Shit shit shit!"

In a reaction too quick for thought, Vivian wrapped her long fingers around the Mountie mantis and planted its blunt wooden base into Trent's chest with a spider-shattering crunch. Trent's gasping mouth dropped open as Vivian drew back her weapon, stretching out a gooey hammock of glowing innards and segmented legs. Barely acknowledging this grisly interruption of her rescue effort, Vivian threw down the statuette and returned to Bobby's side.

"Now get over here and help me!" she demanded furiously. "And don't drop it this time, you idiot!"

Trent croaked out a single, unintelligible word of argument before slumping into a wheezing pile on the floor, having had the wind completely knocked out of him.

Erik slapped the last spider off of Sherri's head and grabbed her by her thrashing shoulders. His mutant arms reached out and gently steadied her at the waist.

"Whoa whoa!" he said, stomping the retreating arachnid. "You're okay! Stop fighting!"

He peeled away Sherri's blindfold of moist webbing and swept it off her head. He tried to fling it to the floor, but it stuck to his fingers.

"It's okay!" he assured her, shaking his entwined hand. "See? It's okay! We're safe! We're safe."

Sherri looked into Erik's kind blue eyes and fell into his four arms, squeezing him in a trembling embrace.

"I ... I ... it ..." she sobbed. "Thank you."

"Whoa," Erik said with surprise. "Are ... are you *crying*?"

"Shut up," Sherri said, wiping a tear from her pink eye, "before I make *you* cry."

Before Erik could reply, the air was filled with a dense, crackling buzz. His head shot up in surprise, falling upon a mannequin dressed as a bee dressed as a Mountie.

"Oh shit," he whimpered. " *Now* I get it."

"Erik!" Vivian screamed. "Behind you!"

Erik's eyes flicked over his shoulder just in time to see a swarm of disgustingly swollen bumblebees burst through the door of the cursed bug zoo.

"Sherri!" he screamed. "Run!"

He turned to take his first fleeing step, stumbling into Sherri's clinging body.

"Let go!" Erik screamed.

"I can't!" Sherri cried.

She wrenched her arms in every direction, but her unwilling grip on Erik remained fast. The sticky strands of oversized spider webbing had adhered the arms of her mangled coat to his sides, effectively gluing the two of them together. Before either of them could realize what had happened, their opposing steps entwined their legs, dropping Sherri on her back and pulling Erik down on top of her.

"Get off! Get off!" Sherri coughed.

"I can't," Erik shrieked, clawing at her arms. "Let go!"

"I told you I can't let go!" Sherri snapped.

Sherri and Erik flailed their limbs to no effect, like an eight-legged overturned turtle. Not only were Sherri's arms stuck to Erik, but her back was now glued to the floor. She had become human flypaper.

Erik's head flipped back and forth on his shoulders as he tried desperately to see the impending doom that he could hear buzzing and bearing down behind him. His glances afforded him only flashes of nightmarish deformity. A fleshy white scorpion stinger protruding from the side of a furry yellow thorax. A knotted green antenna sprouting from an exploded black eye socket. A pair of pincers arcing sickeningly from a black and yellow back. Although each bee was a unique abomination of genetics, they all had one thing in common: a six-inch stinger poking menacingly from each backside.

The swarm turned in unison in the air, swirling into the high, darkened ceiling, then diving toward Erik's vulnerable back. Pinned to the ground, Sherri could see the whole thing unfold and responded accordingly.

"Shiiiiiiiiit!" she shrieked, screwing her eyes shut and squeezing the last breath out of Erik's bony ribcage.

The next thing the immobilized pair heard was the squeak of rubber against linoleum, followed by the sound of ten softballs hitting the padded tarpaulin wall of a batting cage. Sherri opened her eyes to see Vivian standing astride their bound bodies, her wings forming a protective canopy at their full, majestic extension. Dazed bumblebees piled in heaps on the floor around them, struggling against their

own mutated forms to right themselves and return to the air. Vivian leapt up and came down with each foot crunching through the brittle shell of a confounded bee.

"Get up, you two!" she commanded, stomping another wriggling foe.

"We can't!" Erik and Sherri howled in unison.

Vivian grabbed Erik by the shoulders and pulled him upward, but it was to no avail. Her friends were effectively welded to the floor, and the savage bumblebees were quickly righting themselves and buzzing back into flight. One landed on Vivian's struggling shoulder with a pinch of bristly legs. She quickly threw a reedy fist into the insect's furry face, knocking it into a broken heap on the floor.

"Trent!" she screamed. "Help me!"

Trent scrambled to his feet with a stagger, clutching his chest and gasping a breath into his bashed lungs. He pulled his sword from the ground and raised it above his head.

"Don't worry, Vivi! I'll save you!"

With a leap like Peter Pan, Trent slashed his sword through the swarm, completely missing every one of the oversized bees. Two more prancing swings yielded identical results, and a third nipped the edge of Vivian's wing with the tip of his blade.

"Give me that!" Vivian yelled, wrenching the sword from his hands. "Make yourself useful and get those two off the floor!"

"Your wish is my command, sweet-"

"Just do it!" Vivian barked, shoving him toward the gluey mass of her friends.

Trent braced with one foot on either side of the squirming pile of humanity and slid his hands under Erik's arms.

"Up and at 'em, freak," he growled.

With that, he threw his head back and strained upward with all of his strength. Erik's vertebrae each popped clearly and distinctly in sequence.

"Ow-Jesus!" Erik squealed. "Stop it! Stop it before you break my back!"

With a smug grin, Trent pulled again, but this time slightly more aggressively.

Vivian clutched the sword in both hands and watched the diminished swarm as it regrouped at the ceiling. There were seven bees left. She sprinted to Bobby's side and knelt down near his head, keeping her eye on the airborne insects.

"Bobby, come on, Bobby," she said urgently. "Can you move at all? Can you help me lift this?"

Bobby blinked one slow blink as his head shook negatively.

"I can't lift it by myself! I'm not strong enough!" Vivian said tensely, grabbing his hand. "What do I do now?!"

"Kill the bees," Bobby whispered hoarsely. "Come back for me later."

Before Vivian could protest, the swarm turned, slicing out of the air with a screaming buzz and hurtling straight toward them. She didn't take her eye off of the lead bee as she sprang to her feet and swung her sword in defense. *Crack!* The hideous bee split apart upon the blade, splattering into glowing stains on the walls. The blade flashed the other direction. *Crack!* Another set of stains.

Vivian didn't hear the noise of Trent and Erik's struggle. She didn't see the piles of debris or smell the hot blood that still trickled from her own brother. Her entire world had been reduced to one task that she could not fail. All else vanished outside of her arms, her blade, and her five targets. *Crack!* Four targets.

A bee with long green pincers landed on the bent metal wreckage that held her brother captive. Bobby threw a protective arm in front of his face just as his sister's blade exploded the overstuffed insect, showering him with a spray of its glowing innards.

"Ugh!" Bobby moaned.

Apparently giving up hope on ever reaching Bobby, the remaining bees swarmed back to the vaulted ceiling and dove toward Trent's broad back instead. Without so much as a shouted warning, Vivian had bounded up behind him, sword at the ready.

With a stabbing thrust, the blade penetrated the lead bee's thorax, threading it neatly over the end of the sword, leaving its legs twitching with its last dying impulses. The remaining bees changed direction, and Vivian darted across the igloo in pursuit. Her next swing resulted not in a cracking split, but in a dull thump as the bee still on her blade impacted with the one in the air. The clubbed bee sailed toward the ceiling like a baseball, disappearing into the darkness and reappearing as a wet impact of blue glow a half-second later.

"Trent!" Erik sobbed. "Stop! Stop pulling! You're killing me!"

Trent released his grip on Erik's shoulders, letting him drop on top of Sherri.

"Fine, forget you then, freak!" he said bitterly, grabbing a coffee mug off the shelf and storming away. "I've got more important business to attend to!"

"Coffee?!" Sherri squealed. "You're leaving us stuck here for *coffee?! "*

Vivian stuck the point of her sword into the floor, sliding the impaled carcass from the blade with the sole of her foot. The single remaining bee buzzed high into the vaulted ceiling, disappearing into a haze of darkness. Vivian couldn't see where it was, but she could hear its crackling buzz circling, circling, circling overhead. She followed it with her ears as she ducked for cover behind a shelf and waited for her chance to strike.

Finally the bee made its move, plunging directly toward her. She pounced out of her ineffective hiding spot, neatly bisecting her final foe in the air with a clean slash of her blade. As the wet, glowing remains of the bee fell out of the air, its absence immediately revealed another shape, slowly turning, rapidly becoming larger and larger. A split second later a flying coffee mug nailed Vivian square in the forehead.

The last thing that she saw was Trent, standing across the room with his pitching

arm hanging out in front of him, wearing an expression that quickly changed from smarmy satisfaction to mortified guilt. Her vision dissolved into red and white static as she dropped heavily to her knees. Trent rushed to her side, grabbing her around her collapsing shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Vivi!" he blathered. "I'm so sorry!"

"You ... *idiot*, " Vivian breathed.

"That was supposed to hit the bee! I didn't see you there! For real, yo!"

Trent's confession was interrupted by the sound of tinkling glass from the other side of the open door leading into the bug zoo.

"Close the door," Vivian whispered.

"I'm not leaving you here," Trent said. "A man must take responsibility for his actions, and this man just-"

"*Close it!*" she hissed.

Trent held Vivian's barely conscious body for a long moment. Finally a loud crash roused him from his melodrama. He dropped her on the floor and sprinted to the open steel door, frantically pounding the locked-open mechanism with his palm in an attempt to dislodge it.

"Close, you bitch!" he muttered, striking harder. "Close! *Close!* "

With a superhuman blow, Trent broke the rusted old elbow clean off its hinges. A mighty yank on the push bar slammed the door shut without opposition, but it stopped an inch short of the latch. He yanked it open and shut, but the door simply would not fit into its frame. Then suddenly-

BANG!

The explosive vibrations shook the door, traveling up Trent's arms and through his skull. Something was pounding on the other side, and it wanted to get in. He yanked the door again, but it refused to close.

BANG!

Trent looked desperately at the edge of the door. At the floor, he found the answer to his frantic, unspoken question. The broken metal angle of the pneumatic elbow lay pinched in the doorway. The only way to close the door would be to first push it open enough to kick the debris out of the way.

BANG!

Which was not something he was about to do.

He leaned back and braced himself against the floor, his knuckles white against the cold gray steel of the long push bar. He fearfully anticipated the next pound from within, but it never came.

And the universe went silent.

He waited for what seemed like a lifetime before finally working up the nerve to let

even the smallest bit of slack into the door. His forearms burned from the tension of grasping the awkward push bar so tightly in his fingers. Finally he made his move.

With a tiny push against the bar, he opened a gap wide enough to kick away the elbow, slamming the door shut and immediately retreating to Vivian's side.

"I did it, Vivi! Did you see that? I did it," he told her unconscious body. "You're safe now."

"Trent!" Erik yelled. "Trent-the door!"

"It's okay, Little E," Trent said. "The T saved your skinny ass. It's locked."

"It's *not* locked!" Erik screeched. "Look!"

With a chill, Trent turned toward the door, which was now hanging completely open.

"It didn't latch!" Erik yelled. "You slammed it too hard! It just bounced open again!"

Trent launched toward the door, but halfway there he stumbled over his own feet as they reversed direction.

It was too late to close the door.

The entire room beyond the steel doors seemed to emit a sinister blue glow, outlining the edges of an enormous black silhouette nearing the doorway. The shape approached the threshold. Limping. Lurching. Dragging its massive form toward Trent and his pounding heart.

Trent scrambled away from the door and grabbed the sword from where Vivian had dropped it. His broad chest heaved in terrified anticipation. The blade glinted in the dim lantern light as his strong fingers steadied their grip on its handle.

His eyes flicked to Vivian, lying behind him, a thin trickle of blood running from her nose. To Bobby, no longer moving under his glass and steel prison. To Erik and Sherri, locked to the floor, watching him without words. He turned back to the bug zoo door with a tremble in his blade.

"O-okay, I'm warning you," he shouted in a vague approximation of bravery. "I already s-s-sent all your friends back to Hell, and I'll d-d-do you too, bitch!"

The creature disregarded the threats, shambling closer and closer to the door. Trent's breath caught in his throat. At that moment his world shrank to two things: himself and the shape. He didn't care about anything or anyone else. He had to escape, but his horrified brain couldn't issue the order to move his paralyzed legs.

"You b-b-best not be messin' with the T!" he squeaked. "You hear me?! I'll m-mess you up!"

At that moment, the creature limped through the door, its form becoming clear to his petrified eyes in the dingy light of the lantern.

"Oh ... my ... Lord."

His terror flipped inside out, turning into awestruck confusion. The figure that

emerged from the darkness was not a grotesquely deformed insect beast, but a young woman. Trent's jaw dropped as she moved into the light. The girl was built like an Amazon goddess: a six-foot-tall statue carved from long feminine muscle. Her short, ragged skirt and torn belly-shirt gave her the titillating appearance of a shipwreck victim on the cover of a cheap erotic novel.

She didn't speak, but as she staggered from the confines of the bug zoo, her appearance told her story as well as any words could. Her flesh and clothes were riddled with scrapes and cuts, many of them crusted with dried blood, others still glistening and fresh. In her bloody hand she clutched a formidable shard of glass, glistening with wet slime and glowing hunks of mutilated exoskeleton. A plastic nametag covered in glittery foil butterfly stickers was still pinned to her torn shirt.

Insect Igloo - Priscilla

She staggered through the doorway, stumbling over her own feet and falling into Trent's arms with a heavy *slap*. He dropped the sword and caught her weight with an awkward, steadying step, embracing her in his muscular arms.

"Don't worry, girl, it's okay," he said, stroking her hair. "The T is here to protect you."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A crackling campfire threw a flickering orange light over a small yard that had become a makeshift hospital ward outside the North of the Border Insect Igloo. The ashy remains of crumpled park maps floated on the flame's hot updrafts like disintegrating gray ghosts.

Vivian blew a hot, cloudy breath into her cupped hands. Her icy fingers had numbed almost beyond cooperation in the frigid night, but she was determined to finish her work. She stiffly ripped her Swiss Army Knife through the grinning cotton face of a cartoon Mountie, turning another useless souvenir T-shirt into desperately needed bandages. An outsider had suddenly joined their ranks, and with her had come an exhaustive back catalog of wounds to be treated.

The igloo's liberated prisoner lay flat on her back on the cold, hard earth, unconsciously accepting all of the medical attention that Vivian could improvise. The girl's breath was restful, but deep and hoarse, like a snore that didn't quite have the ambition to happen. Kneeling by her side, Vivian carefully bandaged each of the cuts and scrapes that perforated the girl's heavy limbs, picking out shards of glass and shattered ceramic curios where necessary.

Although she was not one who judged by appearances, Vivian's logical subconscious couldn't resist putting together the backstory of this mysterious

newcomer. With her long, well-built limbs, the girl looked like she was no stranger to athletic competition, and no stranger to victory at that. Her breathtaking body was built like a Greco-Roman sculpture: solid and muscular, but distinctly feminine in shape and curve. Judging by the shortness of her skirt and the tightness of her red uniform shirt, Vivian deduced that this girl was not at all shy about flaunting her physical assets.

With a gentle stroke, she carefully brushed the girl's long brunette mane away from her grimy face. The thick braid of hair to the left side of her head was still bound in a pink scrunchie, but the right had come undone, sticking in matted, dust-smearred clumps to her neck and chin. Vivian ran her slender fingers over the girl's pale cheek, gently peeling up the sticky locks with a crackle of dried blood. A wince of disgust gave way to a startled gasp as the hair slowly came away from the girl's filthy throat.

During some savage accident that was best left unimagined, Priscilla, if the name on the nametag was to be believed, had suffered a long gash across her neck, starting from the right corner of her jawbone and extending all the way across her left shoulder. Fortunately this cut was too superficial to have severed anything vital in her throat, but, like her other wounds, it was caked with a slurry of congealed blood and fallout ash.

"Oh, you poor thing," Vivian gasped. "Let's get that cleaned up."

She took a T-shirt-turned-rag and gingerly wiped it through the exposed carnage, exhuming sedimentary swatches of stringy hair, crumbing dirt, and wet, sticky pus from the inflamed scar. Vivian's stomach heaved into her throat but, having nothing to push back up, expelled little more than a wash of cabbage-flavored acid across the back of her tongue. When the injury was as clean as it was going to get, she tied one last bandage snugly around Priscilla's neck, knotting it raffishly to the side like a rayon scarf on a 1960s fashion model.

With the last wound addressed, Vivian sighed and rocked back on her knees. She detached the sticky plastic nametag from the girl's ample bosom, wiped it clean on the torn hem of her own dress, and then pinned it back on.

"You just rest up, Priscilla. You're safe now. You're not alone anymore."

She put her slender hand on top of Priscilla's limp fist and smiled.

"None of us are."

At this moment, that simple fact was burning like a wildfire in Vivian's suddenly optimistic mind. After countless miles of unbridled carnage, they had finally found another survivor. If there was one other survivor, there would be two others. If there were two, there would be ten. Or fifty. Or a hundred. By doing nothing more than stumbling out of the darkness barely alive, Priscilla had given Vivian and the members of her oblivion society a great gift: the gift of hope.

Vivian climbed to her feet, and her malnourished body reeled dizzily. She took one stumbling step and steadied herself, shaking her head as if to dislodge the cloud. She pushed her glasses up over her forehead and mashed her palms into her eyes. A

moment later she regained equilibrium, and she slowly pulled her hands away from her face. As she flexed her numb fingers in front of her eyes, she saw that each reedy digit was bathed in a pale red bloodstain. The stains had been earned in her duties as an improvised nurse, but the blood was not Priscilla's.

Bobby lay asleep on the other side of the fire, slouched against the remains of a round wooden fencepost. The color had completely gone from his already pasty complexion, giving his skin the soapy pallor of a tombstone. From his hips to his armpits, his pudgy torso had been mummy-wrapped in canvas bandages that squeezed his flesh into a doughy ring at each end. In its past life, the enormous bandage had proudly proclaimed "Family fun from 'Eh' to 'Zed,'" but now its message was obscured by the blood soaking through its heavy layers.

Sherri sat cross-legged in the dirt to Bobby's side, nervously tugging and twisting at the gentle curl of her scorched yellow hair, watching her friend's chest rise and fall with each struggling breath. During the melee in the igloo, the last flaky remains of her burnt skin had rubbed off, revealing the dark, healthy-looking layer beneath. Had she stopped to think about it, she would have been mortified-her ghoulishly pale skin had been replaced with the perfect cinnamon tan of a Malibu surfer girl.

But Sherri wasn't thinking about herself at the moment. Her visage had twisted into a configuration that it had never tried before, drawing out an all new, never before seen expression.

It was an expression of concern.

Drool appeared on the lower lip of Bobby's slack jaw, then spilled onto his scruffy orange goatee. Sherri sat up on her knees and gently wiped it with the cuff of her inherited gray hooded sweatshirt. She gently moved a clump of stray red hair out of Bobby's face, tucking it behind his ear with her delicate fingers. As her fingertips brushed his cheek, he awoke with a snort.

"Gnaagh! Wha? Whassa?" he grumbled hoarsely.

"Oh! Um, Bobby!" Sherri stammered, yanking her hand away and stuffing it guiltily in her pocket. "I ... uh ... hello!"

Bobby's eyes slowly focused on Sherri's tanned face, outlined by a flickering aura of yellow fire filtering through her golden hair.

"Are you an angel?" he asked dreamily.

"Am I an ... now what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Bobby blinked.

"You look like an angel."

Sherri looked at Bobby's deathly pale, disconcerted face and let an irritated little smile cross her lips.

"Okay, shut up," she grumbled. "You're just lucky that you've got one foot in the grave, or I wouldn't take that kinda shit outta you, Gray."

At the sound of her brother's groaning voice, Vivian immediately rushed to his

side, falling to her knees a little harder than she had planned. As soon as she hit the ground, her wings swung forward on her shoulders and clapped against the back of her head.

"Bobby! Ow! You're awake!" she cried, slapping away her wings. "I was so worried! How do you feel?"

"I feel like I just got a tattoo of Charlie Brown's shirt," Bobby moaned. Vivian's arrival seemed to bring him around a bit. He tugged at the edge of his massive bandage. "Get this shit off; it hurts like a son of a bitch."

"Oh no you don't," Vivian said, arresting his hands. "That bandage stays on until we're sure the bleeding has stopped. You can't afford to lose any more blood than you already have."

"Come on, Vivian," Bobby implored. "There's still broken glass stuck in there!"

"No there isn't," Vivian said comfortingly.

"Don't give me that crap," Bobby moaned. "I can feel it! How would *you* know if *I've* got broken glass in *my* cuts?"

"Because *I'm* the one who dug it all out," Vivian said sternly.

She held up her stained fingers in front of her brother's eyes, which were in turn immediately drained of their fighting spirit.

"Oh. Uh ... right," he said guiltily. "I'm sorry. But it burns like hell, and I just thought ... never mind. Thanks, Viv."

"It's okay. Forget it," Vivian said modestly. "I picked out all the glass, but by the time that we got you out from under the shelf you were all covered in that dust that's all over everything. I cleaned you out as best as I could, but there's only so much that I can do without proper, sanitary-"

"Yeah yeah. It's cool. Thank you," Bobby smiled, waving his hand weakly. "Where's everybody else?"

Sherri sighed histrionically.

"The powderpuff's stomach growled *one fucking time* and then Erik and Retard-O-Dick got in a cockfight about who was going to get food for her. Now they're back inside the igloo acting like they're these big manly providers, while they're really just trying to be the first one to find that magic potion that unlocks her virgin legs."

Vivian crossed her frosty arms tightly as her face prickled with humiliation.

"They went to find food for *all* of us," she muttered. "I never asked for anything."

"Well, maybe you should start," Sherri shrugged. "I'll bet Trent could find us a four-course meal if you told him you'd flash your tits for it."

Vivian scowled.

"Can we change the subject, please?"

Bobby glanced over Vivian's shoulder nonchalantly.

"Hey, who's the new girl?"

Vivian and Sherri turned and looked in the direction of Bobby's gaze. On the other side of the crackling fire, Priscilla was on her feet, standing shakily on her weakened legs. Her glassy eyes seemed unable or unwilling to accept the reality of the desolate world she now inhabited.

"Priscilla!" Vivian beamed. "It is Priscilla, isn't it?"

She stepped briskly toward Priscilla's towering form, extending her arms in welcome and support. As Vivian's hands rose from her sides, her wings simultaneously extended from her back, spreading into a six-foot wall of nightmarish black leather.

"I'm so glad that you're okay!" she continued happily. "I was so worried about you!"

As Vivian came closer, the traumatized stranger's fist instinctually raised into the air, fingers wrapped around a dagger of glass that she no longer possessed. Her glazed eyes seemed to look not at Vivian, but through her, locking on the black sails that loomed from her back. Vivian stopped and raised a curious eyebrow.

"What's wrong, Prisc-"

Priscilla's fist flew from her shoulder in a fierce but clumsy jab, tagging Vivian on the nose. She stumbled backward with a pained squeak.

"Ow! Damn it!" she winced.

As her hands shot to her face, Vivian's wings flew downward from her shoulders, fanning the fire into an explosive inferno. Priscilla's terrified mouth opened into the shape of a scream, but what came out of her mangled throat was only a gurgling moan. She turned and bolted away from Vivian's demonic silhouette, half running, half limping on her crippled legs. Within two labored steps, she ran directly into another mutated figure emerging from the darkness.

"Hey, you guys," Erik chirped, holding aloft four shopping bags in as many hands. "Look what I fouaaaaaggh!"

Without breaking her clumsy stride, Priscilla plowed straight into Erik's lanky body like a drunken linebacker. Erik dropped his bags and, in a desperate, reflexive attempt at balance, grabbed on to Priscilla's muscular arms with four frantic hands. Her skull slammed down with a dull *thump* on Erik's forehead. For a fraction of a second, he actually felt the front of his brain compress before he lost his quadruple grip and tumbled dazedly to the ground.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Trent said, stepping out of the shadows. "What's going on here, people?"

"Trent," Vivian squealed, "catch her! Before she hurts herself!"

"Herself?!" Erik moaned dizzily.

Before Trent could react, Priscilla plowed into him like a frenzied bull. A fully laden Army backpack flew from his hands and hit the ground with a deafening clatter. Before he could fall, Priscilla was behind him, her bandaged forearm holding him up, thrown around his neck as if taking him hostage.

"Aaaugh! Help!" Trent yelled, swinging his arms frantically. "Get this crazy beotch offa me!"

"Trent, stop!" Vivian shouted. "Stop! Don't fight her! She's just disoriented!"

Disregarding Vivian's plea, Trent continued to struggle, but Priscilla's vice-like hold tightened around his neck until he stood still. A second later all was silent, save for a raspy, overexcited breath emanating from Priscilla's injured throat. All eyes were on her, waiting for her next move. After a long, tense moment, her grip unexpectedly loosened and she lurched forward, throwing her arms around Trent's shoulders and pressing her face against his cheek with a sob of relief.

It suddenly became obvious that she had not been trying to hurt him at all-she had been trying to hide behind him.

Vivian stepped forward and extended her hand in a gesture of goodwill.

"Priscilla? I'm sorry if I startled you just now," she said calmly. "My name is Vivian. We're not going to hurt-

As Vivian drew closer, Priscilla's grip tightened around Trent's chest.

"Ow ow, damn!" Trent squirmed. "Step back, yo! You're scaring her!"

"She's just startled," Vivian said, moving forward. "She's had a rough-

Priscilla took a lurching step backward, squeezing her powerful grip tighter around Trent's chest.

"I said step the back up, Batgirl!" he choked. "Your freaky physique is scaring her shitless!"

Trent's harsh words were like a slap in the face to Vivian, and her mouth twisted into an insulted pout. She glanced meekly over her shoulder and saw that her wings had again extended themselves, belching from her back like a pair of gothic cemetery gates shrouded in demon hide. She stood frozen as her lips moved into shapes, trying to put her helpless thoughts into words.

"But ... but," she pleaded, "I'm not ... I mean, *I'm okay.* "

She gestured pathetically to Priscilla, but the girl's only response was in the form of a wheezing cough that she squeezed accordion-like from Trent's lungs. Erik quickly grasped Vivian's extended wings and tenderly folded them down to her back. He took her gently by the arm and led her to the opposite side of the fire, guiding her crestfallen body to the ground and kneeling in front of her, stealing her gaze from Priscilla's still-trembling form.

"Look, Vivian, don't take it personally," he said. "She's been through a lot. She's in shock. She's going to need some time to get used to ... you know ... *us.* "

Erik's right hand gestured to himself, then to Vivian. Simultaneously his left paw did the same, but in the opposite order.

Vivian frowned. "Well, she seems to like *Trent* just fine."

"I guess it's about time somebody did," Erik shrugged. "I'm not surprised. She looks like she's ... uh, you know, 'his type.'"

Priscilla's grip had loosened as soon as the wings had disappeared from her view, allowing Trent to fall out of her asphyxiating embrace. He took two stumbling steps and turned to look anxiously at his former captor. The tatters of her clothes fluttered over her bare skin with a lurid sensuality as her face melted into an expression of pure, unadulterated gratitude. Trent's own face melted into an amorous grin.

A second later he was holding the shivering girl in his arms, squeezing her tightly against his broad chest.

"You're safe now, Prissy," he said boldly. "Don't worry your pretty little head. The T-man isn't going to let any more nasty mutants hurt you."

"Hurt her?" Vivian said dejectedly. "Why would I *hurt* her? *I'm* the one who dressed her wounds!"

"I'm sure he's talking about the mutant *bugs*," Erik said, throwing a condemning glare at Trent. "Just relax, Viv. We just need to take it slow and show her that all mutants don't want to kill her like the ones inside the igloo did. It looks like she's had some rough times in there."

"Now, that's the thing that I don't get," Bobby said.

"What's not to get?" Erik asked. "It's pretty obvious that she was working late stocking shelves in that igloo and ended up getting trapped in the zoo with all of those killer mutant bugs."

"No, I get that part, Jumpin' Jack Flashback," Bobby grumbled. "The thing I don't understand is why there were mutant bugs *at all*. We shouldn't still be running into these things. There hasn't been any of that nasty pink fog for two states now."

"Well, maybe it's not the fog that does it," Erik guessed. "I mean, maybe the mutations *are* from the nuclear radiation after all."

"Oh, don't start that again," Bobby moaned. "It's just like Vivian said: Radiation doesn't just Jekyll and Hyde a bumblebee into one of those ... Beelzebumblebees!"

"That's true," Vivian said thoughtfully. "But just for the sake of argument, what do we know about what radiation *does* do?"

"Well, it makes 1950s novelty wristwatches glow in the dark," Erik said.

"Tanning beds use it to bronze you up all sexy-like," Trent smiled.

"Sitting too close to the TV makes you start shooting blanks," Sherri added.

"It's used to fight cancer," Bobby noted, "and ironically also *causes* cancer."

"Hold on," Vivian said. "You might be on to something there."

"What-cancer?" Bobby said doubtfully. "Are you serious? Those spiders didn't exactly look like the Make-A-Wish Foundation was about to take them to Disney World."

"No, but think about what cancer does to living tissue," Vivian said. "Cancer causes cells to split and grow uncontrollably. That's how tumors form and expand."

"Oh, come on, Viv," Bobby sighed, dropping his voice two Austrian octaves. "*It's not a toomah.*"

"I know I'm oversimplifying it," Vivian said. "I'm not saying that the mutations are literally caused by cancer. I'm just saying, what if the same underlying biological principles are at work? Theoretically, accelerated cell division could explain how Twiki and those insects grew to be so large."

Erik shook his head.

"But even if radiation did cause the *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid* effect, that still doesn't explain why you and me grew extra limbs. Or those bugs in the igloo for that matter."

"I have a theory on that too," Vivian nodded. "I think these mutants are infectious."

Trent's eyes popped open as he quickly pulled his shirt over his nose.

"Aw shit! You didn't tell me y'all were contagious! I don't want you breathin' mutant-ass germs all up on me! For real!"

"Not *contagious*," Vivian smirked. "*Infectious*. From what we've observed, every time a mutant animal breaks the skin it causes another mutation. It's like they somehow spread their genetic pattern."

Sherri's head tilted doubtfully.

"So the bugs stung the shit out of each other and made new bug parts. I'll buy that," she said. "But what about Erik? Rat Boy over here got fucked up by his *cat*."

Vivian raised her eyebrow and looked pointedly at Erik.

"Did he?"

Erik blinked twice as his brain untangled the facts. He remembered the last creature he had seen in the lonely pipe on the night of the blast. He remembered the weight and heft of an animal just slightly too big to be his normal cat ... and entirely too small to be his mutant cat. He remembered that long, pointed jaw of fiercely glowing teeth.

"No. No, I didn't!" he realized. "It had to be a mutant sewer rat that attacked me!"

He turned to Trent triumphantly.

"It wasn't Twiki at all!" he beamed. "See! I told you I killed it!"

Bobby scratched his beard and squinted.

"That may be so, but Vivian most certainly *did* get scratched by a cat," he said

skeptically. "How the hell did that give her *wings*? "

Vivian frowned.

"That's the part I can't work out," she admitted. "For my theory to hold, I should have acquired feline traits. Cats don't possess bat DNA."

Erik nodded slowly.

"Mine did," he said. "The last time I saw Twiki before she mutated she was up to her little kitty elbows in bat blood. It was probably still all over her claws when she scratched you."

Vivian smiled reluctantly.

"I guess that validates at least part of my theory," she said. "But we still don't know why animals are growing into monsters and humans aren't."

"I already told y'all the answer to that one," Trent said. "It's the soul, yo. It's God protecting his peeps from the minions of the deep. The Big Man is always lookin' out for us-isn't that right, Prissy?"

By this time, Trent was leaning against the outer wall of the igloo with his legs spread apart and Priscilla nestled between them, her back against his chest. She was wearing his varsity jacket and leaning back into his embrace as if they were two high-school sweethearts snuggling in the bleachers at the homecoming game. Despite the warmth of the crackling fire, the hair on Trent's frigid arms stood on end. But he didn't seem to notice or care. He squeezed an embrace around Priscilla's rippling abdomen, and she closed her eyes and nuzzled her head into his grimy cheek without a word.

"Okay, what's *that* shit all about?" Sherri grumbled. "Did you slip her some roofies or something?"

"Now now, don't let that little green monster get a hold of you, Goldilocks," Trent grinned. "Prissy just knows she's safe with me because I was the one who saved her from those demons in the igloo."

"You didn't save her!" Sherri spat. "If anybody saved her it was the powderpuff. All you did was stand there and piss yourself."

"We all played our own little part in her liberation," Trent said.

"And yours was pissing yourself."

"Say what you will-it's abundantly clear which one of us she feels closest to. But you don't need to be jealous, girl! The T is a two-seater! Hop in!"

Trent raised one arm in a giant scoop like a DeLorean's gull-wing door awaiting a passenger. Sherri sneered.

"I'd rather sit on the wrong end of the Kaiser's helmet."

"Damn. That's cold," Trent muttered, wrapping his arm back around Priscilla's appreciative body.

"Dude, don't even talk about cold," Bobby said, rubbing his hands over his

coarsely bandaged arms. "Right about now I feel like my ass should be in a plastic tube between Alexander the Grape and Little Orphan Orange."

"Oh! That reminds me!" Erik smiled, scampering to his feet. "I found something for you."

"If it's Otter Pops, I swear I'm going to smack you," Bobby mumbled.

Erik retrieved the paper shopping bags that he had dropped in the commotion and began rummaging through them. Finally he pulled out a bundle of lime-green terry cloth and tossed it to his friend.

"Here you go, buddy!"

Bobby unfolded the garment and held it up in front of himself.

"A North of the Border bathrobe?" he asked skeptically. "You shouldn't have."

"It was the only thing I could find that was even close to big enough for you," Erik said. "Besides, I think it'll give you that certain Arthur Dentian flair."

With a series of pained grunts, and ultimately Vivian's assistance, Bobby leaned away from the fencepost and slipped the bathrobe onto his stiff, bandaged body. It fit him well, both physically and aesthetically.

"Thanks, dude," he said warmly. "Already I feel less panicked."

"Me next!" Sherri squealed. "This sweatshop sweatshirt is giving me a conformity rash. Gimme my coat-I don't care how messed-up it is."

Erik winced, as if bracing to be punched.

"Yeah, about your coat," he said. "It's uh ... you know, that spider silk was *really* sticky."

"So ... *yeah?* "

"How can I put this?" Erik said nervously. "Your coat is *never* coming off that floor. Ever. I tried everything. Pulling it, pushing it, scraping at it with a metal shelf bracket. All I could get up was a few scraps."

To illustrate his point, Erik pulled a few pathetic strands of black leather out of the bag and dropped them in the dirt in front of Sherri.

"Well, shit," she frowned. "So that's all you got?"

"No no! There's more!" Erik said in a voice like someone awarding a consolation prize. "I couldn't get your coat off the floor, but I got all the stuff out of the pockets for you. I got your smokes and some change, um ... some kind of bird skull, and ... well, you know what you had. I put it all in here."

Erik reached into the bag and gingerly produced a purse made of pink plastic sewn into the shape of a ladybug. The tiny handbag looked like something that Hello Kitty would have rejected for being "too cute." He held it out in front of Sherri with a weak, cautious smile, looking something like a suicidal zookeeper might look as he dangled a raw steak in front of a hungry lion.

"I'm sorry," he whimpered. "It was the only bag they had."

Sherri took the purse with a smile, running her tiny palm over the back of Erik's mutant paw and giving it a flirty squeeze.

"Cool. Thanks, Erik," she said. "That was a really nice thing to do."

Unzipping the ladybug's back, she produced a pack of cigarettes and lit one up. When her pink eyes returned to the faces of her friends, she found herself surrounded by an assortment of slack jaws and suspiciously raised eyebrows.

"What? Get off me," she said defensively. "It was a thoughtful fucking gesture. So what if it's pinker than Strawberry Shortcake's twat?"

The group breathed a collective sigh.

"Um, okay. Good," Erik said. "I'm glad you feel that way, actually."

He clenched four arms together nervously over his chilled torso and continued.

"So, um ... also I was wondering if ... I just thought that maybe, if it wasn't too much trouble you could ... um ..."

Sherri exhaled a long, straight blast of yellow smoke from her pursed lips and rolled her eyes casually to Erik.

"Spit it out, Sievert," she smiled. "I'm not gonna bite you."

Erik reached into the shopping bag, sheepishly producing a single article of clothing.

"Would you mind trading me the sweatshirt for this?"

Sherri's eyebrows lowered menacingly.

"I'm gonna fucking bite you."

Erik held the tiny white "Eskimo Princess" jacket at a defensive arm's length as his mouth quickly rattled his defense.

"Okay, wait, I know it sucks, and I know you don't want any part of this thing. But please, Sherri, be reasonable!"

"You be fucking reasonable!" Sherri screamed, throwing the ladybug at his head. "What the fuck do you think you're doing to me? I'm an individual! I'm not just going to sit here and let you cutesy me up until I match your bullshit, cookie-cutter, Delia's-catalog ideals of beauty, you brainwashed, hive-mind fuckwad!"

"Daaaamn, nice mood swing!" Trent interrupted. "I guess it's that time of the month when somebody's getting a visit from her Aunt Flo."

"Keep that shit up and *you'll* be the one who's bleeding uncontrollably from the groin!" Sherri barked.

"Look, Sherri, I'm sorry!" Erik squeaked. "I don't want to change you! I don't care how you dress! I'd wear this stupid coat myself if it would fit me, but it doesn't."

"So why don't you just get another sweatshirt, asshole?" Sherri snarled.

"There are no other sweatshirts. It's the middle of summer; everything in there is thin and skimpy except for this leftover junk that was on clearance."

Erik's soulful blue eyes peered desperately over the top of the fluffy white hood in his trembling hands. Sherri crossed her arms and looked him up and down angrily. His lean body was shivering. She guessed it was partially out of fear, but mostly from the bitter cold. A cold that failed to penetrate the baggy folds of her remaindered sweatshirt but seemed to wrap around Erik's unprotected body like an icy cloak.

"I know this thing's not your style," Erik continued, "but it's a matter of life and death."

Having lost his polo shirt to the same spider silk that had claimed Sherri's coat, Erik now wore a fresh ringer tee silk-screened with a cartoon Mountie sporting the exact same faux-age wear as the ten others in the stack from which it had been taken. Somehow his mutant arms seemed far less grotesque emerging from two neatly cut slits in a T-shirt than they did belching from their previous nest of filthy polyester bandages soaked in dried blood and pus. Nonetheless, his four bare, shuddering arms were pale and sickly-looking with chill.

"Please, Sherri," he said softly. "I'm freezing."

Sherri's pink eyes rolled back in her head as she sighed a doomed sigh.

"Fine," she grumbled. "Okay, fine, Erik. I'll wear the stupid coat if it means you won't *die*."

Erik exhaled a breath that he had been holding for nearly three minutes.

"Thank you, Sherri!" he gushed. "Thank you so much! I really appreciate it. I mean, nobody's going to see you wearing it tonight but us, and we know the story. Plus we'll probably find another coat for you down the road tomorrow, right? Right?"

Sherri blinked distractedly.

"Oh, uh. Right."

She wasn't listening to Erik's relieved ramble. Her fingers had clasped on the zipper of the sweatshirt but couldn't seem to bring themselves to pull it down.

"What's the matter?" Erik asked. "Is the zipper stuck?"

"No, it's not stuck," Sherri mumbled. "It's just ... I ... I don't want to take it off in front of Raccoon Boy over there."

"Oh, now that ain't cool," Trent said sternly. "Girl, you *never* call a brother a 'coon, yo. That's racist and uncalled for."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Sherri growled. "I meant you've got two black eyes!"

"Damn straight they're black. Why you always gotta make it a racial issue, dawg?"

"You're not black!" Sherri snapped.

"You best learn to free your mind," Trent smirked. "Love is colorblind. For real."
Sherri shook her head.

"Oh, shut up and wipe the blood off your face, you fuckin' hemophiliac."

Trent's fingers darted to his cheek, wiping away a residual trickle of blood from his wing-related injury.

"Can we just do this later, please?" Sherri said, taking a defensive posture. "Seriously, I don't want him watching me undress."

"What's the big deal?" Bobby shrugged. "It's not like you're naked under there, right? You're still wearing a T-shirt."

"God, can't a girl have a little privacy?" Sherri complained. "You wouldn't make Vivian change in front of everybody."

"Ha!" Bobby laughed. "Are you seriously trying to get us to believe that you're *modest* all of the sudden? Seriously, what's the big deal?"

"None of your fucking business," Sherri spat, clenching her arms more tightly.

Trent's swollen eyes suddenly grew wide in his head and he squeezed Priscilla nervously.

"Holy shiggedy shit," he gasped. "You got cut, didn't you?! You're hiding extra limbs under there!"

Sherri fixed her gaze on the dirt.

"I am not hiding extra limbs," she muttered. "Shut the fuck up."

Vivian's scrutinizing eyes ran up and down the lumpy sweatshirt, suddenly realizing for the first time that it was indeed full of more Sherri than it should have been.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "It's happened to you too, hasn't it?"

"Nothing's happened to me!" Sherri snarled. "You shut the fuck up too!"

"Don't be ashamed!" Erik chirped. "It's nothing to be ashamed of! Vivian and I are both fine. You're going to be fine too!"

"I *am* fine!" Sherri screeched. "Shut the fuck up! Everybody shut the fuck up! I'm not a mutant!"

"If you're not a mutant, then what's the big deal?" Bobby shouted back. "Seriously, stop being an attention whore and just take off the damn sweatshirt. What's the big deal?"

"*What's the big deal? What's the big deal?*" Sherri sneered mockingly. "Fine! I'll show you the big deal!"

With a furious yank of the zipper, Sherri tore off the sweatshirt and threw it to the ground. Suddenly the world fell silent except for the crackling of the fire and the imagined wail of an innuendo-laced saxophone solo. She had not grown any extra limbs, but hidden within the shrouded recesses of her mangled leather coat, Sherri

had undergone a different sort of mutation.

" *These* are the big deal, alright?!"

Somewhere along their journey, an underdeveloped waif of a girl had disappeared, eclipsed by a shapely young woman with all the right curves in all the right places. Her previously diminutive bustline had grown like the Grinch's heart on Christmas Day, pressing the nipples of two perky, pink-grapefruit-sized breasts distinctly against the inside of her ragged T-shirt. This bulging bosom distorted the shirt's original form, hauling its hemline up past her navel to reveal a tanned midriff of smooth skin that melted salaciously into a pair of voluptuous hips. The golden curls of her hair bounced across her pointy face as her head jerked accusingly across the gaping stares of her friends.

"Sweet Jesus, Mary, and Frederick's of Hollywood," Trent prayed, making the sign of the cross. "That's a rack that would make *Bullwinkle* say damn! You busted right out of your bra, girl!"

"I don't wear a bra," Sherri said with disgust. "The bra is just another one of the Man's schemes to keep women uncomfortable and subservient."

Trent laughed mockingly.

"Admit it! You just never needed one before!"

Sherri snatched the princess jacket from Erik's hands angrily.

"Alright, show's over!" she erupted. "This is exactly why I didn't want to take my shirt off in front of you people!"

Turning her back on Trent, she jammed her arms into the sleeves and wrestled her way into the tiny white coat. Despite her protests, it couldn't have fit more perfectly over her narrow shoulders if it had been custom tailored for her. She yanked up the zipper, and the quilted nylon fabric hugged her slender form all the way up to where her now ample chest halted its forward progress. The bottom of the tiny coat left four inches of midriff exposed between its furry trim and the top of her frayed skirt.

"Oh, that's just swell," she fumed, futilely tugging the hem. "That's just great. What kind of fashion-whore retard designs a coat with no middle?"

She yanked the coat's hood over her head and stuffed her smoldering cigarette between her lips sulkily. Vivian squinted thoughtfully.

"This is exactly the kind of thing that we were talking about before," she realized. "Sherri, your mammary tissue must be dividing at an accelerated rate!"

"Yeah? No shit!" Sherri retorted. "Why do you guys get all the bad-ass monster parts and all I get is a pair of torpedo tits full of breast cancer?"

"I don't know," Vivian admitted. "I can't explain it."

"You know, maybe you're just reading too much into this," Erik said awkwardly. "Maybe you're just, you know ... *blooming*."

"Blooming my ass!" Trent crowed. "El Pollo Loco can't cook up breasts that

fast!"

Sherri re-crossed her arms over her swollen chest and puffed angrily on her cigarette.

"It could be some kind of hormone imbalance," Vivian suggested, tapping her chin. "It's possible that her ovaries are what's really growing, and this is just a secondary effect."

"Jesus! Hello?" Sherri spat. "I'm right here! Please stop talking about me like I'm some pre-op transsexual fertilizing his bitch-tits with estrogen pills!"

"Wait, hold on," Bobby said suddenly. "That night. At the bar."

"So what-I was wasted," Sherri said. "We said alcohol doesn't have anything to do with it, remember?"

"No, not that," Bobby continued. "In the sub. The pills."

Sherri's eyes widened as the memory sloshed back to the front of her mind.

"Shut up," she said nervously. "Just shut up."

"What pills?" Erik asked.

"Special K," Sherri said tersely, her eyes narrowing into razor blades. "I was high on *Special K* that night. That's all."

"Isn't Special K a liquid?" Erik asked.

"What the fuck? Did you all watch a filmstrip on this or something? It comes in pill form too!"

"Come on, Sherri. You *know* this isn't a radioactive mutation," Bobby said. "It's got to be hormonal! You were popping Menoplay tablets like they were Mike and Ikes that night!"

"Shut up!" Sherri screamed. "You promised you wouldn't tell! You fucking suck!"

She threw her lit cigarette into Bobby's face and stomped off into the darkness, leaving behind only echoes of a humiliated sob. The others sat for a moment of silence as the new information sunk in.

"Menoplay?" Vivian said. "Like 'aisle four, women's hormone supplements' Menoplay?"

"Yeah," Bobby nodded. "It's a long story."

"Damn," Trent said. "I guess that explains why her mood swings like the Brian Setzer Orchestra. A double dip of the lady hormones makes for one powerful rage, yo."

"Oh, shut up, Trent," Vivian scowled. "Benedictine monks have a better grasp on feminine biology than you do."

"I beg to differ," Trent grinned smarmily. "I think I've got a pretty good grasp on a fine specimen of feminine biology right here. Isn't that right, Prissy?"

He squeezed his arms around Priscilla, rousing her trancelike gaze from the ash spiraling upward from the crackling fire. She nuzzled against his body and stroked his chin with absent-minded affection. Swaddled in Trent's wool jacket and wrapped in his amorous arms, Priscilla looked warm, comfortable, and truly happy.

Just then a cold breeze picked up, skating over Vivian's exposed skin, slipping through the slashes in her wrecked polyester dress, and encircling her icy ribcage. She clenched her arms around herself and glared grudgingly at the well-insulated newcomer.

Nick would have liked Priscilla, she thought. This was a girl who knew how to use her assets to get what she wanted. In just a few hours, she had used her statuesque figure to collect both a warm coat and a hot embrace without saying a word. Vivian's teeth chattered. As disgusting as the idea was, she found herself almost jealous of the girl being held lovingly in Trent's arms.

She tore her bitter eyes away from Priscilla, turning to Erik just in time to see him slipping into his regained sweatshirt. Her eyes flashed covetously as he rubbed the cotton-poly sleeves over his quickly warming arms. Why hadn't he offered it to her? Of course it wouldn't fit over her wings, but a few holes cut in its back could remedy that problem easily enough. It was obvious to her that she, and her modest assets, had been conspicuously overlooked. Erik caught her glaring angrily at him.

"You okay, Viv?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Vivian said sourly. "I'm just cold out here without a coat. I guess you didn't notice."

She cocked her head toward the ground and her lower lip darted outward in a shameful pout.

"Didn't notice?" Erik said. "Of course I noticed! I'm sorry, I just got distracted by Sherri's big-"

Vivian glared at him. Erik closed his eyes and shook his head.

"I just got distracted."

He stood up and retrieved the last shopping bag.

"Don't worry, I saved the best for last," he grinned. "Drum roll, please!"

He reached into the paper bag with both hands and, with a dramatic flap, produced the cherry-red coat of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

"Ta da!" he announced. "Sorry, horse not included."

"Oh, nice try, freak boy," Trent laughed condescendingly. "How's Vampirella gonna fit her extra gear in *that*?"

Without a word, Erik smiled and flipped the coat around. On the back of the Mountie Bee's former coat were two wing holes extending from its shoulders to its waist, custom tailored to accommodate the insect mannequin's physiology in a perfect double stitch. As if to make the appropriateness of his find perfectly clear, Erik's two mutant paws popped out of the holes with a showy flourish of their

grizzled fingers.

"I was going to just cut some holes in this sweatshirt, but I think this will be a much better fit for you. Plus you've got to admit, it's got a lot more panache!"

Vivian's lips pulled away from her teeth, revealing a smile so large that it could hardly be contained within the frame of her face. She had not been forgotten after all.

"Oh wow, Erik," she said, taking the coat and turning it over in her trembling hands. "I mean ... wow. Good thinking! I never would have thought of taking clothes off the display model."

"Well, when I was just in there, the Mountie Bee-he made me think of you," Erik smiled. "Er, I mean, not that you look like a humanoid bee or anything, just that ... you know, he had those big stupid wings and-not that wings are stupid! Wings are actually really cool; I just meant-"

"It's okay," Vivian said blushing. "Help me put it on; I'm freezing."

Erik stepped behind Vivian with relief and started working her wings through the tailored holes. With a bit of pulling, folding, and squeezing, her long, spiny wings were wrestled through the fabric until the jacket's epaulettes rested neatly upon her shoulders. Fastening the brass buttons down its front, she found the fit a little snug, but quite comfortable and, most importantly, very warm. She raised her arms and bent her elbows to test the fit, prompting her wings to stretch out from her shoulders in a disturbing arch of bones and black leather.

"How do I look?" she asked.

"Like the wet dream Nell Fenwick never told anybody about," Bobby replied.

Vivian turned to Erik with a newfound warmth that danced in her sparkling eyes.

"Thank you, Erik," she said, taking his human hands in her own. "It's absolutely perfect."

Before Erik could reply, Sherri came stomping back to the fireside, plowing straight between them and tearing apart their gentle grip. She bent down and picked up her new purse, quickly stuffing a fresh cigarette into her chattering teeth.

"Just shut up," she said with quiet preemption. "It's too fucking cold over there."

She lit her cigarette and pulled a long, hot drag into her lungs. Her glare slid up and down Vivian as she exhaled.

"Oh, now that's just *so* unfair," she snarled. "I'm all faggoted up like Holly Hobby, meanwhile Vivian gets to be all Sergeant Pepper over here."

"I'm sorry," Vivian said without at all sounding like she meant it. "I don't think you realize how good you have it. I'd rather wear that stupid little coat than have these awful wings."

"And I'd rather have the wings than wear the coat," Sherri said. "Ain't irony a bitch?"

With that, she dropped into a cross-legged heap by the fire. Erik and Vivian

exchanged a short, longing glance over Sherri's head before sitting down on opposite sides of her veil of cigarette smoke.

"Okay, all of this dress-up montage stuff is all fine and good," Bobby interjected, "but didn't you two bring back any *food*?"

"But of course," Trent said, grabbing the Army backpack and tossing it to Bobby. "While Little E was in there playing fashion show, Big T was bringing home the bacon."

The backpack hit Bobby in the gut with a *thump* that sent pain blistering around each side of his scarred body. He sucked air through his teeth and looked at Trent spitefully. Trent was too busy playing with Priscilla's hair to notice. Bobby set the bag down between his legs and started digging into it.

"Alright, let's see what we've got," he muttered. "Oh! What a surprise! Maple cookies!"

A unified moan went up from the empty stomachs of the hungry survivors.

"That's really all there was?" Vivian said sadly. "Nothing but more maple cookies?"

"Wait!" Bobby said, producing a brown glass bottle. "You can also wash them down with maple syrup!"

"Christ," Sherri grumbled. "All we ever find to eat is sugar. I've got the diet of a hummingbird."

"At this rate we're going to end up starving to death, but with full stomachs and brains still wired on glucose," Vivian agreed.

Bobby pulled several tins of cookies out of the bag and dismally passed them around the fire. He poked at the container left in his lap while speaking in the exaggerated staccato of a fake Shatner.

"It's the end ... of ... the world! You ... haven't eaten anything ... but ... candy ... in three days! Your body ... is ... about to go into complete nutritional failure! This ... is a Grocery911!"

Vivian snapped a stale cookie in half with her teeth.

"This isn't *a* Grocery911," she mumbled. "This is *the* Grocery911."

Bobby picked up a cookie and looked at it distastefully.

"Man, what I wouldn't give for that website right about now. You know what I would order if I had Grocery911.com in front of me? A frozen meat lovers pizza, two cans of refried beans, a can of jalapeños, and a jar of salsa."

"I think we'd all be thankful to share a feast like that, dawg," Trent said hungrily.

"Share? That's all for me!" Bobby sighed. "I would dump all the other stuff onto the pizza and then roll it up into a burrito. How 'bout you, Erik?"

Erik wasn't listening to Bobby. He was mesmerized by the firelight dancing in the cracked lenses of Vivian's glasses.

"Erik?" Bobby repeated. "Hello? What would you order if you had Grocery911?"

"Oh, uh, right," Erik said thoughtfully. "I, uh ... I think I'd order ... a box of Urkel-Os."

"Oh, come on, Erik," Bobby huffed. "Pick something else. Grocery911 doesn't sell antique cereal."

"Grocery911 doesn't sell *anything* anymore," Erik reminded him.

Bobby shrugged.

"Fair enough."

"What the fuck is Urkel-Os?" Sherri asked.

"It was the official breakfast cereal of the wacky neighbor on *Family Matters*," Erik explained. "It had a big picture of Steve Urkel being a doofus on the front of the box."

"Oh yeah, I remember that!" Trent laughed. "One of my homeboys bought a box as a gag and it was kickin' around my crib for like, three years. That thing was hilarious, yo!"

Erik rolled his eyes.

"I'll bet you don't even know who Steve Urkel is," he sighed. "You just saw the nerd on the box and thought it was *so funny*, or *fly* or whatever. You probably never even watched that show, did you?"

"Whoa, lay off, Little E," Trent cautioned. "So I didn't watch some lamer-ass TV show. I never actually ate the shitty cereal either. What difference does it make?"

Erik looked at Trent, then at Vivian.

"It's just typical of you," he shrugged. "All you cared about was the packaging. You didn't even bother to look inside. I guess that's what makes us different."

"Get over it, Little E!" Trent laughed. "It was just some bullshit fad cereal. Don't get up in my grill like *you* didn't just buy it because it had that geek on the box."

Erik shook his head and looked at Vivian with a faint smile.

"Sure, I noticed it at first because of the package, but after the first taste I realized that the cereal itself was actually really, really good. Everybody else just saw the nerd on the outside, but I loved it for what it really was. I never made a big show of it, so I guess nobody really ever knew. It's just the way I am, I guess."

Vivian blinked and tipped her head toward Erik. His eyes darted shyly to the ground as his face quickly turned as red as her Mountie coat. She smiled as her face began to go crimson as well. After a pause, she spoke.

"You know what I'd order from Grocery911?" she said. "I'd order a carton of milk."

"Gah! What's wrong with you two?" Bobby griped. "I'm giving you a hypothetical blank check at the world's biggest online grocery retailer, and all you

want is two-fifths of a complete breakfast? What's so great about *milk*? "

"Well, milk contains essential vitamins and minerals I need to stay healthy, of course, but it also has psychological benefits," Vivian smiled. "It's a comfort food. Humans subconsciously relate milk to feelings of being nurtured and cared for. At a time like this, that's arguably more important than nutrition. Even though I often take it for granted, I'd be crushed if I knew that I'd never see milk again."

She turned to Erik with a single, coquettish blink of her dazzling green eyes.

"Plus, milk goes great with cereal."

Her gaze caught Erik's and they shared a long, silent moment that required no further innuendo to explain. Between them, Sherri's eyes flicked back and forth with disgust.

"Oh for fuck's sake, you two," she grumbled. "Hey Erik, you know what I'd order? Erik. Erik!"

Erik's eyes broke from Vivian's with an almost audible snap.

"What? Uh ... what. I don't know, Sherri. What would you order?"

"A *wiener*," she growled luridly. "A foot-long wiener."

She put her hand on Erik's knee and leaned toward him. His male eyes instinctively shot a glance at the treasure chest down the mangled neckline of her T-shirt before he consciously wrangled them back to her tanned little face. Her words seemed to melt like hot candle wax from her rosy pink lips.

"I want twelve inches of hot, firm meat to stick in my mouth."

Erik coughed violently and shifted awkwardly in the dirt, but Sherri just drew closer and suggestively grasped his inner thigh in her slender fingers.

"Whoa, whoa, okay," Erik blurted apprehensively. "That's no good. That's gotta stop."

"Why?" Sherri asked innocently. "Are you afraid you're going to pop another boner like you did when you were laying on top of me in the igloo?"

"I was nervous!" Erik squeaked.

"I know. You were *enormously* nervous."

Sherri turned to Vivian and held her hands ten inches apart in the air with a knowing wink.

"Sherri, seriously! Stop it," Erik hissed. "Get your hormones under control! You're like a Vulcan with the *Pon farr*! "

"Oh, cut the Puritan bullshit," Sherri breathed, crawling into his lap. "I think it would be bitchin' to fuck a dude with four arms. You could hit all my erogenous zones at once and still be able to hold my beer."

In a concerted effort, Erik's four hands simultaneously grabbed Sherri's body, lifted her completely out of his lap, and deposited her unceremoniously in the dirt at

his side. She seemed relatively unfazed by the setback, leaning back on one arm with a long, provocative drag on her cigarette.

"So uh, Trent! Trent's turn," Erik chattered, his face beet-red. "Trent, what would you order?"

Trent looked at the others, then at Priscilla with a huge toothy grin.

"The T-man wants a full-on slab of honey barbecue ribs," he declared.

"Finally," Bobby nodded. "Somebody who would actually order something worthwhile."

"Hellz yeah, dawg, it's more than worthwhile," Trent smiled. "I'm a man who likes to put his lips up against something with a little meat on the bones, yo. Most men can't handle the full rack, but the T delights the biggest mouthful of hot, sweet meat that he can get. Y'all know what I'm sayin'?"

He pulled Priscilla close and she shifted against him, turning her muscular, feminine body and pressing her forehead against his cheek. Trent turned his head and gave her nose a playful nibble.

"Alright! Forget it! This game is over!" Bobby snapped, waving his hands in the air. "I don't know how you can all turn something as beautiful and innocent as a website into something so filthy and wrong!"

"Well, you're the one who thought it would be fun to talk about food with a bunch of people who are *starving to death*," Sherri shot back. "Have you got any other ideas to keep us entertained, or should we just jump straight to the cannibalism now?"

"We should all just get to sleep," Vivian suggested. "Don't worry. I think we're going to find all the food that we can eat tomorrow."

"Oh, I'm sure," Sherri smirked. "Then, after we eat all the food, maybe you can click your ruby slippers together and fly us all back to Kansas."

Vivian shook her head and spoke authoritatively.

"No, I'm serious. If we keep up the same pace we've been traveling at for the past few days, we should hit Washington D.C. by tomorrow night. If we're ever going to find civilization, that's where it's going to be."

Everyone looked at Vivian, with expressions running the gamut from doubtful to outright condescending.

"Vivian, are you on crack?" Bobby said skeptically. "We're sitting here in the bombed-out remains of a two-bit roadside tourist trap, yet you somehow think the *nation's capital* is just going to be sitting there without a scratch on it?"

Vivian watched Priscilla rub her stout nose drowsily under Trent's chin.

"I don't think that it survived undamaged," she said evenly. "But yesterday I also didn't think we'd ever see another living person again either. Priscilla managed to survive out here in the middle of nowhere all by herself with no warning or

preparation. Washington is the seat of the federal government. I'd bet my life that there are fully stocked shelters the size of stadiums buried under that city."

Sherri shook her head.

"So we're just going to roll up to an airtight underground Hilton full of crusty, old white dickheads, knock on the door and say, 'Hey, can we come in? We're cool! Less than half of us are contagious radioactive mutants!'"

Vivian frowned.

"So, do you have a better plan then?"

"Nah, your plan is cool with me," Sherri shrugged. "Let's go scare the congressional shit out of those assholes."

"That's the spirit," Vivian smiled.

"It sounds like a good plan to me too," Erik agreed. "But if we're going to drive all the way to D.C. tomorrow, we'd better get some sleep. We should try to hit the road at daylight to make sure we get there before dark."

"Any plan that involves sleep is good with me," Bobby said. "I'm beat."

A consenting chorus of grunts and yawns led into the dull activity of everyone bedding down for the night. Six minutes later, Bobby was snoring. The passing of another eight minutes found Vivian fitfully unconscious, wrapped in the blanket of her own wings. Seven minutes later Erik was blissfully dreaming, and four minutes after that, Sherri was out cold, tucked without invitation between his arms.

Trent and Priscilla were the last to remain awake. Priscilla lay face up across Trent's lap, staring into a flat black sky that was as dim as her own eyes.

"Looks like it's just you and me now, Prissy," Trent said softly. "Forget about them, girl. You just stick with me and everything's gonna be all right for you. I promise."

As the fire crackled menacingly nearby, he ran his forefinger around her dry lips, again and again.

"The T is going to make you forget about those nasty mutants. I'm gonna make you feel real good for a change."

With that, he leaned down over his lap and put his lips to hers, pushing his broad, wet tongue into her unresponsive mouth.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Vivian sat by herself on the dusty front fender of the abandoned Plymouth Reliant

K that haunted the North of the Border parking lot. The morning was absolutely silent, save for the crackle of her fingers digging into an oversized cellophane bag of maple cookies. She took the first bite of her stale breakfast and the dry crumbs burned her parched throat, scraping all the way down to her empty stomach.

She turned her sleepy eyes skyward and put her face into the golden yellow sun. Of course, the golden yellow sun was still buried behind a black mile of vaporized urban landscape hanging listlessly in the stratosphere, but just knowing that it was still out there helped to put her mind at ease. The sun was right on the other side of those clouds, just as Washington D.C. was right on the other side of a few more easy hours of driving. It wouldn't be long before this lonely nightmare was finally over.

She slipped off of the fender and stretched her arms and legs, pulling the tightness of her night of uncomfortable slumber out of her muscles. As she did so, the sails of her wings extended and flexed from her back as if trying to prove that they were part of the family too. Vivian turned her head and looked over her shoulder, and the wings dropped back into a bundle of limp folds. She tapped her finger on her lips with a thoughtful blink.

After a glance around the empty parking lot ensured nobody was looking, she turned her eyes to the sky. She placed her feet shoulder-width apart, balled her fists, and threw her arms skyward.

"Flap!" she growled. "Flap!"

The muscles that anchored her wings to her back tensed slightly, then settled back to rest as if ignoring a false alarm.

"Come on! Flap flap flap!"

Her wings remained motionless save for the gentle bounce that rippled through them from the spring of her frustrated knees. She closed her eyes and took a series of deep, cleansing breaths.

"Okay," she whispered calmly. "I'm visualizing the flap. I can see the wings extending and falling in smooth, powerful strokes. I can see my body being pushed through the air, upwards and upwards into the sky."

She opened her eyes and set her passionate gaze straight through the dark clouds above her, straight into the hidden sun. Bouncing anxiously on the balls of her feet, she took a few anticipatory steps backward and crouched down like a sprinter awaiting the starting gun.

"I'm visualizing the flap," she said to herself. "Let's do this!"

With a series of explosive strides from her long, powerful legs, Vivian launched herself across the yard, kicked off the ground, and sailed into the air. The cold breeze whipped through her hair exhilaratingly as her face cut through the sky. It continued to do so for nearly a full second before her palms and knees landed hard in the thinly landscaped dirt, followed immediately by the rest of her battered body. As if to add insult to injury, her inanimate wings flew forward on her shoulders upon

impact, slapping her in the back of the head and ramming her pointed chin into the cracked earth. When her eyes returned to focus, the first thing she saw was the license plate taunting her from the front of the Reliant.

North Carolina - First in Flight

Her face scrunched into the kind of scowl that says, "*Why I ooooughta!*"

"Vivian? Vivian, are you okay?"

Vivian sprang up onto her knees, quickly brushing the dust off of her coat.

"Oh, uh, hi, Erik! Good morning," she said with embarrassment. "I didn't realize anybody else was awake yet."

Erik took Vivian by the arm and helped her to her feet.

"What happened?" he asked, gently steadying her. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, yeah, forget it. I just tripped," Vivian blushed. "Nobody else was awake. I didn't think you'd notice if I slipped away. I mean, you seemed to have your hands pretty full with Sherri this morning."

"Yeah, that I did," Erik said with irritation, dropping his arms. "I don't know what that was all about. I just woke up and she was laying on top of me, and two of my arms were completely numb with pins and needles. Lucky for me, I still have two left!"

His left rat paw plunged into the bag of cookies on the fender, grabbing one and flicking it into the air. As it came flipping back to the earth, his right human hand caught it and stuffed it in his mouth; Vivian watched the spectacle wide-eyed.

"How did you do that?!" she gasped.

"Doo wghat?" Erik chewed.

"Your hand! I mean, your *paw*," she said, pointing. "You just manipulated it!"

"Yeah, I guess I did," Erik shrugged. "I've kinda learned to control them a little."

"A little? There's nothing 'a little' about it," Vivian lauded. "You have complete motor control, down to the fingers! I can't get these stupid wings to even flap! I must be neurophysiologically defective."

"Oh, now that is untrue," Erik said vehemently. "There is *nothing* defective about your brain, Vivian."

"Well, it doesn't really matter either way," Vivian muttered. "I don't even know why I'm trying. At the first hospital we find I'm getting these hideous things amputated so that I can be normal again. I don't want to be a freak of nature. Er ... no offense."

"None taken," Erik said supportively. "I don't think you're a freak of nature. So you've grown a pair of ornery bat wings. It's not the end of the world."

Vivian raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, so I guess technically it *is* the end of the world," he conceded. "But

you've got to admit, it's not the end of *our* world! Come on, Viv. If Steve Gutenberg can survive a nuclear war, then so can we!"

Vivian smiled a warm little smile.

"You're right. We could be a lot worse off, I guess."

"That's the spirit," Erik nodded. "Now let's figure out how to work those wings."

Vivian shook her head.

"Forget it. It's a lost cause. I try to visualize them flapping, but they don't do *anything*. No matter how hard I concentrate I can't even get a twitch out of them."

"Well, that's your problem right there," Erik smiled. "You're wasting your time visualizing and concentrating. That's not the way they work. Don't *think* about your wings flapping, just *flap* them."

"That's a really helpful new perspective," Vivian smirked. "Thank you for that sage advice, Zen master."

"I'm serious," Erik persisted. "You need to just ... how do I explain it? Okay, let me show you."

He took Vivian's hand and held it out in front of her. He pulled her fingers apart and left her standing with her open palm facing the sky.

"Close your eyes," he said. After a terse sigh and a bored look, she complied. "Now visualize your hand as a fist. Picture what it looks like clenched into a fist. Imagine the way that the fingernails feel against your palm. Visualize the way that the knuckles stand away from the back of your hand. Picture your thumb wrapped over the top of your fingers. Are you picturing it?"

"I am," Vivian said.

"Open your eyes."

Vivian opened her eyes and looked at her hand, still palm up, still open.

"You didn't make a fist," Erik said.

"You didn't tell me to make a fist. You just said to visualize it."

Erik smiled triumphantly. "That's exactly what I'm saying," he beamed. "You can sit there all day and *think* about closing that hand, but it's not going to close until your brain just *does* it."

Vivian's fingers curled into a fist, straightened, and curled again. Her gaze flicked from her hand to Erik's eyes with some sense of enlightenment.

"I understand," she said quietly, "but at the same time I don't. I mean, I understand the concept of visualizing versus actualizing, but how do you teach your brain to stop thinking and just start doing?"

"That I don't really know. My rat arms seemed to take cues from my human arms at first. Maybe you should try to train your wings by flapping your arms. Your brain knows how to make your arms move."

Vivian nodded eagerly.

"Okay, stand back."

She straightened her back and stood with her arms at her sides. Closing her eyes and furrowing her brow, she raised her arms slowly to her sides.

"Is it working?" she asked quietly.

"Not yet," Erik said. "Try again."

Vivian lowered her arms, cleared her mind, and raised them again. Again, nothing.

"Hmm," Erik said, scratching his chin. "I've got an idea. Lemme help."

He stepped behind Vivian and grasped the long bony ribs of her wings.

"What are you doing, Erik?"

"You just put your arms out again, and I'm going to spread your wings at the same time. Maybe we can get your brain used to the idea of the wings moving when your arms move."

"Okay," Vivian nodded. "Nice and slow. Ready? ... Go."

She closed her eyes and gracefully raised her willowy arms to her sides. Simultaneously, Erik began pulling her gnarled wings apart on her back. Their fleshy hinges were stiff and unyielding, and Vivian began to topple forward as Erik's efforts inadvertently pushed her shoulders forward of her toes. His mutant paws immediately rectified the situation by grasping her firmly around her waist and holding her steady.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Keep going."

Vivian kept raising her arms, trying to wrap her brain around the obtuse concept of moving her wings without *thinking* about it. As the stubborn sails began to extend, Erik quickly realized that their span exceeded that of his own arms. He stepped forward against Vivian's back to squeeze the last few inches of length out of his outstretched arms.

Vivian kept slowly raising her hands to her sides. She could feel Erik's body pressing against hers. She could feel his four hands on her body, his chest against her back, his stubbly face grazing her neck. Without opening her eyes, she turned her head toward him and spoke with a sly grin.

"Did you really think this was going to teach me to use my wings, or was this all just a ruse to get fresh with me?"

She could feel Erik's extra hands tense around her waist.

"I uh ... well, you see I," Erik stammered. "Oh man, I *so* feel like Trent right now."

A giggle escaped Vivian's lips.

"No you don't," she smiled. "If you felt like Trent you'd be on the ground with two black eyes by now."

Erik smiled shyly as Vivian rubbed her cheek against his. She could now feel Erik's whole body pressing a firm warmth against her back. She could feel the softness of his sweatshirt along the backs of her own bare arms.

But her arms were not bare.

"Whoa, Erik!" she breathed. "Don't move! I feel it!"

"I'm sorry!" Erik chirped defensively. "I'm just nervous!"

"I feel my *wings*, " Vivian clarified. "I feel the sensation of your arms against mine, but ... but not! It's weird!"

Erik suddenly realized that his hands were no longer supporting Vivian's wings but actually holding them back. He released his grip and the black sails spread majestically outward. They seemed larger than Erik had remembered, now spanning at least eight feet from end to end. His fingertips ran like soft little rakes over their leathery surface as they extended outward from the red fabric of her trembling shoulders.

"Eeesh!" Vivian giggled. "Stop it! That tickles! It's *weird!* "

Vivian held her arms out to her sides and bared her teeth in a smile, bouncing on her toes as the ticklish feeling rained out of the air around her. The sensation was no longer coming from her arms. It had turned into a sparkling, freeform ghost that was sliding through her shoulders and across her back.

"How's this? Can you feel this?" Erik ran his hands in broad circular strokes over the backs of her wings. In her own mind, Vivian could almost see blue sparks flying in the same spirals out of her shoulders, forming a cloudy outline of her newly awakened limbs in her subconscious. She could almost feel the distinct trace of each individual fingertip telegraphing an impulse to her brain down a line that had never before been used.

"Oh! Right there!" she squeaked. "Yes! Yes! I can feel it! Keep touching me right there! I'm getting it! I'm getting it!"

Vivian's moment of intense physical clarity was cut short by the jarring voice of her brother.

"Holy crap! That's just *wrong!* " Bobby gasped. "My best friend and my own twin sister. Man, now I know how Luke Skywalker felt!"

The bright mental sparks immediately sizzled into a numb blackness as Vivian's eyes flew open to see Bobby standing ten feet in front of her. His small, beady eyes looked especially menacing peering from the whiteness of his pale, bloodless face.

Erik's hands slipped from Vivian's waist with a nervous cough. He took a step backward that didn't seem embarrassed so much as caught red-handed.

"Oh, uh ... hi Bobby," he said, not making eye contact.

"So, now I finally see the truth," Bobby said, taking slow, deliberate steps around the mutant conspirators. "This is how it is, huh? You never really liked me at all, did you, Erik? All this time you've just been using me to get to my sister. I should have

known that you liked her more than you liked me."

"That's not true!" Erik squeaked guiltily. "You know you're my best friend! You've always been my best friend! I'm not using you to get to Vivian!"

"You've got a funny way of showing it, Dr. Feelgrope."

Erik's four hands flexed guiltily in the air.

"I was just trying to show her how to use her wings!" he chirped. "That's all! Nothing more! I swear!"

Bobby's accusing posture softened into his usual, easy-going slouch.

"Jeez, man," he smiled, rolling his eyes. "Lighten up. I was just messin' with ya. Don't get your panties all in a bunch."

Erik's expression instantly changed from "being hurt" to "wanting to hurt someone else."

"C'mere," Bobby continued blithely, walking toward the Rabbit. "Help me with the satellite dish-I want to see if there's any news today. Hopefully I'll have better luck at picking something up than you just did."

Erik watched Bobby's feet plodding through the parking lot, crushing the last vestiges of a lost moment into the gravel. He turned and looked at Vivian sheepishly. Her eyes were fixed on his, and her face hung halfway between disappointment and anger.

"Viv, you know I just meant that I wasn't ... that I didn't ... I mean, I didn't mean that I don't-"

Vivian sighed and turned away.

"Just go help Bobby," she said coldly.

Erik nodded helplessly and crossed the driveway, rushing to Bobby's side and punching him hard in the shoulder.

"Ow!" Bobby exclaimed. "What was that for?"

"Why did you have to go and do that, you big jerk?!"

"Do what? It was a joke. Get over it."

"Get over it? You just ruined our ... we were like, having a *moment* there."

"A moment? Oh please, Erik."

Bobby pulled the 5-in-1 camping lantern from the trunk and stuffed it into his friend's four hands. When his stubby arms returned to his sides, a few short segments of stained Confederate bandages fell out of his bathrobe sleeve and fluttered unnoticed to the ground. He pulled the cable out of the trunk and plugged one end into the lantern.

"I'm serious, Bobby," Erik said earnestly. "I think we just had a spark."

"A moment *and* a spark!" Bobby laughed. "Wow! You were practically on your

way to the *warm fuzzies!* "

He plugged the cable into the satellite dish and plopped into a cross-legged sitting position in the gravel.

"Why don't you just go after Sherri instead?" Bobby continued, taking the lantern from Erik. "She's totally into you. And you'd get a lot farther with a lot less effort-that's for sure. I'll bet you could score with her in a second if you just asked, and I *know* you think she's hot now."

Erik crossed his arms and leaned on the fender in an insulted huff.

"Dude! Dude, I can't believe you! What makes you think that I'd do Sherri? I'm not just gonna suddenly be interested in her just because ... okay, yes, so she's kinda cute now. But, God! Do you really think that I'm just some horny asshole looking for anyplace hot and willing to stick his-"

Bobby looked up at Erik with a sigh and a slow shake of his head.

"You're messing with me again, aren't you?" Erik scowled.

"I'm sorry," Bobby chuckled. "It's just so easy."

Just then the sound of tiny feet in cloddish boots crunched stealthily into the parking lot. Sherri threw one last glance through the turnstiles and darted over to Vivian.

"Good, you're all here," she hissed confidentially. "Quick, let's get the hell out of here before Trent wakes up."

"Sherri, we're not leaving without Trent," Vivian said. "No matter how admittedly tempting the idea might be."

Sherri's eyebrows wrinkled with incomprehension.

"But if you're not ditching Trent, then what are you all doing in the parking lot?"

"We're having breakfast. Or the closest available substitute," Vivian qualified. "Here. Dig in."

She picked up the crinkling bag of cookies and pushed it into Sherri's tiny hands. Sherri plucked out one of the crumbling snacks and distastefully examined it between her bony thumb and forefinger.

"Okay, how about this," she suggested, "let's just kill Trent and eat *him*. "

"Stop it, Sherri," Vivian grumbled.

"We'd be doing him a favor! He'd go a step up the social order if we turned him into shit!"

Before Vivian could reply, the calm morning air was broken by tinny, childish voices in conversation.

"Whazzat, look! That hermit has all kinds of puppets that we can use for our puppet show!"

"I don't know, Lookout. Mayor Ben says that we should never talk to

strangers."

"Oh, don't be such a stick in the mud! He looks harmless enough to me!"

Vivian and Sherri stepped to Erik's side. All three of them looked over Bobby's shoulder and into the tiny TV screen he cradled in his lap.

"What's going on?" Vivian asked hopefully.

"Well, it looks like the dumpy-ass bear wants to get some puppets from the weird, furry drifter," Bobby said, "but the kangaroo chick thinks they shouldn't be talking to-"

"I meant, what's going on with the search for a broadcast," Vivian interrupted irritably. "Did you find any new channels? Any news?"

"*Nada*," Bobby frowned. "Same shit, different day. Nothing but *Zoobilee Zoo* out the wazoo."

He poked the power button and the miniature screen went black. He shifted his tightly bandaged girth awkwardly in the gravel, but he couldn't quite manage to climb to his feet. Ultimately he held his arm up to Vivian in surrender.

"Gimme a hand here, sis."

As Bobby's arm went up, his baggy bathrobe sleeve slipped to his shoulder, revealing a row of uneven green spikes the size of scissor blades sprouting from the top of his forearm.

"Whoa!" Vivian gasped. "What the-"

Bobby held his arm up to his face and stared at the bony protrusions that sprouted from his wrist to his elbow like a lime-green mohawk. He flicked them with his finger-they felt like plastic.

"Well, shit," he shrugged. "Looks like I'm catching up to you guys."

Vivian reached down and grabbed Bobby's thick hand with both of her own, hoisting him upward with a labored grunt. When he was on his feet, she took the cuff of his sleeve in both hands and pulled it back over his arm.

"We better hide that before Priscilla wakes up," she said. "She's worked-up enough with only two of us showing mutations. If she saw this too, I don't know what she'd do."

"She'd just stand there staring like an idiot," Sherri said. "Like she always does."

"That's an unfair assumption," Vivian scowled. "How do you know what she'd do?"

Sherri turned her eyes over Vivian's shoulder and gave two tiny, pointed thrusts with her chin. Vivian turned around and saw Priscilla standing slumped on two buckled legs just five feet behind her. Her dilated eyes were placid, and she stood quietly, save for the sound of the air being sucked down her mangled throat.

"What's she doing here?" Bobby murmured. "I thought she was scared of you guys."

"She was!" Erik agreed. "Maybe after an evening with Trent she's decided we're not so bad."

"Good morning, Priscilla," Vivian said with a carefully controlled measure of cheer, as though addressing a volatile child. "I'm happy to see you again. We're all happy to see you. We're your friends. Do you understand that?"

Priscilla showed no sign of answering Vivian's question. In fact, she seemed almost unaware that she was being spoken to at all. Her vacant glare was fixed blankly just past Vivian's hip. Vivian followed the eye line curiously to its terminus, which was Sherri.

"Why is she looking at me like that?" Sherri said apprehensively.

Priscilla took a lumbering step toward Sherri and raised her hand, a low sound raising from deep in her throat.

"Okay, seriously," Sherri squeaked, gripping the crackling bag of maple cookies tighter. "Why the hell is Lurch looking at me like that? I'm going to kick her ass if she touches me. I swear to God."

Priscilla took another step forward and pointed her finger at Sherri's hands before raising it hungrily to her lips.

"Wait, it's not you!" Vivian hissed. "It's the cookies! She wants the cookies!"

"First she wants Trent, now these shitty cookies," Sherri grumbled. "This girl likes some pretty messed-up shit."

"Priscilla, are you hungry?" Vivian offered. "We'll share with you. We're all friends here."

Vivian plucked the bag from Sherri's hands and slowly stepped toward Priscilla. The skittish girl quickly hobbled backward, squatting behind the fender of the Reliant with a gasp. Vivian closed her eyes and pulled back her arms, and, in a smooth and graceful movement, her wings extended straight back and downward behind her body, effectively hiding them from Priscilla's glazed eyes.

"Nice," Erik smiled.

"It's okay," Vivian continued. "This is for you."

She set the bag on the trunk of the square little car and backed away slowly. When Vivian had removed herself a sufficient distance, Priscilla stood up and dug into the crinkly cellophane, stuffing a stack of cookies into her ravenous mouth.

"Well, I'm glad to see somebody likes those things," Bobby smirked.

"We're making progress with her," Vivian smiled. "She's getting used to us. Pretty soon she won't be scared of us at all."

Erik looked at Priscilla clumsily digging her fist into the crackling bag and shoving more into her mouth.

"So do you guys think she's ... you know."

"Think she's what?" Vivian asked flatly.

"Um ... a *very special* episode."

Vivian looked at Priscilla and shook her head.

"I don't think she's developmentally disabled, if that's what you mean. I think she's just got some major psychological damage that we're going to have to work through."

"How?"

"I don't know," Vivian admitted. "Baby steps. For starters, we just need to convince her that we're all her friends and that nobody in our group wants to do anything bad to her. That should be easy. We've all shown her nothing but kindness and respect thus far."

"Lookie here, lookie here! First thing in the A.M. and the T's woman is already out of bed and finding her man some breakfast. That's what I call love, yo."

Trent pushed through the turnstiles and strutted across the gravel of the parking lot like the ludicrous white pimp in a blaxploitation film. He plunged his hand into the cookie bag and grabbed a handful before throwing an arm around Priscilla's waist and planting a kiss on her crumb-covered chin. His diaper of canvas bandages had disappeared, but its shape remained visible in the form of a clean swatch of fabric on his otherwise filthy clothes.

"Trent, what happened?" Vivian asked, puzzled. "Your bandages came off."

"Hellz yeah they came off," Trent grinned. "They came *all the way* off last night!"

As if to emphasize his point, he stepped forward and swung his hand in a high arc, preluding a dramatic zipping up of the open fly of his pants.

"That little woman was feisty with a capital *damn!* "

Vivian's hand flew to her mouth in horror.

"Oh my God, Trent. You didn't!"

"Didn't what?" Trent said coyly.

Vivian's eyes ticked between Trent and Priscilla's faces.

"You didn't *have sex with her!* " she hissed.

"Oh no! No, no, certainly not," Trent said with a smarmy smile, tracing finger quotes into the air. "I didn't have '*sex*' with her. Not *legally*, anyway. Let's just say I didn't have '*sex*' with her in exactly the same way that the president didn't have '*sex*' with his intern. Aw, snap!"

The others all stared at Trent agape.

"Trent, how ... how *could you?!* " Vivian stammered. "You know she's not cognizant of her actions right now! She's operating with a diminished capacity!"

"Says *you!* " Trent laughed. "I'd say she was operating at *full* capacity last night, if you know what I'm sayin'! Boo yah! Give the T some love!"

Trent leaned toward Erik and Bobby and threw both hands in the air in

anticipation of two congratulatory high-fives. Bobby remained a statue with his arms crossed tightly. Erik just stood with his mouth hanging open in troubled disbelief. Trent remained bent at the waist, hands in the air, eyes flicking back and forth between Erik and Bobby, almost pleading.

"Come on, my homies! Don't leave me hangin' here, bros!"

As Trent stood waiting for accolades that would never be delivered, Vivian's disgusted eyes were fixed sadly over his shoulder on Priscilla's sweet, shell-shocked face. An overwhelming sense of guilt was rising inside of her. Priscilla clearly was not in a state of mind to be making rational decisions, and Trent was just the kind of guy to see that as an open-ended invitation. Vivian realized that she should have known better than to leave him alone with her. This was all her fault.

As much as she tried not to, all Vivian could think of when she looked at Priscilla's broad, slack mouth was where it had been forced to go because of her negligence. All she could see in her mind's eye was the haunting black shadow of a thick, blunt shaft sliding over Priscilla's round chin and across her lips. The imagery was so vividly disturbing that she could almost see it ...

She blinked hard and gasped a tiny breath.

She *could* see it!

A thick black serpent covered in oily fur twisted across Priscilla's chest and over her chin. She craned her stiff neck away from it, but it continued to glide noiselessly up to her ear. Vivian broke her startled gaze to survey her friends' faces-Erik, Bobby, and Sherri each were transfixed by the snake's gently curving body.

"Trent!" Vivian hissed. "Step away from Priscilla. Slowly!"

She reached into the Rabbit's open trunk and wrapped her fingers around the hilt of the sword. Slowly and smoothly she raised it and held it in front of her body, preparing to strike. The serpent's undefined head bumped into Priscilla's cheek, sliding itself under her nose and across the side of her face. She twisted away from it again with an annoyed grunt.

"Whoa, whoa, Vivi!" Trent said, his eyes growing in terror. He put his arms out to his sides in a weak position of defense. "You just step off of Prissy, a'ight? Nobody gots to get hurt over this. You don't got to be jealous of her."

"I'm not jealous. I'm not going to hurt her," Vivian growled. "Just shut up and step away, before something else hurts h-"

Before she could say another word, the serpent struck! In a lost fraction of a second, the creature tensed its body into a rigid arrow of muscle and rammed its head into Priscilla's nose.

"No!" Vivian wailed.

Behind Trent, Priscilla took one affronted step backward, seemingly more annoyed than injured. In a flash, her hand swatted through the air, grabbing the snake around its neck and slamming it down on the fender of the Reliant with a resounding

bang. Both of Trent's hands flew to his groin as he fell to the ground with a howling shriek.

"Oooowwww!" he groaned. "Ow, shit! Shit!"

As Trent rolled over in agony, still clutching his crotch with both hands, his backside fell heavily into the gravel toward the stupefied onlookers. From a bloodstained hole in the back of his trousers, a furry black tail thrashed back and forth in the air. The horrific sight of it would have caused stomach-plunging hysteria only days before, but by this point the survivors took it in with little more than a relieved shrug.

"Uuuuhngh," Trent moaned. "Oooww. What happened to my beaver cleaver?"

"Nothing happened to your ... nothing happened to *that*," Vivian smirked. "You're just feeling misplaced phantom pain."

"Bullshit!" Trent grunted. "This pain is too legit to quit, yo!"

"But it's not where you think it is," Erik said. "Your brain just hasn't figured out where to send the pain sensations for your tail yet."

Trent's eyes snapped to Erik's in a flash of incomprehension.

"Hold up-back up. Say what now?"

"Oh for fuck's sake, don't you even *know*?" Sherri said with annoyance. "I've never met anyone as clueless as you. And I've worked at Circuit City!"

She stepped to Trent's side and grabbed the end of his thrashing tail, thrusting it in front of his face unapologetically.

"Happy birthday! You have a cat tail, idiot."

Trent's eyes followed the black rope in Sherri's hand back to his own injured tailbone. There was a brief pause as his brain worked over the new information, followed immediately by a spasm of denial.

"No ... no!" he chattered. "It ain't like that! I'm one of the chosen ones! It ain't like that! It ain't like that!"

He scrambled to his feet and took one fleeing step before Sherri yanked his tail like the starter on a lawnmower. With another wailing clutch at his groin, Trent once again dropped to the ground.

"Ha haaa!" Sherri grinned. "This is more fun than Whack-A-Mole!"

"Oooouuugghhh," Trent moaned.

"It looks like Twiki got a bite of you after all," Vivian said grimly. "Serves you right for what you did to Priscilla last night, you creep."

She raised her heel vengefully over Trent's limp tail but couldn't bring herself to stomp it into the rough gravel. She put her foot back on the ground and glowered in disgust.

Trent sat up and pulled his tail around the front of himself with both hands. He

glared at the greasy mutant appendage clenched in his fists with a spiteful fury.

"This ain't right, y'all. This wasn't supposed to happen to me," he rattled. "I'm trippin'. I'm straight trippin'! I'm not one of you freaks! I'm chosen! I'm one of His chosen ones!"

Vivian snorted. "Knock it off, Trent," she said harshly. "It's just biology. God hasn't forsaken you."

"Yeah, quit being so melodramatic," Bobby chimed. "On the one hand, you've got a grotesque physical deformity brought on by exposure to deadly doses of ionizing radiation, but on the other, Jesus loves you!"

"I can't have this," Trent said sternly. "It's got to come off."

"It will, very soon," Vivian said. "All of us will have these things amputated just as soon as we get to Washington D.C."

"No," Trent said with finality. "Now. This bitch has gotta come off now. I can't live like this, yo. It ain't natural. It ain't part of His plan."

"Trent, we can't just cut it off," Vivian snapped. "We don't have the proper tools."

"Bullshit!" Sherri yelled gleefully.

She snatched Vivian's backpack purse out of the front seat of the Rabbit and yanked out the Swiss Army Knife.

"We've got all the tools we need right here. Let's cut off some of Trent!"

She dropped to her knees by Trent's side and grabbed his tail, pulling it taut and raising the knife into the air with a smile. With her thumb, she flicked open a glinting blade from its side with a sinister-sounding *click*. Trent could feel her broken fingernails digging into a shaft of soft, sensitive skin that she was not actually holding, and his hands again slapped over his groin.

"Wait! Hold up, girl! I changed my mind. Stop!"

Without hesitation, Sherri slashed the blade through the air in a savage arc of flashing metal. Halfway to Trent's tail, however, her arm came to an abrupt stop with a sharp slap of flesh against flesh. The knife dropped into the gravel as her tiny forearm was crushed in Priscilla's powerful fist. Before she could even look at her assailant, Sherri had been yanked off the ground and was hanging limply from Priscilla's outstretched arm.

"Aaaaagh! Shit!" Sherri wailed. "Let go of me, warrior princess!"

She planted an oversized boot directly into Priscilla's kneecap. Priscilla threw her to the ground and stumbled backward, tearfully clutching her already wounded knee.

"Oh my God, Sherri!" Vivian gasped.

With a look of tortured concern on her face, Vivian rushed to Priscilla's side and put a supportive hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Priscilla! I'm sorry," she said soothingly. "Sherri didn't mean to hurt you. You just startled her. She didn't mean to hurt you. We're not going to hurt you."

Sherri sat up with a wince and knocked the gravel out of her hair.

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine," she said bitterly. "Feel free to kiss Gigantor's ass."

"I'm sorry, Sherri," Vivian said. "You're going to need to be a little less violent if we're going to make her trust us. Especially toward Trent. For some reason it looks as if she's taken it upon herself to protect him."

"But ..." Sherri said angrily. "But he told me to! He actually *told* me to cut him this time! Didn't you, Trent?"

Trent snatched his bristling tail and held it protectively against his chest.

"Vivi's right," he said. "We best just wait until we get to a hospital."

Sherri's face collapsed in disappointment.

"But you'll go to Hell if I don't cut it off, right?" She frowned. "You don't want to go to Hell, do you?"

"I'm not keeping it," Trent established. "But we gotta wait until we can see an M.D., for real. If we just chop it off I'll still be griddled up with mutant DNA, right? I want a biopsy on that shit so I know it ain't comin' back, yo."

Bobby twisted his head back and then threw it forward, rubbing his eyes in an exaggerated double take.

"What?!" he gasped. " *What?! Did Trent just dismiss biblical mumbo jumbo in favor of a valid scientific theory? Holy shit, we should have started threatening his penis from day one!*"

Vivian shook her head and looked at the brightening cloud cover.

"All right, cut it out, you guys," she said. "If we're going to be to Washington D.C. by tonight, we need to stop messing around and get on the road."

"We still need to grab all of our stuff," Bobby said.

"It's taken care of," Vivian replied, returning the camping lantern to the trunk. "I packed up everything before you guys woke up. We're ready to go."

"Well, somebody's a little eager beaver," Trent said. "I'm surprised you didn't just leave without us."

"I second that," Sherri growled.

"I'm just excited," Vivian said. "I almost can't believe that in just a few hours we'll be back in civilization. Or a reasonable facsimile thereof."

"For real," Trent agreed. "Let's all hop in that little car and get us to a hospital, stat."

"I call shotgun!" Sherri screamed.

"Sherri," Vivian chastised. "You know that you're the smallest and you need to be in the back-"

"Not listening!" Sherri said, planting her palms over her ears. "Not *even* listening."

Vivian turned away with a sigh.

"That's fine with me, yo," Trent said. "Me and Prissy are going to take the back seat with you, Vivi."

"She'll never fit in the back seat," Vivian said. "Her legs are too long."

"What if she sits on my lap?" Trent said.

"That doesn't actually make her any smaller, does it?" Vivian muttered.

"I'll ride in the back seat if I can sit on *Erik's* lap," Sherri grinned.

"Veto!" Erik chirped. "I veto that!"

"This looks like this is gonna take a while," Bobby grumbled. He plodded over to the Reliant and plopped his wide buttocks down on the hood, exercising the shocks.

"What if I sit in the back and Vivi sits on my lap?" Trent said innocently.

"Or even better, what if *I* sit in the back, and she sits on *my* lap?" Erik bristled.

"I can't sit on *anybody's* lap!" Vivian snapped. "Hello? Eight-foot wingspan here!"

"Okay, alright," Trent said. "I drive. My girl Prissy is the tallest-she rides shotgun. Vivi needs someplace to put her extra gear, so we stick her in the center of the back seat with her wings all stuck out over the back. Goldilocks and Lil' E stick their scrawny butts in on either side. Is that copacetic with y'all?"

"Sounds great ... except for one little thing," Bobby smirked. "What am I supposed to do, ride in the trunk with Spritle and Chim-Chim?"

"That's no good," Erik said. "You won't fit in there either."

"This is like the losing end of a game of *Tetris*," Bobby scowled. "It's physically impossible for all of us to fit into that car."

"You're right. We'll never fit into one car," Vivian agreed. "We'll have to take both of them."

Everyone looked skeptically at the derelict Reliant.

"It's a good idea, Viv, but how are we supposed to start it?" Erik asked.

"We can push start it, just like the Rabbit," Vivian said. "It's just another bucket of bolts from the '80s. It shouldn't have any complex circuitry that would have been damaged by the EMP."

"Well, yeah, I agree with you there," Erik nodded. "But the thing is we can't even push start it unless one of us knows how to hot-wire a car."

Four pairs of eyes turned simultaneously to one place.

"What are you looking at?" Sherri snapped. "Just because I'm the only one of you

white-bread pantywaists who has ever stolen anything it doesn't mean that I've got grand theft auto under my belt. I'm not your one-stop larceny shop, for fuck's sake."

The others looked at the ground guiltily. Sherri continued.

"Why don't you just get the Gorgeous Lady of Wrestling here to give you the keys?"

"Wait-you think Prissy has the keys?" Trent asked. "What makes you think that?"

"Christ, I feel stupider just standing next to you," Sherri moaned. "When they bombed the shit out of this place there was *one* car in the parking lot and *one* person still inside. Come on, people, let's have a little deductive reasoning here."

"She's right," Erik said. "This has to be Priscilla's car! Check her pockets!"

"With pleasure!" Trent grinned.

He reached out to slide his roaming fingers into the hip pocket of Priscilla's skirt, but Vivian slapped his hand before it got there.

"Ow!" Trent winced. "Okay, ladies first."

"Please excuse the intrusion, Priscilla," Vivian said kindly.

With that, she slipped her slender hand into Priscilla's pocket and came back with a set of keys attached to a pink rabbit's foot.

"Looks like our luck is changing for the better," she smiled.

Ten minutes later the gang had made short work of dusting off and push starting the butter-colored relic with Sherri's negligible weight behind the wheel. As soon as the engine had sputtered to life, Sherri took off, doing a donut in the parking lot that showered her friends with gravel. She pulled alongside of them and rolled down the window.

"Alright, losers, I am out of here," she said. "See you in D.C."

"Sherri, you can't just take that whole car all by yourself," Erik said.

"You're right," Sherri agreed. "Get your sexy mutant ass in here."

"You also can't drive stick," he reminded her.

"You know, you are really starting to get on my nerves, Sievert."

"Come on, Sherri," Vivian said. "You can ride shotgun in my car."

"Screw that. Your car is colder than Santa's sack. I'm staying in the car with a roof."

"I'm with her," Bobby said. "It'll be nice to go somewhere without my snout freezing to my mustache for a change."

"You can all ride in Priscilla's car," Vivian said. "But there's not enough room in there for me. My wings alone would take up the space of two people. I'll follow you in my car."

"Nobody should be all alone," Erik said. "You know-the buddy system. I'll ride in

the Rabbit with you. I'll even drive if you want."

"You do realize it's going to be cold if you ride with me," Vivian warned.

"Will it?" Erik asked poignantly.

Vivian looked at his apologetic eyes and gave a soft little smile.

"We'll see."

The dull yellow Reliant followed the rattling gray Rabbit in a caravan of two through the cold, smoky ruins of northern Virginia. Erik and Vivian led the way in the frosty convertible, while the rest of the group followed in the relative comfort of the sedan.

Trent sat crushed behind the steering wheel of the Reliant with the seat pushed too far forward and his knees pressed against the underside of the dashboard. Priscilla was by his side in the properly adjusted passenger seat, holding his tail in one hand and stroking it with the other as if it were a soft baby bunny. A broad, toothy grin was spread across Trent's face, and his eyelids hung in a semi-orgasmic slouch.

"That's right, Prissy," he moaned. "Pet the snake. Pet it like you mean it."

"Um, hello?" Bobby squeamishly called from the back seat. "There's other people in the car here, you know. Could you please not get a tail job right in front of us?"

"Seriously," Sherri spat. "You're so disgusting. You were scared shitless of God smiting you over that thing until you realized that it's like the big hairy manpole your late-blooming ass never had. Now you're in love with it!"

"Well, it's like it says in the first book of Corinthians," Trent said thoughtfully. "'We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet.'"

"You're unbelievable!" Sherri yelled. "When Erik mutated, you said he was the son of Satan, but now that it's happened to you it's actually *written in the Bible?!* "

"Greater theologians than I have misinterpreted His divine word at first," Trent shrugged.

"In other words, the Bible always says what suits your needs, even when you change your mind," Bobby retorted.

"My faith is strong enough not to get hung up on the Lord's words, but to just trust the gist of it."

Priscilla closed her eyes and rubbed the end of Trent's tail over her tongue.

"Oh yeah, Prissy, that feels good," he groaned. "Baby, don't stop. Mmm, don't stop."

The tip of Trent's tail disappeared into Priscilla's mouth, but before he could appreciate it, her teeth slammed shut like a steel trap.

"Yeeeeaaaaagh!" Trent wailed.

His whole body recoiled, slamming his knees into the bottom of the dashboard and sending the car careening back and forth across the dusty highway. He quickly regained his composure, pulling the car back into its lane and yanking his tail away from Priscilla.

"Ow! Bad girl!" Trent shouted, rubbing his crotch. "Bad girl! How many times do I got to tell you! Lips and tongue! No teeth!"

"Trent!" Bobby barked. "For Christ's sake, she's a human being! If you don't start treating her with a little bit of respect I'm gonna start smacking you around!"

"She's the one who's down on a brother like the jaws of life, and you're telling *me* to treat *her* with respect? I think that shit just busted my kneecaps, yo!"

"Well, why don't you just move the seat back, you retard?" Sherri asked.

"I tried, Strawberry Shortlegs," Trent said sarcastically. "It doesn't move. You got it all jammed up here when you did the push start."

"Oh, I didn't do shit to your stupid seat," Sherri growled dismissively. "Maybe it's all just *a sign from God* that you should pull over and let somebody else drive for a while? Did you think of that?"

"Like who?" Trent asked. "Last time I checked, Vivi and Little E were in the other car, and none of you other clowns can drive stick. Excluding Prissy of course, but I don't think that she's in any condition to drive in her diminished capacity."

"Oh, *now* she's got a diminished capacity!" Sherri laughed mirthlessly. "Now that it's *beneficial* for *you*, suddenly she's got a diminished capacity. Tell me, Trent, how did you get so detached from reality? I want to smoke some too!"

"You can spin it any way you like," Trent mused, "but the simple truth is this: The T is always going down that righteous path, yo."

Trent put his hand high on Priscilla's thigh and gave it a gentle caress.

"Isn't that true, Prissy?"

As Trent's oblivious hand squeezed her painfully wounded leg, Priscilla pitched violently away, banging her head on the window with a dull *clunk*.

"Jesus, give it a rest, Trent!" Bobby spat. "You're not even touching me and I still have this image in my head of Webster telling me to say no, go, and tell someone I trust."

Trent bent his elbows and returned both hands to the cramped steering wheel. He cast a glance at Bobby in the rearview mirror.

"It's important to give your girl constant physical contact, dawg. I know somebody like *you* wouldn't be familiar with how to treat a lady, but I call that the first T."

"The first T?" Bobby asked. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It's the T's three Ts," Trent grinned. "If you can successfully execute the three Ts on a woman, it's a fast lane, all-access pass to her heart."

"Oh please, good sir," Bobby said sarcastically. "Please educate my poor pathetic soul on the matter of these three Ts of which you speak, so that I too may find true love as you so obviously have."

Trent slipped his hand off the wheel and ran his knuckles gently across Priscilla's cheek. She leaned into his touch and closed her eyes.

"The first T is touch," Trent said calmly. "If a girlie ain't gonna let you touch her, then there's no point in even continuing the application process, yo."

In the passenger seat of the open convertible, Vivian struggled to hold down a road map against the raging whirlpool of turbulence that lashed out of the cold air.

"Here, let me help with that," Erik said.

Leaving his two left hands on the wheel, he reached over with both of his right and grasped the edge of the map. With his eyes still on the road, his human hand inadvertently landed on top of Vivian's. It lingered there for a pronounced beat before departing with a tiny squeeze and catching the raging paper corner.

"Thanks," Vivian said.

She held the map's other two corners with her own hands, finally securing it well enough to get a good look at where they were going. The wind whistled through a long, otherwise silent pause. Then Erik spoke.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean it."

"Don't worry about it," Vivian said. "It was just a little touch."

"No, not for that," Erik said guiltily. "I'm sorry about before in the parking lot. The thing with Bobby."

In the Reliant, Bobby shook his head disgustedly.

"Alright, I'll humor you," he said. "So in the unlikely event that you can touch a girl without her immediately vomiting or knocking you unconscious, then what?"

"The second T stands for 'tell,'" Trent said smoothly. "If the lady is interested in your sweet touch, then she almost certainly is in the market for something more. Just tell her whatever she wants to hear."

"So let me make sure I've got the steps straight," Bobby smirked. "It's manhandle first, and *then* lie?"

"I didn't say lie-I said *tell her what she wants to hear*," Trent corrected. "The second T works even better when it's true blue and from the heart, yo."

Vivian tipped her head down toward the blue grid of her map. Her hair thrashed over her drooping face.

"That did hurt my feelings a little," she said. "When Bobby showed up you practically knocked me over trying to deny what was going on."

The cold wind seemed to blow straight through Erik's chest and into his stomach.

"So ... what *was* going on, exactly?"

"You were helping me with my wings and we, you know ... we kind of had a *moment*."

Erik smiled as the cold wind blew back out of his chest as a hot breath.

"We *were* having a moment!" he smiled. "Bobby thought that I was on crack when I said that."

"Well, you shouldn't care so much about what Bobby says," Vivian replied. "You know that he just says things to get a reaction out of you. He does it to everybody. It's his thing."

"I know that," Erik said guiltily. "But the thing is, this time he was actually ... well, he was sort of right."

Vivian looked at Erik with surprise.

"He was *right*?"

"Sort of right!" Erik backpedaled. "Don't get me wrong, he *is* the best friend that I ever had in my life, and I love your brother like he's my own, but ... well, let's just say that I've been a lot more eager to come and hang out with him ever since he moved in with you."

Vivian's cheeks flushed the same vibrant hue as her hair.

"But ... but in all the time we've known each other you've barely even spoken to me other than to regale me with pop culture trivia."

Erik's face suddenly began sprinting toward its own shade of red.

"Well, I'm ... I was too intimidated to really talk to you."

"What?!" Vivian laughed. "Why in the world would I intimidate you? You do realize that I was just a minimum-wage-earning peon at Boltzmann's Market, right?"

"Well, yeah," Erik said. "That's how everybody *else* sees you. To me, you were always like some kind of super heroine. The befuddled stock clerk was just your mild-mannered secret identity. Then, by night, you turn into the savvy intellectual who clears *Jeopardy!* boards without even trying. *That's* the real Vivian. That's the one that kept me from ever listening when you told me to go home. That's the one that I always wanted to spend a lot more time with."

He gave her a shrugging little smile.

"I guess that wish came true in a big way, huh?"

A fuzzy pink warmth spread outward from Vivian's chest and poured into her face like a hot cup of tea.

"And the third T?" Bobby said with only the most marginal interest.

"The third T is for 'take,'" Trent said. "Take her on her dream date. It doesn't matter if she wants you to fly her sweet ass to the *moon* -you take her wherever she wants to go. If you've got through 'touch' and 'tell' and the girl is still all into you, then 'take' will get you into the boudoir every time, guaranteed or your money back."

"Well, it looks like you're almost there," Vivian smiled.

She pulled her finger over her map, tracing the line of Interstate 67 straight into Washington D.C.

"I've always wanted to go to the capital and experience it all," she said dreamily. "The Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, the Smithsonian. I hope at least some of it is still standing."

"We'll have a chance to see everything there is," Erik said decisively. "If there's survivors here like you think, then we'll be staying for quite a while."

He turned to her with a hopeful smile.

"I think we're almost home, Vivian."

Vivian put her hand on top of Erik's and gave it a squeeze.

"Go home, Erik," she smiled. "And take me with you."

Erik looked at her with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Vivian, you know I'd take you anywhere."

Vivian shifted in her seat but Erik's eyes stayed on the road, curiously squinting into the distance. She leaned toward him and whispered warmly in his ear.

"Erik, what would you say if I told you that I was about to kiss you?"

Erik's eyes shot wide open as he furiously clenched the wheel.

"Holy shit!"

Before Vivian could respond, Erik had slammed the clutch and brake pedals to the floor, locking all four of the Rabbit's tires in a squealing scream. He grabbed her with his two right arms and held her as tightly as he could against his own body as the speeding car began to fishtail.

"Hold on!" he screamed, wrestling the wheel. "I've got it! I've got it under control!"

With two hands on the wheel and two trying desperately to protect Vivian, Erik managed to keep the front wheels pointed straight ahead by his sheer will to survive. For the briefest second, Erik did indeed have the situation under control.

But only for the briefest second.

For days on end the tiny rubber donut of the Rabbit's temporary spare tire had shown admirable grace under fire, outperforming its specifications for speed and endurance without complaint. To force this little trooper into an unexpected stop at seventy miles per hour, however, was simply asking too much. After leaving a suicide note of black skid mark down one hundred feet of pavement, the little tire blew, peeling off of its narrow rim like an exhausted roll of tape.

The driver's-side corner of the Rabbit dropped onto the bare rim, immediately snapping it off at the axle and bringing the front end of the car crashing deafeningly onto the pavement. A fountain of hot white sparks flew from the unsupported corner

of the frame as it scraped fiercely across the interstate. Despite Erik's efforts, the forces of physics almost immediately threw the car into a leftward arc, forcing the rear tire of the passenger side to take the lead.

Behind the grinding shower of sparks, the dragging front fender wrenched free from the Rabbit's steel body. It bounced off the pavement and skipped over the car, turning end over end in the air until it crashed down in a disorienting blast of beaded safety glass on the windshield of the pursuing Reliant.

One second later, friction had ground the Rabbit to a stop, but it wasn't until three seconds later that Trent had the clarity of mind to step on the brake pedal. Able to see nothing but the remains of a gray fender slammed lengthwise across his windshield, Trent plowed the Reliant directly into the front corner of the spun-out Rabbit, immediately silencing the roar of both utterly devastated engines.

The momentum of the collision carried both cars scraping across the scorched pavement until they came to an eerily silent stop at the lip of a ten-mile-wide atomic crater that had once been Washington D.C.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Washington D.C. was not destroyed. It was not in ruins. It was simply *gone*.

Interstate 67 had literally become a road to nowhere, ending in a crumble of blacktop pouring over the side of an abyss where the nation's capital had once stood.

Just twenty feet from the edge of the crater, Vivian's Rabbit lay in a posthumous slouch on its three remaining wheels. The front end of the Reliant was smashed against the gray convertible's side, its hood thrown open, its engine hissing steam and dripping fluids.

Vivian coughed a dry, choking cough as her eyes swam in and out of focus. Her chest was resting across the top of the passenger-side door, spilling her head, arms, and wings limply over the side of the car. She could feel the dull stripe of pain from the worn weather-stripping pressing against her chest, but she couldn't bring herself to move. Her brain wrapped muddily around a sound behind her, which resolved into a voice.

"Oooouch," it groaned. "Vivian, you okay? Viv?"

Erik's hand tugged gently on her shoulder, and with a cascade of tumbling wings and arms she fell back into her seat. Her glasses had slid down her nose. She pushed them back up, bringing the devastation that surrounded her into sharp focus. To her left, all she could see was the steaming ruins of the Reliant; to her right, there stretched a mile-deep atomic crater; to the front, there lay an Archimedean screw of

bent satellite dish that had been thrown thirty feet from the road.

"Ooowww, shit," Erik hissed, pulling himself upright in his seat. "Vivian, are you hurt?"

"No," she answered, peering dismally upward. "I'm fine."

It was a lie. She wasn't injured, but she was not fine. Not in any way. Once again, everything in the world had been taken away from her. Their transportation had been taken away. Their only communication link to the rest of the world been taken away. Even their *destination* had been taken away. But what bothered her most was what had been left behind.

A rusty green overpass soared over her head. It left the ground a hundred feet to the left of the highway but never returned. It extended outward over the void, terminating in a club of withered metal and scorched blacktop. The sight of it instantly slapped a dormant memory to the front of Vivian's mind.

On that first terrible morning, the unfolding atomic nightmare had asserted its reality in the form of the ruined Skyshine Causeway bridge. Now here she was, on the other side of countless days and unknown miles, facing an almost identical vaporized bridge. To her it was more than just another piece of urban wreckage. It was the start of an endless, tragic film loop coming back through the projector of her life a second time. It was a stinging reminder that no matter how long or how far she ran, she would never find the end of this merciless atomic wasteland. The sight of it made her do something that she had managed to keep herself from doing for the entire hellish journey.

It made her break down and cry.

"Oh no. Come on, don't cry, Viv," Erik whispered. "Don't give up. We're going to be okay."

Vivian ran her hand sadly along the destroyed dashboard of her car.

"It's over," she said weakly.

"There's got to be other towns out there," Erik said encouragingly. "We'll find them, Vivian. It's not over till it's over."

"It's over, Erik!" Vivian sobbed. "There's nowhere else to go! I give up! I just give up."

She buried her head in Erik's chest, weeping with a passion that stung the back of her throat and boiled into her sinuses. Her last tenuous dam of hope had finally been ruptured, and she let loose a torrential flood of long pent-up emotion: all the stress, horror, and despair poured out uncontrollably. She cried so hard it seemed her tears were turning to blood.

Her eyes shot open. Blood?

With her head pressed against Erik's chest, Vivian found herself gazing directly into his lap. The worn blue fabric of the driver's seat was completely saturated in fresh red blood. One of the Reliant's square yellow bumpers had plowed deep into

Erik's side of the car, buckling his door into a serrated wedge of torn plastic and snapped steel. The jagged wreckage plunged through Erik's ripped jeans and into his thigh.

"Oh my God, Erik! You're hurt! Why didn't you say something?"

Erik shrugged painfully.

"You didn't sound like you could take any more bad news right now."

Vivian regained her composure shamefacedly. The whole time that Erik had been trying to convince her that everything would be okay, he had been quietly bleeding out into her seat cushions.

"Erik, I'm so sorry! I didn't know!"

"Don't worry. I'm gonna be fine, Vivian," he said stoically. " *I'm* not giving up."

Just then the cold air was sliced open by a piercing scream from the direction of the Reliant. Vivian's eyes flicked toward the other car, then back to Erik desperately.

"Go help them," Erik nodded. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine-you're hurt!"

"I'm fine! Go!"

Vivian leapt out of her car and sprinted to the Reliant. She yanked open the back door and leaned inside. Bobby and Sherri were sprawled across the seat, looking dazed but unharmed.

"What's going on?" Vivian yelled. "Are you guys okay?"

"Yeah, we're okay back here," Bobby moaned.

"Aaaaaaugh!" Trent screamed. "Ooooww! Shit! Get it off!"

"Hold on!" Vivian squeaked.

She pried open the damaged driver's-side door, and it fell off its hinges and smashed to the ground. Her heart leapt up and stuck in her throat at the sight of all the blood. Blood was dripping from the steering wheel and running off of the vinyl seats. Blood was collecting in pools in the floor. Blood was splattered across Trent's shirt and running in thick rivulets down Priscilla's frenzied face.

The collision had forced the dashboard into Trent's lap, and the displaced steering wheel now clamped his legs against the seat. What was once the instrument panel had transformed into a gnarled rake of jagged steel and sharp plastic that sliced mercilessly into the tops of his bloody thighs.

"Get it off!" Trent wailed. "Oh Lord, get it off!"

Vivian's stupefied gaze followed the line of the broken gauges across Trent's mutilated thighs and into Priscilla's immense hands. She was trying to lift the wreckage off of his lap, with minimal success. The shattered instruments dug into her thick palms, making ragged cuts that drained a stream of her own blood into the hot, syrupy puddle congealing in Trent's lap. She didn't speak, but her terrified,

desperate eyes screamed out for help.

"Bobby! Sherri!" Vivian shouted. "Get over here and help me!"

The two back-seat passengers scrambled dizzily out of the car and rushed to her side. Vivian curled her fingers under the safely rounded edge of the dashboard and braced, looking to Priscilla for cooperation.

"Okay, Priscilla! Lift!"

Groaning through clenched jaws, the two girls raised the shattered dashboard away from Trent's lap. He screamed a deafening shriek as the gnarled edge pulled from his flesh, leaving a deep red channel of gore in its place.

"Bobby!" Vivian grunted. "Get him out of there!"

Her brother quickly did as he was told, maneuvering behind Vivian to take Trent's arm over his own thick shoulders. As Vivian and Priscilla strained to hold up the dashboard, Bobby started to haul Trent out of the car. Trent's continued scream turned hoarse and dry as his dragging heels cleared the door frame and his feet fell harshly to the pavement. With uncharacteristic compassion, Sherri quickly squirmed under Trent's other arm, helping Bobby to pull him from the wreckage and lay him down safely in the abandoned road.

Vivian and Priscilla dropped the heavy dashboard with a crackle of snapping steel and plastic. Priscilla immediately began to crawl toward the open driver's door, but halfway across the front seat she caught her leg on a pike of twisted steel. Her face contorted in pain, but her eyes remained fixed on Trent, whom she could see squirming hideously on the cold pavement beyond. With a stuttering intake of breath, she pushed herself forward, digging the wreckage deep into her calf. Vivian planted her palms on Priscilla's broad shoulders and pushed her back toward the passenger side.

"Priscilla, stop!" she squealed. "Go the other way!"

Priscilla's eyebrows folded in a mixture of agony and devotion. Her heavy feet pushed against the side of the car, forcing her inches closer to the door and driving the steel spike further into her bloody leg. A well of tears began to trickle from a set of glistening brown eyes that never looked away from Trent's battered form lying in the street.

"Priscilla, stop!" Vivian wailed. "What are you doing?! Stop!"

At that moment, the passenger-side door creaked open and Erik leaned into the car.

"What's going on?" he asked frantically. "Is she okay?"

"Erik, stop her! Her leg!" Vivian yelled. "She's impaling herself!"

Erik immediately saw the metal spear digging into Priscilla's leg, and he grabbed her stubby ankles with two hands each. She struggled against him, but he quickly pulled her off of the glistening metal point and out of the open door. Vivian came around to the passenger side as Erik lay Priscilla gently in the street. She knelt down

and affectionately brushed the wild hair away from Priscilla's face, which seemed to be drowning in a sea of confusion and rage. The mute Amazon struggled to stand up, but her protectors held her down, gently cooing reassurances that she showed no signs of comprehending.

"Oh my God," Erik gasped. "She's got blood all over her. She's hurt really bad!"

"I don't think it's as bad as it looks," Vivian said. "She's only cut on her hands and on her leg. Most of this blood is Trent's."

"No," Erik argued, "it's not. Look!"

The makeshift bandage around Priscilla's neck was completely saturated with fresh, hot blood. Her old neck wound had been torn wide open. Vivian pressed her fingers against it, and a gush of blood came from the top and bottom of the fabric in a disquieting little wave. Priscilla coughed, forcing a glut of blood out of her mouth and down her round chin.

"Oh no. No no no no," Erik panicked. "This isn't happening. What do we do?"

Vivian stared in horror as the thin blood ran down Priscilla's neck and dripped onto her already soaked shirt. She watched as a pool of blood formed in the dust by the side of the girl's slashed leg. She could see the blood still running down Erik's torn thigh. Everywhere she looked all she saw was blood.

"Vivian!" Erik screamed desperately. "What do we do?!"

For once in her life, Vivian's mind went totally blank. It was as if all of the stress and gore had tripped its circuit breaker, leaving her in a total mental darkness.

"I ... I don't know," she stammered. "We need a doctor! A real doctor!"

"We don't have a doctor!" Erik shouted. "We don't even have a first-aid kit!"

Vivian blinked and looked at Priscilla's car.

"We don't," she agreed. "But hopefully *she* does!"

She sprang to her feet and threw open the Reliant's glove compartment. A bundle of stained road maps and a pile of hair clips fell with a splash into the grisly puddle on the floor.

"Damn it!" Vivian spat, pounding her fist into the roof. "Think, Vivian, think ... Check the trunk!"

She leaned in and plucked the dripping keys from the ignition. Scrambling to the back of the car, she unlocked the trunk with a creaky *pop* that was barely audible over Trent's renewed screams.

"Aaaaagh! Ah, shit, it hurts!" he wailed.

"I know! I'm sorry!" Bobby yelled. "Just shut up! This is gonna hurt even more!"

Bobby grabbed the lime-green hem of his bathrobe and threw it across Trent's bloody lap. He planted one of his meaty palms on each of Trent's thighs and leaned on them, compressing the wounds under his body weight. Trent shot upright from

the waist in agony and started slapping Bobby wildly about the chest and face.

"Ow! Ow! You asshole!" he shrieked. "Get off! Get off!"

"I'm sorry," Bobby growled, turning his face away from the hail of blows. "We need to put pressure on it to stop the bleeding!"

" *You're* going to be bleeding in about two seconds if you don't get offa me, bitch!"

Trent's blood quickly soaked through the thick cloth of Bobby's bathrobe, squishing into hot puddles between his fingers.

"Sherri!" Bobby barked. "We need to make him some bandages! Quick, take off some clothes!"

"Screw you! I'm not getting naked for this jackoff!"

Bobby rolled his eyes indignantly to Trent.

"I meant take off *his* clothes."

Sherri blinked.

"I don't see how that's any better!"

The hinges squeaked as Vivian pushed open the trunk lid, pouring shadowy gray sunlight over a sprawl of random junk. A dirty pink sweater hung over a rusted gas can in one corner. A half-empty two-liter bottle of cola lurked in another. She pawed through the mess in a frantic attempt to find a little white plastic box with an iconic red cross. She carelessly threw a tattered Chemistry 101 textbook into a corner. As its pages fluttered in flight, they loosed a slip of paper that landed on top of the pile. It was a card: homemade, heart-shaped, and cobbled together from pink and red construction paper.

Happy Valentine's Day, Prissy. I love you to the ends of the Earth. -Lee

Vivian blinked once and snapped her attention back to her search. This was no time to get sentimental.

"AaaaAAAAaAAggh!" Trent screeched.

"Shut up! Shut *up!*" Sherri commanded with breathless frustration. "Stop being such a pussy!"

Bobby rested on his knees on the blacktop with Trent leaning back against his belly. Trent squirmed and thrashed, but Bobby's husky arms were wrapped around him, holding him tightly in place so that Sherri could straddle his left knee, pulling a black bandage that had once been half of his own silk rockabilly shirt tightly around his wounded thigh.

"Aaaaghh!" Trent seethed. "Get your bitch ass off of me, B! I told you I don't swing that way!"

"Sit still!" Bobby grumbled. "I don't like it any more than you do! Now be a man and let Sherri finish!"

"Just one more knot in this one," Sherri said.

"Do it tight enough to stop the bleeding," Bobby ordered, "but be gentle, alright?"

Sherri nodded emptily and fiercely yanked the two loose ends of her knot in opposite directions as hard as she could. At the sound of Trent's most tortured scream yet, Priscilla bolted upright with a fire in her eyes. Erik quickly took her by the shoulders and gently pushed her back to the ground.

"It's okay; it's okay," he said reassuringly. "Don't worry; they're taking good care of him over there. Now stay still!"

Priscilla's mouth moved silently as a huge, glistening teardrop rolled out of the corner of her eye. She struggled to stand up, forcing a renewed gush of blood from her gruesome throat. Erik shouted over his shoulder.

"Um, Vivian. I need some help over here. Like, *now!* "

Vivian didn't hear him. Her head was buried deep inside the open trunk as she sifted through the accumulated debris of a life. There was nothing in there that would be of any medicinal use whatsoever. It was all just junk. The insignificant refuse that packed the corners of a teenaged girl's existence. Yet each dog-eared fashion magazine and crumpled receipt that she sifted through helped form, in the shadows of Vivian's mind, a picture of a girl that she had met but did not know.

At the very bottom of the trunk she unearthed a small blue shoebox and yanked it from the debris anxiously.

"Be first aid," she pleaded. "Please be first aid!"

She slipped her fingertips under the box top and tore it off with a desperate kind of optimism. It was not full of medical supplies, but photographs.

"Damn it!"

She started to throw the useless box back into the trunk in frustration, but her hands froze as her eyes hooked into the first snapshot sticking out of the stack. She plucked the photo out of the box and looked at it curiously.

It was a picture of Priscilla wearing an oversized flannel shirt. Slightly out of focus. Wholly unremarkable. That is, except for one thing. She was smiling. Her clear brown eyes were sharp and alive, glistening with a vivacious spirit that they no longer possessed.

In spite of herself, Vivian flicked to the next picture. It was Priscilla again, dressed in a modest pair of overalls and sitting behind a table at a fast-food restaurant. Her face was lost under a gigantic paper crown, beet red in the throes of intense laughter. In the foreground of the picture a boy was facing away from the camera and kneeling on one knee. He was holding out a rose in one hand and flourishing with the other, as if delivering an overly dramatic Shakespearean sonnet. Vivian flipped the picture over and read a bubbly cursive caption scrawled in blue ink.

Lee = Sir Romance! Valentine's Day '97

Just as she was about to stop wasting precious time snooping through the

catacombs of Priscilla's life, she noticed a single oversized print poking out from the otherwise uniform stack of snapshots.

"Alright, just one more," Bobby said.

"Come on, Goldie," Trent pleaded. "Easy this time, a'ight? Please. Please?"

Sherri slipped the wide bandage of torn silk under Trent's leg and crossed it over the top.

"Alright," she said, glancing up at Bobby. "Give the crybaby something to bite on. This is gonna sting."

"Oh no. No, girl, come on. No. No. Come on, girl!"

"Stay with me, here," Bobby muttered, giving Trent's shoulders a manly shake. "One more little bandage and you're done. One more little squeeze. Are you ready?"

Trent whimpered incoherently.

"Alright, deep breaths," Bobby continued. "Sherri, count of five. Ready? One, two ..."

Vivian pulled the wrinkled photograph from the shoebox. It was a five-by-seven enlargement that had been folded in half to fit into the stack, protruding by an enticing inch over its three-by-five companions.

It was a picture of Priscilla standing in an athletic field, towering over a band geek with a battered trombone in his hands. She stood behind him, slightly hunched over, with her arms wrapped around his shoulders and her cheek pressed lovingly against his. The face of the trombone player sent a shock through Vivian.

It was Trent!

She held the picture to the dull light and gave it a good look, and her initial reaction quickly dissipated. It wasn't Trent at all. It was a gangly teenage boy. He had the same haircut as Trent, and the same gigantic toothed smile-even his nose was similar-but his eyes were entirely different. They were large, bright blue, and wide with a certain indescribable aura of innocence. Vivian was suddenly struck by realization. She flipped the picture over and unfolded it, revealing the curly inscription on the back.

Priscilla + Lee 4 ever!

Her hand slapped over her mouth as a myriad of open questions slammed shut in her mind.

"Oh my God," she gasped. "She thinks Trent is her boyfriend!"

She turned the picture back over, as if hoping that another look would change her mind. Not only did the second glance reaffirm her theory, but unfolding the print had revealed its bottom half ... and another terrible secret.

Lee was standing on the grass. Priscilla was standing on the team bench.

She couldn't have been more than five feet tall.

"Five!" Bobby shouted.

Sherri's arms flew to her sides, slamming a knot of silk down on Trent's destroyed thigh and forcing a pealing scream from the very bottom of his being. On the other side of the Reliant, his cry of pain burrowed into Priscilla's ear. She shoved Erik away and clambered to her feet with a determined fury.

"Priscilla, no! Lay down! Lay down!" Erik chastised. "How many times do I have to tell you not to get-"

Erik's orders were silenced by a fist thumping into his stomach. He took one gasping breath and fell to his knees, clawing at the bottom of Priscilla's varsity jacket in an effort to slow his fall. Priscilla just kept striding forward, seemingly unaware of his scrawny body clinging to her side. Two steps later the coat slipped off her broad shoulders, dropping Erik into a gasping pile in the road.

Vivian snapped her eyes away from the photograph of the petite Priscilla just in time to see the seven-foot giant that she had become rounding the rear fender. An inadvertent scream chirped from Vivian's throat. The bandages up and down Priscilla's enormous arms had ruptured beneath her jacket, sprouting a menagerie of insect legs that scuttled madly against the air. Vivian took one staggering step backward and threw out a hand, holding the old photograph in front of Priscilla's face.

"Priscilla, stop! Listen to me!" she said firmly. "You're confused! Trent is not Lee! He's not your boyfriend! He's a creep!"

Priscilla didn't take her eyes off of Trent as she grabbed Vivian's outstretched hand and threw her out of the way. Vivian's knees banged harshly into the Reliant's bumper, dropping her to the ground, but she quickly sat up and screamed a warning to the others.

"Bobby! Sherri! Get away from Trent! Now!"

Bobby and Trent were both facing Priscilla as she came around the corner of the car, but from her reversed perch on Trent's knee, Sherri never saw her coming. She didn't even have a chance to see the boys' startled expressions before a swollen palm smashed into her shoulder, sending her sprawling. Her tiny blond head hit the blacktop with an explosion of fireworks that only she could see.

"Aaaagh! Shit!" she hissed.

Sherri dragged herself to her hands and knees, clawing her escape across the empty road while a fresh scrape on her forehead poured blood down her face. Before Priscilla could deliver a sucker punch to Bobby, he was already on his feet and shoving the confused giant away from his crippled patient.

"Get back! Get back!" Bobby snarled, slamming his hands into her shoulders. "I know Trent's been a dirtbag to you, but you don't have to kill him!"

"Bobby, she doesn't want to kill him!" Vivian squealed. "She's protecting him! She thinks she loves him!"

Bobby's eyebrows arched.

"She *loves* him?"

Bobby's disbelief dropped his guard just long enough for Priscilla to strike. She lurched forward and threw her mutated arms around his body, giving him a bone-crunching bear hug around his slashed midsection. She lifted him off the ground, turned her back on Trent, and held his perceived attacker away at a safe distance.

"Aaagh! Ughh!" Bobby gasped. "Can't ... *breathe!* "

Suspended, he pounded his fists into Priscilla's back and kicked madly. A lucky swing of his foot planted his toe into the fresh gash in her leg, and she dropped him with a sucking wince of pain. Bobby hit the ground with a hard, wet *slap*. His bandages had been cut to ribbons and were quickly turning red with fresh blood-the procession of sharp insect legs that lined the inside of Priscilla's arms had pierced his doughy flesh and broken off inside his body. Before he could even form a scream, an explosive crackling sound issued from Priscilla's throat and a shower of mucus and tissue splattered over his face.

"Trent," Bobby gasped. "Get ... away ... from ..."

Even before Bobby could get out his warning, Trent was already busy trying to scuttle away from the terror that loomed before him.

"Sweet Jesus! That ain't cool! That ain't right! Prissy, that ain't right!"

Having rescued Trent from his assailants, Priscilla turned and dropped happily to her knees in front of him, paralyzing him with fear. Her top lip was smiling with a beam of enamored relief, but her bottom lip had been reduced to nothing more than a string of slack and lifeless meat hanging from a detached jawbone that swung slowly from the right side of her head by one strip of intact skin. In the place where her tongue had once been, an eighteen-inch beetle mandible curved in a serrated, jet-black hook. An identical piece of insect anatomy arced out of her left shoulder, clicking arrhythmically against its mate like a pair of hellish wind chimes.

She put her enormous hand on Trent's leg and leaned in lovingly toward his once-receptive face, her thick blood oozing out of her destroyed jaw and down her heaving chest. Before she could get anywhere near him, however, Trent was already screaming a louder, more bone-curdling scream than he had ever screamed before. He crab-walked backward, a terrified sense of self-preservation enabling him to ignore the pain blasting from his legs.

"Get back! Get back offa me, you freak! Freak! You fugly demon *freak!* "

Puzzled, Priscilla raised a hand toward him, but he kicked it away. Her remaining lip began to quiver, and her dull eyes filled with a perfect expression of complete and utter heartbreak. A single oversized tear rolled out of the corner of her eye, sliding down her cheek, over her lip, and in a quick, racing sprint down the curve of her newly formed mandible.

A second later there was crack of wood against flesh, and Priscilla fell forward on

her knees. Behind her, Sherri stood with her hands wrapped around the barrels of the shotgun, its walnut stock held high in the air, ready for another punishing swing. Through it all, Priscilla never took her pleading eyes off of Trent.

"Don't you *ever* hit me when I'm not looking, bitch!" Sherri wailed. "I'll kick your bloated fucking ass!"

Sherri landed another mighty wallop on the monster's back, but outside of a gentle sway, Priscilla did not react.

"Sherri! Stop! Don't hurt her!" Vivian screamed, clambering unsteadily to her feet. "She doesn't know what she's doing! She doesn't understand!"

"Well, let's see if she understands this!"

Sherri wound up and took a third swing, but this time her blow ended with a *slap* against an outstretched palm. Priscilla yanked the shotgun from Sherri's hands and threw it aside as she climbed to her feet. The mutant girl towered over her petite attacker, a foul ichor dripping from her glistening mouthpieces. Sherri's head tipped back, back, back, as Priscilla rose to her full height in front of her. Far from fear, Sherri's bloodshot pink eyes narrowed into a defiant glare.

"Come on, bitch!" she said, spreading her arms. "You want a piece of me? Come get some!"

Priscilla took one charging step forward, throwing her arms around Sherri's tiny body and clasping her tightly against her own mountainous chest. As she struggled for her freedom, Sherri's thrashing blond head hovered dangerously close to the razor-sharp teeth of Priscilla's shoulder mandible.

"Put me down!" Sherri wailed, kicking and clawing. "Put me the fuck down!"

Sherri's boots scraped over Priscilla's legs, peeling and tearing off the bandages to release a sprawl of mismatched insect limbs from her hideous gashes. The mutated legs scrambled against the air, creating the nightmarish illusion of a swarm of enormous bugs clawing their way out of Priscilla's body.

"Sherri! Stop fighting! Don't fight her!" Vivian screamed. "Priscilla! Look at me! *Look at me right now!* "

The commanding tone of Vivian's voice drew a temporary truce between the struggling combatants. Sherri fell momentarily silent in Priscilla's arms as the giant turned to see Vivian standing before her with the sword drawn menacingly in front of her body.

"Priscilla, I don't want to hurt you," Vivian boomed. "I've *never* wanted to hurt you. But if you don't put down Sherri and behave yourself, I promise, I *will* hurt you. Do you understand me?"

Priscilla's bulbous eyes glared right through her.

"You're confused," Vivian continued compassionately. "That guy is not your Lee. Lee is dea-"

She bit her lip, then continued.

"Trent doesn't love you like Lee does. Look at how he runs away from you. That's not love."

Priscilla gave a long, lingering blink, as if waiting for something-anything-to make sense. Finally her eyes narrowed with sorrow and incomprehension, and she violently turned her head away from Vivian's intense glare. This simple movement had consequences as tragic as they were unintentional.

As Priscilla's head turned, the mandible curling from her fractured jaw closed against the one fixed to her shoulder, clamping down like a pair of scissors on Sherri's tiny skull. A wave of blood gushed from two fresh cuts in Sherri's scalp, saturating the golden waves of her hair. With a tortured scream, she went into a brief spasm of resistance, but Priscilla's panicked arms squeezed her until she fell limp and silent.

"Sherri, *no!* " Vivian screamed.

She rushed forward, preparing to deliver a disabling strike to Priscilla's legs. Priscilla quickly retreated from the blade, lumbering backward until she reached the overpass, where she pressed herself into a corner against one of its concrete pylons. Vivian lowered her sword away from the utterly cornered mutant with one last plea.

"Please, Priscilla," she said, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Just put Sherri down. Please, just put her down and I promise I won't hurt you."

Priscilla's terrified ears didn't seem to understand or acknowledge Vivian's final appeal. She pressed her back against the smooth concrete slab and held out her free arm, desperately clawing at the wall for an escape route. To her surprise, her arm didn't slide over the wall, but stuck to it. The collection of highly adapted insect legs dotting her flesh gripped the tiny cracks and fissures in the cement, holding fast. Her scrambling human legs affixed themselves by their own barbed additions, and with a few lurching thrusts, Priscilla had climbed six feet up the side of the pylon.

"No!" Vivian gasped. "Come back! You'll drop her! Stop! Please, stop!"

She threw down her sword and rushed at Priscilla hopelessly, but it was too late. In a motion like a clumsy, one-armed backstroke, Priscilla raced up the side of the support and adhered herself to the underside of the overpass. She hung there with her back to the steel girders, facing downward, with Sherri's unconscious body dangling limply over her giant forearm.

Vivian's long fingers clawed at the smooth, featureless pylon in desperation. She jumped against it, planting her rubber toes into the wall again and again, only to slide back down with tiny squeaks of failure. She whirled on her heels and looked up at Sherri's inert body bleeding onto the two cars below.

"No, no," Vivian sobbed. "Priscilla, please come back down! *Please!* "

Vivian knew that there was no way Priscilla was coming down and that there was no way she herself could climb the pylon. There was simply no way to reach Sherri. She turned her back to the concrete and slumped against it in anguish, the folded mass of her massive wings cushioning the impact.

Her drizzling eyes popped open as Plan B became immediately clear.

Vivian stepped away from the wall and flexed her knees, springing up and down in anticipation. She didn't think about moving her wings. She just moved them. In perfect synchronization, her four-foot-long wings unfurled majestically from her back. She closed her eyes and sent a silent command, and her wings obeyed, coming down in a broad, powerful flap that blasted a cloud of dust and gravel from the ground. She opened her eyes, backed away from the bridge, and fixed her sights squarely on the captive in the curve of Priscilla's arm.

"Hold on, Sherri," she said through gritted teeth. "I'm coming."

Vivian broke into a heroic sprint that burned through her legs. She could feel the long muscles of her wings pulling all the way down her back as the fleshy sails forced two massive scoops of air into the dirt. She flapped again, and her feet left the ground, not coming back to earth for a good two yards. A feeling of weightlessness grasped at her as she continued to run and flap, run and flap. She flapped as hard and as fast as she could, but to her utter disappointment discovered that all she was doing was increasing the length and height of her strides. She could cheat the law of gravity, but she just could not break it. Soon her explosive efforts exhausted her malnourished body, and she slumped into a gasping, lightheaded heap.

"I'm ... sorry ... Sherri," she heaved. "I ... can't ..."

While Vivian was struggling to rescue Sherri, Erik and Trent had been helping Bobby. Erik kneeled at his best friend's side and carefully pulled the broken ends of Priscilla's shattered insect legs out of his plump belly.

"Oh God, Bobby, oh God," he chattered. "Are you in a lot of pain?"

Bobby's face was ghostly, and he spoke in a panting, crushed-lung rattle.

"It doesn't hurt. It doesn't hurt at all," he said dully.

"Well, hold on to that happy thought, dawg," Trent said, "'cause this is gonna hurt like a son of a bitch."

He grabbed onto a particularly heinous-looking beetle leg and yanked it free of Bobby's flabby side. Its jagged spikes snagged the fibers of his slashed canvas bandages, tearing the final strands that held the banner intact. The instant the restrictive girdle was cut, Bobby's swollen gut ballooned outward, unleashing a pair of gigantic spider legs! Their blunt, hairy tips pounded Trent in the face, bowling him over. By the time that he had righted himself, Bobby was holding his arms in the air, his beady eyes wide and glistening with surprise at the enormous, auburn-red tarantula limbs that now encircled his midsection. There were five in all: two in front, one on each side, and one in the back.

"Holy shit," Bobby said with awe.

"Bobby," Erik squeaked. "Are you okay?"

"I am! I'm better than okay!" Bobby grinned. "Dude, I'm *Spiderman!* "

With Erik's help, Bobby struggled onto his sandaled feet. The spider legs sprawled out in an awkward, arm's-length circle around him, their tips lying sideways against the ground like giant stuffed socks. His gut hung over the top knuckles of the two that branched from his front, and his shirt and bathrobe hung in shredded ribbons over an equator of purple, blistered flab.

Vivian rushed to Bobby's side and grabbed him by the hand.

"Bobby," she cried. "Oh God, Bobby, what happened?! Does it hurt?"

"No, it doesn't hurt!" Bobby snapped with annoyance. "Come on, people, you *know* it doesn't hurt! It's not like this has never happened to you before!"

His three mutated friends looked at each other and nodded in acknowledgment. Suddenly a shrill scream came from the overpass above. All eyes snapped to Sherri, who was regaining consciousness in a place that she did not expect to find herself: dangling fifty feet off the ground. Her tiny hands clamped onto Priscilla's arm as they hung together in the center of the wrecked span.

"Oh shit!" Erik yelped. "We need to get up there and help her!"

"We can't climb it! It's too slick!" Vivian cried. "Priscilla could only climb it because she's got those clingy insect legs!"

As soon as the words came out of her mouth her eyes popped wide as if an idea had goosed her. She looked at Erik, and in turn both of them looked at Bobby. Bobby wiggled his eyebrows and grinned.

"Whenever there's a hang-up, you call the *Spiderman*. "

He grabbed the spider leg in front of him and pulled it from its leaning slouch against the ground, balancing it upright on its furry tip. The others quickly righted the rest of his sagging limbs, setting them in bowing arcs like a series of knotted, hairy buttresses around his portly waist.

"Okay, now what?" Bobby asked anxiously.

"Now go get her!" Vivian yelped.

"Wow! Great idea!" Bobby barked sarcastically. "I mean, how do I make them work?!"

"Oh God, there's no time for this!" Erik winced, slapping his palm against his forehead. "Okay, crash course in mutant limbs-ready?"

"Ready!"

"First, do they work with your real legs? Stand on your toes!"

Bobby stood up on his toes, and his spider legs all rose in the air like a Can-can dancer's skirt.

"They bend when you stretch out. It's a mirror!" Erik realized. "Try bending your legs instead!"

Bobby started to kneel down, and as his human knees bent, each spider joint extended. When his butt was halfway to the ground, his arachnid legs landed on the

pavement. He continued to bend his knees, and the weight of his body was lifted completely off the ground on the flex of his new limbs. Inside the cage of spider stalks, his human legs were bunched beneath him in the air, the backs of his heels pressed against his husky buttocks.

"That worked!" Bobby beamed. "Now what?!"

"Now *go!* " Erik screamed.

Bobby's folded legs swung in an abbreviated shuffle against his sagging belly, and immediately his spider legs launched into action, running him backwards across the road.

"No no! They're *mirroring* your real legs!" Erik yelled. "Run *backwards!* "

"Get offa me! I'm new at this!" Bobby growled.

He stopped and reversed direction. This time his spider legs danced forward, racing him to the side of the concrete pylon. When he reached it he just kept running, and his hairy arachnid feet slammed into the cement, sticking to its slick surface and climbing the wall.

"Am I strong, listen bud," he sang to himself. "I've got radioactive blood ..."

When he reached the top of the pylon his legs charged onto the steel, turning him upside-down and hanging him from the bottom of the overpass. His limp ponytail and bathrobe hung toward the ground like Spanish moss as what blood he had remaining flowed to his head.

"Whoa, shit," he muttered dizzily, pounding his palms into his forehead. "Ow, dude, head rush."

Priscilla saw the human spider creeping across the bottom of the bridge and turned on him with a shrieking hiss. When his disorientation cleared, Bobby could see the glistening cuts in Sherri's head trickling blood down her pale, delirious face. As Priscilla postured menacingly toward Bobby, the pink ladybug purse slipped off of Sherri's shoulder, plummeting fifty feet to the blacktop and exploding in a blast of split plastic seams.

"Whoa whoa! Alright lady, take it easy," Bobby said diplomatically. "I see you don't want to keep Sherri. I understand where you're coming from. She's a royal pain in the ass."

"Fuck you too," Sherri muttered dimly.

"And she speaks with such vulgar language," Bobby continued. "So why don't you just hand her over and we'll all be cool, okay?"

Bobby took a lurching step forward on his untrained legs and held out his arms.

"Okay? Priscilla? Hello?"

Looking deep into Priscilla's eyes, Bobby could see nothing but a most rudimentary psyche brimming with fear and confusion. He could see his own horrifying reflection in her wet, glistening irises, and it sent a chill up his spine. His

wickedly jointed red spider legs sprawled out of his bloodied midsection like the fingers of a gigantic, gnarled hand tearing him apart from the inside out; from her upside-down perspective, his matted hair and mangled clothes seemed to stand straight up in an intimidating display of dominance; his hands were reaching out for her with disquietingly ambiguous purpose. He suddenly realized that in her bulbous, twitching eyes, he was nothing more than another mutant demon come to kill her.

For all of these reasons, Bobby was not at all surprised when Priscilla suddenly pitched forward in a misguided attempt at self-defense.

He was, however, surprised when in doing so she uncurled her arm, unceremoniously dropping Sherri.

"Sherri, no!" he wailed.

He took a clumsy, skittering step forward and threw out his arm, but he was too far away from her. In a sort of tragic slow motion he could see Sherri's shapely body slide through the air less than ten inches past the ends of his outstretched fingertips. Almost faster than he could see her pass, he was looking at the top of her quickly shrinking head, her golden hair seeming to wave goodbye to him as she plummeted to her death.

He could not reach her. She was gone.

"No!" he screamed.

In the heat of the moment, every fiber of his body chose to ignore reason and continue to stretch out impotently toward the lost cause. He could feel the muscles in his arm striving to bridge the rapidly growing chasm of inches to save Sherri's life. Though it had gone strangely numb, he could feel his forearm seem to swell and burst with the strain of its extension.

And half a second later, that's exactly what it did.

The sleeve of Bobby's bathrobe exploded into a flap of slashed terry cloth as the mohawk of knobby green teeth erupted from the straining flesh of his forearm. Three segments of green exoskeleton swung outward from his elbow, revealing the double-hinged span of a gigantic praying mantis foreleg!

With an extraordinary precision that strained the very boundaries of luck, the tip of his new appendage hooked into the back of Sherri's hood, tearing to a sudden stop at the ruffle of synthetic fur lining its edge. Her fall completely arrested, Sherri's traumatized body swung in a broad arc beneath the bridge on the end of a four-foot green pendulum anchored to Bobby's shoulder. She raised her head dizzily to look up at him with gratitude in her cloudy eyes.

"Th ... thanks, Bobby."

Bobby opened his mouth to reply but was rudely interrupted by a huge, bony fist hammering him in the jaw. A flash of lights and color swirled before his eyes as he stumbled backward, still clinging to the bottom of the overpass. His rear leg darted upward to find a girder upon which to plant itself, catching nothing but the open air beyond the bridge's edge. The unexpected loss of support threw him into an

off-kilter swing, but his hanging weight quickly found equilibrium between the stalks of his four other legs. He pounded his palm into the top of Priscilla's head and viciously shoved her away. She retreated toward the bridge's center by two skittering backstrokes.

On the ground, Erik and Vivian stood petrified next to Trent's injured body sprawled on the pavement. All three sets of eyes were fixed unflinchingly on the struggle above.

"She's going to kill them!" Erik said hysterically. "Oh my God, she's going to kill them! We have to stop her! We have to help them!"

"We can't stop her," Vivian said tearfully. "There's no way to get up there. No way."

"Yes, there is!" Erik pleaded. "Come on! We can go up the ramp!"

With that, he hobbled off the left shoulder of the road and furiously limped toward the level beginning of the overpass in the distance. Vivian watched the thin splatters of blood flick out of his cut and across the wilted grass every time that his lacerated leg hit the ground. She could hear the agonized grunts choked back in his determined throat without a second thought.

A tingle of inspiration boiled up through Vivian's own shameful resignation. The start of the ramp couldn't have been more than a hundred feet away from the highway, but for Erik, getting there would be an agonizing marathon. And even when he was on top of the bridge, there was no way that he could reach any of his friends hanging from its steel bottom, let alone help them fight or pull them to safety. It was a hopeless, pointless endeavor. Yet there he was, charging through his pain, completely unwilling to give up hope.

"Erik, wait," Vivian called. "Stop. You can't get to them like that."

"But there's no other way!"

Vivian's eyes were fixed on the bottom of the bridge as if in fevered calculation.

"Yes, there is," she said bravely. "I can get up there. I know I can."

"How can I help you?" Erik asked frantically.

Vivian flapped her wings with a single, billowing *snap*.

"You can't. I have to do this one on my own."

She turned away from the bridge and sprinted away down the dotted center line of the interstate. Erik watched her leap over the scattered remains of Sherri's ruptured purse as she bolted into the distance. A small bird skull and seventy cents worth of change stared back at him from the road, slowly drawing a memory to the front of his mind.

"Whoa, wait a second," he said excitedly. "I *can* help! I can stop Priscilla!"

He hobbled over, dropped to his knees, and pawed through the debris with all four hands.

"What the hell are you doing, E?" Trent exclaimed. "There's nothing in a lady's purse that's gonna save our peeps from that freaky freak!"

"Yes, there is," Erik yelled. "It was in Sherri's coat when I emptied her pockets! ... There!"

He found what he was looking for at the side of the road, grabbed it, and ran off, leaving Trent baffled.

"Black lipstick?"

High above, on the bottom of the overpass, Bobby looked down the extended green shaft of his arm at Sherri.

"Grab my arm," he ordered, "er ... hook!"

Sherri raised her hands to comply, and her thin body immediately slipped downward through the slick nylon lining of her jacket. With a gasped expletive, she bent her elbows and wrapped her arms over her head, catching herself before she could completely slide free of her makeshift harness.

"Aaagh! Shit!" she snarled, clutching her coat for dear life. "I can't reach you!"

As Sherri struggled, Bobby could see the fur trim starting to rip away from the quilted fabric of her hood, detaching stitch by stitch like a sudden death countdown.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," he groaned.

Bobby could hear Erik screaming at him from the ground below.

"Bobby, move!" he wailed. "Get away from Priscilla, now!"

Before Bobby could respond, a pinching, tearing pain sailed up his human leg. His head whirled around, throwing out a scream in a broad, circular arc of sound. Priscilla was clinging to the bottom of the overpass in front of him with her head pressed against her shoulder and an enormous severed spider leg twitching between her plier-like mandibles. From his inverted perspective, a drizzle of blood fell upward toward the ground from the stump of a missing leg sticking out of his belly.

"Aaaaaghh! Priscilla, no!" he gasped. "For the last time, I am not your enemy! Leave me the hell alone!"

The mutant girl spat a sharp hiss, and Bobby's remaining legs took another staggering step backward, plunging a second hairy foot off the edge and toward the charcoal clouds above. The bristles of his two remaining spider feet suspended him from both sides like a playground swing, tenuously grasping the rusty surface of the steel. As his arachnid legs started to slowly lose their grip, a strange sensation tingled across the bottom of his human feet. It felt like the sound of Velcro being pulled apart.

"Ah shit," he growled. "Now what? Think, Bobby, think ..."

Bobby looked back over his shoulder at the edge of the overpass, then down at Sherri hanging helplessly from his pointed mantis arm, then back up at the bridge. He nervously flexed his mutated right arm and sighed.

"Well," he sighed. "Here goes nothin'."

With a mighty flex of his thick bicep, he swung his arm away from the edge of the bridge, drawing Sherri up in a long, graceful arc beneath the cold green steel. When she had reached the top of her backswing, Bobby yanked with all of his might in the opposite direction, sending Sherri's slender body whistling through the air beneath him, all the way around the edge of the bridge, and slamming it with a bony clang into the tubular steel railing of the sidewalk above. The weight of her heavy boots carried her legs over the top of the bar, folding her in half at the waist and hanging her over the top rail like a wet towel.

The wrenching force of Bobby's desperate swing completely detached his last two wall-walking legs from the steel girder. His pudgy body dropped toward the ground, and his spine made a painful, crunching *pop* as he came to a swinging rest, hanging from the broad concrete lip of the bridge by the last hinged segment of his mantis arm.

As his full weight hung by one narrow, brittle hook of mutated chitin, Bobby could suddenly feel every cheeseburger he had ever eaten still sitting in the enormous gut that was slung around his waist. He could feel every Big Gulp and every all-you-can-eat barbecue session yanking at the tendons of his shoulder like a gluttonous game of tug-of-war. He could feel every corn chip and pork rind wedging themselves like salty knives through the sweating meat of his strained back.

A wet drop of heavy black goo splashed against his cheek. His head rolled skyward to see Priscilla stuck to the steel above him, wrapping her gnarled pincers around the spiny green shaft of his mutant arm.

"Oh no. No! No, Priscilla, no!"

"Bobby! Move!" Erik wailed. "Get your fat ass away from her, God damn it!"

"What do you think I've been trying to do?!" Bobby screamed.

Against all of the advice he had ever heard about dealing with heights, Bobby looked down. The first thing he saw was not Erik, but Vivian, sprinting at full speed up the long, straight runway of the abandoned interstate, wings fully extended and flapping in gigantic, powerful strokes.

Her lean, elongated legs didn't seem to be running as much as throwing her body forward, harder and harder past the blur of the dotted center line. With each flap of her wings, her strides got longer and longer, faster and faster. The wind whistling around her glasses and into her ears didn't seem to be resisting her anymore. It seemed to be embracing her, guiding her, pulling her forward.

"Hold on, Bobby," she growled. "I'm coming."

She closed her eyes and threw her arms gracefully in front of her like a ballerina, extending her long legs and launching herself into the sky.

One and a half flaps of her wings later she was ten feet away, face down in a battered heap on the cold, hard blacktop. A searing collection of fresh road burns bleeding from her palms, knees, and elbows reminded her that human beings were

not designed for flight. She pounded her bloody fist into the ground and wailed.

"No! Damn it! Not now!"

She looked up at the bottom of the bridge just in time to see Priscilla's head swing down against her shoulder, bisecting Bobby's brittle mantis arm with a splash of clear viscera and hard green splinters. There was a complete and deafening silence as he plummeted fifty feet through the cold air, landing with a fleshy bass note as he caved in the roof of the Reliant.

"No!" Vivian shrieked.

A fraction of a second later the air over Vivian's head ignited in a massive burst of air and noise and fire. Almost before her blasted eardrums had registered the sound, she saw Priscilla's chest tear apart in an explosion of flesh and blood. The mutated girl slammed into the bottom of the overpass and then seemed to peel off, sailing through the air with a kind of tragic grace, landing in an upside-down, broken heap in the back seat of the destroyed Rabbit.

Vivian turned with a deafened, heart-pounding lurch to see Erik standing behind her, holding the shotgun in his trembling hands. He tipped the weapon to the ground, clicking open the breech and ejecting a spent, lipstick-shaped shell. His eyes were dilated as he stared at the carnage.

"I tried ... I tried to stop her, b-but ... I ... he ... he just kept getting in the way," he chattered numbly. "H-he wouldn't get out of the way ..."

His chest began to convulse in heaving sobs until he finally fell to his hands and knees and violently threw up. Trent just stared at the two bodies lying in the automotive wreckage, his face as white as his teeth.

Vivian clambered to her feet, launching herself up the highway and onto the roof of the Reliant, collapsing on her knees at Bobby's side. His glasses had been lost in the fall, and his unobstructed eyes still showed a dancing spark of life. She clenched his hand between her two and squeezed it hard, as if trying to force the life back into his broken body.

"You're going to be okay," Vivian sniffed. "You hear me? We're going to get you to a hospital! There is still time, brother!"

Bobby shook his head and coughed.

"I know there isn't," he grumbled acceptingly. "I don't need you to blow sunshine up my skirt."

Vivian bit her lip guiltily.

"I'm so sorry, Bobby! This is all my fault! I tried so hard to use these stupid wings, but the aerodynamics are all wrong! I knew it wouldn't work! But I thought ... I thought if I just *believed* in myself that I could do it!"

Bobby shook his head.

"That's just *Full House* monologue bullshit, and you know it. Believing in yourself doesn't change the laws of physics."

Vivian's lips quivered and pursed as they struggled to hold back a tide of sobs. Bobby tugged gently on the edge of her leathery wing and continued.

"Vivian, you're never going to fly with these ..."

His arm swung upward, tapping his sister's forehead with his stumpy finger.

"... unless you fly with this first."

Vivian squeezed her brother's hand as the tears poured down her grimy face.

"You're going to be okay, you hear me?" she choked. "I'm not leaving without you, Bobby!"

Bobby shook his head weakly.

"Knock it off," he muttered. "You know you have to leave. The rest of those dumb asses will never survive without you. Promise me you won't ever stop fighting until you're all safe."

"But-but I can't-"

"Don't argue with me, Vivian!" he coughed. "I'm dying here!"

Vivian's eyes clenched and her head launched into a frantic little nod.

"I promise."

Bobby blinked a long, slow blink before he spoke again.

"Good. Now promise me one more thing," he breathed.

"Yes, Bobby?" Vivian whispered. "Anything."

"From now on, don't let Trent pick up any more chicks."

With that, he smiled, squeezed Vivian's hand, and quietly closed his eyes for the last time.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In a nondescript plot of yellowed grass, two lifeless bodies lay with their hands crossed over their chests in tranquil repose near the shoulder of Interstate 67. A scraped Volkswagen fender and the few clods of rock-hard dirt it had chipped from the earth told the tale of a foiled attempt at burial.

On the other side of the road, Vivian was kneeling next to a small, pathetic patch of wilted purple wildflowers. Glassy trails of tears ran from the corners of her otherwise sober eyes. She could see the others hovering around the bodies, each paying their respects to their fallen friends in their own way.

Trent stood at the head of the above-ground graves with his eyes closed,

muttering some piece of scripture that he almost certainly found relevant for all the wrong reasons. He was wearing the bloodstained varsity jacket and holding himself upright on his wounded legs using the shotgun as a crutch.

Erik stood to the side of Priscilla's body, brooding sulkily. He held the last remaining shotgun shell in his hand, turning it over and over again in his fingers without looking at it. The sleeves of the pink sweater discovered in Priscilla's trunk had been recruited to tie off the bloody gash in his thigh, leaving him looking like a grisly parody of a Bananarama fan. The remainder of the sweater was wrapped in a tight hood over Sherri's wounded scalp, tied in a sugary bow under her pointed bronze chin. In a surprising display of emotion, she was kneeling at Bobby's side with her head buried in her arms over his bloated belly, sobbing uncontrollably.

Vivian picked a handful of the dismal flowers from the ground and noticed something stuck in the tall grass beyond. She pushed aside the withered foliage and discovered Bobby's lost glasses. A choked snuffle launched out of her throat and lodged itself somewhere behind her nose.

For a set of twins, Bobby and Vivian shared very little in the way of physiology, but their eyeglasses were absolutely identical: the same style, the same frames, even the same prescription. She picked them up and looked at them through her own cracked lenses. From the bold black outline of his plastic frames, she could almost see Bobby's face ripple outward in an imaginary haze, the split of her left lens bisecting the phantom into two vertical slices that didn't quite match up.

"I should give these back to him," she thought. "He would want them."

She stood up and began walking toward the rest of the group, flowers in one hand, glasses in the other. She knew that he couldn't see without his glasses any better than she could, which was not very well at all. Returning them to him seemed like the right thing to do. As she crossed the street, however, the ghost image of Bobby rolled his eyes disgustedly.

"You're such a sentimental wiener," it seemed to say. "What the hell am I supposed to do with glasses now? I'm all dead and shit."

"But what if you ... you know ... need them?"

"What, in the afterlife? Give me a break, Vivian. I think Valhalla will have an optometrist. How are you supposed to get these chumps to safety if you can't even see where you're going? Be reasonable; don't be superstitious."

Vivian pulled her own glasses off of her face and replaced them with the unbroken pair. The smooth black plastic was cold against her ears and nose but quickly warmed up to meet her body temperature as her vision adjusted to the clarity of the intact lenses.

"Okay, logic over sentimentality. That's what you would have wanted," she said. "But how about we compromise?"

With that, she knelt down by her brother's head and placed her own broken glasses on his cold nose. She could see the reflection of Trent's face in the split lens

as he limped to her side. He put his heavy hand on her shoulder with a long, lingering rub of support.

"You okay, Vivi?"

"I've said my goodbyes," she nodded. "We should get away from this terrible place before it gets dark. There's nothing else we can do here."

"But ... but what about *them*?" Erik mumbled, gesturing to the bodies. "We can't just take off and leave them here by the side of the interstate like roadkill, can we? It just seems so ... *wrong*."

Vivian stood up and shook her head.

"I'm sorry. We can't take them with us, and you know we can't bury them. I don't know what else to do."

"No, Little E's right," Trent said. "If we can't give them a burial we can at least hook them up with a proper funeral to guide their souls to the pearly gates. It's the least we can do."

"All right," Vivian nodded. "If nothing else, it might give us some sense of closure. Go ahead."

Trent cleared his throat and boomed, "Almighty God, we commit these bodies to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless them and keep them, the Lord make his face to shine upon them ..."

Vivian's mind drifted sharply away as Trent's stony delivery of the time-honored prayer dredged up the celluloid memories of every depressing funeral that she had ever seen in the movies. In her own mind, the four of them were now standing on a rainy green hill amid a crowd of mourners dressed in sharp black suits and veils, each holding an identical black umbrella. Most of them were content to stand with a pensive look on their gray faces, but there was that one old lady wailing uncontrollably at the graveside. Wailing, wailing, wailing. Vivian opened her eyes not to the phantom of a grieving widow, but to a very real Sherri, hot tears streaming down her reddened, sobbing face.

"Uh, Trent," Vivian interrupted, "I ... we all appreciate the sentiment of what you're saying, but ... honestly, Bobby was never one for sentimentality. I know he wouldn't want to go out with us all huddled around and weeping over him like this. Don't you know another passage that's more, I don't know, uplifting?"

Trent thought for a moment, then cleared his throat and spoke with a metered passion.

"Dearly beloved ... we are gathered here today to get through this thing called life. Electric word, life. It means forever, and that's a mighty long time."

Erik shook his head.

"Okay, do you know anything that's uplifting and *isn't* out of a Prince song?"

"This is pointless," Vivian muttered. "Look, if you want to say goodbye to Bobby and Priscilla, just do it. Don't recite canned speeches that you think you're

supposed to say at a time like this. If you're going to say anything, just speak from your heart, okay?"

Sherri nodded and stood up, drawing a long, wet breath of air into her lungs before finally speaking.

"Bobby Gray was a stupid motherfucker."

"Sherri!" Vivian snapped.

"Well, it was from the heart-you've got to give her that," Erik shrugged.

"You'd be alive right now if you didn't come after me, you stupid asshole!" Sherri sobbed. "Why did you get yourself killed to save me? What were you thinking?! I never did a goddamn thing for you! I never did a goddamn thing for anybody! I didn't ask for this, you asshole! You stupid ... *asshole!* "

Sherri's eulogy collapsed under the weight of a gratitude that she was ill-equipped to express, degenerating into a tearful, shuddering sob. Drowning in the sea of her own frustrated emotions, she didn't protest when Trent offered his conciliatory embrace, but actually returned it, rubbing a cheek full of tear-activated grime across his shoulder. Without a hint of subtlety, Trent's cat tail straightened out and stood as upright as a flagpole.

"It's okay, girl. It's all right," he cooed. "You know that God has a plan for all of us. Maybe Big B's purpose for being on this earth was to protect you, because you have the most important purpose of all."

"Important purpose? Trent, I don't have *any* purpose! I've *never* had a purpose besides giving assholes somebody to point at when they make their itty-bitty-titty-committee jokes. Now I don't even have *that* going for me anymore."

Trent put his mocha fingers under Sherri's chin and pushed her head upward until her wet pink eyes met his own dull brown smolder.

"I know, Goldie. It's all part of His plan," he smiled. "And I'm here to help you serve your divine purpose."

With that, he leaned in and pressed his chapped lips against Sherri's tiny pink mouth. His tongue probed into her narrow jaw, flooding her palate with a stale taste of neglected oral hygiene. Almost before his advance had even started, it was ended by a knobby, fishnetted knee delivered swiftly to his groin. As Trent staggered back with a coughing groan, Sherri leapt away from him, frantically wiping her tongue with her fingertips. Finally she drew a massive wad of contaminated spit into the back of her throat and deposited it with a wet *thump* on Trent's chest.

"You horny asshole cockbag dipshit motherfucker!" she spat. "What the fuck are you doing?!"

"Isn't it obvious?! It's your purpose!" Trent moaned. "You just said it yourself! You spend your whole life built like a carpenter's dream, and then just when we need to repopulate the earth, you suddenly bust out all over like some kind of freaky tiki fertility idol! How can you not see what you're supposed to do next?!"

"What? *What?! What the fuck, Trent?! Just because some asshole conned me into overdosing on old-lady hormones it doesn't make me your goddamn baby oven!"*

"Aww, that's bullshit and you know it! If there was a magic pill that just slapped on hips and tits like a Beverly Hills surgeon, don't you think that every sixteen-year-old girl in the country would be all hopped up on that shit? This isn't a side effect of bad drugs, girl! This is the work of a higher power! It's time to accept and carry out your purpose. You're the new Eve. You're going to be the new mother of mankind!"

Sherri crossed her arms over her swollen chest and glared at Trent with a fire in her eyes.

"That is *the* most desperate and clumsy attempt at getting a girl into the sack that I have ever heard in my entire life. Did you ever stop and think that if God was so gung-ho about the survival of the human race that maybe he wouldn't have *killed everybody on Earth?! "*

Trent shook his head.

"It worked out okay for Noah," he shrugged. "Look, I know you think I'm some kind of superfly slick playa, but I'm being honest with you here. For real. With Prissy gone, you and Vivi are the only ones left who can carry on the human race. Why can't you see that, girl? Prissy wasn't all uptight about it. She understood what we needed to do if we didn't want to be the last bookend on God's mighty shelf."

"Um, I don't mean to speak ill of your noble attempt to propagate the species," Erik interrupted, "but to put it delicately, if you were trying to reproduce with Priscilla you were using the wrong end."

"Damn, E! The T doesn't steal home on the first date! There is still such a thing as chivalry, you know!"

A high, mirthless laugh clucked out of Sherri's throat.

"What is the *matter* with you?!" she shouted. "Listen to yourself! You're trying to write off date raping a retard as fulfilling a biblical mandate! She didn't want to fuck you any more than the rest of us do, but she was just too goddamn stupid to say so!"

"To say so?" Trent growled. "You know she couldn't talk! She had a gash in her throat the size of the San Fernando Valley!"

"Even if she could talk, I'll bet she wouldn't have said *shit*," Sherri argued. "I've seen guys passed out under pool tables with better communication skills than her!"

"Stop it!" Vivian screamed. "All of you stop it! You're unbelievable! This is supposed to be a funeral! Do you think that Priscilla would have wanted her memorial service to consist of a bunch of strangers arguing about her sex life?"

The others hung their heads in acknowledgment of their disgraceful behavior.

"Well, what the hell are we supposed to say about her then?" Sherri growled.

"She was a giant evil bug bitch that murdered your brother. End of story."

"That's not the end of the story," Vivian insisted. "She wasn't always like this."

She pulled the old photograph of Priscilla and Lee from her coat pocket and looked at the smiling face of a girl who no longer existed. She held the picture up to the others and continued.

"Don't demonize her, Sherri. This creature lying in front of us isn't Priscilla-I mean, the *real* Priscilla. The real Priscilla was just an average girl, just like you. Just like me. She lived in an average little tourist town. She worked an average job selling average junk to average people. And just like us, I'm sure that she dreamed of something better than that average life. The real Priscilla wasn't an atomic monster, Sherri. She wasn't a murderous mutant. She was just an average girl. Just like us."

The group observed a short moment of silence as the force of Vivian's words slowly sank in. Finally Sherri grabbed the hood of pink bandage on her head and threw it to the ground with a growl.

"What are you doing?" Vivian said. "Your cuts are going to get infected."

"So what?" Sherri spat. "A few germs aren't going to make any difference once I turn into a giant ogre, are they? Somebody just kill me right now before I change into a freak like her."

"Change? You're not going to change!" Vivian said doggedly. "Just because this happened to her doesn't mean that it's going to happen to us!"

"Not going to happen to us my ass!" Sherri roared. "You just said like, ten times that she was just like us before all of this atomic shit went down! But by the time we met her all she understood was 'eat,' 'fuck,' and 'don't die.' I don't want to live like that! I don't want to live with the brains of a fucking cockroach!"

A short stuttering of rebuttal tumbled from Vivian's lips, but it quickly fell apart before it could form.

"You're right," she said thoughtfully. "She *was* just like a cockroach."

"Oh, that's great, Vivi. That's real nice," Trent grumbled. "You complain that we're doing a bad job eulogizing Prissy's memory, and then you step up here and start calling her a cockroach."

"No no, I'm not saying that Priscilla was a cockroach, Trent," Vivian defended. "I'm just saying that's what she had been reduced to in the end. The mind of a cockroach. I mean, I saw her drive an eight-inch metal spike into her leg just because she lacked the simple cognitive skills to pull it back out! It was like the evolved parts of her mind had been shut off, leaving her with nothing but the most basic fragments of human instinct."

"We already knew that," Erik said. "The stress of being stuck in that igloo with all of those killer bugs broke her brain."

"That might have had something to do with it," Vivian conceded. "But I don't think that's really what happened to her."

Her eyes seemed to flicker with thoughts working themselves into logical clusters in her mind.

"I have a theory," she continued. "We think that Priscilla's cells multiplied so rapidly because her DNA was damaged by the radiation, right? If her body absorbed that much radiation, imagine the damage it must have done to her brain! It must have been like getting hundreds of skull x-rays at once."

"But she couldn't have lived without a brain," Erik contended.

"No, you're right," Vivian said, raising a finger. "But she could have lived with only *part* of one. What if the radiation only damaged the lobes of the brain that handle reason and cognizance, leaving nothing but motor function and basic instinctual behavior?"

"Damn, Vivi, that's a whole heapin' helpin' of the what-ifs," Trent said dismissively. "If all that brain-damage jive is true, then why didn't the exact same thing happen to anybody's brain but Prissy's?"

"It did," Vivian said. "It hasn't happened to any of us, but it's completely consistent with every one of the other mutants we've come across. Think about it. Those bugs in the igloo seemed to be attacking us, but what did they do, really? The bees were defending their hive, and the spiders were capturing prey. That's what bees and spiders do! Erik, what about the rat that scratched you in the storm drain? Did it chase you down and attack you?"

"No, I picked it up," Erik said with embarrassment. "It didn't claw me until I tried to ... uh ... hug it."

"You see?" Vivian said. "It was probably just acting in self-defense! What if all this time we've been mistaking rudimentary animal instinct for aggression?"

"But what about the cat?" Sherri said. "That bitch was definitely out for blood."

"She was," Erik agreed thoughtfully. "But Twiki *always* tried to kill anything that moved. She had some serious aggression issues."

"It all makes some kind of sense now," Vivian said. "What if none of those mutants was evil, but just brain damaged?"

Erik's glance drifted to the thin tangle of wildflowers that did a poor job camouflaging a ragged, fleshy hole bored deep into Priscilla's chest. His eyes began to pool as his lips trembled in a suddenly amplified remorse.

"Oh my God," he whispered. "I executed a retarded girl. With a shotgun! I'm worse than the governor of Texas!"

As the words came out of his mouth the sentiment behind them suddenly became concrete, and Erik broke down into a flood of horrified tears.

"I ... I didn't know!" he wailed. "I didn't realize that she was just brain damaged! I thought she was some kind of savage monster!"

"But she *was* a monster! That's what I'm trying to say!" Vivian explained. "I'm not talking about the Special Olympics here-I'm talking about a walking brain stem!"

Her personality and humanity were completely destroyed with her dissolving gray matter! That thing that you killed was not a retarded girl, Erik. It was just a completely mindless shell. It was a ... it was a *zombie*. "

"She was *not* a zombie!" Erik sobbed. "Zombies are the walking undead who kill people and eat their brains! She did not come back from the dead, Vivian!"

"Didn't she, Erik?" Vivian shouted.

She held up the creased photograph and planted her long forefinger on Priscilla's tiny smile.

" *This* girl was dead long before we ever met her."

Her finger slashed downward to Priscilla's mutated body.

" *That* girl was a thoughtless bundle of burned-up neurons parading around in a human body! She may not be an according-to-Romero zombie, but the *person* who was once Priscilla died, and this *creature* was born. Priscilla, the *real* Priscilla, was already dead before you shot this body, Erik. You are not a murderer. She was no different from any of the other monsters that we've had to defend ourselves against."

Erik tipped his head to the ground in a pained resignation.

"You're wrong, Vivian," he said. "She's not like the other atomic monsters at all."

"How can you say that?" Vivian asked irascibly. "Every single fact that we have says that she was *exactly* like them!"

"No, it doesn't," Erik muttered. "All of the other mutants started glowing as soon as we killed them. Look at her, Vivian."

All eyes turned curiously to Priscilla's inert form. The long, grotesque black mandibles still jutted from her fractured jaw and shoulder, and dozens of horrible legs stuck from her body like a mad entomologist's pincushion. A lot of words could be used to describe how unnatural she looked, but "glowing" was definitely not one of them.

"She's not glowing, and neither is Bobby," Erik continued. "She may have been mentally handicapped, but she wasn't some kind of undead atomic freak like the others. She was still a human, Vivian. Just a mutated human. Just like Bobby. Just like us."

"But ... but that's just one little insignificant incongruity!" Vivian stammered. "Whether or not she glows is irrelevant in the face of all of the other evidence! Priscilla suffered gigantism, just like the others. She acted on instinct, just like the others. All she had left in her head was fight or flight, eat or starve, live or die."

Erik threw a finger toward Trent and spoke with snapping aggression.

"Well, if she didn't have any higher thought, then why did she try so hard to defend this idiot that she thought was her boyfriend?"

Vivian's eyebrows knitted and she spoke with a trembling clarity.

"Because the only human instinct stronger than survival is love."

Erik searched Vivian's face mournfully. She was gravely serious and steadfastly hopeful. He gazed into those green eyes for a long moment before he spoke.

"I want to join the pact."

"What?"

"Your homicide pact. I've changed my mind. I agree with Sherri on this one. Growing extra limbs is one thing, but if I go completely brain-dead like Priscilla, I want you to kill me."

"Damn it, Erik! You *won't* go brain-dead!" Vivian shouted. "None of us will! We're still sharp and alert! Just the fact that we're able to *have* this discussion proves that we're going to be okay! There's something different about us!"

"No, there's not," Sherri moaned. "There's not jack shit that makes us different from Priscilla."

"There's *so much* that's different! We went through so much without her!" Vivian argued. "What about ... what about that pink vapor back in Stillwater? Every one of us breathed that vapor except for Priscilla! What if there was something in that cloud that's protecting us?"

"It's no good, Viv," Erik said, shaking his head. "Both the rat and Twiki were exposed to that fog too, and they both went brain-dead in a matter of hours."

"Yes, a matter of hours," Vivian said desperately. "Both of them turned into zombies in a *matter of hours*. We don't know how long it took Priscilla, but she was changed by the time we got here. It's a quick process! If it was going to happen to any of us, it would have happened by now!"

"I'd like to believe you, Vivian. I really would," Erik said morosely. "But biology doesn't follow a neat and orderly time table. I mean, look at us. Bobby's cuts got splattered with spider goo and he grew legs the next afternoon. Twiki cut Trent and he didn't grow a tail for *days*. Things effect everyone's body differently. We're not machines, you know. We're not going to fall over in rows."

"But we're all going to fall over eventually," Sherri mumbled.

Erik stared at the shotgun shell as he turned it over and over in his fingers.

"I've already committed one murder out of ignorance," he said. "I don't want to ever do it again. When I lose my mind, I want you to take this last shotgun shell and blow my brain-dead head off. I deserve it for what I've done. Will you do that for me, Vivian?"

"No!" Vivian screamed. "Cut that out!"

Erik's hypnotic stare was broken as Vivian snatched the shell out of his hand and stuffed it into her coat pocket.

"Nobody is going to be blowing anybody's head off! Do you understand me?" she barked. "We're all going to get through this! We're all going to survive!"

"I'd rather put a gun in my mouth right now than survive riding the short bus to

Hell," Sherri grumbled.

Vivian turned fiercely on Sherri with a fire raging in her eyes.

"Sherri, just a few minutes ago you were furious because Bobby sacrificed himself to save you, and now you want to kill *yourself*? He thought your life was important enough to die saving, and now you just want to throw it away?"

Sherri's teeth ground together as if trying to dam up the flood of emotion building in her throat. She lowered her gaze and spoke softly.

"I've been throwing it away for years," she whimpered. "If he thought that saving me was worth killing himself over, then he was already brain damaged."

Her jaw broke into a quiver that quickly burst into a sobbing cough.

"Bobby, you idiot," she choked. "Never waste your heroics saving a smoker!"

Vivian stepped forward and put her arm around Sherri, holding her tortured body in a comforting embrace. Sherri put her head against Vivian's chest and wept.

"We're doomed. It's just a matter of time now," Erik said morbidly. "It doesn't matter how far we go—we can't outrun biology."

Vivian closed her eyes and took a deep, steadying breath. Even if she couldn't prove it, she knew that they were all wrong. She knew that they weren't going to turn into mindless zombies. She knew that there was a safe haven waiting for them somewhere. She just knew it. But somehow she had to make the others know it too. She opened her eyes and turned to Erik.

"Do you know what the last thing Bobby said to me was?" she asked him.

"If I know Bobby, he ended on a joke."

Vivian slipped her hand under her glasses and rubbed her eyes with her thumb and forefinger.

"Okay, do you know what the *second-to-last* thing Bobby said to me was?" she amended. "He made me promise to never stop fighting. As he was lying there bleeding to death on that roof, just as sure as he knew that he wasn't going to make it, he knew that the rest of us *were*. You know what separates him and us from Priscilla and those creatures? It's hope. We can look beyond our immediate situation. We have the mental capacity to transcend this moment of desperation and see a time in the near future when we're all clean, and fed, and safe. If you give up hope, then you may as well just lay down and die right here, because without hope, you're no better than a brain-dead zombie."

"But, Vivian," Erik pleaded, "hope doesn't keep gamma radiation from destroying brain tissue! We're still going to lose our minds, one by one, and have to be put out of our misery! When the time comes, you'll have to respect our final wishes, Vivian."

Vivian let go of Sherri and took a sharp step toward Erik, balling her hand into a fist before flicking out a finger and pointing it furiously toward his face. When she spoke, however, her voice was as cool as ice.

"Okay, fine, Erik. Fine. You want to change your mind about the homicide pact? Fine. Because you know what? I change my mind too. I'm out. I'm out because I know the agreement is pointless. I may not know why, but I'm absolutely certain that there are *two* kinds of survivors out here in this atomic wasteland, and Priscilla and Bobby prove it. There's the kind of survivor that devolves into a brain-dead zombie, and then there's the kind that evolves into a hero."

She looked down at the bodies and continued.

"Just as surely as the apocalypse changed Priscilla for the worse, it changed Bobby for the better. I loved him with all my heart, but let's be honest here. Before the bombs dropped, Bobby Gray was a lazy, sarcastic, self-centered jerk. But today, when he sacrificed his own life to save Sherri's, Bobby Gray became Atomic Bob, post-apocalyptic mutant hero."

Sherri wiped the wet streaks from her face with her palms and nodded in silent agreement. Erik shuffled his feet noncommittally while Trent just stared at the dirt as if afraid to let out whatever demons were haunting his mind.

"So what's it going to be, people?" Vivian demanded. "Are you going to just sit around and wait to see if your brains collapse, or are you going to suck it up and be heroes like Atomic Bob? I've made my choice. From now on I'm going to be Vivian Oblivion, and I can't get through this without the help of an Erik the Barbaric, and a Scary Sherri, and a ... and ... well, Trent."

She winced at her clumsiness, but she continued.

"My point is, we're not zombies now, and we never will be. You just have to have faith in that fact and ... uh ... believe in yourselves."

After a tense pause that seemed much longer than it actually was, Trent broke the silence with a slow, insincere clap.

"Oh, that speech was aces all the way, Vivi. For real," he said. "But all the motivational speaking in the world isn't going to make any difference when our brains all turn into Jell-O pudding. You can pull Biology 101 guesstimates out of your derriere all day long, but you just don't have any *proof*."

Vivian's mouth fell open. She blurted out the start of a word, then started another word, then just cackled in disbelief.

"Proof?! You want *proof*?! The *one time* I ask for you to have faith, and Mr. Bible-Knows-Best wants proof! Okay, you know what-fine! If every piece of logic and reason that I can knit together into solid scientific hypotheses aren't good enough to make you believe me, then it's up to God."

She raised her arms upward and shouted into the sky.

"Excuse me, God? Science isn't cutting it down here-could you please give us some heavenly sign that we're going to be okay?!"

The moment the words left her mouth, a drop of ashy black water streaked down her new glasses. Then another, and another. In a matter of seconds, the tar-black

clouds above had torn themselves open, dropping the char of a thousand burnt cities in a grimy deluge. Trent silently screamed, "I told you so" with one raised eyebrow before gently shaking his head and shambling off for the cover of the ruined overpass. Erik and Sherri followed him without a word, slouching though the precipitating filth as if it was melting away their will to live.

Vivian did not take cover. She just stood like a crumbling statue in the black rain, letting its cold embrace her. As dirty as the water was, it was still cleaner than her, and as it ran across her skin and down her wings it streaked away layer upon layer of blood and grime. She dropped to her knees at Bobby's side and spoke to his still remains.

"I'm sorry, Bobby. I tried. I know you told me to keep fighting, but how am I supposed to keep fighting if nobody else will? I did just what you said. I used my brain. I used logic. I even resorted to telling them to believe in themselves! But nothing worked. I *know* that she's different from the rest of us, but I just can't make the pieces fit together. Even God is against me!"

She closed her eyes and rocked back on her heels, taking a deep, wet breath. Tears of frustration ran down her face, but the streaming downpour effectively obliterated them. In the darkness of her eyelids, she could hear the heavy drops pounding a mournful drum solo out of the remains of the satellite dish nearby. She remembered the looping episode of *Zoobilee Zoo* and wished that they had taken its advice about not talking to strangers.

"Why don't you glow, Priscilla? What's the missing piece?" she muttered. "Everything would click if you would just glow!"

She opened her eyes and looked at Priscilla's dead body in some kind of desperate, foolish hope that it would somehow give her the answer to her question.

Which was, in fact, exactly what it did.

Through the dark sheets of rain, Vivian could see Priscilla's twin mandibles glowing with a more intense blue than a temporary price reduction at the Smurf Village K-Mart. The exposed teeth and bones of her shattered jaw all emitted the same sparkling blue light, as did the chitin shafts of the insect legs that hung limply from the clawed holes in her mangled skin.

"You ... you're glowing!" Vivian gasped. "Why are you ..."

The answer ran down her body in cold, wet streaks.

"The rain. The rain! It's the water!"

In a flash, the filing system of her mind screamed into action, unshelving the memories of each of the zombies they had encountered. Erik had said that the rat's teeth had started to glow after he killed it and threw it into the puddle of street runoff. She remembered Twiki's bony remains glowing out of the dirty pool of the Port Manatee fountain. Each of the bugs in the igloo hadn't started to glow until she had smashed them open, splashing their fractured exoskeletons with gobs of their own clear, wet viscera.

"That's it! That's the missing piece!" Vivian shouted. "It's not *dead* zombies that glow! It's *wet* zombies!"

She looked at Bobby and reached out for his face, then flinched at what she was about to do, and then leaned in with a muttered apology.

"I'm sorry, Bobby. But I have to know."

She took his stiffened lips in her fingers and peeled them back from his teeth. As the cloudy rainwater splashed down into his open mouth, his teeth retained their normal hue of dull, non-illuminated yellow stain.

"I knew it! We *are* different! Only the *glowing* mutants grow and lose their minds! I have proof! I have a test!"

She turned her head to the sky and bared her teeth in self-examination, but when she turned her eyes downward she saw nothing but her own cheeks. Without thinking, she turned her head to the ground and tried the same, as if that would make any difference. Finally she scrambled to her feet and sprinted off toward the remains of the overpass. When she got there she did not enter its umbrella of shelter but yelled to those huddled within.

"Look at my teeth!" she grinned, hopping up and down with her chin thrust forward, jaw clenched. "Look at them! Look at my teeth! Look at my teeth!"

"Knock it off!" Sherri barked. "You're freaking me out!"

Vivian stopped dancing, barely containing herself. "My teeth," she said again, pointing to her manic grin with both hands. "Are they glowing?"

"What, you mean like a Crest kid?" Erik asked.

"No, I mean like a wet zombie!" Vivian beamed crazily. "Look over there! Priscilla is glowing! She glows in the rain! I don't know why, but the zombies' teeth and bones glow when they're in water!"

The landscape was obscured behind the curtain of rain, but everyone could clearly see two distinct, curved blades of bright blue light shining from the darkness like an angel's hedge clippers.

"Wait, I've heard of this," Erik said, scratching his forehead as if to coax forth the memory. "They call it Cerenkov radiation! When highly radioactive particles move faster than light, they glow blue! I read all about it in a *Lost in Space* fanzine!"

"That's unbelievable!" Sherri cried.

"It's true!" Erik squeaked. "I mean, it's impossible for anything to move faster than light in a vacuum, but it can happen in something dense like water!"

"No, I mean a *Lost in Space* fanzine? You seriously read that shit?"

"Hey! Look at me!" Vivian interrupted. "Look at my teeth! Are they glowing with Cerenkov radiation or not?!"

"No!" Erik beamed. "They're not! They're not glowing! You're okay!"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you!" Vivian exclaimed happily.

The heavy blanket of lethargy and doom was suddenly whipped off of Sherri's shoulders like a magician's tablecloth as she sprang to her feet and out into the splashing rain.

"What about me?" she snarled through bared teeth. "Can you see anything through the nicotine stains?"

Vivian grabbed Sherri by both cheeks and turned her tanned face into the rain. The drops pelted off of her teeth without a hint of light.

"You're good!" Vivian cheered. "You see?! No need to kill yourself!"

Trent hobbled out of the shelter of the bridge and turned his head to the sky. The cold water ran in rivers down his face as he grinned his huge, toothy grin into the clouds.

"Ooo, what about Trent?" Sherri said excitedly. "Can we kill Trent?"

Vivian took Trent's chin in her hand and glared into his mouth. Despite his holiday from toothpaste, his teeth remained perfect squares of unblemished, non-glowing white.

"Sorry, no such luck," she smiled. "Trent is okay."

In the exhilaration of the moment, she leaned in and gave Trent a celebratory hug around his neck, which he reciprocated with a two-handed squeeze of her behind. Vivian leapt backward and wagged a shameful finger at him, but even Trent's hornball antics couldn't take the wind out of her exuberant sails.

"Come on, Erik," she called. "Let's see those pearly whites!"

Erik stepped slowly into the rain, but he did not open his mouth.

"I'm scared," he said. "What if I'm the only one who glows?"

"You're not going to glow!"

"But what if I do? Do you promise that you'll honor the pact?"

"Oh come on, Erik," Vivian groaned. "Stop being so melodramatic. Yes, if your teeth glow, which they *won't*, I promise I'll blow your zombie head off. Okay?"

Erik nodded.

"Okay."

He slowly leaned his head back and bared his teeth to the heavens, allowing the water to pool up between his lips.

"You see!" Vivian said. "Your teeth are-oh."

"*Oh?!*" Erik squeaked, taking in a spluttering mouthful of black water. "Why 'oh'? What 'oh'?!"

"Nothing," Vivian mumbled. "I'm sure it's nothing."

She pulled the last remaining shotgun shell from her pocket and held her hand out to Trent, whispering out of the corner of her mouth.

"I've gay me the otgunshay."

"Oh my God!" Erik wailed. "Oh my God, I'm one of them! I knew it! I'm one of them, aren't I?"

Vivian dropped the shell back into her pocket with an explosive burst of laughter.

"Erik, you're fine!" she cheered. "Lighten up-I was just messin' with ya."

As the grim joke slowly sunk in, Erik blinked, waiting to feel his heart beat again. Suddenly his lips pulled back from his non-glowing teeth into a fierce grin. He rushed forward in the rain and threw his human hands under Vivian's arms, grasping her around the waist with his mutant paws and lifting her off the ground for a single joyous orbit around his twirling body.

"Your brother must have left you his sick sense of humor," he said.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist. You know that somewhere he's watching this and laughing his head off," Vivian smiled. " *Now* do you believe that we're going to be okay?"

"I'll never doubt you again," Erik blushed. "You're right. We *are* different from the others. But I still don't understand *why*."

"There's only one answer," Trent said, saluting the sky. "We *are* the chosen ones after all."

Sherri groaned.

"You know what? At this point I'm willing to accept that answer if it means that I'm not going to get so fucked-up that I think blowing you is a good idea."

"Okay, okay," Erik conceded. "Vivian, you may not have all the answers, but you sure have enough to let me sleep at night."

With a shy smile, he leaned in and gave her a tiny kiss on her broad, wet lips. When he backed away, Vivian grabbed his ears and pulled him in for a big wet kiss of her own.

"Damn, E, don't bogart our heroine!" Trent said, wiping his dirty lips on the back of his sleeve. "The T is cookin' up a big batch of congratulatory action for you too, Vivi girl!"

He leaned in toward Vivian's face with puckered lips, which she deflected with a gentle push of her open palm.

"All right, settle down, you," she said, half smiling. "If we're going to survive, we're not going to do it by standing around here. I say we wait out the storm under this bridge and then keep moving first thing in the morning. All right?"

"Moving toward what?" Erik asked. "Washington is gone. We don't have any idea where to go from here."

The rain seemed to pelt down harder on the heels of Erik's plaintive words, driving an almost calypsonian beat from the steel drum of the wrecked satellite dish. Vivian nodded to it with a smile.

"I have an idea where to go," she said. "We're going to Pennsylvania."

The others looked at her quizzically.

"The satellite broadcast," she explained. "It was coming from a PBS station out of Liberty Valley, Pennsylvania. It's not much, but it's the closest thing we've had to making contact with other survivors."

"Pennsylvania?" Sherri burst out. "How in the hell are we supposed to get to Pennsylvania without a car?"

Vivian looked into the distance with a flash of hope in her eyes.

"Get a good night's sleep," she said. "We've got an awfully long walk ahead of us."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It rained.

It rained a rain so thick and black that it was as if the very night was melting.

It had been like this for weeks.

Billions of sooty drops the size of licorice jelly beans pounded relentlessly onto the pavement of a forgotten country road somewhere in central Maryland. Tiny slivers of silvery white moonlight began to slice through the ashy clouds, lightly sketching out the forms of four figures staggering single-file through the downpour.

"Are we there yet?" Erik moaned.

"Are we *where* yet?" Vivian asked.

"Anywhere."

Vivian shook her head solemnly.

"No."

The harsh weather and rough terrain had taken the wind out of the group's collective sails, slowing their forward progress to a battered, limping crawl. Vivian was leading the refugees toward a destination too far away to even seem real. The water pelted against the flattened copper curtain of her drenched hair, flowing over her face and into her saturated Mountie coat. Her soaked wings hung limply from her shoulders, dragging on the ground behind her like a pair of drowned animals. She could feel the rivulets of wet grime trickling off her polyester dress and through the fair red fur that now covered her bare, unshaven legs. Yet the filth and the rain didn't bother her nearly as much as the hunger that clawed at her stomach.

She gently shook her head and nearly lost her balance. It was like her neck was

made out of an old sponge, and her skull out of lead. With a stumbling, splashing step she caught herself, leaving her vision swimming with the pink and blue fireworks of a starved delirium. It hardly mattered. Between the darkness, the rain, the water stains on her lenses, and the veil of drizzling red bangs hanging over the front of her glasses, she could barely see where she was going anyway.

Erik sloshed along behind her. The gash in his thigh had long since resolved into a ragged scar, but its pink bandages still hung loosely around his leg. Hunger and exhaustion had taken their toll on his physique. Thin as a skeleton, with a few weeks' worth of scraggly beard sprouting from his bony face and the 5-in-1 camping lantern hanging dimly in his knotty mutant hand, Erik was beginning to look like a prop from a cheap Halloween hayride.

Sherri dragged herself along behind Erik. The curls of her yellowed hair lay in soiled, waterlogged clumps over her scarred skull and her heavily lidded eyes. Her formerly white princess jacket was stained with long vertical streaks of rain-deposited soot, giving her the appearance of a crumbling brick smokestack looming over some abandoned Victorian factory. Behind Sherri, through the continuous, almost deafening clatter of the driving rain, an uneven measure of rhythm repeated itself over and over again in an erratic loop.

Zip. Clunk. Zip. Zip. Clunk. Zip. Clunk.

At the rear of the parade of drowned souls, Trent hobbled painfully upon the scraped barrels of his shotgun crutch, clunking it heavily into the ground with every other step. In an attempt to keep the filthy rainwater out of his injuries, his legs were now wrapped in thick dressings of scavenged plastic tarpaulin bound with varied lengths of twine and cord. With each step that he took, his swollen wrappings rubbed together like the thighs of a husky boy in corduroy pants.

Zip. Zip. Clunk. Zip. Clunk. Zip. Zip.

Trent's peripheral vision had been lost to the overstuffed pillows of his black eyes, and the narrow corridor of his forward gaze was now fixed steadfastly between Vivian's wings and upon her soaked behind. Like a carrot on a string in front of a cartoon mule, her skirted bottom seemed to be all that kept him moving through the haze of his famished delirium.

Clunk. Zip. Zip. Zip. Splash!

With the roar of the rain and the mental cloud of their own starvation, it took the others a full ten seconds before they realized that Trent was no longer following them. Vivian and Erik stopped, but Sherri just kept walking.

"What happened?" Erik mumbled.

"Trent ate pavement," Sherri muttered. "Just keep going."

Despite Sherri's suggestion, the others turned to find Trent lying face-down in the road behind them. With what seemed like a great physical effort, Vivian returned to her fallen companion, kneeling by his side on her wobbly legs.

"You okay?" she said dully.

Trent grabbed onto the leaking fabric of her coat and laboriously pulled himself upright, leaning against her and pressing his stubbled cheek into her soggy chest.

"I can't do it, Vivi," he groaned. "I can't keep going, yo. I ain't gonna make it."

"You are going to make it," Vivian said. "We'll find Liberty Valley."

Trent pressed his face tighter against her bosom and moaned.

"The T can't keep walking, girl! We ain't never gonna get to no Liberty Valley without a ride! It just ain't gonna happen, yo!"

"We don't need a car," Vivian said curtly. "We can do this. We just need to stay strong and keep moving."

"Girl, you're out of your mind!" Trent cried. "How's a brother supposed to keep moving his busted ass without any food in his belly? I'm done, Vivi! I'm spent! For real!"

Vivian pulled off her glasses and slicked her overgrown bangs over her forehead with her palm. She rubbed the lenses clean with her pruny thumbs as she stalled for a rebuttal. Trent was right. If they were ever going to get to Pennsylvania they needed at least one of two things: a car, or a reliable source of food. But she wasn't about to give up.

"We don't need a car," she repeated, slipping her glasses back onto her nose. "When pushed to its limits the human body can adapt to even the most adverse conditions. We can make it on foot. All we need to find is—"

"A car!" Erik yelped.

"I just said we don't need a car!" Vivian snapped.

"No," Erik squeaked. "A car!"

Vivian turned to Erik, then to where he was pointing with three excited hands. Barely visible through the sheets of falling black water was the shape of a heavy-duty pickup truck shimmering in a moonlit silhouette of ricocheted droplets.

"A car!" Vivian gasped.

Sherri's eyes grew wide before she turned and bolted toward the vehicle, leaving one shouted word hanging in the air.

"Shotgun!"

Vivian and Erik tucked themselves under Trent's arms and took off in a dizzy, lightheaded trot toward the vehicle.

"We're saved!" Trent grinned. "We gonna drive all up out of this bitch, yo!"

"You see!" Vivian said vacantly. "I told you we'd be okay!"

"Girl, you said we could get there *without* a car!"

"I lied," Vivian admitted. "There's no way we could have made it to Liberty Valley on foot. Not without food. Not in this rain. No way. But now we won't have to worry about it."

The three huddled friends stumbled excitedly to the truck to find Sherri already standing before it with a scowl hanging on her face. A flood of emotions welled up in the hearts of all who now laid eyes upon the vehicle, but Sherri managed to capsule everything they were feeling in a single word.

"Fuck."

The lonely pickup truck looked like a toy that had been hit with a lawnmower. Each tire was completely flat and turned upward at the axle. Between the bed and the cab, the body frame was bent at a shallow angle, touching the center of the vehicle to the cold, wet pavement. This truck had clearly taken an unscheduled flight for which it had been totally unprepared.

The crush of the disappointment, coupled with the weight of Trent on her shoulder, sent Vivian's head into a spin that threatened to relieve her of consciousness.

"What ... what do we do now?" Erik whimpered.

"We'll be fine," Vivian backpedaled meekly. "Like I said, we just need to find food and we'll be fine."

"Food my ass!" Trent said. "Unless the Lord starts servin' up a heapin' helpin' of chocolate manna, we are done and done, girl! For real!"

The group stood in the pouring rain and stared at the broken truck, but in reality, they were staring at a broken charade. The charade that they could actually walk all the way from Washington D.C. to the mountains of northern Pennsylvania. The charade that they were going to find safety. The charade that they were going to be all right in the end.

The doomed survivors were speechless for a long, wet moment before Sherri finally broke the tension with a casual shrug.

"Fuck it, dude," she said. "Let's go bowling."

Without another word, she disappeared behind the pickup and stalked across what the others suddenly realized was a small parking lot. As the boiling clouds shifted above them, a patch of moonlight fell across a sign depicting a sassy-looking cowgirl with breasts as large and round as the bowling ball she held in her weathered steel hands. Directly beneath her was a western lasso scrawl of broken light bulbs spelling out the words "Calamity Lanes."

For lack of a better option, Vivian and Erik followed Sherri's blond head through the pounding downpour, dragging Trent's shuffling body between them. As they moved closer, the sheets of black rain revealed a small brick building at the edge of the parking lot. Its face had been slapped off by the indiscriminate hand of some distant atomic overpressure, creating a life-sized shoebox diorama of blue-collar recreation.

The four soaked survivors climbed over the low debris field and through the massive hole in the side of the bowling alley. Finally sheltered from the driving rain, their skin tingled eerily as if phantom drops continued to pelt their overstimulated

nerve endings. Erik's rodent paws clicked on the lantern's flashlight and swept its beam across the darkened interior.

In life, Calamity Lanes had been an intimate sort of place, sporting only four lanes of oiled pine boards. A western theme was in evidence on the faded cinderblock walls in the shapes of cactus and cow skull graphics rendered in peeling latex paint. The smooth, dull sheen of ancient chrome and linoleum dominated the interior surfaces, curving over benches and swooping through the spoon-shaped arcs of jet-age-inspired ball returns. Even with a hole blown in its side, the bowling alley was still quaint and inviting, but its current visitors were not interested in being charmed by the décor.

Vivian smudged her lenses clean, and this time they actually managed to stay that way. Even in her excitement, her weary eyelids barely managed to get above half-mast as they scoured her surroundings.

"Look!" she said breathily. "There!"

Erik swung the flashlight's beam in the direction of Vivian's pointing finger, revealing a modest cocktail bar built into the far end of the room-so modest, in fact, that it didn't even have shelves of liquor bottles behind it. Or beer taps. What it did have, as Vivian's hungry eyes had spotted, was a heavy, art-deco-styled refrigerator that looked straight out of a Tex Avery cartoon.

"Food!" she gasped.

Sherri's head was throbbing from hunger as she took off across the bowling alley, leaping over the loose balls that had fallen from their tubular chrome racks. The others pursued with a gait like a three-legged race times two, and a moment later all four of them were behind the bar. The smooth white face of the monolithic refrigerator was blemished only by a smattering of promotional magnets in the shapes of little ambulances. Each one bore the same promising message in a block of red text.

Buy groceries online @ Grocery911.com

"It's like I tried to tell you," Vivian grinned weakly. "We'll be fine. We don't need a car as long as we have food!"

"I should have never doubted you, Vivi girl," Trent smiled.

"Let's eat already!" Erik groaned. "Before I black out!"

Sherri grabbed the long steel handle of the fridge door and unlatched the old-fashioned lock. The door swung wide open on its hinges, revealing an interior full of absolutely nothing.

"Well, that's just swell," she whispered defeatedly.

As the last breath of chilled air escaped the heavily insulated appliance, the last dregs of strength escaped the bodies of the survivors, dropping them into a disappointed, over-exhausted, waterlogged heap on the rubber-matted floor.

A thin film of dried ash crumbled from Erik's eyelids as they slowly pulled

themselves apart. As his vision swam into focus, he found himself lying with his cheek pressed into the rubber floor mat, staring between several sealed cardboard beer crates and at a pair of worn-out combat boots. He slowly rolled over to see Sherri standing over him, guzzling a longneck bottle of cheap domestic beer.

"Get up, Waffleface," she greeted. "It's happy hour."

Erik pulled himself upright and dragged his fingers across the sunken red gridlines on his face where the floor mat had temporarily imprinted itself on his skin. Once he had regained his bearings, he found that one of the cardboard crates had been sliced open and half of the bottles were missing.

"How long was I out?" Erik muttered.

"Six hours? Ten hours?" Sherri shrugged. "How should I know? I just woke up too."

She thrust a bottle toward him with a smile.

"Here-breakfast is served."

Erik wrinkled his nose.

"I don't drink beer for breakfast."

"Fine. Think of it as a toast soda."

Erik climbed nauseously to his feet and plunked himself down on the tall stool behind the bar. On the other side of the bowling alley he could see a small fire crackling from the end of lane three. Its broad chrome ball return had been filled with debris and turned into a makeshift fire ring, throwing out a warm yellow light and wafting smoke across the slanted ceiling and out through the blasted-open front of the building. Vivian and Trent sat on the semicircle of creamsicle benches that flanked the fire, each holding their hands to the flame and drinking their own bottles of warm beer. A Mountie coat, a varsity jacket, and a white nylon parka hung on chairs around the warmth of the fire, slowly drying. A clammy chill gripped Erik as he peeled off his own drenched sweatshirt and hung it over the long steel push bar of the back door.

"What is there to eat in this place besides beer?" he asked sluggishly.

"That's it," Sherri said. "The fridge is empty. This shitty bar doesn't even have any of the hard stuff. Just a coupla cases of beer on the floor. Not that I'm complaining."

She held up her half-empty bottle with a toasting waggle of her eyebrows before downing the remainder. She punctuated her achievement with a thunderous belch and a wipe of a tanned forearm across her pouty pink lips. Erik twisted the cap off of his bottle.

"Well, I guess this is better than nothing," he said. "At least my stomach will have something in it for a change."

"It's best to drink on an empty stomach," Sherri nodded. "You get shitfaced twice as fast. Every scumbag who ever tried to get a girl drunk knows that."

"You drink up on that beer, Vivi," Trent said. "You haven't had any food, so those fluids will do your body good, yo."

"Actually, it won't," Vivian said. "Alcohol is a diuretic. Drinking beer will only accelerate my dehydration."

She held her bottle up to the crackling firelight and blinked at the warm suds within.

"But at this point, I can't bring myself to care."

Vivian put the bottle to her lips and took a long swig. Whether it was good for her or not was irrelevant. She relished having a taste in her mouth besides her own cruciferous saliva. Her tired eyes blinked without synchronization as she set the bottle down on the bench and stared at the fluttering bits of ash that rose hypnotically on the hot updrafts of the fire.

"I just hope they have something a little more nutritious than beer waiting for us in Liberty Valley," she said dismally.

Trent smiled at Vivian's long, tired body huddled in the gentle firelight. With her coat, shoes, and socks drying by the fire, she wore only her brutalized cocktail dress, giving her a wild, untamed sort of allure. He slid across the bench and put his hand on her damp arm. Vivian's nose wrinkled against the rank musk of body odor that poured off of his wet skin.

"You need to quit foolin' yourself, Vivi," he said smoothly. "This Liberty Valley is just a fairy tale. For real."

He smiled his huge white smile and winked.

"Give it up, girl. You don't need to go chasing rainbows when the pot of gold is right in front of you."

Vivian ignored that last remark, taking a sip of her beer.

"You're wrong. Liberty Valley is real," she said firmly. "All of the available evidence suggests that there are still intelligent, reasoning people there. Look at the facts. If WOPR is still broadcasting, that indicates that there's an operational TV studio and a satellite dish that's still capable of putting out a signal. That means that they still have electricity as well. Most power plants would have been wiped out in the disaster, and with the unbalanced load the regional power grid would have almost certainly collapsed without intelligent human supervision. Applying Occam's Razor proves that we'll find some kind of civilization once we get into Liberty Valley."

Trent chuckled condescendingly.

"That's some pretty convoluted shit for Occam's Razor to prove, isn't it?"

Vivian shrugged, then stared into space.

"It's better than believing the alternative."

Trent put his hand on Vivian's furry thigh with a misogynistic smile.

"If you're so keen to apply Occam's Razor to something, maybe you ought to hit

those bushy stems of yours, girl. The T ain't down with that Parisian flair."

Vivian's cheeks burned as she threw Trent's hand off of her lap and stormed across the crumbling bowling alley without a word.

"Hey, give me some credit, Vivi!" Trent laughed. "It's not like I told you to apply a razor to liberty valley!"

"Seriously, Erik," Sherri said. "Don't you think this Liberty Valley thing is total bullshit?"

Erik leaned back on his stool and finished his first bottle of beer.

"No, I really do believe that there's something there," he said. "Don't you remember *Woops!*?"

"Now, what in the hell is *Woops!*?"

"It was a short-lived sitcom," Erik explained. "It was about an accidental atomic disaster that destroyed the entire world."

"No wonder I don't remember it," Sherri said. "Any comedy about a nuclear apocalypse is guaranteed to suck."

"It did suck," Erik continued. "The show was a really shitty *Gilligan's Island* rip-off where six unlikely survivors found this farmhouse that was the last livable place on Earth."

"So?"

"So the farm was in a deep valley that protected it from the surrounding blasts. I think Liberty Valley must have survived the same way."

Sherri blinked.

"You seriously believe that lame sitcom bullshit?"

Erik shrugged and stared into space.

"It's better than believing the alternative."

Sherri shook her head and opened another beer.

"Well, it doesn't really matter if there's anything there or not. We're never going to get there without a car anyway."

Vivian stood at the edge of the blasted wall and peered at the wrecked pickup truck in the parking lot. With her clean lenses, she could now see that the license plate read "LV2BOWL." She could hear Trent's clanking shotgun crutch over the sound of the rain crackling on the tarpaper roof as he approached her from behind.

"It's another abandoned building with a single car in the parking lot," Vivian muttered thoughtfully. "After Boltzmann's and the igloo, I'm starting to understand that this is a very bad sign for us."

Just as the words came out of her mouth, two large hands grabbed her firmly around the waist from behind.

"Forget about the bad sign, girl," Trent cooed playfully. "You know we'll have a lot more fun if we just obey the good one."

Without further explanation, he pulled her tightly against his body, lewdly grinding her backside into his swollen groin. Vivian's shoulders clenched as she lurched away, clapping her massive wings together like a pair of giant hands swatting a fly. Trent tumbled dazedly from between the leathery sails and onto the puddled hardwood floor. Vivian whirled around and glared at him furiously.

"Trent, what's the matter with you?!" she barked. "What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

Trent shook his head clear and pointed angrily at the splintered front door lying on the ground to his side.

"Damn, Vivi! I was obeying the sign! It was just a joke, girl! You need to lighten up! For real!"

Vivian's narrowed eyes shifted toward a small gold-colored plaque mounted on the door, reading "Make all deliveries in the rear."

"Oh, ha ha. *Very* funny," she smirked. "Seriously, Trent, can't you ever stop thinking about sex for five seconds?"

Trent slowly climbed to his feet, shaking his head with an unsettling crackle of displaced vertebrae. He leaned on his crutch and shrugged with a rakish grin.

"Oh, quit frontin', Vivi," he smiled. "You make it out like knockin' da boots is some kind of dirty sin. It ain't like that. The good Lord made sex feel good for a reason, yo. It's just natural instinct for a man and woman to want to get their groove on. It ain't nothin' but a beautiful natural high, girl."

"Well, it's a lot more than that to me," Vivian scowled. "Most girls don't have such a cavalier attitude toward sex as you do, Trent."

Sherri lay on her belly across the length of the bar, knees bent, feet playfully swaying in the air. She leaned on her elbows, arching her back and framing the tanned spheres of her ample cleavage between her two slender arms. As her pointed tongue suggestively circled the smooth glass neck of her beer bottle, her smoldering pink eyes cast a seductively invitational glare at Erik. Erik didn't notice. His attention was focused upon a dead laptop computer that sat on the far end of the bar.

"Hey Four-Arms," Sherri growled. "What do you say you quit poking around with that laptop and start poking around with mine?"

Erik blinked.

"It's kind of weird, isn't it?" he said.

"What's weird about it?" Sherri grinned, running a slender hand down his rodent arm. "You get a hot, busty blond girl; I get a guy with two grotesquely mutated rat arms. I think we'd both get our money's worth out of the deal."

Erik shook his head and tapped on the fried computer.

"No, I mean the laptop. It seems out of place here on the bar, doesn't it?"

Sherri's eyebrows knitted in frustration.

"Yeah, it's all wrong," she scowled. "Let's do something about it."

With a swipe of her arm, she slapped the black clamshell off of the bar, dropping it to the floor with a clatter of displaced plastic keys. The startled blue saucers of Erik's eyes finally landed on Sherri as she leapt behind the bar, landing with a *crunch* of heavy boots on delicate electronics.

"There," she said sweetly. "Now that I have your undivided attention."

Before Erik could say a word, Sherri grabbed him by the collar of his damp T-shirt and pulled his face down into hers. He felt her smooth lips pressing against his own cracked mouth. He could taste the faint tang of old cabbage and cigarettes being brushed over his tongue by Sherri's passionate counterpart. He could feel a pair of hands grabbing his mutated limbs and pulling them around a hot, fleshy hourglass of perfect feminine curves that pushed throbbing waves of lust through his slim, bony body.

It was, in short, the most erotic thing that had ever happened to Erik in his entire pathetic life.

Yet as Sherri's tiny hands began to fumble with the button on the front of his jeans, all four of Erik's hands took hold of her body and gently pushed her away.

"No, no, Sherri," he said softly. "Don't. I can't do this."

Sherri smiled a dirty little smile.

"Oh yeah? Well, I think your little friend disagrees!"

With that, her tiny bronze hand swung forward, grabbing a generous fistful of Erik's denim-clad groin. The look of surprise that snapped onto Erik's face was eclipsed only by the one that snapped onto Sherri's. She let go of her flaccid handful and spoke with soft astonishment.

"Your little friend *doesn't* disagree. What the hell, Erik? Are you queer or something?"

Erik bowed his head and blushed.

"I am *not* queer," he muttered. "It's just I ... I just don't like you that way."

"What do you mean, *that way*? " Sherri asked incredulously. "I've turned into the Playboy Princess of Candyland and you *still* won't fuck me? What's your problem?"

Erik scowled with embarrassment.

"Most guys don't have such a cavalier attitude toward sex as you do, Sherri."

"Bullshit!" Sherri spat. "Like you've never just gone out and fucked some girl before!"

Erik's already reddened cheeks turned a brighter shade of crimson. Sherri shook her head in disbelief.

"Holy shit, you've never fucked a girl before," she muttered. "Please tell me that you have some kind of condition, and you're not just 'saving yourself for that one special girl.'"

"So what if I am?" Erik barked. "What do you care?! You don't even like me! The only reason you want to do me at all is because of these!"

He raised his rodent arms and wiggled their gnarled fingertips angrily. Sherri pursed her lips in acknowledgment.

"Well, it wouldn't matter if you had *ten* arms now," she sighed disappointedly. "Your dumb virgin ass wouldn't know what to do with them once you got my panties off anyway."

Erik nodded in a weak sort of agreement. Sherri leapt back up on the bar and lit a fuming post-coital cigarette that wasn't.

"So, we're cool then?" Erik said hopefully.

"No. *I'm* cool," Sherri corrected. " *You're* pretty fucking far from cool. I don't fuck virgins. I'm not some kind of remedial sex-ed class for losers."

Erik smiled a relieved little smile.

"Thanks for understanding, Sherri," he said, extending a friendly hand. "Still friends?"

Sherri shook her head with a disbelieving little laugh.

"Just get away from me, Sievert," she sighed. "Christ, I can't believe I almost fucked an Afterschool Special."

"What's the T got to do to show you that you're his special girl, Vivi?"

Vivian sighed.

"If I really was your 'special girl,' you wouldn't have to ask," she said. "Just give it up, Trent. I'm sure you'll find somebody out there who's a better fit for you than I am. There's plenty of other fish in the sea, you know."

"Are there?" Trent asked skeptically.

Vivian nodded optimistically.

"I'm sure of it," she said. "I know there's at least one."

Trent looked across the bowling alley at Sherri's perfect behind perched on the bar.

"You're right," he grinned. "And what a fine piece of tail it is!"

"Look, Sherri, Trent's been throwing out bait for you since day one," Erik offered. "If you're just looking for a meaningless quickie, maybe you should just bite already."

Sherri's eyebrows lowered with a cold, disgusted menace.

"Fuck you. I'd rather die than be teamed up with that douchebag."

"Fuck me! Why do I have to be teamed up with this douchebag?"

"It's all good, Goldiloccks," Trent slurred. "Don't worry, girl. This one has 'shtrike' written all over it, cho. This is th' good one."

Leaning heavily on his crutch, Trent drunkenly hobbled up to the line and hurled a chipped bowling ball down the dusty lane. Five feet later it dropped with a pathetic *bang* into the gutter, where it rolled agonizingly slowly until it passed ten standing pins.

"You schuck, Trent," Sherri snarled. "Fuck this shit. I wanna new teammate."

Erik was slouched behind a score table littered with at least two dozen empty beer bottles. His hand moved with all of the delicate subtlety of an arcade claw machine as he marked down Trent's final gutter ball on a score sheet documenting the worst game of bowling in recorded history.

"It's not like it really mattersh which one of us is on your team, Sherri," he said vacantly. "We're in the tenth frame and nobody'sh hit a damn thing yet."

"At least it saves us from havin' to reset the pins," Vivian shrugged wearily.

Erik pointed at Vivian with the nub of his chewed-up golf pencil.

"You're up, Viv," he said. "Tenth frame. Make it count. Thissiz our team's last chance to hit some pins."

Vivian pushed herself to her feet and a wave of hops-and-barley disorientation swirled around the inside of her brainpan. She leaned against the score table with a clumsy giggle.

"Hit some pinsh?" she laughed. "After nine beers, I'll be lucky if I can hit the lane!"

"Come on, Viv," Erik smiled. "I know you can do it."

He picked up a stray bowling ball from the floor and slipped it into her hands, standing up and guiding her wobbling step to the foot of the alley. Vivian's bloodshot eyes blinked heavily behind her water-spotted glasses, but she could not stop the pins from swirling in her vision. She stood with the ball held in two limp arms for a long, swaying moment.

"Are you all right?" Erik asked.

Vivian blinked numbly.

"I'm just waiting for the kaleidoscope to stop turning."

"Come on, now, you can do it, Viv," Erik smiled. "Here, I'll coach you through it."

Through her disorientation, Vivian suddenly felt a creeping warmth sliding over her cold, pale skin. She looked to her right to find Erik holding her gently oscillating body with four steadying hands. One of his rodent paws rested on the small of her back, the other on her sloshing belly. His left human hand tenderly directed her soggy wings away from him as he leaned in and took her right hand in his own.

Together they lifted the heavy ball to her chest, and he pressed his cheek against hers as they stared over the ball and toward its ten targets.

"Just keep your eye on the pins, swing straight, and follow through," he coached.

As he spoke, he slowly guided Vivian's hand backward and forward, practicing the swing with a sloppy sort of coordination. Although they both stumbled with a drunken giggle, somehow their bodies seemed better balanced together than they had been on their own. As their arms swung in a pendulum, the peripheral world seemed to slip away, leaving nothing in Vivian's clouded mind but the warmth and stability of Erik's hands. In this moment of clarity, the pins seemed to stop dancing in her vision and line up for the beating that they knew they had coming.

"You ready?" Erik said.

"I am," Vivian nodded.

Erik's hands slipped from her body, but before he stepped back he took her face in his human hands, tipped her head forward, and gave her a tiny kiss on the forehead.

"For luck," he smiled.

Vivian blushed as Erik released her and stepped away. Her eyes narrowed in concentration as she took two steps forward, drew her arm back, and swung it forward in an arc of perfect grace. The ball hit the boards with the tiniest knock, sliding at a picturesque angle all the way to the end of the lane. Although beautifully thrown, the ball barely managed to pick off the solitary ten pin before dropping loudly into the end of the gutter.

"I did it!" Vivian cheered. "I did it! I hit one!"

She jumped up and down in excitement, nearly pounding the consciousness out of her own sloshed head. Erik rushed forward and grabbed her in a four-armed embrace.

"You're awesome!" he laughed. "I knew you could do it!"

"I couldn't have done it without you, coach," Vivian smiled.

"Alright, alright, break it up, you two," Trent said irritably. "Y'all didn't win yet. My girl still has one more chance to school your lame asses."

Vivian and Erik exchanged a twinkling glance as they separated and returned to their seats. Trent stuffed a neon-pink ball into Sherri's hands and gave her a slap on her firm backside.

"Hey, watch it, dickbag," she growled.

"You can do this, girl," he grinned. "You just need a little coaching from Pro T."

"Fuck off," Sherri spat. "I don't need any help from you."

She stepped up onto the lane and held the ball before her narrowed pink eyes. The nine remaining pins seemed to echo outward in an infinite picket fence of white and red, but many years of drunk driving experience gave her the clarity to know

what was real and what was illusion. She targeted the headpin and hurled her arm backward in anticipation of her pitch.

"That's right, girl. Slow and *uungh!* "

Before Sherri could complete her swing, the ball came to an abrupt, cushioned stop behind her. Her unbalanced feet pivoted on the wooden floor, turning her all the way around to see Trent doubled over with the hot-pink bowling ball buried in his groin.

"You screwed up my swing!" Sherri snapped. "What the hell are you doing?!"

"Just ... coaching ..." Trent gasped.

He stumbled forward and grabbed Sherri clumsily by her shoulders.

"Trent, what the fuck?!" Sherri demanded, struggling. "Get off!"

"For ... luck!" he wheezed.

He grabbed the sides of Sherri's matted head and leaned in to deposit a kiss on her tanned forehead. Sherri dropped her ball and took a lurching step backward as his stench burned her nose.

"Shit no! Hey! Get off of me, you shitbomb!"

She pounded her petite hands into Trent's broad chest, but his two clenched fistfuls of her knotty blond hair held her firmly anchored in his grasp. As his stubbly lips connected with her smooth forehead, Sherri planted her palms on his chest and shoved herself away from him with a tearing *rip* of uprooted hair!

"Owww! Jesus H. FuckGillicuddy!"

Sherri took two reeling steps backward as she slapped her hands to the sides of her stinging scalp. Trent looked at his own hands in shock. Two massive clumps of blond hair clung to his sweaty fingers, but he hardly noticed them. All he saw was the blood. The crumbling streaks of dry, dirty blood.

"I'm sorry, girl! I'm so sorry!" he choked. "Damn, girl! I was just tryin' to give y'all some luck! You didn't have to get all hostile!"

"Owww, shit fuck motherfucker," Sherri seethed. "You tore open my scabs, you shitbasket!"

As she furiously raked the hair away from her reopened head wounds, Sherri felt the strangest sensation. It didn't hurt, but it felt indescribably like a paper cut happening inside-out, all around her scalp. She fell silent as her trembling fingertips bumped up against what felt like the bottom of a wide-brimmed beach hat.

"What ... what the hell is that?" she stammered.

The others didn't answer. They simply stared in disbelief. Sherri's eyes darted across them with an increasing uneasiness as the edges of their mouths began to curl into conspiratorial smiles.

"Holy shit, I just mutated, didn't I?" she gasped. "What is it?! What did I get?!"

Vivian opened her mouth to speak, but all that came out was a barely squelched giggle, which Erik and Trent were soon echoing. Sherri burned with fury at their mute amusement.

"Alright, you assholes! What is it?! What's so funny?!"

She wiped her palm across the dusty chrome of the ball return and looked into its mirrored surface. A look of unadulterated horror slowly spread across her face.

"Oh no. Shit no. No no no," she chattered. "Why?! Why me?! Why *me*?!"

Her voice trailed into a desperate kind of whimper she gently ran her fingers around the soft edges of two butterfly wings the size of dinner plates that had blossomed from the sides of her head. The delicate wings were colored in a palette of pastel blues and yellows so resplendent with spring cheer that one could imagine the Easter Bunny choosing them to redecorate his bathroom.

"What the fuck?!" she shouted. "How come you guys all turned into something out of a Hieronymus Bosch painting and I turned into a fucking Lisa Frank?!"

She furiously grabbed the frilly wings in her fists, crumpling them like two old magazines. The second they began to bend, she squealed sharply and released them, pressing her palms over her eyelids and rubbing out a phantom pain that she had inadvertently crushed into them.

"Ow! God damn it!" she yelped.

She stretched out her face and gave her eyes two exaggerated blinks, like someone putting in a pair of contact lenses for the first time. As her eyes opened and closed, her wings moved up and down in a sweet little flutter.

"Oh, that is *so* messed up," she muttered disgustedly. "Why butterfly wings? Why me?"

"Seriously, what gives, yo?" Trent asked. "Girlfriend didn't get bit up by no giant butterfly!"

"It was Priscilla," Erik reasoned. "She must have passed her infected DNA on to Sherri when she pinched her!"

"Priscilla's DNA?" Sherri spat. "That bitch was a hard-ass monster! She didn't have Shirley Temple's DNA!"

"No, it makes sense," Erik said, scratching his scruffy beard thoughtfully. "You saw the crazy way she mutated. Every bug in that zoo must have taken a stab at her while she was trapped in there. Her bloodstream probably carried more kinds of bug juice than the bottom of an exterminator's shoe!"

Sherri shook her head in furious denial.

"That is so unfair!" she cried. "That freak drools a jawful of killer bug slobber all over me, and I grow *this shit*?! Why?! Why not claws?! Why not stingers?!"

"I don't know! It's not like I'm not an expert on this!" Erik squeaked defensively. "What do you think, Vivian?"

Everyone's eyes turned to Vivian's conspicuously silent form slouched upon the bench. She raised her heavy eyes and looked at the absurd mutation with a shallow, disbelieving shake of her head.

"I think I need another drink."

The world seemed to slowly blur past Vivian's boozed-up eyes as she knelt down behind the bar and pulled the last warm beer from the last sliced-open crate. She stood up and turned toward the door but bumped into a wall of arms and hair.

"Ack! Oh. Erik," she blushed. "What are you doing back here?"

Erik held the score sheet in his two rodent hands and pointed to Sherri's tenth frame with his bony index finger.

"OI' gutter mouth just threw her last gutter ball," he smiled. "We won!"

"With just one pin?" Vivian laughed.

"Hey, what can I say?" Erik nodded. "We make an unbeatable team. I'm entering this massacre into the hall of fame for future generations to marvel over."

He reached across Vivian's body in the cramped space and used all four hands to slap the score sheet onto the fridge and affix its corners with Grocery911 magnets. Vivian leaned languidly on her elbow against the icebox door and squinted at the single-digit victory.

"That's a pretty pathetic score we racked up," she said.

"Yeah, but at least we had fun," Erik shrugged. "After all, there's more important things in life than scoring."

Vivian's eyes rolled in a slow, coy arc to Erik's face.

"Even so, it's nice to score when you have the right teammate."

With an uncoordinated step, she threw her arms around Erik's bony shoulders and planted a wet, sloppy kiss on his surprised lips. Erik managed to catch her in his arms, but her reeling weight sent him stumbling backward, slapping his back against the wall. Vivian's bare toes crunched against the plastic debris on the floor as she felt the warmth of Erik's lips overcoming their surprise and returning her clumsy affection. Even as the exhilarating tingle of the moment danced through her drunken body, Vivian's mind was distracted by the tug of a cable wrapped around her ankle.

"I can't believe this is actually happening," Erik whispered. "Vivian, I ... I ... from the moment I met you I've wanted to take you in my arms and hold you against my-"

"Laptop?"

"Well, no," Erik said shyly. "But I admit, this time it's not just because I'm nervous."

Vivian bent down, untangled the length of phone cable from her leg, and held it up in front of her. The broken clamshell of the computer hung from the cord like a dead possum. She repeated the question with her eyebrows.

"Oh, right. *That* laptop," Erik blushed. "I just meant to say ... I mean my 'laptop'"

is, er ... you mean so much more to me than just a quick ... I mean, don't get me wrong, I'd sure like to ..."

He closed his eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath.

"What I'm trying to say is that I ... I love you, Vivian. And I'm sorry that I had to drink a whole shipment of beer to get up the nerve to finally say it."

The shattered laptop lowered to the floor with a *crunch* as Erik's confession slowly seeped into Vivian's inebriated gray matter. Somewhere deep behind the haze in her eyes, the words seemed to ignite a pile of dry kindling that had been anxiously awaiting a spark.

"You're right. A whole shipment of beer," she repeated distantly. "Erik, we drank an *entire shipment* of beer that hadn't even been put in the refrigerator."

"I know; I know," Erik said self-consciously. "But I promise it's not just the booze talking. Vivian, if you'd have me, I promise you that I'd-"

"Make all deliveries in the rear!"

Erik's eyes widened, narrowed, and then shrugged.

"Well, I was going to say 'be true to you forever,'" he said, "but I'm open-minded."

Vivian shook her head and pushed herself away from Erik as if her thoughts were a thousand miles away from his bumbling profession of love.

"The unopened beer crates!" she said excitedly. "They were all stacked up right next to the back door!"

Vivian's excited prattle began to bring a picture into focus behind Erik's cloudy blue eyes.

"Wait! The computer! The magnets!" he gasped. "Vivian, you don't think that-"

"I do!" Vivian beamed.

She stumbled to the back door and squished her palms into the soggy sweatshirt hanging over its push bar, knocking it wide open on its creaky hinges.

"Just minutes before the bombs dropped, this place must have taken a delivery from ..."

The two wide-eyed friends tumbled through the door and into the pouring rain of the back alley, putting them face to face with the hulk of a Grocery911.com ambulance glistening in the sharp white moonlight.

"Oh my God, you found it!" Erik said incredulously. "You found us a ride out of here!"

"I didn't find it," Vivian said. "We found it. Together."

The warmth of Erik's smile cut through the chill of the pounding water.

"It's like I said," he shrugged. "We make an unbeatable team."

The black water flew from Vivian's hair and off the tips of her wings as she turned to Erik and held out her slender white hand with a beaming grin.

"Come on! Let's check it out!"

In their excitement, Vivian and Erik completely failed to notice two waterlogged corpses and an unsigned invoice laying in the shadows near the Dumpsters as they scampered across the pavement and climbed through the unlocked driver's-side door of the ambulance. Erik slid across the cab and tumbled into the passenger seat as Vivian slipped behind the wheel and slammed the door. The dark water clattered like thousands of tiny, hard fingers over the steel shell of the vehicle as the two soaked friends giddily caught their breath.

"This is awesome!" Erik said excitedly. "Do you think we can actually push start this thing?"

Vivian shook her head as her eyes slowly slid across the faux-wood and smoky yellow plastic of a dashboard that should never have been allowed to leave the 1970s. All of the typical gauges and controls were represented, but between the rolled odometer and the eight-track player, one little word caught her eye and spread a smile across her lips.

"We shouldn't even have to push it. It's a diesel," she said, tapping on the labeled fuel gauge. "No electric ignition. No spark plugs. I'll bet this old tank would start on her own if we could just find the ... keys?"

Her eyes fluttered in a disbelieving blink as she discovered a set of keys still hanging from the steering column.

"What the-" she muttered. "What kind of person just leaves the key in the ignition?"

Erik shook his head with a knowing little smile.

"A stupid person," he said. "And I once heard that the only people at Grocery911 stupider than the drivers were the suits."

Vivian wrapped her long fingers around the key without any further argument.

"I never thought I'd say this," she smiled, "but thank God for the stupid people."

She closed her eyes and gave the key a hopeful crank, awakening the beast under the hood with a blast of choking black smoke from the twin tailpipes. She pumped the gas pedal as the ancient diesel engine roared like a grizzled old pack animal ready to carry its next load.

"It starts! It works!" Erik cried. "Let's go get the others and get out of here!"

Vivian turned to Erik with a conspiratorial glint in her green eyes. She put her long hands on his thigh and tossed her head toward the small door leading to the back of the ambulance with a coquettish grin.

"Hey, what's the big rush, teammate?" she said silkily. "Wouldn't you rather spend a little time alone in the back of the ambulance first?"

Erik's eyes widened as a hopeful smile poured across his face.

"You ... you mean ..."

"That's right," Vivian said hungrily. "We get first dibs on all the food!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The diminishing gray blanket of the doomsday cloud pulled apart and recongealed in amorphous waves as it spread itself thin over the yellowing sky. These cracks in the heavens laid a shifting pattern of afternoon sunlight like a web across the rolling wheat fields of Turnstone, Pennsylvania.

After a marathon of driving, the weary heap of the Grocery911.com ambulance enjoyed a steaming reprieve. It slouched on its bowed axles next to a rusty mailbox at the mouth of a long, dirt driveway leading straight down a gentle slope into the heart of a small family farmstead.

The driveway ended in front of a barn that sagged so drearily it made Andrew Wyeth paintings look cheerful by comparison. Between the ambulance and the barn a smaller driveway crossed the main run, terminating in a drab, colonial-style farmhouse on one end and the sixty-foot tower of a creaking Dutch windmill on the other. Although the farm looked far from abandoned, its decaying buildings seemed to remain standing due to little more than a stubborn refusal to collapse.

A rusty collection of derelict cars set up on cement blocks populated the dried-out lawn, giving the farm that quaint redneck flavor that nothing else but derelict cars set up on cement blocks can. The latest shower of black rain could have given an aura of cleanliness to this graveyard of bubble-shaped fenders and intimidating chrome grilles, but all it had managed to do was beat the stench of old mildew and abandoned bird nests from their rotting upholstery.

Sherri drew in a hot, smoky breath as she lit the last of her cigarettes. The Grocery911 ambulance had offered a smorgasbord of canned foods to fill her hungry belly, but it had offered nothing for her blackened lungs. She clicked her lighter closed with a flick of her wrist, blew a long yellow blast of smoke from her nostrils, and fanned it away with her butterfly wings.

"Well, I guess I quit," she said sadly, tossing the empty pack on the ground.

She sat down on the steps of the farmhouse and leaned back on her elbows, looking around the yard at her bustling companions. To her right she could see Erik running down the long driveway and toward the ambulance in the distance. The rusty squeak of its back door was loud enough to reach her ears as he yanked it open and climbed inside.

She took a long, savoring drag on her cigarette and turned to her left. Just to the side of the steps upon which Sherri sat, a tiny shack was built on to the front of the farmhouse. To even call it a shack was generous. In reality, the waist-high, meter-wide, shingled wooden box was nothing more than an enclosure designed to protect a single piece of machinery from the elements. Vivian had followed a thick bundle of electrical cables across the front of the house and into the box, and now its low front door hung wide open, belching out two long black wings and two squatting black buttocks perched on top of two filthy red sneakers.

Trent was struggling slowly toward the farmhouse on his clanking shotgun crutch. The endless cycles of wet and dry had taken their toll on his varsity jacket, and his broad forearms stuck out of its shrunken sleeves like an idiot who accepted hand-me-downs from his younger siblings. Sherri could see that he was heading directly, and somewhat unsurprisingly, toward Vivian's unsuspecting rear end.

Vivian could barely see inside the box's cramped interior, but her eagerness to repair the stalled machine within outweighed her patience to wait for Erik to return with the camping lantern. A bead of sweat raised from her forehead as she pushed all of her weight down her trembling arm and into the flat handle of her Swiss Army Knife. The tip of its Phillips head screwdriver slipped and jumped over the last ornery, rusted fastener in the faceplate of a diesel-powered electric generator.

"Come on, work with me here," she grumbled. "How am I going to fix you if you won't open up?"

With a grunting flex of her tired forearm, she finally broke through the bonds of oxidation and twirled the screw out of its hole. The thin metal access plate dropped to the ground with a sharp *clang*, revealing a gutful of rusted wheels and crumbling rubber belts. A dizzying haze of diesel fumes wafted from the machine and into the claustrophobic chamber.

"Okay, diesel repair," Vivian muttered. "How hard can this be?"

The smell of fuel in the air was suddenly overpowered by a rancid stench of body odor. Vivian's nose wrinkled as the sliver of light by which she worked was completely eclipsed.

"Hey," she grumbled. "Move it, Trent. You're in my light."

The next thing she knew, Trent was kneeling on the ground beside her, squeezing his shoulders into the tiny chamber like a size-10 foot into a size-6 shoe. The weathered, brittle wood of the box crackled violently as Vivian's body was crushed against its wall and ceiling by his encroaching mass.

"Aaagh! Trent!" Vivian gasped. "What are you doing?! Get out of here!"

"You can't hide from me in here, Vivi," Trent grinned. "I need to be with you."

"No, you need to be *outside*," Vivian said, shoving him away. "Get lost, Casan *odor*."

Trent struggled to turn his crouched body toward Vivian's in the cramped space, filling the air with his bitter stench.

"Quit playin'," he grinned. "You know you want me all up in your box, girl."

Trent's foul breath blasted into Vivian's face like a spray of fetid cooking oil. The smell was composed of a comprehensive selection of ghastly odors, but the stale reek of regurgitated beer was obviously leading the charge.

"*Gah!*" Vivian winced. "Trent, what's *wrong* with you? Are you still drunk?! Go bother Sherri for a while!"

"Screw that," Trent scowled. "Every time a brother tries to hit that he ends up getting his nuts busted in. You got the sweetness, Vivi. For real."

Just then, Trent's head suddenly flew forward and smacked against the iron casing of the generator with a hollow *clang*. Before Vivian could question why, Trent's body slipped backward out of the enclosure and was thrown dazedly to the ground.

"Jesus. Sit down and give the girl some space, you drunk-ass, stank-ass, horny-ass bastard," Sherri spat. "What's your fucking problem?"

Vivian barely had a chance to regain her balance and her senses before her nose was again filled with acrid fumes. Sherri plunked herself down on her knees and leaned inside the low door, blowing out a cloud of tobacco smoke into the close air.

"You okay, Powderpuff?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Vivian coughed, fanning her nose. "Jeez, Sherri, do you mind?"

"Oh, well you're so fucking welcome," Sherri sneered, swinging her cigarette hand out of the box. "What are you doing all stuffed in here anyway?"

"I'm trying to get this old generator running," Vivian said. "The water pump and heater in this farmhouse are both electric. If I can fix this, then we all have hot showers."

"It's about time," Sherri moaned. "For the past week Trent's smelled like a dead homeless guy's jock strap."

"We all could use some freshening up," Vivian agreed. "As soon as I get my hands on some soap and water I'm going to start scrubbing, and I'm going to scrub, and I'm going to keep scrubbing until I smell absolutely nothing like cabbage."

"I hear that," Sherri agreed. "I smell like the green smears on Peter Cottontail's toilet paper."

"Oh, that's pleasant," Vivian smirked. "Get out of here. I can't fix anything with you blocking the light."

"Alright, alright, keep your skirt on," Sherri muttered. "I got you covered."

Vivian heard a sparking scrape, and the vapor-filled enclosure was suddenly bathed in the firelight lapping from Sherri's lighter.

"Sherri, no!" Vivian gasped.

With a clumsy, frantic snatch, she plucked the lighter out of Sherri's bony fingers and lurched backward out of the doorway. When she was clear of the box she

snapped the lighter shut and stuffed it safely in her coat pocket.

"Important safety tip," she scowled. "Diesel fuel and open flame are not charming bedfellows. Let's just wait for the lantern, okay? I don't want to blow anything up today."

Sherri took a long drag on her cigarette and shrugged.

"You've got some major gratitude issues, you know that?"

The soft slap of Erik's sneakers jogging back up the driveway distracted Vivian from a reply. He hopped over Trent's sprawled body without interest or query and stopped by Vivian's side.

"Here you go," he beamed, holding out the abused lantern.

Vivian squeezed Erik's hand with a warm smile.

"Thanks. Could you please hold it for me?" she asked sweetly. "I'm going to need both hands to work on this."

"Anything for you, Viv," Erik nodded.

"Barf," Sherri said under her breath. "And I thought I'd totally lost my gag reflex ..."

Vivian squatted down and squeezed back into the generator enclosure. Erik obediently stepped up behind her and tucked the lantern's flashlight nose into the narrow gap between her shoulder and the top of the doorframe. With a twitch of his finger, he snapped the power switch to the "on" position.

"It's time for the big puppet show! I'm so excited, Talkatoo!"

At the sound of the voice screaming in her ear, Vivian jumped, slamming the back of her head against the wooden ceiling with a rattling *thump*. She tumbled backward out of the shed, trying to rub the flashing stars out of her vision.

"Aaagh! Damn it, Erik!" she growled.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" Erik squeaked. "I thought it was set to flashlight! I didn't know it was on TV mode!"

Vivian's eyes popped open through the haze of her head trauma.

"Wait! TV mode?" She leapt up and grabbed the device from Erik's startled hands. "Let me see that!"

"Brkwaaaak! You and Whazzat have worked so hard, Lookout! I'm sure the puppet show will be a huge success! Brkwaaaak!"

"Jesus! Turn that irritating shit off!" Sherri growled, covering her ears. "I thought when we lost the satellite dish it meant that I'd never have to hear that bird bitch's voice again!"

"It did!" Erik exclaimed. "This is impossible! We can't get a satellite feed without a dish!"

Vivian reached around the back of the lantern and yanked half a yard of

telescoping antenna out of its rear corner. The distortion immediately fell out of the signal, revealing a crystal-clear image of a girl kangaroo with a sock puppet on her furry hand.

"We're within broadcast range!" Vivian grinned eagerly. "We must be getting close!"

"And someone in Liberty Valley is still calling us home!" Erik beamed.

"Bkrwaaaak! You have to work hard to make your dreams come true! Bkwraaak-waaak-waaaaaak!"

"Alright, alright," Sherri barked, grabbing the lantern. "Christ! I can't stand that fucking chicken lady!"

"She's not a chicken," Erik corrected. "She's a cockatoo."

"I don't care what she is! She's fucking annoying!"

"Bkwraaaaak!"

Sherri jabbed her finger into the lantern's power switch, extinguishing the tiny screen.

"Ahh, that's better," she sighed. "Christ, if I hear another-"

"Bkwraaaaak!"

Sherri's shoulders leapt to her ears as the screaming squawk pierced her skull. Vivian and Erik immediately fell into startled silence as Sherri whirled around to see what they were already looking at. What she saw was three chickens looking at her.

Three chickens looking *down* at her.

"Holy shit," she murmured, staring up in amazement. "It's Colonel Sanders's wet dream!"

Sherri took a slow step backward toward the house as the enormous, ostrich-sized chickens scratched their huge, taloned feet menacingly in the dirt. Two of the birds were fat, awkward-looking brown hens. The third was a lean and proud red rooster. As their flesh and bones had stretched them into six-foot-tall parodies of their former selves, their plumage had been completely ignored. With their undersized feathers exposing spotty patches of bristly gray flesh, the chickens looked like an arts and crafts project that had suffered from woefully inadequate supplies. Their giant heads cocked nervously from side to side as their black, 8-ball eyes sized up Trent's dazed body lying before them in the dry grass.

"Damn," he muttered airily. "I ain't seen a cock that big since last time I took a piss, yo."

"Trent!" Vivian hissed. "Get up, you idiot!"

She grabbed him by his undersized coat and hauled him to his feet. He grabbed her around the waist and held her body tightly against his own.

"Don't worry, Vivi girl," he growled. "I'll protect you."

Vivian wrestled herself free of Trent and shoved him against the side of the farmhouse.

"Nobody needs to be protected from anything," she whispered sharply. "They're zombie chickens. Instinct-driven. Chicken instinct does not include attacking people. They're just curious. Watch."

She leapt forward and threw out her arms and wings with a yelping squeal. The two hens exploded into the air with a heavy blast of flapping wings and flying dirt before scampering away in a clucking frenzy down the driveway. The rooster also leapt backward at the noise, but he did not flee. He spread his massive wings out to his sides and pointed them toward the ground as the undersized red feathers of his neck began to puff out with a menacing crackle.

"Go on!" Vivian yelled, waving her arms. "Get out of here! Scram!"

The rooster rose up on his toes and flapped his wings as an earsplitting crow trumpeted out of his throat. His beak whistled through the air, pounding into the ground just inches from the ends of Vivian's toes. Vivian leapt back, flattening herself against the farmhouse next to her three companions, who were already doing likewise.

"What's it doing?!" Erik squeaked. "I thought they weren't supposed to be aggressive to people!"

"They're not!" Vivian agreed. "Maybe these zombies don't act on instinct after all!"

"Make up your mind, Powderpuff!" Sherri barked. "This is not the time to be making new shit up!"

The rooster made another lunge at Vivian's feet, and she pressed herself harder against the wall. As she forced her back to the shingles, her wings squashed out from her shoulders, prompting the rooster to spread his own wings with a screaming cluck. Vivian looked down at the dirty red front of her Mountie coat and then back at the rooster's pathetic crimson plumage.

"Wait! The wings-the red coat!" she realized. "That stupid bird thinks I'm another rooster!"

"So it's trying to kill you?!" Sherri yelled.

"No! It's just trying to be dominant! It's trying to establish our places in the pecking order!"

"So what do we do?" Erik squeaked.

Vivian grabbed a stout stick from the ground and spread out her intimidating twelve-foot wingspan assertively. "We put ourselves at the top of the pecking order."

With an aggressive hop forward and a growling shout, Vivian poked the rooster in the chest with her stick. The mutant bird made a motion to counterattack, but Vivian quickly rapped it on the beak, causing it to stumble backward with a frightened

squawk. She stepped forward with purpose, forcing the rooster to back up in unsundering little hops of retreat. As Vivian's strides grew longer with each jab, her friends peeled off of the wall of the farmhouse and fanned out to follow behind her.

"What's the matter?" Vivian jeered at the rooster. "*Chicken?*"

"Ouch," Erik grumbled. "That joke was a cock-a-doodle- *don't*."

"If you ask me," Sherri said, "you've both got *fowl* mouths."

As soon as the words passed her lips, Sherri slapped her palms over her mouth and gasped.

"Oh, Jesus Christ! What have you lame-ass fuckers done to me?!"

Vivian kept pushing the rooster back across the yard with firm jabs of her blunt stick, but he just kept hopping back and forth, refusing to abandon his machismo. Vivian fully extended her wings, throwing a midnight-black wall of intimidation between her friends and the crackling rooster.

"Go on-get out of here!" she growled. "Leave us alone! Vivian Oblivion is the top of the pecking order around here now."

The rooster jumped backward and hit the ground with a *thud* that sent a numb little quake rumbling up Vivian's legs.

"What the ..."

A second tremor rattled through Vivian's knees, prompting the rooster to relinquish its pride, turn, and run in a frantic flapping sprint across the yard and around the side of the old windmill. Before Vivian could form a guess as to the cause of the sudden seismic activity, a third quake revealed its source in the form of a gigantic black hoof stepping out from behind the corner of the drooping red barn.

"What the hell was that?" Erik squeaked.

"It's the top of the pecking order," Vivian whispered in awe.

Vivian's shoulders slumped as her arms fell to her sides, dropping her outstretched wings like a curtain and revealing to the rest of the group what she could already see.

It was a bull. A bull the size of a cement truck.

The creature took another pounding step and breathed a blast of steaming air from its cavernous nostrils. It slowly raised its head and stretched with the thunderous crackle of an old-growth forest being violently shoved to the ground. Its massive legs were like the sooty concrete pylons holding up an elevated train track in some angry gray cityscape. Two impossibly large horns sprouted from its skull in twin curves of pointed yellow keratin.

Even in a post-apocalyptic world of hideously deformed animals, the bull's mutations stood out as particularly gruesome. The forces that had caused its cells to explode into an uncontrolled orgy of growth concentrated their effort upon bone

more than flesh, pushing the glowing plates of its exaggerated skeleton through the hairy folds of its thick hide. Meaty curtains of flesh licked fresh blood over the exposed blades of glowing blue pelvis, ribcage, and scapula that protruded from the bull's mangled body as it stepped into full view. Yet even with its internal organs hanging like hammocks from its lacerated sides, the bull didn't look like it was suffering.

It just looked angry.

"Don't ... run," Vivian whispered urgently. "If you run, he'll be driven by instinct to chase you. Whatever you do, *don't ... run*. Okay, guys? Guys?"

With the most conservative movement possible, Vivian glanced over her shoulder to see her three friends racing off in different directions as fast as their legs could carry them. In the bull's black, empty eyes the farm suddenly became a Lilliputian Pamplona. A hot snort blasted out of its trickling nose, followed by a bellowing cry of such powerful and resonant bass that it shattered the windows of the farmhouse. Before Vivian's skull had stopped ringing, the bull lowered its head and charged across the farm.

Vivian took three long, bounding strides of retreat, pounding her wings desperately against the air in an effort to take flight. The force of gravity kept her aerodynamically challenged physique on a short leash, granting her nothing but a single enhanced leap over the hood of a derelict pickup truck. She landed awkwardly on her feet, twisting her ankle with a loud *pop*.

"Aaagh! Damn it!" she hissed.

She tumbled against the truck's rotted fender and rubbed her wrenched bones as Trent hobbled up to her side. His face twisted into a lusty grin as he threw his beefy arms around her and pulled her against his body.

"That's right, girl," he said. "You're safe here with the T."

"I know I'm safe!" Vivian spat impatiently, slapping Trent away. "It's not me that the bull was after! Look!"

Far across the yard, Sherri's blunt leather boots rapidly clipped the ground in a blurred haze of speed. Her butterfly wings sliced through the air, flapping frantically against her skull as if begging her body to eke out enough thrust to lift her off the ground and carry her to safety. But even at this seemingly superhuman pace, the earthquake of the bull's pounding hooves thundered up behind her as if she was standing still.

"Sherri, run!" Vivian screamed. "*Run!*"

Sherri could see the pointed tips of the long yellow horns coming up on either side of her as she clenched her teeth and leaned forward, throwing herself at the only thing standing between herself and certain death. She could feel the rancid heat of the bull's breath enveloping her as she flung out her arms and kicked her feet off the ground, sailing like an arrow through the air and straight through the open rear door of the Grocery911 ambulance.

Before she had even hit the steel floor, the pile driver of the bull's skull had already smashed into the back of the vehicle, crushing it like an empty beer can against a biker's forehead. The force of the impact sent the ambulance into a squealing spin on its treadless tires, flinging a fan-tailed wake of flying foodstuffs across the driveway.

The bull staggered backward on its barrel-sized hooves and shook its monstrous head. The edge of the open door had left a jagged slice down its forehead, and the blood running into its darkened eyes seemed to only anger it further. With another bellow, it charged the ambulance again, collapsing the passenger side and nearly knocking it off its wheels. From inside the vehicle, a blue streak of screamed profanity proved that Sherri was still among the living, if only for a limited time.

Vivian helplessly watched the horror unfold from behind the swooping green buttock of the pickup truck's classically styled fender.

"Think, Vivian! Think!" she begged herself. "You've got to do something!"

Trent's oily hands slid around her waist and gave her a gentle tug.

"Why so tense, girl?" he oozed. "Come here and let the T soothe some relaxation into your tight little body."

"Stop it, Trent! This isn't the time!" Vivian screamed, wrenching his hands from her hips. "Sherri's going to *die* if we don't think of something!"

Vivian pounded her fists on the fender in frustration, sending an impact tremor tinkling through three glass bottles resting on its curved surface. Their inexplicable presence pulled Vivian's gaze away from the bull long enough for her to notice that the rusted steel fender was riddled with small-caliber bullet holes.

"Target practice," she thought.

A flash of inspiration streaked across her mind as she patted the bulge in her pocket that represented the last shotgun shell. She hoped that she would be a better marksman than whoever had been shooting at these unbroken bottles. If she was going to save Sherri from that bull, she was literally only going to get one shot at it.

"Trent, give me the shotgun!" she ordered, throwing out her hand. "Quick! Before it kills her!"

With an unexpected swiftness, Trent grabbed Vivian around the wrist and yanked her body toward his, slapping her chest against his own.

"Let it kill her!" he growled. "I ain't interested in dat skank ass! I want you, Vivi!"

" *What?!* Trent, have you lost your mi-"

Vivian's question was broken in half as Trent grabbed her around the waist and shoved her against the side of the truck, forcing her wings through its broken window. He pressed his stout body heavily against hers, pinning her down as he ran his thick hands down her slender hips. The stinging stench of his body burned in Vivian's nose and eyes as his hands clumsily slid up her thighs and under the ragged hem of her skirt.

"Stop it!" Vivian choked. "What are you doing?!"

"Don't play like you don't know," Trent snarled. "You know I been ready for this for weeks! This 'hard to get' shit ain't cute anymore, girl!"

"Stop it! Trent, stop it!" Vivian shrieked. "*Stop it!*"

With all of the fury that boiled through her body, Vivian's foot launched from the ground, driving her bony knee into Trent's crotch like a sledgehammer into a railroad spike. The impact was so hard and so solid that it made an audible *pop* and sent a tingle of pins and needles down Vivian's calf. Yet Trent barely even seemed to notice. The air squeezed out of Vivian's chest as he leaned harder against her, dragging his ragged fingernails against her skin as he clumsily attempted to liberate her from her cotton underpants.

"Trent!" she gasped. "Stop! Get off of me!"

Vivian scrambled to escape, but even fueled by adrenaline her narrow frame and captured wings were no match for the pinning weight and dedicated strength of Trent's hulking body. Her hands clawed urgently at the sides of the truck as a cold breeze blew up her skirt and through her stretched-out panties, tingling across the exposed warmth of her chaste flesh. Her searching fingertips connected with something solid, and in a blind lunge she grabbed it and swung into the side of Trent's head. The butt of a tall orange bottle connected with a heavy *crack* and exploded into shards. Trent stumbled away from her with a yelp, shielding his face with his hands.

Vivian pried her wings from the window frame and hobbled away from the truck on her twisted ankle, thrusting out the remnant of her shattered bottle like an unarmed cowboy in a spaghetti western bar brawl.

"Stop it!" she exploded with rage and embarrassment. "What's the matter with you?!"

Trent lowered his bloodied hands and turned on Vivian with a savage snarl on his lips, revealing a fresh gap where one of his enormous front teeth had once been. He spit out a mouthful of hot blood, and his displaced tooth bounced across the dirt to Vivian's feet. Even slicked in blood, its flawless face retained a perfect, unblemished whiteness. But from behind a coating of filthy saliva, the yellowed enamel of its long, rotten root glowed an electric shade of radioactive blue.

"Trent!" Vivian gasped. "Your tooth! It ... it's ..."

"Oww, shit," Trent moaned, rubbing his jaw. "You busted up my grill! I just got that enhanced, bitch!"

Knocked from the safety of his gums, Trent's tooth betrayed the secret to his perfect smile: a shroud of dental-grade porcelain, recently installed by Ben Affleck's dentist.

Vivian thrust her makeshift weapon toward Trent and glared down the length of her sleeve, across the jagged orange teeth of her shattered bottle and into Trent's blood-slicked maw.

"You ... you glow! You're one of *them!* " she hissed. "But *how?!* "

At that moment, the constant shifting of the clouds threw a flickering slice of sunlight down Vivian's arm and across the bottle, glimmering through the prism of its shattered orange face. The glare stung Vivian's eyes, temporarily burning the image of a spongy sort of molecule into her corneas, followed by five extreme words.

Fusion Fuel - Load and lock!

A wildfire of sparking synapses blazed through Vivian's brain as her face took on the expression of one who had just finished the last page of an Agatha Christie novel.

"That's *it!* " she shouted. " *That's* the key! I get it!"

"Girl, you're about to get it," Trent said savagely. "And you're gonna get it good, yo!"

He leaned sideways on his crutch and began to fumble with his fly. A dark, wet stain spread across the front of his filthy trousers as his cat tail went into a series of stiff, spastic convulsions.

"No! Stop! Trent, listen to me!" Vivian said firmly. "This isn't you! Your brain is damaged! Fight it, Trent! You're better than this! You're better than your animal instincts!"

Trent continued to trudge toward Vivian with no apparent interest in her impassioned plea. He finished wrenching down his zipper just as the front of his soiled khakis exploded outward in a blast of torn flesh and dried blood!

Horror saturated Vivian's psyche so completely that she didn't even think to scream. Her heart rate did not bother to elevate. Her body just froze with cold comprehension as three words of explanation clicked together in her mind.

Priscilla's infectious saliva.

Between Trent's bandaged legs there now stood the rippling, fleshy white stalk of a scorpion tail the size of a bodybuilder's arm. A scrap of urine-dappled jockey shorts hung impaled from an eight-inch black barb of razor-sharp stinger slicing from its tip. Trent leaned back on his crutch and flexed his curved member with a look of Christmas-morning awe on his cloudy face. More horrifying than the fact that Trent's genitalia had been completely obliterated in his grotesque mutation was the fact that he didn't even seem to realize it.

"How you like me now, Vivi?" he grinned. "I'm hung like Godzilla, yo!"

Vivian's face went pale as Trent turned his nightmare phallus in her direction.

"Are you woman enough to take a man like Long Dong Trent?"

"I'm not!" Vivian screamed. " *Nobody* is! Use logic, Trent! Reason! You can't possibly have sex with that ... *thing!* It's a physical impossibility!"

The look of cock-sure self-satisfaction on Trent's face showed no trace of comprehension as he continued to plod forward amorously on his smashed legs.

Vivian hurled her bottle at his blackened eyes, but his throbbing stinger smashed it harmlessly out of the air with one mighty swing.

Vivian furiously limped away from the truck, her twisted ankle sending snapping rockets of agony up her leg with every hobbling step. She forced herself through the pain, carrying herself away from her assailant and through the debris field of the yard. Her mind was ablaze with the image of Trent's mutated body, but when she reached the center of the driveway, she was suddenly reminded that he was not the only monster in the barnyard.

"Oh, right," she muttered hopelessly. "There's that too."

At the end of the driveway, the zombie bull stiffly nudged the wrecked ambulance with its blood-soaked head. From the lukewarm prodding that it was now giving its automotive victim, Vivian could tell that the beast felt it had satisfactorily completed its work. The sound of Sherri's voice had been extinguished behind the snarled, blood-slicked walls of the ambulance, and the silence rang out like a funeral knell in Vivian's ears.

"Oh no!" she whimpered. "I'm too late!"

The bull's ears pricked up at the sound of Vivian's squeaky voice. She could see the ropes of muscle in its enormous neck pulling under its ruined flesh as the bull turned its head and locked its eyes on her vulnerable body. Vivian sucked a sharp breath of air between her teeth and stood completely and utterly still in the shelterless, wide-open space of the driveway. After what seemed like hours, the bull turned away and continued lazily prodding the side of the destroyed ambulance with its twisted horns.

Letting out a tight sigh of relief, Vivian turned and ran, sprinting only two steps before nearly impaling herself on Trent's mutated phallus!

She leapt backward as the thick, segmented stalk of throbbing muscle swung up from between the zombie hipster's legs. The onyx blade of his stinger whistled through the air, slashing the thick fabric of her coat in a long slice that ran from waist to shoulder. Vivian toppled over backward, sprawling across the ground and grabbing at the blood-soaked gouge in her eviscerated chest.

But there was no blood. No gouge.

She quickly sat up and pulled her hands apart to find her coat hanging open in two slashed flaps, revealing a thin diagonal slice in her cocktail dress that exposed the pale skin of her completely intact midsection.

Before she could even release her clenched breath, the black spear slammed down between her awkwardly spread legs, driving through the stretched surface of her skirt and into the ground. With a simultaneous kick of her heels and flap of her wings, Vivian threw herself backward, drawing the blade through the worn polyester with a high, peeling *rrriip*.

"Sit still, girl!" Trent yelled. "I ain't gonna hurt you! I just want to make you feel good!"

A second later Vivian was back on her feet and limping desperately across the driveway. Her twisted ankle felt as if it was being crushed in a vice with each agonizing step. There was no way that she could outrun Trent. Her only option was to find someplace to hide. Hopping and flapping her wings like a wounded bird, Vivian made her way to the nearest available shelter: the creaking hulk of the Dutch windmill.

She grabbed the iron handles of the tall, barn-style double doors and yanked with all of her strength, but all she managed to do was make them rattle. Before she could give it a second try, her eyes landed on a pair of thick, U-shaped steel brackets sprouting from the doors, bound together in the loop of a heavy old combination lock.

"Damn it!" she snarled.

Her eyes flashed over her shoulder. The bull had now completely abandoned the ambulance in favor of doing a little bit of grazing, but Trent was not so easily distracted from his prey. He was still coming, forcing his crippled legs to wobble ever forward toward his carnal reward with a sinister *zip, zip, zip*.

"Y'all act like it's unnatural!" Trent screamed. "You can't fight nature, girl!"

"Shhhh!" Vivian hissed, tossing a nervous glance at the bull. "Trent, shut up!"

She turned back to the door and took a deep, calming breath.

"Use your logic," she breathed to herself. "Find a way."

She picked up the combination lock and gave it a quick examination.

"Okay. Only three tumblers," she mumbled. "Ten digits each."

She blew a frustrated blast of air into her bangs.

"Only a thousand possible combinations," she grimaced, slamming the lock against the door. "Give it up, Vivian. You've got a better chance of unlocking the *brackets*."

Her eyebrows shot up. The brackets! She lifted the lock, revealing two large, exposed mounting screws.

"Yes!" she chirped. "That's the way!"

With a deft flick of her fingers her Swiss Army Knife launched from her pocket. She snapped out the screwdriver blade, rammed it into the rusted face of the top screw, and started cranking as fast as her swift fingers could maneuver.

"Come on, baby, come on, come on," she begged.

She twisted and twisted the screw, but instead of coming loose, it seemed to just keep getting longer and longer. The sweat beaded up on her forehead as she looked back over her shoulder to see Trent still limping toward her in his relentless, mad delirium. He couldn't have been more than twenty quickly diminishing feet away. The screw finally wobbled in its setting and fell from the door.

"One more!" Vivian grunted.

"Saddle up and spread 'em, girl!" Trent bellowed. "Cowboy T's gonna ride you like a rodeo!"

At the end of the driveway, the bull's head rose sharply as its blood-caked eyes squinted at Trent's shouting form. Vivian could see the monster drawing up to its full, barn-like height in her peripheral vision as she frantically cranked away at the second screw. The bull took a few pounding steps toward them and stopped, tilting its head in curious investigation.

"Work the screw; don't look at the bull; work the screw," Vivian chattered nervously to herself.

With a rumble like a sonic boom, the bull released its bellowing moo, lowered its horns, and charged the windmill. Vivian's pupils dilated as she turned toward fifty tons of beef bearing down on her. Her eyes snapped back to the screw and her hands worked with increased vigor.

"You looked at the bull," she growled. "Don't look at the bull; work the screw!"

Beyond her flying fingertips Vivian could see Trent's long shadow sliding across the ground between her legs and creeping up the front of the barn. She could smell the stinging fetor of his body pushing through the uncomfortably narrow barrier of air that remained between them. She took small comfort in knowing that in a matter of seconds, when the bull's horns hammered into her body, snapping her spine, crushing her ribcage, and forcing her internal organs out of the openings at both ends of her digestive tract, the exact same thing would also be happening to Trent.

Her eyes bounced in their sockets as they turned slowly to her right and filled with a stampeding vision of black fur and flying drool. She had always heard that you're supposed to see your life flash before your eyes just before you die, but all she could see was chickens. Three gigantic, squawking chickens bolting out from around the right side of the windmill and cutting a direct perpendicular to the rampaging bull's path.

"Go on! Go! Go!" Erik screamed. "Move your McNuggets!"

Vivian's eyes sent the images to her brain, but her brain refused to accept them. Like a rancher from some bizarre universe, Erik was running behind a flock of super-sized chickens, swinging a rusty pitchfork at their giant meaty backsides and herding them into the bull's path. As soon as the overstuffed poultry crossed the bull's eye line, their thrashing wings and terrified squawks immediately captured the beast's full attention, drawing him away from Vivian and Trent as if they had never even existed. With his diversion firmly in place, Erik peeled away from the back of the flock and pressed himself inconspicuously against the side of the windmill.

The rooster squawked a shrill, gurgling squawk as a monstrous front hoof slammed down on its back, exploding his patchy flesh like a rotten, meaty grapefruit. Before the flying innards had even settled, a rear hoof finished the job, smearing the now unrecognizable poultry remains into the dirt. The senseless carnage seemed to energize the two remaining hens, bolstering them with enough speed to keep them far ahead of the bull as the trio disappeared around the side of the barn.

Erik scampered up to Vivian's side and threw his arms around her in a loving embrace. She shoved him away with a scowl.

"Not now, Erik!"

"Vivian! What's wrong? Are you okay?!"

"Yes I'm okay!" Vivian barked, throwing out a finger. " *He's* the one who's not okay!"

Erik turned toward the sweaty pendulum of Trent's claw-like phallus swinging in a crackling metronome not more than two staggering meters away.

"Oh shit!" Erik yelped. "What the-"

"He's a zombie!"

"But his tee-"

"Porcelain veneers!"

"But why did it take such a long-"

"Late bloomer!"

"But how come-"

"Fusion Fuel! That's why he doesn't smell like cabbage!"

"*What?!*"

"Look, there's no time for this right now, Erik!" Vivian snapped. "We'll be safe in here! Just hold him back for two more seconds!"

She planted her miniature screwdriver into the screw protruding from the loosened bracket and continued twisting. Erik's brain throbbed from the barrage of non-information that had just been machine-gunned into his head, but he understood one thing: He had to stop Trent.

He leapt to the side of the driveway, retrieved his pitchfork, and pounced in between Trent's bladed shaft and Vivian's soft, unprotected rear end.

"Get back, Ginsu dick!" Erik screamed, brandishing his pitchfork in Trent's direction. "Get away from her!"

Trent lurched backward, losing his balance and stumbling several clumsy steps on his bandaged legs before righting himself on his crutch. Another stabbing swing of the fork produced the same result, and after another Trent had been pushed just over five cautious yards from Vivian's back.

"Stand back, little boy," Trent grinned, flexing his monstrous stinger. "Vivi wants to get with a real man!"

"A real man?" Erik laughed. "Hey, I'm not the one whose testicles fell off!"

Trent growled a fierce roar as his stinger flew through the air toward Erik's head. In a lightning-quick maneuver of three coordinated arms, Erik swung the pitchfork into a defensive position. Trent's bloodstained mouth dropped open in a wailing

scream as the force of his own swing inadvertently impaled the soft flesh of his mutant shaft on the pitchfork's rusted prongs!

"Now that I've got your attention," Erik snarled, "I'd like to raise a few points."

A hot trickle of dark red blood spiraled down the pasty white skin of Trent's shaft like a barber pole as Erik lifted the fork, elevating the already impossibly high pitch of Trent's scream to a frequency that would have made dogs howl. Trent's feet rolled onto their wingtipped toes as his pierced flesh attempted to keep pace with the rising prongs. Erik leaned in and spoke through furiously clenched teeth.

"Number one," he growled, "I'm not going to kill you unless you make me, alright? So be cool!"

Despite his obvious agony, Trent's swollen eyes were not looking at his pierced stinger. They weren't even looking at Erik's commanding face. As his cat tail stood on its throbbing end, his sweat-soaked gaze was still fixed on Vivian's rear end as she yanked the last screw out of the lock bracket. Erik noticed Trent's lusty glare and lowered his eyelids angrily.

"Number two," he snarled, twisting the fork. "If you ever so much as *think* about having sex with Vivian Gray ever again, I'm going to Bobbitt your hobbit! You got that?!"

Trent's gasping, anguished face turned on his captor with a flash of burning rage.

"Get offa my jock, you pussy-ass bitch!"

Trent's weight wobbled on his toes as his arm swung brutally from his side. The last thing Erik heard was a scrape of tubular steel against dirt and a cold swish of air before two heavy shotgun barrels connected with the side of his head. He was completely unconscious long before his unexpectedly bloodied face hit the ground.

Vivian clawed the unscrewed lock bracket out of the ancient wood and let it drop in a clanking chain of hardware that was still locked to the other door. She grabbed the handle and leapt backward, pulling open the massive, creaking hinges of a tall, broad door.

"Erik, I got it!" she screamed, turning toward him. "Come on! Get insi-"

The scene unfolding in front of Vivian's unbelieving eyes grabbed her around the throat and squeezed it into silence. Erik lay flat on his back on the ground, spread-eagled and unconscious in a growing pool of blood that was drizzling through his thick, wild hair and into the thirsty dirt. To his side, Trent stood in a striking silhouette against the yellow sky, holding the bloody pitchfork with both hands, prongs down, preparing to drive it savagely through Erik's unprotected groin.

"I'll show you who's the real man around here, bitch!" Trent howled.

"Trent, no!" Vivian shrieked. "*Stop!*"

Her words tore through the thin air but didn't seem to make it to Trent's enraged ears. With a grunting heave, he hoisted the fork over his head in a momentum-building upswing. Vivian clumsily darted across the driveway with a

series of limping hops, but she knew that it was a waste of effort. It would take that pitchfork less than a second to whip through the air and nail Erik's testicles to the ground. There was no time to physically stop Trent.

She had to find another way.

"Oh God, I'm so *horny!* " she moaned breathlessly. "You're right, Trent! I need a big man to sex me up, and I need it *right now!* "

Her eyes clenched shut and her teeth ground together as if she had just been slapped in the face with a jellyfish. She had one chance to save Erik's life, and *that* was the best dirty talk she could come up with? It was pathetic.

But it had worked.

The tensed muscles in Trent's hulking arms went slack as his head turned toward her. If an expression could be read from his swollen black eyes, it was definitely one of cautious skepticism. Vivian's eyes turned skeptical in return, but she quickly resolved not to waste the moment with overthinking what had worked.

"Yeah you, big sexy sex, uh ... man," she growled, bending over and pulling her palms gawkily up her inner thighs. "I'm all hot and bothered and, um ... ready for some big stud to make sweet animal love to me all night long!"

To supplement her awkwardly slung innuendo, Vivian whipped off her glasses, pouted her pink lips, and struck a pose like something out of a Gil Elvgren painting. Trent's eyes widened as his dull gaze flicked back and forth between Erik's loins and Vivian's provocatively arched body.

"That's right, forget about him," Vivian growled nervously. "I've got what you want right over here, hot stuff!"

She pushed aside the slashed halves of her coat and cupped her hands around her polyester-clad breasts, jiggling her modest endowment as her face flushed in utter humiliation. A red, runny grin spread across Trent's face as he tossed the pitchfork to the side and dragged himself toward Vivian on his shotgun crutch with a lusty sort of limp. Vivian slapped her glasses back onto her face and slowly backed away toward the mill, not taking her eyes off his crackling stinger.

Now what was she supposed to do? She had rescued Erik, but now her well of ideas had run dry. She could make it back to the open door of the windmill, but locking herself inside would only leave Erik in danger again. She needed to stop Trent once and for all. She needed to find a weapon.

Her eyes darted around her immediate surroundings, but there was nothing of any use. The pitchfork was far behind Trent's approaching bulk, and the driveway offered up nothing but useless dust. She couldn't see anything at all that could save her.

She could, however, hear something.

At the far end of the driveway, the cranking, scraping stroke of a retired diesel engine grinding itself to life pounded its way through the cold, still air of the farm.

Vivian's head snapped toward the sound, and her shimmering eyes picked out a petite blond head peering at her from behind the wheel of the nearly totaled Grocery911.com ambulance.

"Sherri!" Vivian gasped.

In the distance, Sherri's filthy sleeve mopped a trickle of blood from under her nose as her boot pumped the gas pedal, revving the engine. She thrust a finger at Vivian that screamed, "*You!*" followed by a crank of her thumb that just as clearly said, "*Get the fuck away from him!*"

Vivian shifted her disbelieving gaze away from Sherri and back to Trent, who was also staring down the driveway with a concerned expression on his swollen face. The roar of the ambulance's engine exploded across the farm as it launched forward on its bald tires, throwing a spray of loose gravel clattering against its bent wheel wells. Trent's scorched brain obviously hadn't worked out all of the details, but Vivian could tell that he knew something very bad was about to happen to him.

"Hey, Boner McGee!" she barked, waving her palms. "I'm still hot and sexy and ready for action over here! Come get a hot piece of this hot girl meat!"

She twisted on the balls of her feet and thrust out her backside toward Trent, giving it a sharp, sassy slap and squeaking with a naughty sort of delight. As she struck her bent-over pose, the bisected tatters of her skirt fell to the sides of her legs, exposing a nibble of her panties to the shimmering sunlight. This provocative posturing immediately captured Trent's full attention once again, wiping the rest of the world from his damaged memory and dragging him toward her soft, slender body.

Vivian clenched her eyes for a brief second of humiliated self-disgust as she whirled back around, putting her assets away. She could hear the scream of the racing engine growing louder and louder, but she did not break her gaze from Trent's face. His expression was filled with a primal sort of lust, yet his eyes looked hollow and empty in his bloated head.

The ear-ripping howl of the engine grew deafeningly closer as Vivian slowly backed across the open driveway. She could almost hear the individual pounding of each exploding piston as they drove the snarled grille closer and closer to Trent's hobbling legs. Louder and louder, closer and closer. Trent made a desperate lunge at Vivian, but she jumped backward, throwing herself into the air with a pounding flap of her wings. She landed on her non-injured leg in the protection of the windmill's doorframe, leaving her attacker alone and bewildered in the path of the screaming ambulance.

"Uh-oh, Trent," she yelled. "It looks like *you're* having a Grocery911!"

Trent's head snapped to the side with a look of dismay, but, to Vivian's surprise, in completely the wrong direction. Her eyes blasted open as two enormous, terrified chickens thundered past him with the bull in hot pursuit. The bloody wall of its slashed forehead was now leading ten thousand pounds of mutated beef on a direct collision course for the ambulance.

"Look out!" Vivian wailed. "Sherri, look out! Stop!"

Behind the spider-webbed safety glass of the shattered windshield, Sherri's teeth were bared in a heroic defiance. As the two chickens darted around the front of her thundering chariot, her enraged pink eyes filled end to end with a reflection of black fur, punctuated with a tiny dot of swarthy, crippled man-meat in the center. There was no way that she didn't see the bull charging straight for her shattered headlights, but nothing in her face suggested that she cared.

"One of us better be wrong about the afterlife, Trent," she said stoically. "'Cause I don't want to see you in Hell!"

The next few seconds drizzled through Vivian's eyes in a grisly slow motion, as if so many horrible things were happening at once that time itself couldn't keep up.

Trent stumbled forward on bloated legs, bending into a stiff, awkward crouch as he attempted to jump clear of the tons of flesh and steel that were about to compress him into a hairy, wet carpet. As his toes scraped across the ground they twisted outward ... and just kept twisting, all the way around to the back. His bandaged legs were instantaneously bathed in a thick, black blood for the most insignificant blip of a second before they exploded outward in a mass of sticky plastic and cotton shreds. In that one horrible moment, the mangled, infected flesh of Trent's legs seemed to spiral off the bones like ribbons from a party favor on New Year's Eve as his fleshy thighs blew apart, revealing a pair of colossal, black and green striped grasshopper legs.

Vivian stood dumbfounded as the two massive, muscular hinges of Trent's blossoming limbs pounded into the dry dirt, launching him into the air and straight toward her. His shoulder rammed into her chest, knocking the wind out of her and throwing her body in a sprawling tumble across the wooden floor of the windmill. In the fraction of a second before her head hit the ground, a single remembered image flashed through Vivian's analytical mind: Priscilla's slashed palms spilling a stream of contaminated blood down the wrecked dashboard of the Reliant and into the open wounds of Trent's crushed legs.

This thought was immediately obliterated by the ear-numbing, steel and flesh cacophony of a speeding ambulance crushing itself to death against a mutant bovine's collapsing skull. In the seconds following the collision, the wail of the diesel engine fell into a steaming hiss that seemed understated next to the bull's thousand-decibel scream.

The enormous creature staggered backward on its butcher-block hooves, shaking its crushed and deformed skull back and forth in a slow, drooling denial. One of its rear legs folded against the ground, initiating a domino effect that dropped the animal to its knees with a rumble like two oceanliners colliding. With a final snort of atomized blood, the bull capitulated, keeling over and dropping its five-ton mass against the creaking windmill.

Vivian regained her wits just in time to see the bull's ribcage plummeting toward the open door, slamming it closed and buttressing it with the full load of its

collapsing weight. A sharp, rattling creak echoed through each weary wooden joint of the tower, dropping a sepulchral sprinkling of dust from the shadows of its thick rafters.

With the doors suddenly and permanently closed, the only light that reached the octagonal floor of the windmill was a single shaft of sunlight that fell from an open vent in the roof, sixty feet above. Long, nightmarish shadows chewed at the walls as the dusty sunbeam filtered through the club-like teeth of a series of massive wooden gears slowly grinding together, still driven to work by the lazy motion of the turning sails outside.

Just inside of the buckled doors, Trent ground his shotgun crutch into the floor and pushed himself up onto the stiff cradle of his new insect limbs. His human legs had been all but obliterated in the mutation, leaving nothing but a few ragged ropes of glistening meat hanging from the bottom of his pelvis. The sleek shafts of his grasshopper legs cut in swift angles out of his hips and behind his back, angling at the knees behind his shoulders and returning on barbed stalks to the floor beneath him.

Vivian scrambled to her feet and turned in a quick circle, searching for an escape route. She was surrounded by eight intimidatingly thick stone walls punctuated by a few twenty-foot-tall aluminum storage silos tucked into their obtuse corners. She completed her futile turn to face Trent's towering, blade-phallic form standing menacingly in front of the solitary exit, which was now barricaded by enough beef to feed an army.

"Well, that could have gone somewhat better," she muttered sarcastically.

Trent rocked his weight ghoulishly back and forth, pushing his narrow, hairy feet into the floor. Whereas Vivian had been required to trick her own mind into acknowledging her wings, Trent's damaged brain didn't even seem to notice that his natural legs had been replaced with a foreign set. He dropped his shotgun crutch on the floor next to the doorway and took a confident, pounding step forward on his armored stalks. Vivian's sweaty hand fingered the shell in her pocket as she eyed the discarded firearm longingly.

"You don't have to keep up the good-girl act anymore," Trent said, fixing her blankly in his swollen eyes. "We're all alone now, girl. Just you and me. It's time to get *freaky*."

Trent's two clawed toes dug into the splintery wood as he leapt into the air, landing with a *crack* directly in front of Vivian. With a darting shuffle of her feet, she made a move to bolt around his right side toward the abandoned shotgun. The floor creaked as he effortlessly bounded in front of her, cutting off her path. She clumsily retreated and made a break around his left, but another swift leap put him directly between her and the weapon she so desperately needed. Vivian suddenly came to the horrible realization that Trent now had the upper hand in size, strength, *and* agility. Yet she narrowed her eyes defiantly.

"*Find another way*," she thought.

She quickly backed away, keeping a careful eye on Trent. For every three limping steps that she retreated, Trent closed the gap with one clomping stride of his powerful, backwards-hinged legs. As he moved into the sunbeam, the gold cross hanging from his swollen neck glimmered, catching Vivian's eye.

"Trent, what would the Bible say about this?" she said accusingly. "What kind of Christian assaults helpless girls?! What would God say if he saw you trying to rape me to death?!"

Trent's pulsating stinger shrieked through the air in front of Vivian's face.

"Forget God," he said coldly, flexing his hulking, dripping shaft. "I'm bigger than God now."

Vivian jumped back as the tensed stinger howled in front of her chest, clipping the flags of her torn-open jacket and throwing a tangle of coarse red fibers into the air. She stumbled backward until the tips of her wings bumped against a barrier of dense, solid wood, stopping her dead in her path. Flashing a quick, desperate look over her shoulders, she quickly spread her wings out to her sides as her face drained in terror.

"Oh please, Trent, oh please," she sobbed in surrender. "Don't hurt me, Trent!"

"I'm not gonna hurt you, girl," he said in a low, salacious growl. "But I am gonna make you scream."

He grinned lasciviously as he bent on his misplaced knees and slid his segmented stalk across Vivian's cheek, over the hammer of her heart, and down the inside of her fuzzy thigh.

"I give up, Trent! I'll kiss you. I'll touch you. I'll do anything you want. Anything!" Vivian begged. "Just please, *please* keep that stinger out from between my legs!"

Trent's cracked lips pulled away from his remaining teeth in a grin of carnal anticipation. Ignoring Vivian's pleas-or perhaps even driven to new heights of arousal by them-he launched the bulging shaft of his bayoneted phallus between her soft white thighs! To his surprise, instead of a smooth embrace of warm flesh, his thrusting assault was rewarded with a grinding agony.

The pathetic, terrified expression on Vivian's face instantly curled into a mischievous grin.

"Aww, Trent," she cooed. "I'm so sorry to disappoint you after you got all geared up!"

With that, she dropped the curtain of her muscular wings with a gigantic flap, launching herself off of Trent's arrested stinger and revealing a pair of enormous vertical gears. A scream too voluminous for the confines of the windmill tore out of Trent's throat as two sets of brutal wooden teeth rotated upward, pinching his distended member at the bottom of their mesh and drawing it into their crushing bite.

Vivian's bruised ankles collapsed as she hit the floor, sending her into a tumble

that landed her at the door of the windmill. She grabbed the shotgun, fed the last black shell into its cold steel chamber, and snapped it shut with a commanding flex of her long arms. Planting the battered stock against her shoulder, she squinted down the barrel and into the back of Trent's skull.

"You are not bigger than God, Trent," she growled, slipping her finger into the trigger guard. "But I'll let Him explain that to you in person."

The shotgun's recoil sent a teeth-rattling punch through her shoulder and down her spine as a load of red-hot lead spat from its muzzle and toward Trent's greasy head. A splinter of a second before the gunpowder explosion tore through the air, however, the mechanical jaws of the windmill's gears had completed their monotonous cycle, pushing Trent's abused shaft from the top of their meshed snarl. In that most urgent of seconds, his insect legs extended, launching him across the darkened mill.

The streak of burning buckshot screamed past the tip of Trent's nose and punched a fist-sized hole in a nearby silo, releasing a thin, mocking spout of finely milled grain from within.

Trent landed with a pounding clatter of chitinous feet on thick wooden planks. A roar bubbled up deep within him and spilled out from between his giant square teeth. Brimming with anger and pain, it sounded more animal than human. He spun around to face Vivian, throwing a spatter of thick, black blood onto the wall as his phallus swung out in front of him like a shredded fire hose. Its flesh was now split and torn like an overcooked hot dog, spilling quarts of his toxic, infectious blood like a sinister venom down the glistening blade of its still-attached stinger.

Vivian didn't find the sight of his mutilated appendage nearly as chilling as the pure, primal rage in his beady eyes.

"Aaaagh! God damn it! You cocktease *whore!* " he seethed. "You'll pay for that with your ass, bitch!"

Vivian dropped the spent shotgun and snapped her wings together, blasting out of the way as Trent's pointed feet pounded into the floor where she had been standing. Her agonized knees buckled clumsily as she landed, and Trent's long, hard legs threw him effortlessly over her head. She spun around just in time to leap clear of his swinging blade, falling flat on her back as an arc-shaped wave of noxious blood flew right over her body. To Vivian's surprise, instead of hitting the hard planks of the floor, she landed on a cushiony heap of spilt flour.

The jagged teeth of the silo's puncture wound were being forced farther and farther apart by the pressure of the escaping grain, turning the original trickle into a surging fantail of white powder. Vivian choked and coughed as pounds and pounds of flour beat down upon her body, filling the sails of her wings and pinning her to the ground. As the fine grain sifted over the lenses of her glasses, she could see Trent stepping menacingly to her side. She thrashed her anchored shoulders against the floor as he bent over her and held the remains of his drizzling shaft over her body.

"I can do anything I want to your virgin ass now," Trent hissed evilly. "Girl,

you're gonna get your cherry popped by a real man."

"Thanks for the offer," Vivian groaned, "but I can de-flour myself!"

With a surge of strength that started deep in her back and raged all the way to the tips of her mutant extremities, Vivian threw her wings forward in a mighty snap, launching twelve cubic feet of blinding white powder into Trent's face! Trent grabbed at his burning eyes and stumbled backward as Vivian leapt to her feet with a kick of her reedy legs. She leaned forward and pounded her wings against the broad waterfall of flour again and again, beating it into a stifling, opaque cloud that quickly filled the room.

Vivian could hear Trent gagging and thrashing through the thick, silty haze as she pulled her coat over her face and blindly retreated to the perimeter of the windmill. She crouched down behind the aluminum belly of one of the undamaged silos, stared blankly into her smokescreen, and thought very, very hard.

A supreme irony bit into her mind: Trent was the one who had been reduced to the basest level of human instinct, yet *she* was the one with her options reduced to fight or flight.

The cloud of slowly drifting flour had obfuscated all details of the windmill's interior from her stinging eyes, save for one. All that remained was a single, solitary beam of heavenly sunlight breaking through the open vent at the top of the tower. Vivian's palm settled on a lump in her coat pocket as she suddenly saw her only option for survival.

Fight *and* flight.

Just on the other side of a mountain of unprocessed hamburger, two six-foot hens pecked sleepily at the hard, dead earth of the driveway. To the chickens, with their limited memories, both the deceased bull and the deceased Grocery911 ambulance had become little more than irrelevant bumps on the landscape.

"Scram!" a squeaky voice shouted. "Get outta here! Go write a love letter to Gonzo!"

The two hens retreated with a squawk and a flying of feathers as a dazed Erik stumbled between them, waving four threatening arms in the air. He thumped dizzily against the door of the wrecked ambulance and wrenched it open.

"Sherri? Hello? You okay?"

Inside the crushed cab of the ambulance, Sherri lay unmoving, hunched over the bent steering wheel with her arms hanging flaccidly at her sides. Erik took her gently by her bony shoulders and leaned her back against the seat. At the sight of her wounds, a single explosive heartbeat hammered out of his chest, creating a vacuum that pulled a gasp of air into his lungs.

"Oh God, oh no. Oh God, Sherri, no!"

Sherri's lifeless head and arms hung limply over the back of the broken ambulance seat, forcing her battered chest to jut out of her coat like some kind of bloated

mammalian hood ornament. The thin fabric of her blasted T-shirt had been all but ripped apart during her conflict with the bull, and its slashed neckline now plunged in a horrific décolletage. Blossoming from where she had violently impacted the steering wheel, a single, contiguous purple and black bruise spread out over her swollen chest and gruesomely across her shoulders, lapping with pointed, flaming tongues into the tanned skin of her slender neck.

The goose egg growing on Erik's recently clubbed skull beat like a drum as his heart began to race with helplessness. He stared at her purple chest in horror, and his disoriented eyes imagined it to be slowly expanding and falling. He leaned in for a closer look, and Sherri's head rolled over on the seat.

"I'm not dead," she rattled hoarsely. "Quit staring at my tits."

Erik's back wrenched upright as his embarrassment was completely eclipsed by joyous relief.

"Sherri!" he chirped. "You're alive!"

"Yeah. No shit, Sherlock."

Wincing and sucking in a hiss of air between her teeth, Sherri pulled her winged head forward onto her shoulders. Her bent wings fluttered pathetically as she blinked her eyes into focus over the wrecked, blood-streaked hood of the ambulance.

"Did I hit Trent?" she asked dizzily.

"I don't know," Erik admitted. "It doesn't look like it."

"Damn it all!" Sherri seethed.

Through the hole where the windshield had once been she could see the bull lying against the door of the mill, bleeding into the dirt from its wrecked skull.

"Well, at least I killed that mad-cow megafreak."

"Forget about what you killed!" Erik yelled. "Sherri, how are *you* still alive?! How did you survive that crash without collapsing your lungs?!"

Sherri's tiny thumbs thrust weakly toward the bruised cushion of her enhanced bosom.

"Dual airbags, motherfucker."

Inside the windmill, Vivian clawed her way up the deep corrugated ribs encircling the grain storage silo like a ladder. She drew in a breath of fresh, clean air as she hoisted herself out of the swirling dust cloud and onto the container's gently domed top. On the ground below her, she could see Trent's dark form stalking furiously through the floury haze, stirring the slowly settling cloud into the air with every fierce slash of his bladed stalk.

"You can't hide from me, you dirty whore!" Trent roared. "Where are you?!"

"Way above your head," Vivian said. "As usual."

At the sound of her voice, Trent looked up through the chalky haze to see Vivian staring him down from the top of the silo. A flick of her thumb knocked open the lid

of Sherri's Zippo lighter with a steely click. Trent's palms slapped the floor as his grasshopper legs folded deep into a preparatory crouch.

"You're goin' down, bitch!"

Vivian sparked a tall flame out of the lighter with her slender thumb.

"To the contrary," she said calmly. "I'm goin' up."

With that, she bent her knees and leapt into the air, spreading her twelve-foot wingspan out to her sides like a leathery black hang glider. Trent's powerful legs simultaneously launched him off the ground and toward her soft, lean belly hanging in the cloudy air. As the two bodies sailed toward each other, Vivian tossed the lighter between the extended goalposts of Trent's grasping arms and into the thick, folding swirls of airborne flour.

The open lid of the lighter caught the air like a rudder, twisting its descent into a tight, football-like spiral as it plunged through the cloud. In a flash of time too fast for the human eye to detect, the yellow-blue flame ignited a single flour particle, instantly wrapping fire around its combustible surface bathed in the oxygen-rich air. The combustion spread to another suspended particle, and another, and another, slicing a millisecond-long cone of flame through the dust. Before the already-scorched steel of the lighter had even hit the floor, every particle of flying grain in the enclosed windmill had near-simultaneously caught fire, pushing a thunderous explosion against its thick cobblestone walls.

For the briefest of seconds, Vivian could actually see the expanding fire wrap its clawed fingers around Trent, igniting the stinking, oily flesh of his mutated body into a demonic pillar of red and yellow flame. His mouth opened to scream, but only a forked tongue of crimson fire and black smoke rolled out of his throat as the unforgiving hand of gravity wrapped around his rapidly charring body, yanking it back into the depths of the hellish blaze.

Before Vivian could plummet to the same horrible fate, the spontaneous detonation punched a blast of heated air into the sails of her outstretched wings like a giant invisible fist. The explosive thermal updraft had already thrown her thirty feet into the air before she could give her wings a single, majestic flap, launching herself further skyward by pushing the almost tangible thickness of the hot air back toward the ground. As she rushed toward the high ceiling, Vivian folded her wings straight back toward her toes and threw out one heroic fist. Her willowy body swished gracefully through the center of the open vent as she shot from the top of the burning tower like a bullet from a rifle.

The bright, fresh air of the farm whistled over Vivian's face as the eruptive force of her launch fell away from her flapping and tattered clothes, slowing her ascent to a gentle, weightless standstill nearly a hundred feet from the ground. Without panic, she bent in half at the waist and pointed her fingers to the ground like an Olympic high diver. As she began to fall back toward the earth, her powder-covered wings unfolded effortlessly from her shoulders, feeling out the gentle currents in the air and carrying her gracefully across the sky.

Vivian was flying.

Although her slapdash physiology still lacked the muscle power to become airborne by its own devices, the broad sails of her wings were well-suited for a short, graceful glide across the heavens. With tiny adjustments in the pitch of her bony limbs, Vivian sent herself swooping in a wide, smooth circle around the crumbling buildings of the old farm. She could see Erik and Sherri far below her, staring back at her angelic silhouette from the yard, their faces punctuated with tiny black dots representing their gaping mouths.

The slapping flap of her shredded white clothing was like a drum circle of seraphim heralding her arrival to the skies as she swiftly sailed over the peaked roof of the farmhouse. The air rushing down her long neck and whipping across the sensitive sheaths of her wings sent an unexplainable feeling of sizzling blue euphoria through her body. She had done it. She had put it all together. And for once, she had actually come out on top. For the first time in her life, Vivian Gray had actually, truly succeeded at something. And it felt *good*.

The white dust trickled from between the strands of her oily red hair as she approached the broad, mossy roof of the slouching red barn. With a grand flap of her wings, she flung herself over its eaves, dropping to her feet in a landing so gracefully light that it barely even disturbed her swollen ankle.

Perhaps it was the sudden rush of oxygen, or victory, or a combination of both, but as Vivian stood on the peak of that crumbling barn, she felt as if she was standing on top of the world. She gave the squeaky iron weathervane a playful spin and took two long, momentum-building steps toward the edge of the tarpapered roof in preparation for launch.

But before she could return to the air, a rotten, wet crackling thundered from beneath her feet. Without warning, she dropped like a stone through a collapsing ring of decayed shingles and into the darkness of the barn.

The tips of her wings hadn't even cleared the hole when her aching feet hit a tall, sloping haystack leaning up against the sagging wall. Her startled knees crumpled upon impact, sending her rolling head over heels down the heap's gentle grade until her backside landed with a dusty *slap* on the dirt floor. Bits of broken straw and hay stuck to her hair and clothes as her head wobbled in a slow, dizzy orbit of her neck.

Five seconds later her reeling vision was filled with the beaming, chattering faces of Erik and Sherri.

"Holy shitbombs! You blew the ever-living fuck out of that windmill!" Sherri cheered. "Please, Powderpuff, *please* tell me that you actually killed Trent."

Vivian nodded distractedly and Sherri stomped her heavy feet in delight.

"Fuckin' A! You're officially my best friend," she gushed. "You're so fucking bad-ass!"

Erik dropped into the soft hay by Vivian's side and grasped her hand.

"You flew! Vivian, you actually *flew!*" he cheered. "That was incredible! You

were amazing!"

He planted a congratulatory kiss on her smiling lips, but she just continued to stare in a goofy, dreamlike trance past his glowing face.

"Vivian?" Erik asked. "Viv, are you okay? What is it?"

His puzzled eyes met Sherri's, then they both turned to see what it was that had Vivian so captivated.

A single beam of bright white sunlight sliced through the fresh hole in the roof, landing on the gleaming yellow fenders of a fully restored 1953 Cadillac Eldorado convertible. An assembly of tall red tool chests and the rusted-out bodies of parts cars looked on from the shadows as if waiting anxiously for their humble gift to be accepted. Vivian smiled knowingly.

"That's the kind of car you drive to paradise."

Several euphoric hours later, the pristine, spotless chrome of the classic Cadillac's grinning front grille was melodically whistling through the brisk Pennsylvania mountain air. The V-8 hummed an elegant, rolling bass note as Vivian used the glossy, two-tone steering wheel to guide it through the curves and past a large, reflective green sign.

Liberty Valley - 1 mile

Vivian's clean, vivacious red hair danced joyfully in the breeze under the wide brim of a straw cowboy hat. Just as she had suspected, the repaired electric generator had yielded a round of much-deserved long, hot showers to herself and her friends, peeling weeks of apocalyptic filth from their bodies and out of their souls. The farmhouse had been equally hospitable with clothing, offering up rural fashion choices for every sex, style, and freakish mutation.

A long, slender pair of bib overalls seemed designed for the task of covering Vivian's freshly shaven legs, crossing its denim straps in a comfortable "X" between her wings. Underneath the overalls, a modified sweater hung over her mutated limbs, its accommodating slashes tied off in two sassy knots beneath them.

Erik sat in the passenger seat, his smooth, angular face looking clean and sharp atop a secondhand tweed suit with patches on the elbows. The thick brown waves of his hair caught the wind and the light like a shimmering field of barley, hypnotically rippling in the open air of the convertible.

The back of Vivian's seat was reclined flat to make room for her wings, but the wide bench of the back seat still left plenty of room for Sherri to sprawl out. Her narrow shoulders had been returned to their natural environment: tucked into the sleeves of a black leather jacket, this one clumsily embroidered with the words "Classic Caddy Club." Beneath the jacket, the immodestly buttoned neckline of a red flannel shirt displayed the dark purple orbs of her bruised cleavage like a trophy of heroism. A clinging pair of cut-off "Daisy Dukes" completed the ensemble, spilling her shapely bronze legs into the tops of her battered black combat boots.

Sherri leaned on the back of Vivian's seat and twisted her sizzling platinum-blond

hair around her tanned fingers. Seemingly lost in her own world, she pouted her tiny pink lips provocatively into the rearview mirror with a coy flap of her frilly butterfly wings. Vivian glanced into the mirror and Sherri's pink eyes immediately dropped to the floor as she blushed.

"It feels good to finally be clean and feminine again, eh Sherri?"

"Hey, I'm not *that* clean," Sherri smirked guiltily. "I scrubbed myself raw, and I *still* smell like the ass end of a cabbage."

"Me too," Vivian agreed. "We all do, and we should be thankful for it."

"This is obviously some strange usage of the word 'thankful' that I wasn't previously aware of," Erik said skeptically.

"That cabbage smell is what separates us from the zombies," Vivian explained. "By process of elimination, it *has* to be. It all makes sense now. That pink fog that we breathed back in Stillwater was vaporized bay water. It must have been infused with red tide bacteria."

"So what?" Sherri asked.

"The newspaper said the bacteria was resistant to radiation," Vivian explained. "What if it made *us* resistant to radiation once it got into our bodies?"

"But what about the rat and Twiki?" Erik asked. "What about Trent? They all breathed the fog too. How could that possibly be the antidote?"

"It's the Smilex factor," Vivian said. "I don't think the vapor could absorb into human tissue on its own. It needed Fusion Fuel to serve as a catalyst."

"Fusion Fuel?" Erik said incredulously. "The energy drink? Are you saying that all that 'Load and lock' marketing hype was actually *true*?"

"Apparently so," Vivian shrugged. "That would also explain how an overdose of estrogen tablets could turn Sherri from a skinny waif into a voluptuous little powderpuff."

Sherri's cotton-candy pink eyes flashed.

"I am not a powderpuff," she said coldly. "I am an individual."

"All right, all right," Vivian smiled. "Save it for the people in Liberty Valley."

Sherri leaned back in her seat and frowned.

"But what if there is no Liberty Valley?" she grumbled. "Or what if all we find there is more saber-dicked zombies?"

The gentle hum of the Cadillac's whitewall tires changed in pitch as they bumped onto the pavement of an overpass bridge spanning between two rolling mountain peaks. Tons of smooth, white concrete held aloft a long, straight shelf of slightly rusted green steel and unblemished blacktop. Six seconds later, the wheels returned to their original pitch on the other side of the undamaged bridge.

"I have a feeling that everything is going to be okay from now on," Vivian promised.

The truth was, Vivian didn't know what they would find in Liberty Valley. But it didn't matter. She knew that everything would, indeed, be okay from now on.

The purr of the Cadillac's engine intensified as it pulled the antique car toward the final rise before the road dipped into the valley ahead. A large wooden sign slid silently up the shoulder. It was cheerily painted in patriotic hues of red, white, and blue, spelling out its message in tall, serif letters.

Welcome to Liberty Valley - An Historic Past, A Bright Future

Vivian glanced at Erik to find him smiling back into her eyes with a look of unflinching optimism on his face. He put his left hand on her thigh and gave it an excited squeeze. Vivian put her hand on top of his and smiled hopefully as the Cadillac's glittering chrome bumper crested the top of the hill.

About the Author

Marcus Alexander Hart is the author of *Caster's Blog: A Geek Love Story*, the tale of one improbable year told as an online journal; and *Walkin' on Sunshine*, a quantum physics sex farce. He is perhaps best known for his dual role as editor and movie critic for the comedy website *misinformers.com*.

In addition to writing, Marcus is also an award-winning digital animator. His resume includes over ten published video-game titles, including *Scan Command: Jurassic Park* and *American Idol*. His short film *A Narrow Martian of Error* has been screened in festivals around the world.

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